



*a place for all*  
**SEASONS**

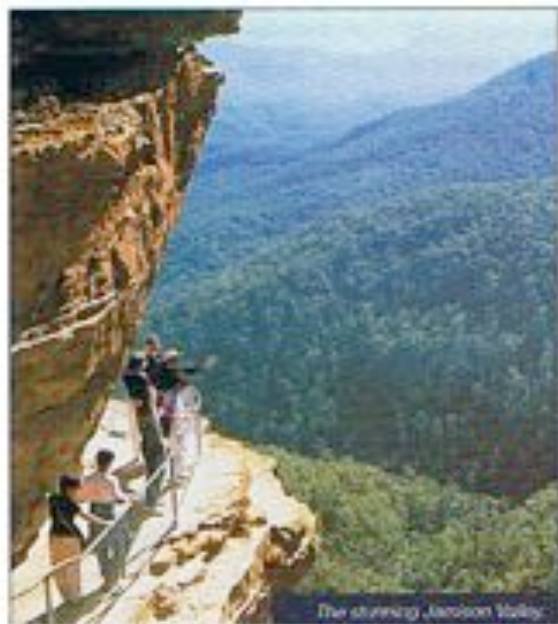
*The Blue Mountains, to the west of Sydney, offers year-round activities for the pursuit of happiness, says Leigh Robinson*

FOLK WHO LIVE IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS OFTEN JOKE about the weather being like four seasons in one day, so it's fortunate to find an abundance of indoor and outdoor pursuits available whatever the weather.

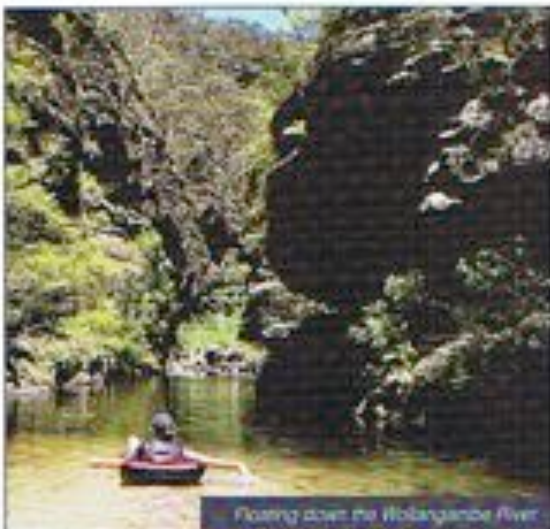
While many of Australia's premier tourist destinations wind down during winter, the Blue Mountains comes alive. For the past 20 years Yulefest has provided the next best thing to a European Christmas for local residents and tourists alike. This mid-year mountains' tradition was initiated by a group of nostalgic Irish people on a winter holiday at the then California Hotel (now the Mountain Heritage Retreat) in Katoomba. Relaxing in front of a log fire with the snow steadily falling outside, they began to reminisce about Christmas in their homeland. The result: they asked the proprietor to provide a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings in July, an idea which soon caught on and has grown in popularity ever since, with the 20th anniversary of Yulefest being celebrated this year. While a mid-year Christmas may sound absurd, the venues that play host to Yulefest would certainly disagree, citing it as one of the busiest times of the year. And if traditional turkey dinners, carols, decorations and log fires aren't enough, snow often makes a welcome appearance for added authenticity.

Another winter celebration drawing thousands each year is the colourful Winter Magic Festival, held as close as possible to the Winter Solstice. While it's a relatively new festival compared to Yulefest, it has already captured the imagination of scores of locals and tourists who dress up in fantastic fairytale costumes and parade down Katoomba Street, which is closed to traffic and lined with street stalls and performers. It's a merry mixture of musicians, artists, poets, artisans, dancers and ordinary folk who gather together to celebrate the magic of a mid-winter mountains' day.

The special charm of the Blue Mountains in winter attracts many visitors eager to escape the dreary city weather for a cosy weekend away in more picturesque surroundings. An abundance




The stunning Jamison Valley.



Floating down the Wollangambe River.

of warm and welcoming accommodation is always available on short notice, with intimate B-&Bs sprinkled throughout the mountains from Lapstone to Lithgow, to the more upmarket resorts and hotels such as Fairmont, Lilliarfels, the newly restored Carrington Hotel at Katoomba and the famous Hydro Majestic Hotel at Medlow Bath, with its sweeping views of the Megalong Valley.


While the larger hotels boast their own fine restaurants, an eclectic mix of trendy eating places has sprung up in recent




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\* All prices based on twin share. Valid Sunday to Thursday nights 1 May to 31 May, 2000. Conditions apply. Not valid on Public Holidays. Subject to availability.

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Autumn gardens at Mt Wilson

years, with many of Sydney's top chefs retreating to the mountains in search of a different lifestyle. From hip vegetarian cafes to classy brasseries and elegant restaurants, all tastes and appetites are well catered for. It's even worth taking a day trip to the mountains for the sheer pleasure of experiencing fine dining in the fresh mountain air, which tends to incite a hearty appetite.

A day trip might also include a visit to some of the region's historical sites, such as the Explorer's Tree at Katoomba, the Zig Zag Railway at Lithgow or Lennox Bridge at Glenbrook, which is the oldest

bridge on the Australian mainland. Those jaded with shopping in city plazas and malls may also find pottering around the quaint arts and crafts shops, antiques stores and art galleries an enriching experience, and a particularly enjoyable pastime in the colder weather.

If the thought of winter temperatures, which often hover around zero degrees Celsius, sends a shiver down your spine, then a summer sojourn in the mountains is a wonderful way to escape the sizzling city heat. The Blue Mountains is densely populated with eucalyptus trees which fill the air with finely dispersed droplets of

oil creating a characteristic blue haze and a refreshing, uplifting aroma. This effect is particularly pronounced in summer. A sunny morning walk through the bush after a night of rain, accompanied by a symphony of birdsong and the strong scent of eucalyptus permeating the air, is a delight for the senses.

While summer in the mountains is usually mild in comparison to the city, the sun can be just as strong, so bushwalking is often preferable in autumn and spring when the flora is more colourful and there are less snakes lurking around. While the Blue Mountains has become one of



The Winter Magic Festival, Katoomba



Shopping at The Mall, Leura



Majestic views of the Grose Valley from Mt Hay

Australia's premier destinations for camping, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, abseiling and canyoning, bushwalking is still the number one activity. The Blue Mountains National Park is now protected from commercial development and is cared for by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, so the vast and pristine wilderness will remain an eco-paradise for many years to come.

While professionally guided bushwalks, tours and adventure trips can be organised either in Sydney or with various tour companies in the mountains, most of the walking tracks are easy to follow and are well maintained, so many people choose to set off on their own. Some of the best known walks are located in the Katoomba area, with Echo Point and the Three Sisters being the most famous sights. The Three Sisters is one of Australia's most recognisable rock formations, and its mystique is enhanced by an Aboriginal legend which visitors can learn about at the Echo Point Visitor Information Centre. Echo Point is the best place from which to view the Three Sisters and the grandiose Jamison Valley below.



Springtime in the mountains

Arguably the most frequented bushwalk in the Blue Mountains begins at Echo Point and descends down the Giant Stairway (980 steps, some of which are actually more like ladders) leading into the Jamison Valley. If your knees are still intact when you reach the bottom, you can follow an easy walking track around to the Scenic Railway, about an hour's walk, and catch the train back up to the top, or follow various other walking tracks, all of which are well marked.

The dense foliage of the mountain flora conceals a virtual labyrinth of lesser known walks appealing to those who prefer to get off the beaten track and perhaps catch a glimpse of a wallaby or some colourful bird life. Many of them are just as beautiful as the well known



A beautiful blue Mountains sunset

#### BLUE MOUNTAINS VIRTUAL POSTCARD

The latest in multimedia technology has arrived in the Blue Mountains, bringing the historic part of Australia well and truly into the future. The Blue Mountains Virtual Postcard is a new CD-ROM offering visitors the chance to preview the region's unique attractions at the click of a mouse, or send it to family and friends in Australia and overseas for the cost of making a standard postcard.

The Blue Mountains Virtual Postcard contains stunning images of activities, landscapes, flora and fauna and local architecture - literally hundreds of postcards in one. It also includes free screen-savers and wallpapers for visitors to install on their personal computers to remind them of their trip to the beautiful Blue Mountains. Visitors are able to take virtual tours of some of the best lookouts in the Mountains and preview some of the best accommodation, shopping, dining and activities available.

The CD is divided into townships with sections on accommodation, dining, travel, shopping and activities. All businesses operating between Westworth Falls, Mt Victoria and Weyang Valley are offered a free listing featuring the company name and telephone number at the visitor's own choice, which makes the CD a comprehensive and useful guide for visitors searching for particular products and services.

The CD-ROM is produced by Slipstream Communications Pty Ltd, a local business based in the Mayer Blue Mountains town of Lennox. All staff who have worked on the CD live and work in the Blue Mountains and have extensive knowledge of the area. The Blue Mountains Virtual Postcard is the first in a planned series, with the next CD covering Sydney in time for the Olympic Games. Other areas being considered include the North Coast Region, Hunter Region and Southern Highlands.

The Blue Mountains Virtual Postcard is available at every retail outlets throughout the Blue Mountains, as well as through mail order, internet shopping and on the Slipstream Website, which includes a preview of the CD and an order form. All subscribers of *Holiday & Travel News* will receive a copy free of charge, and non-subscribers can fill out the coupon on page 72 to order their copy.

For more information contact Ross Delaney or Kerry Mulvaney at Slipstream Communications. Tel: (06) 47843157 Fax: (06) 4784 3538 or email: cbsales@slipstream.com.au



Autumn gardens at Mt Wilson



The Three Sisters, Katoomba

walks, such as the Valley of the Waters at Wentworth Falls, Sassafras Gully in Springwood, Katoomba Falls and Cascades, the Cathedral of Ferns at Mt Wilson, the Grass Valley at Blackheath, and Leura Cascades. If visiting Leura Cascades take the scenic route from Katoomba to Leura along Cliff Drive, a renowned drive along the cliff tops with dazzling panoramas of mountain scenery providing wonderful photo opportunities.

For those who like to appreciate nature at its most refined, various garden festivals are held throughout the year, and are particularly breathtaking in spring. There is the Leura Gardens

Festival, the Rhododendron Festival and the Annual Summer Flower and Craft Show at Blackheath. Just as pretty as springtime gardens bursting with new life are autumnal gardens glowing with warm gold, red and orange hues, on show at Mt Wilson, Mt Tomah, Blackheath and Leura. The garden festivals have evolved out of community pride, and local residents are only too happy to open their spectacular private gardens at the height of their beauty to visitors.

The Blue Mountains is also home to a thriving arts community, and there are concerts, music and film festivals, craft markets, galleries, and exhibitions to enjoy year round. The Annual Blue

Mountains Festival of Folk, Roots, & Blues is a three-day festival held in March showcasing world-class acoustic performances of folk, blues, Celtic, a cappella, swing, world and rockabilly. Also popular is Songs of the Wind in May, an autumn arts and environment festival culminating in a spectacular concert at Jenolan Caves. The Annual Leura Village Fair is held in spring, and various weekend craft markets are held at local schools and community halls throughout the year.



Cascade of Rock Ledge

## fact file

**Getting there:** the Blue Mountains National Park is easily accessible by car, bus or train. If driving from Sydney follow the M4 Motorway until it adjoins the Great Western Highway at Lapstone, or use the historic Belts Line of Road via Woadsor and Richmond. The western approach is via Lithgow and pretty Hartley Valley. Trains to the Blue Mountains depart regularly from Central Station in Sydney. Economical railcoach tour packages are also available.

**Information:** for more information on holidays or exploring the Blue Mountains, contact Blue Mountains Tourism on 1300 653 408.