

Kurrajong DISCOVERY TRAIL: an account of things to see and do along the trail

The Kurrajong discovery trail is more of an adventure than most of the 17 other trails attached to the Greater Blue Mountains Drive.

As the only one that requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle or mountain bike, it gets right in amongst some very bumpy country. The route skirts around the edge of two big chunks of wilderness, centred on the wild, undammed rivers of the Grose and the Colo, and crosses two deep tributary valleys – and all this just an hour from the Sydney Opera House!

It's best to allow a whole day for the drive to take full advantage of the views, walks and rest spots along the way. Or even two days, camping at Buralow or Wheeny Creek.

Our starting point is the lovely village of Kurrajong, in a quiet setting just off Bells Line of Road (also known as The Botanists Way and part of the main Greater Blue Mountains Drive). When you can drag yourself away from all the fine food and art, Bells Line leads westward into the wilds. At Kurrajong Heights a four-wheel-drive trail enters Blue Mountains National Park and winds down through increasingly lush forests to the flats of Buralow Creek. Filtered views of the Bell Range and into the Grose Valley give a taste of what's to come.

If you have some over-energetic passengers on board, you can drop them off at the top of the Buralow walking track and meet them at the bottom. This is also the best place to switch to two wheels, because the rest of the trail back to Kurrajong makes a great mountain bike ride on bush trails and quiet sealed roads.

Buralow Creek is unusual. Most of the creeks around here are confined in narrow gorges, but the Buralow valley is wide, flat and swampy, full of washed-in sediment trapped there like water behind a dam. But it wasn't a dam that blocked the valley; the drainage was disrupted when the area was tilted up as part of the uplift of the Blue Mountains escarpment.

There is evidence that the local Darug Aboriginal people lived in Buralow Creek long before colonial explorer and naturalist George Caley passed through on his epic walk to Mount Banks. On 4 November 1804 his party sheltered in a 'rock house' (overhang) overlooking the swamp. But they weren't as capable in the bush as the Darug. Their campfire escaped to spread through the valley, burning Caley's vasculum and nearly incinerating the whole expedition!

Later another early settler thought the swampy vale would be good for irrigated agriculture. A few relics of George Bowen's experimental rice farm – the first in Australia

– can still be seen scattered around the flat. The grassy clearing is now just a great place to camp or picnic.

The short and easy Bulcamatta walking track skirts around the Buralow swamp and enters a beautiful little side-canyon. As the cliffs close in the gorge becomes chock full of rainforest and ferns, and then ends suddenly in a small horseshoe waterfall.

The four-wheel-drive trail climbs up the other side of the valley and through drier bush on the Paterson Range. The many different types of forest encountered are one of the special joys of this drive. To the left lies the Grose Wilderness, still much as George Caley saw it two centuries ago. The trail comes back out onto Bells Line of Road, briefly, before heading down a sealed road to the next unusual landform: Mountain Lagoon.

This isolated settlement of small farms and hideaways is based on rich soils – as shown by the few massive blue gums that are still standing. The lagoon itself is a natural lake, perched on a ridge-top way above where any self-respecting lake should find itself. This is again because of the mountains uplift twisting the local drainage pattern.

The lagoon is on private property, but you can snatch a glimpse of the reed-beds and ducks from Sams Way, that encircles the lake. Part of Sams Way has been planted as an avenue of exotic trees and shrubs that presents a lovely sight in autumn and spring.

For those who prefer nature's gardens the side-trip along the four-wheel-drive T3 trail into Wollemi National Park is a must – and a good place to get the bikes off the roof-rack for a short ride. The bush itself is reward enough, with ferny understories, massive twisting smooth-barked apples, grass-trees like giant green wigs and even a superb patch of rainforest. But the climax comes at the end of the trail, where a rough walking track descends into the Colo River gorge at Tootie Creek. The full walk might be for keen bushwalkers only, but everyone should try the first fifty metres.

The track comes to an edge of rough brown sandstone and a vast panorama opens out across the Wollemi Wilderness. Sit down and rest here awhile; take in 'the serenity'. Looking over Tootie Creek and D'Arcy Range, you can see the edge of the Colo Gorge – reputedly the longest in Australia – and

away to the high basalt tops that rim the western and northern edge of the largest wilderness in New South Wales. Around to the east, the flat-topped Mount Yengo is the main landmark.

Many times I've soaked up this scene, listening to the birds and marvelling at all the different textures and tones of tree and flowering shrub on the slopes below – a cornucopia of unique Australian vegetation that won world heritage recognition for the Blue Mountains. Once, I even heard the unnerving, unmistakable grunt of a courting male koala. It was inspiring to realise that such an icon of Australian wildlife – fading away in many places – still finds refuge here.

Surely this is the essence of wilderness: places that stand apart from the changes and pressures that humans always bring, places set aside just for nature, in all its complexity, strangeness and beauty. Just two per cent of New South Wales has been formally protected in this way, as wilderness.

T3 lookout can be a memorable place to watch the setting sun spread golden light across the ridges and fade into darkness – but depending on your plans you may not want to stay so long! From Mountain Lagoon a well-worn fire track, open to the public, descends a long ridge to the east. This is usually the roughest driving encountered on the Kurrajong Discovery Trail, but still 'soft' on the bump-o-meter.

Then the more civilised Comleroy Road descends into the valley of Wheeny Creek to reach our final stopping place. Tall Sydney blue gums and rainforest thickets shade the picnic and camping grounds along the stream. I can think of nothing better than wading slowly along the sandy bed on a warm afternoon and listening to the bellbirds piping overhead, before tackling a picnic and the last bit of the drive.

The return to Kurrajong actually makes a very pleasant transition back to suburbia. The road exits Wollemi National Park, hits the tar and winds along a fertile shale ridge through rural countryside. To the west, the forest-clad escarpment of the Blue Mountains rises into the hills where you've just been wandering. Funny, isn't it, how the bush can seem drab and uninspiring as you drive by from a distance? But we know that all the simple joys are revealed only to those who get right in there and spend some time.

The **Greater Blue** Mountains Drive has been established by the regions which share the mountains as their own backyard working together to develop the drive in collaboration with the NSW Dept of Environment and Climate Change, Tourism NSW and Tourism Australia. Further development of the drive product has been enhanced by the ongoing involvement of Transurban. The establishment of the drive was proudly supported by the Australian Government and its business program delivery division, AusIndustry in a program proposed and developed by Blue Mountains Tourism Limited. © 2007

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