WALKING IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

Two million acres of forest and 96 types of eucalyptus – but are there any koalas?

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'Sorry not to get back to you sooner,' said the e-mail. 'I've been out fighting bush fires.' This was not what you want to hear from the man who is organising your four-day walking tour in one of the most densely forested regions of Australia. I had seen last winter's television footage of conflagrations in the Blue Mountains – curtains of flame billowing across woodland, small towns igniting – and imagined being handed a hose on arrival with instructions to point it at the base of my hotel. But Tim Tranter insisted that my trip could go ahead, and fearing that only a Pom would whinge at the prospect of being burnt to crisp, I took his word for it.

Heading up from Sydney towards the mountains' broad, almost level silhouette, the reason for his confidence became clear. Although the fires were still reported to be raging, the only evidence I could see of them was a cigarillo-slim funnel of smoke rising in the far distance. So vast is the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area – some two million acres – that even a major fire seldom affects more than one per cent of it.

Still, I was glad that I would be walking with guides who could steer me away from the flames, wherever they might lurk. The tracks in the mountains are well-established, but this does not prevent walkers from straying down wallaby trails by mistake. Another great advantage of a guide is that he or she goes first, which means that if there are snakes around – and this region contains seven of the world's deadliest varieties – you are less likely to be the one who steps on them.

The 'eco tours' offered by Tim Tranter's company Tread Lightly are designed for a maximum of seven people (though I was usually on my own) and aim to introduce walkers to the plants, wildlife and history of the mountains. My first guide, Shane, had a David Bellamyish knowledge of botany and geology, and made frequent stops to point out intricate veins of ironstone in the rocks, or explain how the plants have evolved to survive fires: banksia trees, for example, release seeds which float away on the hot air.

Starting from the town of Wentworth Falls, with the din of amorous cicadas all around us, we set out along the escarpment of the Jamison Valley – a vast prospect, stretching for 100 kilometres to the south, bounded by vertiginous cliffs against which the tree canopy seemed to wash like a green ocean half a mile below us. After stopping at Breakfast Point Lookout to gape at the dramatic outcrops of Mount Solitary and the Ruined Castle, we descended via the Undercliff Walk – passing literally under a six-foot-wide ceiling of rock, cushioned by a hanging garden of moss and ferns – to the Wentworth Falls themselves. Though still depleted by the recent drought, they looked awe-inspiring as the water streamed across their broad expanse of rock and plunged 400 feet to a rockpool in a rainbow of spray.

Despite some demanding climbs, and a temperature of 30°C, the going was easier than I expected: Shane set a gentle pace, we were shaded for much of the time by trees, and the trails were laid out with steps and (where necessary) handrails. The gradients mean that walks are best measured in hours rather than units of distance: as the National Parks' smart-alec slogan puts it, 'It's not the kilometres in your walk, it's the walk in your kilometres.' We put in six to eight hours a day, which proved satisfying but not too exhausting.

Inn-to-inn walking tours are starting to catch on in Australia, and this was the kind of itinerary I had requested. As I discovered, though, the best walking is away from the towns into the wilderness, so it is really more sensible to base yourself in one place and be ferried to a different starting point each morning. There is plenty of comfortable accommodation to choose from, and you can replace your hard-lost calories at some first-class restaurants, such as Darnley's in Katoomba, Ashcrofts in Blackheath and the Post Office at Leura.

The second day took us into very different terrain. Starting further west, in Leura, we left Jamison's Lookout in the cool of the morning and descended into the rainforest which constitutes ten per cent of the mountains' tree cover: a steep, spectacular journey down a creek lined with tall, thin eucalypts, sassafras and coachwood trees, as well as tree ferns and the barbed lawyer vine ('It gets its hooks into you and won't let you go'). Following the Federal Pass, we came at last to Leura Forest – an enchanting primeval glade strewn with vast boulders and guarded by giant turpentine trees.

To my dismay, the way back up to Katoomba was via the Scenic Railway – a funicular which boasts of being the steepest in the world, with a gradient of 1.27 in 1. If you are bad at heights, this two-minute journey also feels like the longest in the world. Suddenly, I had new respect for the devil-may-care koalas who scamper up their giddy gum trees without a thought for life or limb.

Koalas, however, are rare in these parts: the Blue Mountains may have 96 different types of eucalypt, but these are not the tastiest varieties. The best you can realistically hope to see is a wallaby, a spotted-tail quoll or a lyre bird. We had to be content with crimson rozellas, white and black cockatoos, and – as we followed the cliffs across the top of Katoomba Falls, towards the monumental sandstone pinnacles known as the Three Sisters – a peregrine

falcon sailing across the valley on thermal currents before flashing down into the void.

My second guide, Rosie, was an expert in aboriginal culture. Strolling down the start of the Six Foot Track, which leads across the mountains to the stalactite fantasies of the Jenolan Caves, she pointed out the plants the aborigines used for food and medicine, the rocks which provided pigment for body decoration, and the types of bark used for building shelters. She explained, too, how controlled burning had been used to clear and regenerate the bush. (Today, 90 per cent of forest fires are started by arsonists, and control is the last thing on their minds.)

The final day's walking, on the edge of the Gross Valley close to Blackheath, was the most remarkable. From the Shipley plateau we followed steep steps down to a waterfall, before passing through a narrow rock passage which opened on to a panorama of sheer red sandstone cliffs. Several parties of climbers were in action, but it was a day of high winds and in the space of half an hour we witnessed four falls: luckily the safety ropes held fast in every case.

In the afternoon we followed the track from Neates Glen to Evans Lookout – a journey that gave us the grandeur of the cliffs and the exoticism of the rainforest rolled into one, as we descended into a 400-foot gorge past soaring trees, giant ferns and massive rock shelves. We could have been exploring the Land That Time Forgot, and I half expected to see a giant lizard come lumbering around the corner, tail thrashing. Below us we could hear the rush of water in one of the mountains' many canyons, and above us the maracas rattle of cicadas.

One sensation in particular remains with me: climbing up from the cool of the rainforest and passing momentarily through a warm pocket of air carrying the deep scent of eucalyptus. Half-way round the world is a long way to go for aromatherapy, but I would do it again at the drop of a cork-strung hat.