



From far left: Echo Point Lookout, near the Three Sisters rocks; a cable car over the Blue Mountains; the dining room at Raes on Wategos hotel, in Byron Bay.



# Natural Instincts

**In the lush Blue Mountains and windswept Byron Bay—two vastly different but equally beautiful corners of New South Wales—determined residents are fighting to preserve the wilderness.**  
By Tony Perrottet

I FOUND MYSELF LOST in Blue Mountains National Park, and I hadn't even left my hotel. For the first hour in the Hydro Majestic Hotel, a sumptuous Art Deco warren about 90 minutes west of Sydney, my hometown, I wandered wide-eyed from one theatrical setting to the next, taking in the glass-domed lobby and quirky murals from the 1920s that depict both medieval knights and outback safaris. But even amid the Gatsbyesque flourishes,

it was the sweeping vistas of the Megalong Valley, considered the Grand Canyon of Australia and a key part of the Blue Mountains' 3 million-plus acres of forest, that were the most captivating. Looking out at the atavistic expanse—which was, as the name promised, bathed in azure eucalyptus haze—I expected a pterodactyl to sweep into view.

The property, which spans more than half a mile along a rugged cliff edge, was the perfect starting point from which to explore a part of New South Wales that figures large in Australians' vision of our vast, untamed continent. The first European settlers saw the raw terrain as an intimidating barrier, and it took 25 years to find a route through its labyrinthine bushland after Sydney was colonized in 1788. But in the Victorian era, "the Blueys" became the country's first vacation destination—the Adirondacks of the antipodes.

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Sydneysiders in search of fresh air and open spaces began visiting its villages, with their odd English-sounding names such as Blackheath and Medlow Bath, where the Hydro Majestic was built. (In fact, explorer Captain James Cook gave the state its Anglocentric name, New South Wales, in 1770 because he thought its coast looked like the soggy shores of Wales.) Guests used the elegant hotels as launchpads for day hikes into pristine valleys, where the endless ancient forests were framed by sandstone cliffs and filled with kangaroos, wallabies, and iridescent cockatoos.

With such rich wildlife, it figures that the Australian conservation movement was born here in the early 1930s, when a group of bushwalkers raised money to buy their beloved Blue Gum Forest—situated within the now-national park's Grose Valley—to save it from logging. "It shows

## Laura Brown's Sydney

"When I return to my hometown, it feels like I exhale a long-held breath. The more years I've been away in New York (18 now), the more I crave that feeling. It's the funny-sounding birds at Sydney Airport on a bleary early morning after a 15-hour flight from California. That singular "koo-koo-ka-ka" of a kookaburra is the kind of Australian-ness that exists nowhere else. We're a still-young country of settlers, ever reconciling itself with its indigenous owners, and now in possession of one of the most multicultural populations on earth.

We have some of the best Thai curry you'll ever eat (and you'll most likely find it at a casual hole-in-the-wall), local wine that has a sprightly elegance and is delivered with no pretension, and always-excellent coffee that's topped with a heart-shaped froth. The walks around Sydney Harbour expand your lungs with fresh air. Jasmine and frangipani bloom all year long.

The common greeting of "Owzitgoing?" (Cut to writer, weeping from homesickness, wondering why she left.) The blessing and the curse of Australia, for us expats, is its distance. Its total uniqueness. But what will lure me back one day is its heart. And a green curry. Fresh mango. And my mum. Not in that order."

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