

EVERY BENCH IS PAINTED: A DAY IN AUSTRALIA'S BLUE MOUNTAINS

Every bench is painted, every lawn is mown, there is no litter. Cars go at the speed limit. Signs are polite and complete, but the overriding feeling is 'do the right thing'. Trains run on time, fares are reasonable, children wear hats and shorts, have sunscreen and patient parents, supervising their endless activities.

Railway workers stroll along clean platforms—back in the yard sits the surfboard, ready for their early evening activity. A calm train passes in the opposite direction—no drama of the smash of opposing winds, just ships passing in the night. A station with works going on—neat barriers prevent any dangers, the phone number of the contractor visible.

Wentworth Falls next stop! We're here. Emerging clueless as to geography, the cheery stationmaster provides maps, directions and a pocket timetable for our return. We use the immaculate facilities and compliment him on his beautifully cared for station. He seems fazed by the words—he's just doing his job. We 'tap out' using our opal cards—£4 each for the two hour run up the mountain to Wentworth Falls. We head towards the Darwin trail, which takes us out to the falls. We have passed an antique shop—nothing older than 50 years, a stuffed golden pheasant, six 1960s chairs for 300 dollars and a ceramic dog amongst the paraphernalia. A bus stop with graffiti'd lorikeets—even angry youths toe the line! Then out past a neat park with perfect picnic tables encased in low walls. A bag sits abandoned under a tree—I pass on, and then go back, in case someone has forgotten it. I



Upper Wentworth Falls: en.wikipedia.org

stare at the waterfall, who is a 25 year old woman, and she's sitting high up in the angle of a branch. "OK," I say, "just checking it has an owner". "No worries" was the almost predictable reply. The park gives way to the trail, compressed sand pathways, hardwood step edged where necessary, some weathered boardwalks. The sun shines yellow light, skinks and lizards scurry as we appear.

Now the stream gathers momentum—it's trickling gurgle splashes over sandstone ledges, small trout hang in the shadows in shallow sandy pools of brandy-coloured water. We cross small curved bridges past 'Regeneration project: please be patient' signs and soon the excitement builds as the twisting path takes us down to the falls. Barriers prevent us getting too close to the 100m edge. However, even then we are strongly advised not to jump them in favour of a closer look (people have died), and yet the sign still asks us politely! The stately curve of the cliff frames the staggering view down the valley, virgin eucalyptus forest

carpeting the ancient rocks, the distant caws from the sulphur-crested parakeets which wheel away, tiny white idiosyncrasies against the green of the trees. The water cascades, but doesn't thunder over the edge. We stand mesmerised before discovering the National Pass. This turns out to be a path carved in 1910 by enthusiasts, determined to open up the mountains so that crinoline-clad Edwardian ladies may stutter down impossible cliffs on

their Sunday constitutional walk.

100m below the falls, the first pool. Excited students whoop in the chilly water, splashing to take away the 35 degree heat. We sit and eat, then venture into the water. The water so hard on the head as to feel like a drill, so cool as to create the sucking in of air you get on a Devon beach in June.

Reassembled and dressed we leave, and are faced by a decision. The path forks—continue on the National Pass, or go to the ‘Valley of the Falls’. A romantic name, or potentially a foretaste of what might happen to us? Ladders, we were told, steep descents, tough conditions. Of course we agreed to go for it—we may never get another chance! Off we went, arriving at four more falls, clambering in total down and then up 903 metres. Each time we approached a fall you could feel the air moisten as the natural air conditioner chilled it and gave it a faint musty smell of earth—welcome relief from the relentless path. We scrambled up rocks and yet whenever guidance was needed, a root, a rough-cut step or a rudimentary railing helped you through to the next obstacle.

Suddenly we saw the final task. Towering above us was the cliff again, foreboding and vast above us. Step by step, that’s the only way.

Finally up, we headed for the picnic area.

Immaculate, fresh loos, clean electric barbecues freely available for all. Back along the path, past runners and out of breath tourists, towards the station and the 17:32 back to Sydney. A paddle to ice the blistered toes, anaesthetising them in minutes and refreshing them for kilometres. We passed a local couple luxuriating in a natural plunge bath, chatting inconsequentially about their day. We thought we had exhausted our wonderment until we passed a two-foot long water-dragon, a local protected lizard, laying eggs. Eying us suspiciously, she was committed to this ancient task and we witnessed her dropping her eggs into a scrape, judiciously covering them, whilst never taking her unblinking eyes off these interlopers. A beetle slowly walked along her crest—at any other time a tiny snack for her, but for now her mind was elsewhere. She seemed to realise that we were no threat and completed her reptilian reproductive ritual. Sated with wonderment and with video evidence of our Attenboroughic moment, we continued the final kilometre. Of course that was not all—a brash squawk heralded lorikeets of the most garish colours—punks of the avian world. Delighted and bemused and yet thirsty beyond belief, we staggered up through the park again. Our fantasy was a cold beer and we had 23 minutes to spare. Suddenly, like a mirage to a desert traveller, I could see that beer. Like moths to a flame we mounted the steps to the Wentworth Falls Bowls Club. Its gloomy chintzy Christmas decorations incongruous against our recent experience, the ‘hail fellow’ host gladly poured us frozen glasses of Victoria Bitter—our personal nectar, ambrosia and delight rolled into one pint! An Irishman drinking stout regaled all present with a long and dirty joke—a ‘newcomer’ of thirty years with his original accent intact. We’re back in ‘civilisation’! The train left on time...



The water dragon

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