

Prince Henry Cliff Walk, Giant Stairway, Federal Pass, Scenic Boardwalk and Furber Steps (or the Scenic Flyway alternative)

Friday 17th February 2006

The diversity we experience on our bushwalks never fails to surprise. Rainforests to heathlands, cliff tops to canyons, expansive views to enclosed grottos all typify the variety. On this walk however we would chance upon hints of the more bizarre. Elusive giants, the threat of menacing walkers, overbearing siblings and fancy footwear would prove to be just a few of the diversions encountered today.

We gathered at the park adjacent to the Katoomba Cascades, eleven walkers keen to take advantage of the fine weather and clear views. It was a pleasure to welcome Libby's daughter Beth who joined us this morning and to welcome back Geoff Kelly who has missed the last few walks while he was away with the little people. Our first stop was at Cliff View Lookout. This spot is adjacent to the new east station for the Scenic Skyway and affords views of great contrast. On the one hand laid out before us is all the mechanical infrastructure of the Scenic World facility busily transporting tourists to the various attractions, on the other hand a slight turn toward the south and we are looking across the valley floor 600 metres below to the monolithic Mount Solitary and beyond, this view is unencumbered by man made intrusions. From this spot two starkly different examples of what Katoomba has to offer are on display.

Our next stop was at Wollamai Lookout which provides a great view across to the cliff line of Narrow Neck, down which the Golden Stairs meander to meet the Federal Pass. This leads to the Ruined Castle and is the path we will follow on our March walk. Continuing along the cliff line two of the few varieties of plants we saw in flower today were encountered, an example of the Dog Rose (*Bauera rubiodes*) and the Coral Heath (*Epacris microphylla*). We pass Allambie Lookout near which there is a fine stand of Blue Mountains Ash (*Eucalyptus oreades*) and arrive at Lady Darleys Lookout. (Lady Darley lived in the nearby Lillianfels House with her husband Sir Frederick Darley who was Chief Justice of NSW and Lieutenant Governor in 1890.)

Now the track weaves away from the cliff edge and leads down under rock overhangs into a more enclosed moist environment. The predominant growth here is Black Wattle (*Callicoma serratifolia*) while the track is edged with Pouched Coral Fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*). As the track rises again we pass sandstone cliff faces decorated with convoluted seams of ironstone. Clinging to these vertical rock faces were many tiny basal tufts of the Narrow-leaf Trigger Plant (*Stylidium lineare*) displaying their flowers in an unusual fashion. The slender normally upright stems in this case took on a weeping habit presenting pendulous clusters of pink blooms.

Suddenly we emerge from the seclusion of the Australian bush into the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Echo Point. Though we are early enough to miss the main rush of tourists, the excited exclamations heard from those seeing this spectacle for the first time carry a veritable United Nations of accents.

We decided a morning tea stop would be in order before our descent into the valley and settled down on the seats overlooking the Echo Point tourist precinct. Spending a little time here looking across the increasing throng of tourists and out to the magnificent views beyond makes one realize that familiarity does perhaps breed contempt. This vista, which we 'locals' tend to often only give a cursory glance, is truly stunning. How fortunate we are to have such sights so easily accessible in our own 'backyard'.

Soon we are making our way down the Giant Stairway. Rock Sprengelia (*Sprengelia monticola*) and Dragons Tail (*Dracophyllum secundum*) decorate the cliff face beside the stairway, not in flower at this time yet their glossy foliage provides a contrast to the surrounding growth. As we proceed down the stairway into more sheltered environs a few examples of Blueberry Ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*) appear.

At a sharp bend in the stairway a sign declares simply "Warning – Walkers Below". This conjures up all manner of possibilities; are we about to be ambushed by a group of dissident bushwalkers, is it suggesting you don't throw yourself over the edge at this point as you may land on an unfortunate walker, do a group of feral walkers reside just below this point ready to plunder our packs – who knows? We proceed cautiously and with great relief safely pass this area. Shortly we negotiate the last of the nine hundred or so steps and arrive at the bottom of the stairway, not a single Giant being sighted along the way.

We follow the Dardanelles Pass which soon links into the Federal Pass as we head toward Katoomba Falls. A Christmas Bush (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*) was sighted here carrying a few bright red sepals, a late finish for the last festive season or an early start for the next? Accompanied by the musical tinkle of Bellbirds and the raucous shrieks of Cockatoos we made our way along this path which is about 170 meters below our morning tea spot.

Presently we encounter yet another cryptic sign – "Under The Sisters". One's imagination, especially one as twisted as mine, could run wild as to the meaning of this message. Of course just as the possibilities were being mulled over I glanced up and there towering high above us were indeed the Three Sisters.

The views across the valley from this path are spectacular and are in fact akin to looking back in time. The vegetation of course represents the present, the cliff faces of Mount Solitary and indeed those directly above us are Triassic sandstone which is around 230 million years old, the slopes below these cliffs which contain the coal and shale deposits are of the Permian era making them about 290 million years old while deep in the valley there are rock outcrops from the Devonian period which are approximately 400 million years old. Think of those figures for a moment and the mind boggles.

As we proceeded along the track we passed some beautiful examples of the Smooth-barked Apple (*Angophora costata*) and the Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*). The smooth trunks of the former contrasting markedly with the fluted, fibrous barked trunks

of the latter. Soon we entered the rainforest area near Katoomba Falls. The flow of the falls was a mere trickle compared with the thunderous torrent of water crashing into the valley last time we visited this spot in February 2003.

Here once more we move suddenly from the quiet atmosphere of an area where we encounter very few other walkers into the realm of the tourist. The Scenic Railway and the Scenic Flyway (previously the Scenicender) present an opportunity for many people who would not normally venture into this type of country to experience the magical atmosphere which exists below the cliff lines. A short walk delivers us to the gate which divides the National Park area from that of the "Scenic World".

We pass the bottom station of the Scenic Railway and follow the raised boardwalk through the rainforest, past many remnants of the coal and kerosene shale mining activities which were carried out here from 1878 to 1945 and arrive at the Rainforest Room where we paused for lunch. Adjacent to this spot there is a lone Prickly-leaved Paper-bark (*Melaleuca styphelioides*) enjoying the moisture provided by the Marangaroo Spring, apparently there are no other examples of this tree anywhere nearby.

Photographs taken of The Incline (now Scenic Railway) in about 1892 show the surrounding area to be devoid of any vegetation, the debris from felled trees scattered across the valley like a disorganised pile of giant fiddlesticks. The regenerative powers of nature are amazing as we are now walking through this area beneath a canopy of, among others, Coachwood (*Ceratopetalum apetalum*), Sassafras (*Doryphora sassafras*), Lillypilly (*Acmena smithii*) and Cedar Wattle (*Acacia elata*). Five-leaf Water Vines (*Cissus hypoglauca*) twist and turn across the forest floor before climbing into the canopy in search of sunlight. This is now a quite enchanting place.

Now we are at the bottom station for the Scenic Flyway - decision time! Continue along the boardwalk to the base of the Furber Steps track and negotiate the one thousand and forty steps back to the top or join the good ship multinational for a three minute ride out of the valley. "No decision at all," some would say and six of our group joined the line for the Flyway while the remaining five continued along the boardwalk with the knowledge that we still had the fall back option of the Scenic Railway.

It was in this area that we came across a very stylish and sophisticated bushwalker. Beth was surprised to say the least when she spotted a lady wearing not just high heels but full-blown stilettos. Not what the guidebook writers would have had in mind when they suggested sensible walking shoes.

Having avoided the temptation of taking the Scenic Railway option we began the climb up the Furber Steps track. This track takes you past massive rock overhangs, through cool rainforest areas and up the Furber Steps proper to the Queen Victoria Lookout. From this vantage point there are superb views of Katoomba Falls and the Three Sisters and today's added attraction was two people abseiling down and then climbing back up the sheer walls of the Katoomba escarpment opposite. We continue on to the Rainforest Lookout and through the beautifully enclosed atmosphere of the Witches Glen, past Witches Leap

and eventually emerge onto Cliff Drive for the short stroll back to our starting point, so ending another great walk.

Here we meet up with the six relaxed and comfortable sky travellers who have spent their time indulging in ice cream and a pleasant amble along the road. They however missed out on the pleasure of climbing those one thousand and forty steps!