

AUSTRALIA'S GRAND CANYON

Get off the beaten track and explore
the little-known Capertee Valley

Text Lara Brunt Photos Glen Pearson





Kangaroos are most active between dusk and dawn



The abandoned Glen Davis Shale Oil Works

The bush is as much a part of life Down Under as beaches and barbecues, yet few visitors have heard of Capertee Valley. Even some Aussies would be hard-pressed to tell you where it is. But spend a few days in Capertee Valley and you'll feel like you've stumbled upon one of Australia's best-kept secrets.

Capertee Valley lies on the western edge of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains in New South Wales, 200 kilometres northwest of Sydney. Your first glimpse of the sprawling valley is from Pearsons Lookout, just before the village of Capertee. And what a view it is.

Bounded by soaring sandstone cliffs topped with thick eucalyptus forests, rivers crisscross the valley floor dotted with cattle and sheep farms. Come dusk, mobs of kangaroos graze on rolling farmland. The valley—some 30 kilometres wide, making it one of the largest in the world—is just three hours' drive from the country's biggest city, yet it feels wonderfully remote.

Capertee village, home to just 180 people, marks the entrance to the valley. The Capertee Royal Hotel (caperteeroyalhotel.com.au), a handsome sandstone building with a wide veranda, is a classic country pub with warm hospitality and cold beer. It has a colourful past, too. Capertee's feisty womenfolk, fed up of their husbands frequenting the original timber pub, burnt it down in the 1890s.

The area was originally inhabited by the Wiradjuri Aboriginal people, until white settlers arrived in the 1820s in search of farming land. They established the hamlet of Glen Alice, which today has a quaint village hall, pressed-metal church and a primary school with just one teacher and seven students.

The valley was opened up for mining in the 1880s after huge reserves of coal, limestone and shale were discovered. Things really got going in the late 1930s when a shale processing plant was built at Glen Davis on the eastern rim of the valley. The plant produced petrol for the war effort but closed in 1952 due to falling output, and Glen Davis became a virtual ghost town. Today, you can visit the crumbling ruins on a guided tour (tourism.lithgow.com).

The Glen Davis Hotel (glendavishotel.com.au) was built during the village's heyday to house visiting dignitaries. The beautiful Art Deco building has been meticulously restored and hosts weddings and conferences; call ahead if you'd like to have a look around.

The canyon is bordered by three national parks, making it a top spot for hiking ('bushwalking' in the local lingo). The Bicentennial National Trail, a long-distance trekking route that stretches 5,330 kilometres from Cooktown in far north Queensland to Healesville in the southern state of Victoria, passes through the valley. Join the trail north of Glen Alice for a couple of hours' easy walking along the western edges of the Wollemi National Park.

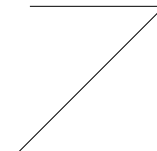
Experienced hikers can tackle



Signs outside 29 Nine 99 promoting yum cha

Pantoneys Crown, a dramatic flat-topped mountain in the Gardens of Stone National Park. The full-day hike leads past remarkable rock formations known as pagodas and along clifftops, before a steep 60-metre scramble to the top where you'll be rewarded with magnificent 360-degree views.

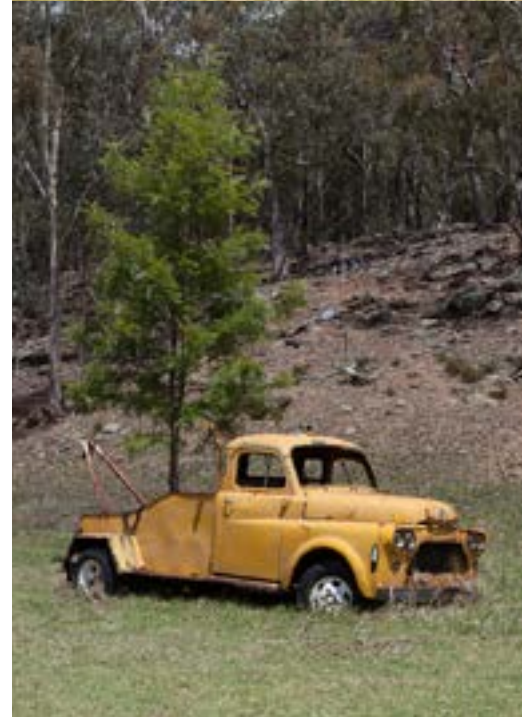
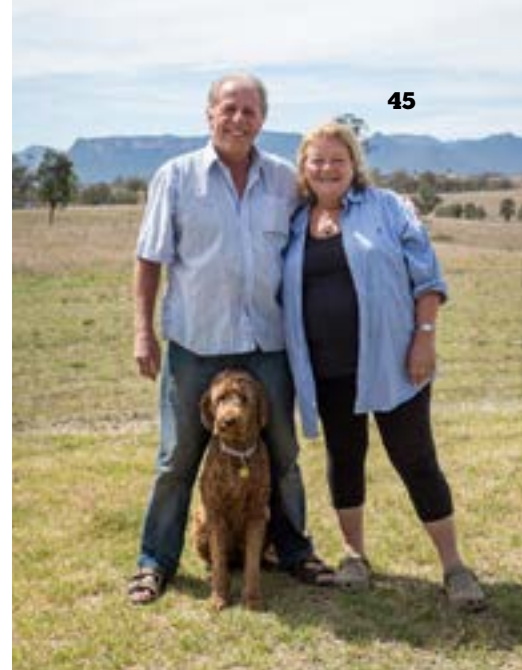
Along with kangaroos, wallabies and wombats, the valley is home to an amazing array of birds and is one of the world's top bird-watching areas. "There are 242 bird species in the valley, including the endangered Regent Honeyeater," says local enthusiast Kerrie Cooke. In a bid to save the striking yellow and black species, volunteers have planted over 100,000 trees in recent years to expand its habitat. Resident birding expert Carol Proberts (bmbirding.com.au) is your best bet for tours. >>



(From top) Roger and Di Page, with their dog Tilly

Abandoned vehicle at the Glen Davis Shale Oil Works

Dumplings at 29 Nine 99



Kangaroo and wombat warning signs





A sandstone building in Rylstone

And it's not just natural wonders that impress. You'll find old-fashioned friendliness and a cheery "G'day!" everywhere you go. At first glance, the main town of Rylstone looks like a typically charming country town: wide, tree-lined main street, historic sandstone buildings, two pubs, butcher and bakery. But Rylstone has a few surprises in store. Inside the 19th-century Bridge View Inn is 29 Nine 99 ([facebook.com/29nine99yumcha](https://www.facebook.com/29nine99yumcha)), a funky gift shop and yum cha restaurant.

Chinese-born artist Na Lan settled in Rylstone with her Australian husband, Reg Buckland, after meeting in Beijing in the 1990s. She originally opened the shop in 2008 to sell her black-and-white linocut prints, before deciding to serve homemade dumplings too. Her plump dumplings and succulent steamed pork buns were an instant hit. "I never expected to become a chef," she laughs.

More gastronomic delights can be found at Saffron Kitchen ([caperteesaffronaustralia.com.au](https://www.caperteesaffronaustralia.com.au)), a new store selling saffron-infused products such as spiced nuts and artisan ice cream. Katrin and Greg Dixon grow the prized spice—the world's most expensive by weight at around USD2,200 per kilo—on their 40-hectare farm in Glen Davis. "We discovered saffron likes extreme

heat and extreme cold so it was ideal, as it can get up to 45 degrees here in summer and drop to minus six in winter," says Katrin.

Self-catering cottages and farmstays are the main accommodation options in the valley. Glen Alice Farm ([facebook.com/GlenAliceFarmBB](https://www.facebook.com/GlenAliceFarmBB)), an 80-hectare cattle property, has a homestead bed-and-breakfast and cute cottage with a rustic wooden veranda overlooking an orchard brimming with sweet apricots, peaches and apples.

Owners Di and Roger Page relocated from Sydney four years ago with their gorgeous Labradoodle, Tilly. As the sun sets, we join them for a glass of wine and watch as the honey-coloured cliffs glow pink, orange and red. "That's a view I'll never tire of," says Roger. ■

A grazing wombat



Five tips for Capertee explorers:

1

Hire a car: There's no public transport, so a car is essential. There are a number of scenic routes, including a 2.5-hour drive from Capertee to the picturesque Dunns Swamp. [greaterbluemountainsdrive.com.au](https://www.greaterbluemountainsdrive.com.au)

2

Go kangaroo spotting: Roos are most active between dusk and dawn, so be careful when driving at night. You'll see plenty grazing in fields, or head towards Coorongooaba Camping Area near Glen Davis.

3

Take a helicopter tour: The best way to appreciate the vastness of the valley is from above during a joy flight with Capertee Valley Helicopters. Tel +61 2 6359 0157

4

Don't miss Mudgee: This popular wine region, 80 kilometres north of Capertee, has almost 40 cellar doors, several chic boutique hotels and plenty of cafés and restaurants. [visitmudgeeregion.com.au](https://www.visitmudgeeregion.com.au)

5

Pop into a pub: For a true slice of Aussie life, sink a schooner of beer with the locals. The Globe in Rylstone has a popular bistro serving locally-sourced food. [theglobehotel.com.au](https://www.theglobehotel.com.au)