

Train Your Dog

Old fashioned steam train travel with your dog and a leisurely lunch in Leura

It's Friday afternoon, on a hot summer Sydney day. It's been a hectic week and already the heat outside intensifies the exhaust fumes of city living. I look over to the dog stretched out in the middle of the office floor, quietly soaking the cool tiles. She looks up at me and here is the inspiration that I need for a quick weekend breather. A day trip away from heat and a respite from crowds that we can both enjoy.

I think quickly about what elements this trip should incorporate:

1. an easy trip within 2 hours drive (dogs and people die in hot cars and frankly I loath driving for longer than necessary)
2. it must be a dog friendly (she would punish me unmercifully should I leave her behind)
3. it should incorporate some good food (I'm thinking more about my own gastronomic needs than hers. So I'll have to find a dog friendly café or restaurant.)
4. there should be some quiet adventure involved (I'm not talking about extreme tandem human/dog abseiling here. Just something we can both do that would be different from our normal activity)
5. if we go on a Sunday, we should get back to the city early evening, as I'm back to work on Monday, (and secretly, I don't want to miss important evening TV shows such as the addictive Newlyweds!)

On Saturday I hit the keyboard to do some quick, fingered Google searches and devise a master plan for a Sunday both of us should enjoy. We're going to drive to the Blue Mountains to enjoy the fresh air, flora and fauna, food and a trip on a train that allows dogs –the Great Lithgow Zig Zag Railway.

Sunday morning arrives and we pack car with the day's essentials:

portable drink bowl for dog	bottled water for me
favourite blanket for dog	favourite road tunes courtesy of iPod for me
liver treats for dog	assorted nuts and chocolate for me
lead and travel harness for dog	map and back-up global positioning device for me
dog poo bags for dog	bacterial handie-wipes and other assorted toiletries for me

It's a relatively quick drive up to the Blue Mountains, with us both singing along to 'Wide Open Spaces', although I'm not sure if the dog is inspired by the Dixie Chicks or if she needs a rest stop. We follow the road signs through to quaint town of Mount Victoria, down the Bells Line of Road to get to the Clarence departure point of the Zig Zag Railway. Parking spaces are plentiful and free. We set off over the railway line to the ticket office. I met Lucy, one of the 'enthusiasts' who keep the operations of the railway running. She giggles as she issues us with our tickets—one for me and a special dog ticket for my hound. "You know dogs travel for free", she tells me.

As the Zig Zag steam locomotive shines in the morning sun, we eye which travel compartment we would like to ride in. Most of the carriages have separate entry doors that open from the outside but not on the inside. A sliding window allows access to the outside handles. The dog leaps aboard and I realise my initial reservations as to how she would navigate the gap between carriage and platform are unfounded.

Unlike many City Rail services, the Zig Zag Railway runs on time. With a celebratory whistle blow, the train pulls away from the Clarence Station. In a few minutes the train goes through the dark Clarence tunnel. I look over to the dog and she has that 'spooky face'. Some dog people may recognise this face—it's the wide-eyed expression that I interpret as "I have no idea what's going on here". In a matter of minutes it's as if she's suddenly developed 'train-legs'. She seems completely unfazed by the gentle rocking and rolling, clicking and clattering of train travel.

The trip literally zig zags down over three magnificently constructed sandstone viaducts and has drop off points for picnic spots. You can let the guard know where you want to stop off for a picnic and they'll pick you up on a return journey. At various stops we get out to watch the Zig Zag personnel prepare the train for its return trip. There are many people who comment to the dog and me that they didn't realise the train excursion was 'dog friendly'. If only they had known they would have brought their own pooch along.

For folk wanting to pick up a picnic lunch there's a great little delicatessen called 'Deli and More' conveniently situated on Station Road in Mount Victoria. They have fantastic coffee and other beverages. There's a wide selection of meats and sandwiches are made to order. My suggestion would be to try one of their yummy homemade pies.

The return uphill journey puts this mighty steam train through her paces and there's a great deal of puffing getting back up the steep slopes. The round trip is approximately one and a half hours of picturesque vistas.

We step out into a bright (but cool) summer day and head for the car. It's here that dog poo bags come in handy. The handie-wipes are also put to good use as I've got soot all over my exposed body parts. We head back up to Mount Victoria and onto the Great Western Highway towards the charming village of Leura.

I'm tipped by a local's suggestion that Café Bon Ton would be a good option for lunch. It's just a short stroll through 'The Mall' to the restaurant. We're greeted by a cheerful waitperson who ushers us through the cool, leafy courtyard to a 'dog table'. In minutes we have a refreshed dog water bowl and menus. Café Bon Ton is a busy restaurant serving big breakfasts and a wide selection of lunch choices including soups, pasta, sandwiches and salads. They also have an imaginative and moderately priced wine list. The 'dog table' is under a shady awning with a view of the courtyard. I order up a warm salad of roast vegetables, coffee and mineral water. The dog looks at me as I savour every morsel of delicious pesto flavoured veggie. I remind her of the rules of when we're dining out—she's a dog and it's bad manners on my part to feed her at a restaurant table—no matter how dog friendly they are.

After a relaxed lunch we stroll through Leura for some window-shopping. The town has an interesting collection of gift shops, specialist food outlets and a wine shop with a wide and interesting selection of Australian and imported varieties.

The dog looks a little tired from all the activity so I take this a cue to find the car for the return journey home. Once again it's time to fire up the iPod for our homeward bound journey. The thought of heading back to the heat of the city isn't as appealing as our anticipation for our earlier drive. It's not long that we're jammed into the crawling traffic on Parramatta Road. I'm trying to ignore the traffic squeeze by singing along to ZZ Top's 'She's Got Legs'. I glance back at the dog—she's not singing and she seemingly hasn't got legs—she's lying, fast asleep on her blanket.



Zig Zag Railway History

The Great Lithgow Zig Zag Railway was built between 1866 and 1869 originally to enable produce to be taken from farming areas beyond the Blue Mountains and to help develop coal and iron ore found in the Lithgow Valley. The steep sloping tracks form the letter 'Z' with reversing stations at Top and Bottom Points. The engineering feat of overcoming the steep sloping railway led to construction of other mountain railways overseas—mainly the Americas.

The railway was the vision of John Whitton, Chief Engineer of the NSW Government Railways. Originally from Yorkshire, Whitton arrived in Sydney in 1856 and lived his final years in St Leonards. At the time he arrived in New South Wales there was just 21 miles (34 kms) of completed railway. By the time he retired in 1889, more than 2199 miles (3538 kms) of railway was in use. In the Blue Mountains, Whitton had to build many viaducts, bridges and other works such as culverts; he used readily available sandstone. For this reason many of these works have survived.

By the end of the 19th Century, rail traffic over the Blue Mountains was heavy and the single track had become a bottleneck. In 1910 completion of a ten-tunnel deviation through the escarpment meant that the single track was retired. The track was removed and the land reverted to bush.

In 1972 a group of railway enthusiasts formed a Co-operative and started to rebuild the track and buy the rolling stock. Members of the Co-operative still maintain the railway and the facilities.

How to get there:

150kms from Sydney, in the Blue Mountains. 10kms East of Lithgow on the Bells Line Road.

Parking:

Free - at the Clarence station

Cost:

Adults: \$20.00

Children: \$10.00 (under 5-years travel free)

Dogs: free but on purchasing tickets please let the staff know so they can issue a 'special dog ticket'.

www.zigzag.com.au for timetable information

ph: (02) 6351 4826 (recorded timetable)

ph: (02) 6355 2955 (general information)

Café Bon Ton

192 The Mall

Leura NSW 2780

ph: (02) 4782 4377

e: bonton@ozemail.com.au

Deli and More

30 Station Street

Mt Victoria NSW 2786

ph: (02) 4787 1157



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