
Introduction

Around midday on **Sunday 23 August 2020**, 20-year-old friends Jana and Leila, from south-western Sydney, left their car in the car park at Evans Lookout and went down the Grand Canyon track, expecting a two-hour walk. It had snowed the day before, and this was one of the coldest days of the year. They were wearing thin full exercise/gym gear that completely covered their body, arms and legs. When they got to the bottom of the stairs and reached the creek that runs through the canyon, instead of turning right and going back to Neates Glen as intended, they didn't see any signs, and turned left into Rodriguez Pass.

From there, it is a demanding six-hour walk back to Govetts Leap, descending and climbing 600-800m, but they didn't know it. All they were carrying was a bottle of water and an apple. They had seen some warnings about bush fire damage and became worried when they saw many fallen trees and found themselves on the edge of high cliffs on a faint and narrow track. They were expecting to find themselves going in a circle and arriving back at their car no later than 3 pm. So around 3 pm they turned back, and tried to use their phones to call for help. However, they found that they had no reception. They found themselves walking towards a waterfall (possibly Beauchamp Falls) and on a trail that ended in a muddy puddle. They tried using the maps on their phone but kept ending up at cliff edges and dead ends that weren't apparent on the map. They then made the decision to stay the night, as there



The girls didn't see this sign: Rodriguez Pass to the left and the Grand Canyon track to Neates Glen on the right. (author's photo)

was no way they were going to make it back to the top with clear vision and were worried they might fall off the cliffs.

So, they walked back down as they believed the lower they went, the warmer it would be. Darkness falls early inside the valleys/canyons because of the shadows from the cliffs. When it started to get dark, they found a level spot not far from the cliff edges that offered a little shelter. The temperature started to drop, but luckily there was very little wind and no rain. They told each other jokes to keep up their spirits and moved around a bit to stay warm, but nightfall found them at the same spot.

By this time, the police had been advised that they were missing. At around 10 pm they heard a helicopter and jumped for joy, hugging each other, and tried signalling to the helicopter with their phone light. The helicopter hovered right above them but didn't seem to see them and didn't have any lights on. They were very cold and afraid to go to sleep. They stayed where

they were though, and when the sun came up, they saw a landmark they had been looking for, and the path leading to it, and (using the phone as a compass) followed the path upwards.

Early in the morning on Monday 24 August 2020, their friend Bushra Moussa put an appeal on a Facebook bushwalking group for people to look out for the two girls. The girls' families drove up to Evans Lookout, split into groups and, despite police warnings to the contrary, went looking for them. Soon the girls were overjoyed to hear the voice of their uncle shouting their names, and were able to walk out with him. Somehow, though they had lots of bruises and scratches, they were safe and well.

About four million tourists visit the World Heritage listed Blue Mountains every year.ⁱ This number has risen sharply over recent years, though numbers fell during the COVID crisis. It is Australia's second most popular tourist attraction and the busiest National Park in NSW. There is very little reliable visitor data available on use of walking tracks, but use is estimated to range from several thousand on a typical informal track providing access to a significant feature such as a canyon, to 300,000 walkers per annum on a typical cliff-top track on the Jamison Valley escarpment.ⁱⁱ Since only about 10-20% of incidents are reported in the media, few people realise the nature of the risks they are taking. They may think the risks are negligible or at least publicly managed without need for personal effort. My research suggests there are now about 200 people being rescued each year. Every year until 2013, around 130 bushwalkers got lost or needed rescuing, of which about 20 spent an unexpected night in the bush.ⁱⁱⁱ That's about one every three days, but most happen during peak visitation times: weekends (especially on long weekends) and holiday periods.

i This compares favourably to the 5 to 6 million who visit the Grand Canyon in the USA annually. Nearly 16 million visit the Lake District in the UK, which is about the same size (236,200 ha) but much more accessible (there were 535 incidents there in 2015, including 30 deaths). There were 2.8 million international and domestic visitors yearly to the Blue Mountains National Park alone in 2018, but the World Heritage Area includes several other national parks and the Blue Mountains includes many areas that are not in the national parks.

ii NPWS management plan for Blue Mountains National Park, p.78.

iii *Blue Mountains Gazette* (BMG) 9/1/2013, quoted on the current NPWS "TREK" web page. The more recent police rescue figures (176 incidents) show a significant increase in the number of incidents since then.