

Dear Sydney...

NOTHING BEATS GETTING TO KNOW SYDNEY FROM A LOCAL'S PERSPECTIVE, ONCE YOU'VE TICKED OFF ALL THE BUCKET LIST ATTRACTIONS...

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For many overseas travellers, a visit to Australia is a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Seeing the sails of Sydney's famous Opera House, driving across (or climbing) the Harbour Bridge, touring the historic Rocks, and cruising Sydney's sparkling harbour are must-do activities for first-time visitors here.

As a couple from Sacramento, California, on our first visit, we diligently checked these iconic tourist attractions off our bucket list; but we felt something was missing. A drive through the city's diverse collection of neighbourhoods left us longing to see more of the "other" Sydney. We wanted to get out and walk around its different neighbourhoods and really get to know Sydney like the locals.

On our second trip to Sydney, last year, with help from our good friend, Jon Benson, a lifelong Sydneysider, and our daughter Ashley, a recent transplant to Sydney, we wandered off the beaten path, determined to see Sydney as its residents do.

First, Ashley advised us to purchase Opal Cards. A smart move. A tap of these cards gave us access to >>

Main image: Manly Beach



Sydney's excellent train, bus, ferry, and light rail systems. Then, for four weeks, we used only local transport and shanks' pony to criss-cross the city on our quest for authentic, local experiences, and to check out some of the best bars and restaurants.

CRONULLA COASTAL WALK

Sydney is widely considered one of the planet's most beautiful cities, largely because it folds around the world's greatest natural harbour. And at the very heart

“ At the very heart of Sydney's appeal is its well-maintained coastal walks ”

Clockwise from far left: Cronulla Beach; the Manly Ferry; Wendy Whiteley's Secret Garden; the ocean pool at Shelly Beach; Luna Park; the ANZAC Bridge in Blackwattle Bay

of its appeal is its well-maintained coastal walks, where you'll find stunning shoreline views – and meet plenty of its residents.

Located in Sutherland Shire, Cronulla delivers one of the best coastal walks, accessible by train or car. We headed there with Jon – who knows all the best harbour walks in Sydney. Anxious to shake off our jet lag, we were more than happy to get some exercise and fresh ocean air.

Parking near the Shelly Beach Café across from Shelly Park, we made our way toward the water and the esplanade. We followed the smoothly paved walkway to Hungry Point, past Shelly Park and the rock baths at Glaisher Point.

The path curves around the waterworn sandstone edges of the peninsula past Bass and Flinders Point to Salmon Haul Bay. Once there, we admired the grand views of Bate Bay across to the Royal National Park near Bundeena, and the glistening waters of Port Hacking receding into the Tasman Sea.

On Sunday, the path teems with joggers, strollers, and picnickers. Shady picnic spots along the esplanade provide an escape from the sun. We passed a group of friendly picnickers who offered us a bite to eat. These Aussies are very friendly!

THE SECRET GARDEN

On a cool cloudy day, we met up with Jon at Circular Quay. He loves his walks, as most Sydneysiders do, and today he was going to take us on one of his favourite adventures – to a 'secret spot' across the harbour near Lavender Bay.

Using our treasured Opal Card, we boarded the ferry and then disembarked at the Jeffrey Street Wharf – a ferry stop used mostly by locals. A small grassy hill just above the dock provides a spectacular view over the Central Business District across the harbour, framed by the Sydney Opera House on our left and the Harbour Bridge (fondly known as 'The Coathanger') on our right. Jon led us under the Bridge to a path running along the water's edge. >>

Fishermen love this spot. Continuing along the waterside path past Olympic Pool, Milsons Point, and the giant sardonically smiling face of Luna Park, we came to Lavender Bay to discover Wendy Whiteley’s Secret Garden – although it’s not really so secret anymore. This shaded nature refuge was lovingly created by Wendy Whiteley, widow of Brett Whiteley, one of Australia’s most famous artists.

Wendy still resides in the white family home that overlooks a gorgeous garden. This delightful botanic treasure overflows with native and exotic plants, towering trees, and quirky benches, tables and chairs. We marvelled at the colourful parrots, kookaburras, gulls and wagtails that call it home.

Full of nooks and crannies and hidden pathways, the garden has a magical, mystical feel to it. We half expected to step around a corner and stumble across some fairies.

After a classic Aussie lunch of barramundi at the Kirribilli Club, we headed around the corner to the Harbour Bridge for a 1.5 kilometre walk back to The Rocks. The spectacular views from the Bridge helped Pam forget her fear of heights, as she snapped photos all the way.

DINING HOTSPOTS

A popular day trip for Sydneysiders is the ferry ride to Manly Beach. In Manly, everyone told us that we must dine at Manly 16ft Skiff Club along the esplanade, near the marina. The Skiff Club offers inside and outside dining and a full bar.

We arrived early and had no trouble getting a table. The food is well prepared, the fish fresh, and the atmosphere reflects this exclusive, yet friendly yacht club. And the perfect views of Manly Cove added to

Right: Harbour views from the restaurant terrace at Kirribilli Club



the classy ambience. A walk along the esplanade after lunch to Manly Beach let us experience its vibrant café culture, as well as its stunning seaside beauty.

Doyles on the Beach opened in the 1880s as a tiny shop front in Watsons Bay, serving fish caught by Alice Doyles’ grandfather. Now it’s a Sydney icon, a seafood restaurant celebrated for its friendly service and fabulous harbour views. Accessible by ferry from Circular Quay, Doyles is a mecca for locals celebrating

“Doyles on the Beach is a Sydney icon, a restaurant celebrated for its fabulous harbour views”

special occasions. With its idyllic location right on the beach, Doyles has long been recognized as one of Sydney’s most romantic restaurants. We spent an afternoon there lingering over a long lunch, enjoying a seafood platter for two, Champagne and the stunning bayside views.

Another favourite place to dine was located in the Customs House at Circular Quay. Café Sydney is acknowledged as one of Australia’s best-known restaurants, and it is much frequented by locals. You have to go there once!

The Café offers dazzling window-framed views of Sydney Harbour and the international maritime dock. Oh yes, and the exquisite seafood dishes match the views!

HIP HANGOUTS

It was time to hit Sydney’s bar scene! Ashley showed us where the natives go to drink. We hit three different bars, all located within a few steps of each other in the Central Business District, just off Clarence Street.

Descending into The Baxter Inn through the back door, the exposed brick basement was filled with mahogany furnishings and an entire wall of whisky behind the bar. We felt like we’d entered an American prohibition-era speakeasy.

Like a 19th century hardware store, The Baxter Inn features wheeled ladders suspended from railings in the ceiling. The bartender slides the ladders to the bottle shelves, and climbs up to fetch your order. Amidst a well-turned-out crowd of Aussies, we had discovered one of Sydney’s inside secrets! >>



Clockwise from top: Shelly Beach; a whisky lover’s heaven at The Baxter Inn; the iconic Doyles on the Beach restaurant in Watsons Bay



The ferries come and go at Manly Cove



They're more mainstream now, but still worth checking out for new and vintage clothing, creative arts and crafts, jewellery, palm reading, holistic treatments and so on.

We ate our way through a delicious international food sampling of mussels and a Mediterranean plate filled with falafel, hummus and grilled peppers.

BOHEMIAN GLEBE

Lined with rows of Victorian terraces, the older inner-city suburb of Glebe once housed one of Sydney's largest Aboriginal communities. Now, this vibrant neighbourhood has miles of restaurants, bars and local shops, and reasonably priced housing for young professionals and working families. We loved Glebe for its leafy, residential feel and frequently strolled Glebe Point Road.

Situated between stately Victoria Park, on Parramatta Road, and Bicentennial Park, on tranquil Rozelle Bay, Glebe Point Road is a lengthy strip where we spent hours casually walking from café to restaurant to bar. Its village vibe really represents what Sydney is all about – local entrepreneurs running an eclectic variety of businesses along a single street. This synergy of independent efforts showcases Sydney's true essence.

Glebe Point Road includes a culinary collection of diverse restaurants serving all kinds of multicultural cuisine, and I'm sure we missed a few.

Add the road's colourful florist shops, terraced balconies, bottle shops stocked with wines from Australia's acclaimed wine regions, and grocery stores packed with fresh fruit and vegetables that spill over onto the footpath, and you have a street well worthy of walking from one end to the other, just to experience its vibrant personality!

BICENTENNIAL PARK

For a closer look at the Anzac Bridge, we strolled along Blackwattle Bay. You can see the bridge, from the serpentine-shaped paved pathway that snakes around the south side of Rozelle Bay, Blackwattle Bay and Glebe Point. With a picnic lunch from a Glebe Point Road grocery, we headed toward the water.

Bicentennial Park is a peaceful grassy area, boasting a playground and a foreshore track, much used by local dog walkers and joggers.

We proceeded east along the path toward Glebe Point, on the far edge of the parkland and marked by two enormous Moreton Bay fig trees. This point offers a photo opportunity for a dramatic close-up of the Anzac Bridge.

For a month, we got out of the city centre, lived in its neighbourhoods, rented apartments in Glebe and Surry Hills, an Airbnb in Ultimo and a few nights in our daughter's two-storey, four-bedroom terrace house in Glebe, typical of Australia's Victorian era.

Dear Sydney, we loved getting to know you like a local. Can't wait to come back! 🇦🇺

Next – just a stumble down the back alley from The Baxter Inn – we headed to The Barber Shop. A barber shop by day and a cocktails and gin joint by night, the vibe is totally different from The Baxter. With a glass shelved wall lighted from behind in a cool blue hue, The Barber Shop stocks an impressive array of specialty gins.

Across Clarence Street, the Lobo Plantation is another cool basement bar, influenced by old school Caribbean styling. Named after the legendary Cuban sugar baron, Julio Lobo, the Plantation features an impressive selection of rum-based cocktails and well-seasoned bar bites, and is regularly attended by the after-work crowd.

Clockwise from top left: Artisan stalls at Paddington Markets; Victorian architecture in Glebe, a colourful fruit and veg store on Glebe Point Road

“The Paddington Markets are a fair dinkum Aussie suburban cultural experience”

LOCAL MARKETS

Ashley showed us around the Paddington Markets. One of Sydney's oldest community markets, where more than 170 artisan stall vendors sell a range of beautiful Australian-made goods, the Paddington Markets are a fair dinkum Aussie suburban cultural experience.

These quirky long-running markets have turned Saturdays into pandemonium! When they started, in the 1970s, they were distinctly countercultural.