

**SYDNEY**

“By God what a site! By man what a mess!” wrote architect Clough Williams Ellis on a 1950s visit to Sydney. And there can be no disputing that while some divine landscaper must have been particularly inspired when he laid out the 21 square miles of harbour, until recently Sydneysiders have done little to enhance His work. It speaks volumes for the outstanding natural beauty that everyone immediately falls in love with the city, despite man’s contribution. What other city could triumph over such a hotchpotch of undistinguished skyscrapers, a centre full of trashy souvenir shops, an expressway thundering above and a railway clanking alongside? And what audacity to dominate every aspect with an opera house built so prominently over the water in a form that was bound to be controversial.

And yet Sydney harbour has been, is, and will continue to be the most stunningly beautiful stretch of water imaginable. It is the heart, soul and *raison d’être* of the city. All roads radiate to Circular Quay, which acts like a magnet for anyone with time to spare or a ferry to catch.



Photo by Dan Feldstein

Leisurely waterborne transport dictates the pace of the harbour. Careworn commuters press their way urgently through the cavernous business area, arrive at the quayside, loosen their ties, visibly relax. I have never seen one run to catch a departing ferry. There’ll be another along soon. Meanwhile a beer (tinny to you) at a sunny harbourside café will round off the day nicely. The buskers, acrobats, jugglers, cartoonists, clowns, along the quays have a willing captive audience, the young Japanese violinist plays her Brahms apparently unconscious of onlookers, just for the joy of it.

Circular Quay has never been circular. Currently it is a wonky quadrangle, with one side

water, but when the First Fleet's commander, Captain Arthur Phillip, came upon it in 1788 it was a V-shaped inlet in the bush, which he named Sydney Cove, after the Home British Secretary, Baron Sydney.

A walk around the Quay from one Sydney symbol, the Harbour Bridge, to another, the Opera House, is an obvious way to get the flavour. If you have only an hour to spend in Sydney, this is where to spend it. If you have only a day, take a Captain Cook harbour cruise too. If you have any longer, keep on taking the prescription without any risk of indigestion.

The Sydneysiders' pride in their heritage is endearingly evident. They know full well how lucky they are. The Bridge, not the most beautiful in the world, and the controversial Opera House have become icons, the one affectionately known as the Old Coathanger, the other an ongoing source of debate. Whatever previous conceptions may have promised, the reality of the Opera House is always surprising. Not white, as the posters indicate, the fishscale tiles glitter cream, honey, even sand-coloured, depending on weather and aspect, glowing in the sun, shining in the rain. The building's diversity challenges the imagination; like a familiar piece of classical music that never bores, it invites individual interpretation. Set where it is, on reclaimed land jutting out into the water, surrounded by fleets of busily tacking yachts, 'sails' is the most obvious comparison for its splayed arches. 'Nuns' coiffes' is a delightful idea, 'seashells' is another. From a jealous Brisbane wag comes, "Like Joan Sutherland's mouth in the mad scene of *Lucia di Lammermoor*". Look at it from its most unattractive angle, head on from the water, and you can just see what he means, but there can be little doubt about its success.

Nearby is the setting for one of the sights that best sums up the Sydney way of life—an evening of music or theatre in the park. Around 7 o'clock the audience starts drifting in, spreading out rugs, setting out picnics, pouring out something bubbly. There are friends, families, lovers and children, all quietly relishing the sunshine and the prospect of the undemanding enjoyable evening ahead. No noise, no fuss, no mess. Just a taken-for-granted bonus for those who inhabit this multi-blessed city.

But the harbour is not all Circular Quay. Far from it. Captain Phillip reckoned that "a thousand sail of the line might ride in it in perfect security". And that security derives from the sheltered bays, coves and inlets that make the waterscape so intriguing. So deeply do they probe, so convoluted is their geography, that the distance all round the harbour edge is 159 miles. Houses bordering the water command ever-escalating premiums, at which Sydneysiders love to boggle. As the Captain Cook sightseeing boat approaches prosperous Double Bay (Double Pay in Sydneyspeak) the commentator fills us in on the property scene. "The green house changed hands for eight million dollars. They're asking 11 million for the one with the helicopter pad. See those two on the edge? The house that was there before sold for two million; they pulled it down and those there now fetched ten million."

At the Bridge end are The Rocks, a sandstone outcrop above Sydney Cove that was the earliest and most indisputable of the settlements Captain Phillip discovered. In the dark courts and furtive alleyways lived thieves, prostitutes and drunkards, the scum of the early Sydney population. It was not until the beginning of the last century that matters changed, when bubonic plague caused many of the unhygienic buildings to be demolished—by 1970 the potential of the surviving Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian buildings was realised and a miraculous facelift was achieved. Today it's a self-contained enclave of crafts shops, boutiques, wine and cafés, perfect for a stroll, particularly at the weekends when streets are closed to traffic and markets take over. Down by the waterfront is a clutch of multi-national

restaurants, whose clients get a fine view of non-stop activity, marine and pedestrian.

There are so many small harbour beaches, some approachable only by boat, that the Sydney Morning Herald features “A Beach a Day—You thought that getting to Store Beach was a challenge? Well, try Quarantine Beach”. Evocative names like these are appended to many a landmark. Some refer to local activity—Rushcutters Bay, Forty Basket Beach (fish), Camp Cove, Pinchgut Island (where prisoners were starved), Neutral Bay (where foreign ships had to anchor), and some like Kirribilli, Parramatta and Woolloomooloo hark back to the aborigines, as do two of Sydney's most famous sites—the Opera House is built on Bennelong Point, named after a loyal servant of Captain Phillip's and Manly describes the noble bearing of its original inhabitants.

Ah! Manly—everyone's favourite ferry ride. Pier Three at Circular Quay puts it in a nutshell—“7 miles to Manly, 1,000 miles from care”. The ride can be a rough one, since the sturdy green boat has to negotiate the ocean waves rolling through the Heads, but the passengers to Manly always seem to be in holiday mood and shriek with companionable glee at every pitch and roll. Manly has the best of all worlds—on the harbour side are sheltered coves and a magical eight mile harbour walk, the Manly Scenic Walkway. On the ocean side is a vast beach rivalling Bondi for sand, surf and beefy lifeguards in funny hats. The connection between the two is The Corso, a wide pedestrian promenade lined with surfing shops and fish cafés. The centre has benches and trees and sunken squares for amateur entertainers. Always humming, the atmosphere is like a very jolly family outing to Blackpool, but somehow sleaze-free.

Many of the beaches boast excellent restaurants where, toes in the sand, you can enjoy some of the most interesting cooking in the world, thanks to the uninhibited approach of its multinational chefs and the unparalleled variety of indigenous ingredients. Cuisines oriental, Mediterranean and American are put into the melting pot, and out comes something utterly delicious known as Modern Australian.

Public transport from the harbour is excellent, with most places accessible by ferry, but walking is the best way to get to know the harbour borders. The obvious route is behind the Opera House, round Farm Cove to the headland where the Japanese will be photographing one another in Mrs Macquairie's chair. Another time, do yourself a favour—pick up a picnic, a camera and a cozzie and catch the ferry for the short ride across to Old Cremorne Point. Take the path round the cove, high above the water and the lighthouse, through banks of frangipani, hibiscus and plombago, with kookaburras chortling away in the background, and take your pick from the dozens of idyllic shady spots on the way, that offer superb photo opportunities of the Opera House, Harbour Bridge, water, and yachts at anchor.

Early one lovely February morning I did just this and met only one housewife in a dressing gown, walking her dog, a pair of earnest joggers, and a few commuters, briefcases in hand, jacket over shoulder, en route for the ferry. What a way to start the day! But Cremorne Point is more than just a pretty face. It has a secret tucked away that no guidebook seems to have discovered. Built out over the rocks, shielded by colourful shrubs, is a long narrow swimming pool, donated by a local resident and free to all. Can there be another swimming pool in the world with a view like this? Film stars and tycoons have fantasy pools galore, but none that I know of where you can swim in a flowery bower with a backcloth like the Sydney skyline.

*Patricia Fenn*