

# TRAVEL

Australia is throwing open its borders to fully vaccinated visitors. And its largest city, Sydney, often compared to Vancouver for its expansive urban green spaces, scenic harbour and iconic bridge, was my first port of call.

Mark Sissons.

VANCOUVER SUN SATURDAY, MARCH 12, 2022

PAGE C12



The 'Emerald Way' coastline near Sydney offers over 100 km of urban trails. "This walk allows you to see how the continent has been physically and historically shaped." TOURISM AUSTRALIA

# G'DAY, SYDNEY!

MARK SISSONS

Australia reopens borders to vaccinated travellers

To welcome the first international flights back since Australia lifted its COVID-19 travel ban, Sydney decided to throw us a party.

The arrivals hall was packed with jubilant, kangaroo costume-clad teenagers handing out Waratah flowers, stuffed koala toys and yellow jars of Vegemite to bewildered passengers. Tourism Minister Dan Tehan was on hand to welcome the world back to Oz as a DJ spun and local TV news crews captured joyful reunions and interviewed passengers about how it feels to be back in 'Straya.'

"Sweet as, mate. Sweet as."

It's my first international sojourn since I flew home from South Australia in December 2019. Soon after, the entire continent went into a fortress-like lockdown and tourism all but ended.

Now, Australia is throwing open its borders to fully vaccinated visitors. And its largest city, Sydney, often compared to Vancouver for its expansive urban green spaces, scenic harbour and iconic bridge, was my first port of call.

I boarded a private Sydney Harbour yacht cruise offered by East-sail.

As we departed from the Darling Point Marina and traced the contours of one of the world's most spectacular natural harbours, we cruised past landmarks like the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, Fort Denison and Cockatoo Island, one of Australia's UNESCO's World Heritage convict sites.

We continued past the opulent homes and sandy beaches of waterfront suburbs like Balmain and Point Piper before approaching the historic Barrenjoey Head Lighthouse, where Sydney Harbour meets the sea.



Iconic Sydney Opera House is one of the most-photographed buildings in the world. CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS OF AUSTRALIA



Founded in 1858, Tyrell's Wines is one of the Hunter Valley's oldest wineries. TOURISM AUSTRALIA

## IF YOU GO

### Getting there

Qantas Airways now offers year-round non-stop flights between Vancouver and Sydney (qantas.com).

### Where to stay

Rising dramatically above the bustling Barangaroo Precinct, Crown Sydney offers the city's first 6-star hotel experience (crownosydney.com.au). For a funkier vibe, try Ovolo Woolloomooloo, a boutique waterfront hotel situated within the world's longest timber-piled wharf (www.ovolohotels.com).

Located in the heart of Hunter Valley wine country, Chateau Elan at the Vintage offers private villas overlooking a championship golf course popular in the early morning with wild kangaroos (www.chateauelan.com.au).

The following day I hiked along the popular Eastern Beaches Coastal Walkway from South Coogee to Bondi Beach, joined by Jon Brian and Dugald Cameron, who operate a guiding service called Urban Walks.

This stretch of coastline forms a small part of the Emerald Way, their signature multi-day trek that spans over 100 km of coastal walking trails.

"We're a harbour city obsessed by the ocean in an island nation surrounded by sea," says Brian. "This walk allows you to see how the continent has been physically and historically shaped and how the complex story of Australia goes back millions of years."

As we approached Bondi, home to Australia's famous surfing scene, an unseasonable storm broke out, mixing my plans to swim. But the ocean pool overlooking the beach's south end was open, so I took a plunge there as huge waves crashed over its concrete breaker wall.

Open to the public year round, the famous Bondi Baths has been a historical landmark at Bondi Beach for more than 100 years. Operated by the Bondi Icebergs Club since 1929, the pool was once a winter training pool for Bondi's lifeguards.

### A DAY ON THE ROCKS, A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

Home to upscale cafes, shops, restaurants, open-air markets and museums, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, the bustling harbourfront promenade under the Sydney Harbour Bridge called the Rocks is Sydney's oldest neighbourhood.

The first British fleet of convict-carrying ships arrived here in 1788, and the Rocks soon became the site of Australia's first European settlement.

For thousands of years before that, Sydney was home to the Eora People, as heard on The Rocks Aboriginal Dreaming Tour. This tour was designed to share the Eora's enduring connection to the Australian landscape and to build mutual understanding and respect between Sydney's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

As we explored the Rocks our Aboriginal guide shares fascinating stories about Eora life and society, including their land and water use, rite of passage ceremonies, and deep spiritual connection to the harbour and its adjoining waterways.

The Sydney Opera House, the symbol of modern Australia, was built on the site of an Aboriginal settlement called Wocconmagullii — now Bennelong Point.

A far different take on historical heartbreak awaited me that evening at the Sydney Opera House, where I watched Six, the global pop-musical phenomenon about the six wives of Henry VIII.

Billed as six rebellious heroines taking to the mic to remix more than 500 years of history and heartbreak in a celebration of girl power, Six is part kick-ass 'herstory,' part Spice Girls meets X-Factor.

It's a hugely entertaining introduction to this masterpiece of 20th-century architecture that took fourteen years to construct, and today hosts everything from innovative theatre productions and symphony music to classical ballet and contemporary dance performances, pop concerts, and of course magnificent opera productions.

Any visit to Sydney should include an excursion to the nearby Blue Mountains.

Best known for dramatic sandstone ridges and deep canyons covered in eucalypt trees and bushland, this World Heritage-listed region is home to bucolic hide-aways like Spicers Sangoma Retreat, a luxurious, eco-friendly, eco-certified cluster of villas aptly named after the Zulu word for healer.

Here, I took advantage of Sangoma's emphasis on rejuvenation and connection to relax, unwind, meditate and indulge in its spa-like atmosphere.

Chief Will Houia and his team



Bondi Icebergs overlooking iconic Bondi Beach is Australia's most stunning ocean swimming pool. **TOURISM AUSTRALIA**



Located in the Hunter Valley wine region, Brokenwood Wines offers tastings in its stylish restaurant. **BROKENWOOD WINES**

offered a daily gourmet menu featuring fresh, organic produce sourced from the nearby Hawkesbury region and paired with some of Australia's finest wines.

Oenophiles will also want to venture two hours north of Sydney to explore the wineries of the Hunter Valley, Australia's oldest wine region. World-renowned for its quality Shiraz and Semillon wines, the Hunter has been a wine-growing

region since 1828.

Today, it is home to 120 wineries, award-winning restaurants, charming hotels and country guest houses.

As accessible as the Okanagan but more mellow, the region offers a considerable range of winery tasting and dining experiences set in the picturesque foothills of the Brokenback Ranges.

I began my whirlwind tasting



Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, Spicers Sangoma Retreat offers a luxe escape. **SPICERS RETREATS**

tour at Tyrrell's Wines, one of Australia's oldest and most distinguished family-owned wine-making companies. Established in 1858, Tyrrell's produces some of Australia's most awarded wines, including the iconic Vat 1 Semillon.

I also stop at Brokenwood Wines, one of Australia's most reputable premium wine labels, known for its famous Graveyard Vineyard Shiraz and highly acclaimed IlR

Reserve Semillon.

As I sample some of the finest wines the Hunter has to offer paired with a five-course degustation dinner at the elegant Margan Winery, I reflect on how every where I've been on this brief trip I've been met with smiles and enthusiastic welcomes.

Australia, I've missed you. It's sweet as to finally be back Down Under.