



The stars of Beautiful.



Bennelong restaurant.



Spicers Potts Point.



Junior suite, Ovolo 1888.



The Grounds of Alexandria.



Chef Kylie Kwong.



The Grounds of Alexandria.



Sokyo at the Star.

The author was a guest of Destination NSW.

W SOME KIND OF Wonderful

Sydney is bold and beautiful but what's beneath its shiny surface? **Julie Hosking** eats humble pie — and a whole lot more — as she falls in love with the Emerald City.

Firstly, an apology. I'm sorry Sydney, I had you all wrong. I always thought you were beautiful. But you're so much deeper than your flashy exterior suggests. I have to admit I misjudged you. And it's all Carole King's fault. (Sort of.)

I always thought of you as the bolder, brasher but somehow less substantial cousin of Melbourne. Sure, you had that fabulous glittering harbour. Those incredible man-made icons. Not even a diehard Melburnian could argue their city had anything to match the sails of the Opera House or the majesty of the Harbour Bridge. But what Bleak City lacked in glamour (and, OK, maybe weather) it made up for with the kind of cultural, sporting and gastronomic delights the Emerald City could only dream about.

To be fair, Sydney, my bias has deep roots in your southern rival. The kind of bias built not just from being born there, but from having spent many adult years living and working in the inner city, returning once I came back west whenever I could.

Sure, I have visited you many times, too, but I have stuck to those tried and true tourist zones, or disappeared way out west to the suburban enclaves my brothers call home. I had no idea before I jumped on that plane, lured by the promise of seeing one of my heroines brought to life on stage, that I would come away not just singing the musical's praises but waxing lyrical about experiences for which I had long thought Melbourne far superior.

My conversion begins slowly but inexorably with my ride from the airport. A chat with an amiable driver who knows the city's faults — snarling traffic being one of them — and still exudes the kind of enthusiasm for a place that tourist bodies pay big money to replicate. It helps that the sun is shining.

And my mood only improves when I arrive at the boutique Ovolo 1888. This is a hotel a few travellers in the know have been raving about for a while now — a converted wool store, it oozes charm and the kind of features (distressed walls, bold artwork) that you'd associate with a hip suburb rather than the touristy enclave of Darling Harbour. And with all the little added extras that make you feel welcome, rather than ripped off. Everything in the mini-bar is included. Granted, it's not as well stocked as many but it's got everything you need (and more) for one night. And you're not being slugged like a wounded bull every time you get the late-night nibbles either,

with a delightful Loot Bag on the bed that includes nuts, chips and chocolate. I could get used to this kind of service.

It's a short walk to Sokyo at the Star, where I'm meeting my sister-in-law for dinner before Beautiful: the Carole King Musical. Being a restaurant at a casino complex and not huge Japanese fans, neither of us is expecting much. But this trip is all about defying expectations. And raising them. The attentive waitress can see we're a little lost with the menu and offers some suggestions. An hour later, having hoed into sweet potato tempura, served with chipotle and buttermilk, and asparagus with truffle poke sauce and edamame dip; corn-fed chicken robata (that's grilled skewers); and Aylesbury duck breast with Brussels sprouts (I thought I didn't like them — wrong again) and baby cos, we roll out of there satisfied and suitably chagrined. It's a winner.

Now for the main event. The reason I so readily jumped at the chance to come to Sydney. How would the musical measure up to my long-held love for singer-songwriter Carole King? The force behind the first vinyl album I ever bought. Someone whose warmth of personality carries the crowd as much as her music. Would the Australian production live up to the rave reviews I'd read of the Broadway version? I needn't have worried. From the moment the curtain rises in the recently refurbished Lyric Theatre — and what a makeover — my heart is soaring.

Written by Douglas McGrath, Beautiful tells the story not just of Carole, but her husband and writing partner Gerry Goffin, and their great rivalry and friendship with fellow songwriters Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. It takes the audience on the remarkable journey of a rather dorky girl (just 16 when *It Might As Well Rain Until September* was released) who finds love, falls pregnant, writes a string of hits with her husband for the likes of the Drifters before losing love and finding her own voice. The cast is astounding, Esther Hannaford in particular doing Carole proud, and the music, which takes you from the sixties up to the seminal Tapestry, is marvellous. Take Good Care of My Baby. Some Kind of Wonderful. One Fine Day. So Far Away... By the time (You Make me Feel) Like a Natural Woman is played, there are tears. Lots of them. Many of them mine.

It's not easy to come down from such a high — I wonder how the performers do it night after night — but thankfully Sydney keeps playing the hits. Most of

which are new to me. Take Spicers Potts Point. The latest addition to the Spicers Retreat portfolio has only been open a couple of months but it's already striking the right note of sophistication and charm for the kind of traveller who prefers a home away from home to a bustling hotel.

The heritage-listed building, in the vibrant village of Potts Point, has been strikingly reinvented, with 20 guest rooms behind its elegant facade. I'm led down the hallway to a modern reception area that doubles as a bar, come cocktail hour, before taking a seat in the lounge, where I'm presented with my Spicers Potts Point Passport, a guide to the goodies outside the door. The rooms are decorated in muted shades of blue and green, Martine Emdur's paintings of underwater swimmers dotted throughout adding to the sense of calm. I've been upgraded to the Victoria Terrace suite — a spacious haven at the top of the stairs, sunlight streaming through the windows. The bath is big enough to sleep in, the walk-in shower would take my whole family. I'm tempted to simply sink into the plentiful pillows on the king bed and soak up my surrounds but there's lunch waiting. Yes, more food. And art. Did I mention art?

I jump in another cab, bound for the Art Gallery of NSW, a stunning 19th century building in The Domain awash with treasures that on this day include the Archibald Prize entrants. But first there's a table in the corner of Matt Moran's Chiswick Restaurant with my name on it. The place is humming with a mixture of business types and friends and family eating before or after they've visited the gallery. Some have probably come to enjoy the view, which is rather specky, but undoubtedly more for the food. There's no sign of the celebrity chef today but the menu bears his signature — fresh, local and full of flavour. I'm seated next to a mother and son who are having an interesting conversation about gay marriage, though I'm doing my best to avoid obvious eavesdropping. My entree arrives in time to distract, a dish so beautiful it could hang in the gallery. The smoothest, silkiest of goat's cheese with baby squash, edible flowers and a drizzle of lemon, it's plate-lickable, too. I contemplate ordering a second before I remember I also have snapper to come.

With no room for dessert, I make my way back to the gallery. I'm drawn more to landscapes than portraiture, so I find myself in the free public gallery first, admiring the likes of Eugene von Guerard's late »

feature

« 19th century painting of Milford Sound, New Zealand, before taking in the Archibald. It's the children's entries I find most fascinating; some are so good for ones so young and many of the stories behind their creations are also amusing and endearing. Such as 14-year-old Feng's "self-portrait of exasperation", based on an old picture of him crying, or 16-year-old Soo Min's portrait of her grandma, for which she's simply written: "I have created a portrait of my grandmother because I miss her." Who knew children's art could be so moving?

It's time for a wine. Luckily, I've heard of a place. Founded in 2008, Urban Winery Sydney takes a bit of finding. Tucked down the back of Precinct 75 in suburban St Peters that is something of an artistic hub, I have to ask a few friendly folk (including the local brewery) for directions. Owner and winemaker Alex Retief makes the mission worth my while, with a sample of a few fine drops from his A. Retief label and a chat about the wine he creates in the city's first urban winery. A proud New South Welshman, Alex only sources grapes from the State, many from lesser known regions such as Gundagai (which produces a rather fetching tempranillo) and Tumbarumba (an earthy chardonnay).

The winery is a great open barn of a space, with an inviting long bar down one side, bottles of the good stuff lining the walls. As we sit at the bar chatting, a tenant from one of the design shops comes in to pick up a few boxes of wine for a soiree that evening. How nice to have such neighbours. There's

a massive table in the centre, surrounded by tanks of wine and barrels, where they host functions, including lunch on the last Sunday of every month with a visiting chef. Next month, it's MasterChef finalist Arum Nixon's turn to cook up a feast to match the wines made on premises. You can also take a master class in blending your own wine, then bottle them with a personalised label. If only I had the time.

The rest of my stay is a similar challenge to my waistline, but also a tribute to the variety of spaces and places there are to eat and explore. Within walking distance of Spicers Potts Point, there are too many eateries to name but Billy Kwong is a must. Even better, because I'm dining alone, I can sit at the bar and watch the chefs in action as I eat.

Owner/chef Kylie Kwong is in charge tonight and she directs proceedings like a conductor would an orchestra: with precision. All the kitchen staff are wired for sound, so they can communicate over the hubbub and across service areas. I watch as spring onions are meticulously chopped, while another crew member keeps an eye on the buns steaming away. Floor staff are knowledgeable and very friendly. I take their advice and opt for saltbush cakes with chilli sauce and tamari, and a half serve of the most divine sung choi bao I've ever had. It's messy but who cares.

The following morning I'm so full from dinner, I can only face a slice of toast from the lovely breakfast menu at Spicers, but by the time I get to Black Star

Pastry, in Roseberry, I'm starting to feel peckish. I ignore my savoury palate and head straight for dessert. I'd been told that you simply can't go to this cafe without having the watermelon cake. It sounds odd, but it looks amazing and I'm sold at first bite. It's a divine blend of almond dacquoise, rose-scented cream, watermelon, strawberries, pistachios and dried rose petals. It's so light I decide I have room for another sweet (have I been taken over by aliens?), this time a caramel panna cotta. I do not regret it. Besides, I can walk it off wandering the neighbouring shops, before popping into Archie Rose Distillery to try a gin, or Three Blue Ducks for a coffee.

In the evening, I do what all good tourists should do at least once when in Sydney and head to the Opera House. I'd walked around the area the day before, watching as Sydneysiders wheeled luggage down the wharf to board a massive cruise liner, preparing to set sail from one of the world's most beautiful harbours. By day, it's truly stunning; the view never gets old. At night, it's magical. Even more

so from the inside as I sit with a girlfriend at the bar of the chefs' station in "the circle" at Bennelong Restaurant, the arches of Jorn Utzon's magnificent creation casting a golden glow over the diners. Everything we devour from Peter Gilmore's acclaimed kitchen is so delicious it's more than worthy of its exalted location. After all the eating I've been doing, it seems appropriate to finish the night at a dinner party – even if it is one where the knives are out.

Pity the Sydney Theatre Company's production of Moira Buffini's viscerally witty Dinner finishes tomorrow; it's a play with real belly laughs.

At the risk of sounding like Monty Python's ever-expanding Mr Creosote, I manage to find room for breakfast the next day. Only because there's this place called The Grounds of Alexandria I'd heard so much about. A friend in Sydney told me he thought it was overrated, but the queues outside this destination spot indicate otherwise. Located in an old pie factory, the Grounds has myriad nooks and crannies outside in which to eat or you can head for the cafe. Known for its specialty coffee (thumbs up from this caffeine addict), the Grounds also does a damn fine brekky. My cauliflower, chickpea and almond fritters come with soft scrambled eggs, cherry tomato compote and a mint and chilli yoghurt. It's divine but halfway through I find I can't fit in another wafer-thin morsel. Could it have been the fact I'd been eating my own (growing) weight since I arrived?

After a few quiet days with family, it's time to head home. I wait at the airport, listening to Tapestry on Spotify, Carole's words ringing in my ears: You've got to get up every morning/With a smile on your face/ And show the world all the love in your heart/ Then people gonna treat you better/ You're gonna find, yes you will/ That you're beautiful, as you feel...

Well, Sydney, you made me feel pretty good. Thank you. I'm happy to admit I was wrong. Now I know you a little better I hope we meet again soon. 🍷

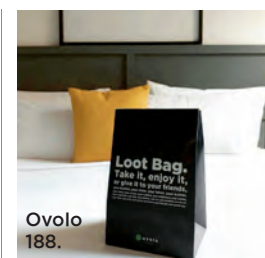
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Black Star Pastry.



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Beautiful: the Carole King Musical is at Lyric Theatre, Sydney, until January 21, see ticketmaster.com.au.

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