

Travel



FROM THE DAZZLING WHITE sails of the Opera House to the gaudy Mardi Gras floats on Oxford Street, Sydney certainly does flaunt its attractions. And as the many thousands of visitors to this Emerald City will discover over the next few years—the Olympics are in 2000 and the Gay Games in 2002—it's a bloody great show set against a stunning geographical backdrop.

Sydney's glittering jewel—you might say the city's *raison d'être*—is its harbor. Dominating this magnificent naturally enclosed body of water are the two structures most associated with Sydney—the Opera House and the Harbor Bridge. Popularly called the Coat Hanger, the arched metal bridge stands in the deepest part of the harbor; for a spectacular view climb 200 steps up the southeast pylon. The Opera House—actually a performing arts complex—designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. The iconic structure, with its nine off-white flying roofs, is Australia's most recognizable and controversial landmark; and it certainly doesn't lack for colorful descriptions—a giant sea monster up to no good, nine nuns in a rugby scrum, or my favorite, Joan Sutherland (Sydney's own beloved diva) in the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

But you've got to experience it for yourself. Take one of the many harbor cruises (on the express ferry, Rocket, you cover the entire harbor in one hour) and you'll see this truly awe-inspiring edifice morphing from a vision of serenity into something quite scary and then to something uplifting as your point of view and the light changes.

For a peek into the dawn of Sydney's history—its Caucasian beginnings, that is—visit The Rocks. This is where, in 1788, the English Captain

Arthur Phillip docked his 11 ships to become governor of the penal colony that evolved into modern Australia. Located on the western shore of the harbor area known as Circular Quay, The Rocks, once a notorious red-light district and hive of criminal activity, is now a magnet for tourists, with a plethora of shops, nightclubs and restaurants. But walk down the cobbled alleyways (there is a walking tour if you are interested) and you'll discover buildings which still retain walls built by the convicts in the days of the gulag, or you could find yourself in a dead-end alley in which, back in the bad old

Street, in Paddington and the Aboriginal & Tribal Art Centre in The Rocks. Tours to the Blue Mountains (see sidebar) also usually include a visit to the few remaining tribal sites, where you can find examples of ancient rock carvings.

It's easy to get around Sydney by public transport—a week's Travelpass gives you unlimited travel on the buses, trains and ferries—but many areas, like the Central Business District and the Rocks, are best explored on foot; the futuristic monorail takes you to Darling Harbor (where the Sydney Aquarium is located). For a sampling of Australia's

unique wildlife, there is the Taronga Zoo (just a short ferry ride across the harbor from Circular Quay) as well as several wildlife parks just outside Sydney.

As the year 2000 approaches, many visitors will be trekking off to Homebush Bay, west of the central business district, to check out the development of the Olympic site. The Aquatic Center is already complete and open to the public; you can fantasize about being the new Greg Louganis and do a few laps in the pool, which is purified with ozone instead of chlorine—a new technique expected to enable gold-medalists to break records with greater ease.

Since the days of the Vietnam War, when American GIs took their R&R in Sydney, King's Cross, west of the city center, has had a reputation as Sydney's red-light district. Today the Cross is a mix of good restaurants and seedy straight-sex venues but also includes a four-star hotel. Some residents warn that a few of the side streets in the Cross can become questionable after dark; a passerby could get caught in the midst of a drug deal or an internecine gang war, or even fall prey to a gay basher.

Adjacent to King's Cross is the qui-



Love, Sydney

by Gerard Raymond

days, many a drunken sailor was murdered for his pay packet.

Aboriginal tribes (the first Australians) are said to have inhabited the Australian continent for more than 40,000 years. Alas, the beginnings of Sydney spelled the beginning of the end of the Iora tribe, the local aborigine tribe, which became extinct within 50 years of British settlement. Other places in Australia, such as Northern Queensland and the Northern Territory, are better for experiencing indigenous culture, but in Sydney you could visit the Caspian and Coo-ee aboriginal art galleries on Oxford



CROSS ROADS:
 Sydney Opera House
 (top); King's Cross.

etly beautiful suburb of Paddington. "Paddo," as the locals call it, is dotted with Sydney's most distinctive architecture—two-story Victorian houses with balconies decorated with intricate wrought-iron trelliswork. "Paddington lace," as it's called, is said to have come into fashion when the convict era

ended and the foundries which forged chains for the prisoners were put to better use. If you are in Paddo on a Saturday (10 a.m. to 4 or 5 p.m.), you might stroll through the popular Paddington bazaar (corner of Newcombe and Oxford Streets), an open-air market where you can find every-

thing from tribal jewelry to low-cost clothing and yes, lots of kitsch.

Sydney is often compared to San Francisco, not just because it has a harbor as focal point, but because of its prevalent gay culture. The biggest event on the city's calendar is the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade held at the end of February. Come Mardi Gras, all 3.7 million of the city's population seems to get in on the act. It's certainly true that Mardi Gras (not connected to Shrove Tuesday as in New Orleans or Rio, but essentially the traditional June gay-and-lesbian pride event brought forward to take advantage of the Australian summer) is a major source of revenue for the city, and now, going into its 21st year, it's the most organized, the biggest and the best show in town.

At the Millennium, the luxury hotel in the Cross, the management has shown appreciation for its gay Mardi Gras guests by placing a pink feather on each pillow, and nobody raises an eyebrow when revelers from the all-night Mardi Gras party meander through the hotel lobby at 10 o'clock the morning after. Visitors pour into Sydney for the Parade and concurrent month-long cultural extravaganza, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Festival, so if you want to catch a glimpse of the floats as they pass along Oxford Street be prepared to line up several hours before the scheduled time of 8:30 p.m.

Make your way to Oxford Street and you've landed in the epicenter of queer Sydney. Just east of the central business district is the "golden mile" of gay boutiques, bars (according to old custom, many are still called hotels), clubs and cafes. Pop into Bookshop Darlinghurst at 207 Oxford Street, Australia's original gay and lesbian bookshop, and pick up copies of the weekly local gay rags, *Sydney Star Observer* and *Capital Q* (there is also a lesbian monthly, *Lesbians on the Loose*) to put you into the scene.

Sooner or later you'll gravitate, like everyone else, to Café 191 (191 Oxford Street), where you can sit outdoors and survey the Oxford scene. Almost all the popular bars are located on Oxford Street: Albury Hotel, The Lava Bar At Burdekin Hotel, Gilligan's,

Midnight Shift and Stonewall. You'll find Sydney's second queer strip in the inner-west suburb of Newtown on King Street. Newtown hosts several gay-friendly cafes and restaurants and is favored by Sydney's lesbian community.

The Sydney Opera House is home to the Australian Ballet, the Sydney Dance Company and the Australian Opera Company; here you can also attend concerts by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Chamber Orchestra. For something different, you may want to check out the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, which presents both traditional and modern interpretations of Aboriginal dances.

Most popular Broadway and London musical productions will eventually find their way to Sydney, and recently the flow has been moving in the reverse direction as well. Sydney originated the recent revival of *The King and I*, which became a Broadway hit and is now moving on to the West End. Currently breaking all Australian box-office records at Her Majesty's Theater is *The Boy from Oz*, a home-grown musical based on the life and music of Peter Allen, which may be headed soon for Broadway. The show features excellent performances from the principals playing the Australian-born entertainer, his one-time wife Liza Minelli and legendary mother-in-law Judy Garland.

With its large immigrant population and close proximity to Southeast Asia, Sydney offers a multicultural feast for the gourmet; a fusion cuisine of Mediterranean and Asian is very popular. To top off your culinary experience, Australian wines can be some of the best in the world. Rockpool, at 107 George Street in The Rocks, provides a very satisfying upscale dining experience; ask for the baked Barramundi (a tasty Aussie fresh-water fish). Several restaurants offer indigenous "bush-tucker" which includes kangaroo (the lowest-cholesterol meat), emu and crocodile (the fattiest meat). Try Shark Fin and Wokpool in Potts Point to experience the best of Sydney's Asian cuisine. For a caffeine fix, stop by the trendy Bar Coluzzi on Victoria Street in Darlinghurst—locals swear it's the best coffee in Sydney.

Out of Sydney

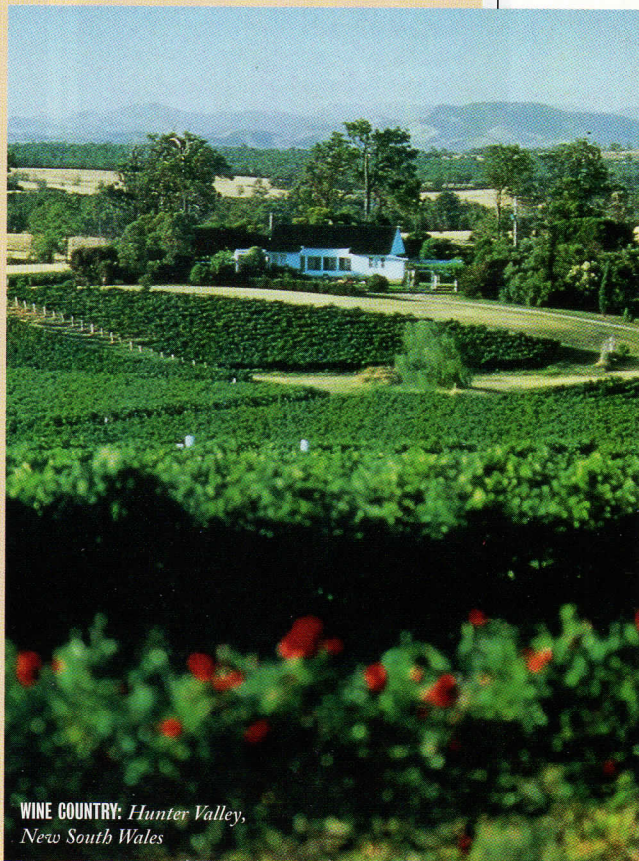
If you can, try to keep a day free in your busy shopping, socializing and sightseeing schedule to include a trip into the Blue Mountains or to the Hunter Valley wine country. My visit to Sydney was capped by a day tour with Australian Wild Escapes, a Sydney ecotour operator into the scenic wilderness which lies less than a two-hour drive west of Sydney. The enveloping blue haze that gives this region its name is an optical illusion caused by the refraction of light by droplets of oil emitted by the indigenous eucalyptus trees.

The small mountain town of Katoomba can be reached either by scenic railway or by joining one of the several tours into the region. At Echo Point, you can survey the panoramic splendor of Jamison Valley and the sandstone rock formation, the Three Sisters. My tour included a short "bushwalk" into parkland dominated by giant eucalyptus trees, a visit to some aboriginal sites, and an opportunity to observe kangaroos and cockatoos in the wild.

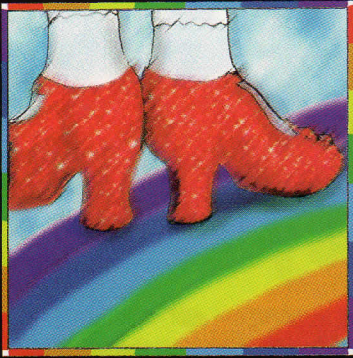
If you have three or more days to spare, put the Great Barrier Reef on your itinerary. Your destination is Cairns in tropical North Queensland, a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Sydney. Turtle Cove (30 minutes drive from Cairns airport) is a comfortable and friendly gay and lesbian resort with a secluded clothing-optional beach; a haven for taking time off after gadding about in the city. Turtle Cove affords a private and romantic atmosphere. Cairn's other gay holiday spot, 18-24 James Street, has no beach access, but it's an attractive plantation-style hotel

built around a central pool which becomes a magnet for gregarious guests. 54 Cinderella Street is a much smaller private resort that caters exclusively to lesbians.

To merely say that the Great Barrier Reef, the 1,200-mile-long living organism which lies parallel to Australia's northeastern coast, is one of the world's great natural wonders is an understatement. Just stick your head under the crystal waters for even a second and you can't fail to be dazzled by the colors and shapes of the truly alien world underneath. While there are umpteen number of tour operators taking tourists out to the Reef, Turtle Cove organizes its own twice-weekly exclusive cruises for its guests. Once you have taken in the marine splendors of Cairns, you could spend a day touring the steamy forests surrounding Daintree River. If you have less time on your hands, I'd particularly recommend Skyrail, a spectacular cable ride over the canopy of a tropical rainforest. The 40-minute journey up to the small highland village of Kuranda takes you gliding serenely over the tops of the trees and includes two stops on the forest floor as well. It's yet another breathtaking peek into the wonders of Oz.



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54 Cinderella Street
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Fax: 61-2-9267-9733

Skyrail
Tel: 61-7-4038-1555

Fax: 61-7-4038-1888
Email: reservations@skyrail.com.au

Events

Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade
February 27, 1999; February 26, 2000

Sleaze Ball
(Private circuit party)
October 3, 1998, October 2, 1999
October 2, 2000
Tel: 61-2-9557-4332
Fax: 61-2-9516-4446

Olympic Games
September 2000
<http://www.sydney.olympics.org>

Gay Games
September 2002
Tel: 61-2-9665-9678

With a climate that boasts 342 sunny days a year and registers 60°F in the winter (June to August), it's no wonder that so many Sydneysiders are tanned, buffed and running about near-naked. Sydney is blessed with many beaches, the best known of which is the surf beach Bondi. Due to get a facelift in time for the Olympics, Bondi may be a little worn out. But if you're looking for the gay beach, head south from Bondi to Tamarama, known in local parlance as "Glamarama." Another popular gay spot is Redleaf, which has no surf, but no shortage of gay men. Nudists frolic at Lady Jane and at the more remote Obelisk, which is surrounded

by wilderness and a military barracks. For the girls there's an exclusive women's pool at the southern end of Coogee Beach.

When planning your trip to Sydney give yourself extra time for travel elsewhere in the country. Australia gets its name from *terra incognita australis*, "the unknown land in the south," and to be sure, this continent has many strange and unique attractions. A trip into the Blue Mountains or the Hunter Valley wine country just outside of Sydney, or a few days taking in the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef in North Queensland, will whet your appetite for further exploration of the enticing land down under.