

Sydney's Brash Charm

photography by Sean Francis Martin

Its graceful concrete sails soar over 200 feet above the harbour, a dazzling white against the perennially blue sky. The image is unrivalled.

Few landmarks, with the possible exception of the Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal and Tower of Pisa, so immediately, so clearly identify where you are as the vaulted roofline of the Sydney Opera House. The facility opened in 1973. Only then did the naysayers and doubters who had dogged its tortuous 14-year construction period finally fall silent. The Opera House was, and still is, one of the world's most audacious architectural designs. It set the stage for Australia's bold claim on the world's imagination, a claim it isn't about to give up anytime soon.



Sydneysiders, as residents call themselves, are a puzzling breed. They can be friendly, easy-going, brash and uppity – all at the same time. It's a cheeky sort of confidence that makes it tough to get a read on people or to get a sense of the 'real' Sydney. But after a few days in this sun-drenched upbeat city, you understand. The temperate climate, the ocean views, endless beaches, carefree lifestyle ... Sydneysiders have it all. And they know it.

The relaxed pace and easy-going charm are infectious. It's a fun city to explore. There's a ton of things to do and see, and most of the big-name attractions are in the south shore area, all within easy walking distance. The Sydney Opera House at Bennelong Point is usually one of the first stops for visitors, as if you have to see with your own eyes whether the postcard image is for real. It is, all 4.5 acres of it. Sign up for a tour if you don't want to get lost.

Left: Aborigines have been living in the Sydney area for some 50,000 years. For a journey into Aboriginal culture, visit Sydney's Aboriginal Art and Tribal Centre.
Above: Sydney's reputation for gorgeous beaches is well-earned.
Above right: The Sydney Harbour Bridge is a centrepiece of the Sydney skyline.
Right: The Metro Monorail will get you anywhere you want to go in downtown Sydney, from major tourist sites to shopping areas. It's fast, safe and relatively cheap.





Greater Sydney encompasses two shores – north and south – divided by the harbour. Most of the action happens on the south shore. The Opera House is here, along with a cluster of sights: the Royal Botanic Gardens, Mint Museum, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Sydney, Parliament House (originally built with profits from the booming rum trade) and Hyde Park Barracks (home of Sydney’s early convicts).

The ‘old coat hanger’, the local term for the 1,650-foot long Sydney Harbour Bridge, is worth a visit because you can climb 200 steps up the Bridge Pylon lookout for a breathtaking view of city and harbour. There’s an even better view from Sydney Tower, a 1,000-foot tall, CN Tower-like structure with a 360-degree view.

Sydney is Australia’s largest city. Its nearly four million inhabitants are a multicultural mix of Anglo-Irish, Aborigine, Italian, Turkish, Greek, Lebanese, Asian and more.

A short walk along the waterfront takes you to The Rocks, the place where the British first planted the colonial flag in 1788. Sydney was originally a penal colony; the first free settlers didn’t arrive until 1793. In its early days, it was a rowdy frontier town but it grew quickly. It became a city in 1842, two years after the abolishment of convict transports, and by 1925 boasted a population of a million people. The Rocks today still has a heritage flavour. In the cobblestone streets you’ll find some of the city’s trendiest shops, restaurants, museums and galleries in restored heritage buildings, many built from locally quarried sandstone.

Sydneysiders love to shop and it shows. Pitt Street Mall is the main drag. It’s a pedestrian plaza with five distinct malls, from the popular Mid-City Centre to the futuristic Skygarden. Other shopping districts include Double Bay (posh), Castlereagh Street (upmarket), Woollahra and Surry Hills (antique markets), Victorian Strand Arcade (Australian designers), Mosman’s (north shore chic), Oxford Street (fashion with attitude), Paddington (hippie flashback), Chinatown (neon and lots of colour) and the turn-of-the-century Queen Victoria Building (180 high-end boutiques). Pace yourself, because you’re not going to hit them all in one day.



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A short hop on the monorail will deposit you at Darling Harbour, a revitalized wharf area that now houses shops, restaurants, the National Maritime Museum, Powerhouse Museum, Imax Theatre, Chinese Gardens and Sydney Aquarium. The aquarium is a must, even if you’ve been to others. From Great Barrier Reef to mango swamp to northern river systems, the displays are distinctly Australian. So are the animals, from the weird-looking platypus to the downright dangerous saltwater crocodile.

You can’t visit Sydney without visiting the beaches. To the north there’s Manly, Curl Curl, Mona Vale and Powderpuff Point. To the south, Cronulla and world famous Bondi Beach. Once the favourite haunt of legendary surfers, Bondi today is a little too mainstream for purists but its beach activities, Sunday Market and oceanside amenities ensure its popularity with locals and visitors. Remember your sunblock! ☀

Sydney is a mix of architectural styles, from Victorian to ultra-modern. Sydney’s waterfront caters to visitors with day and evening harbour cruises, guided tours and regular ferries between north and south shores.

