

Three Days in SYDNEY

The concert in the Australian bush was already going strong when we arrived.

By Monica Frim
Photography by John and Monica Frim

Magpies warbled and trilled, mynah birds whistled and wailed, white crested cockatoos screeched out a raucous chorus from their various perches—picnic tables, eucalyptus trees and even the patchy grass at our feet. Kookaburras joined in with their laughter, while we, a motley troop of wayfarers from various parts of the world, tucked into an Aussie bush breakfast of fried eggs and ham in a bun. Nature’s open air concert hall permitted food but it came with peril: thieving birds that brazenly swooped and swiped at the provisions in our hands, the sounds of their wing beats and bizarre vocalizations occasionally accompanied by the victims’ shrieks of surprise and feigned offence.

While the acoustics of the bush may not be as fine-tuned as those of the Sydney Opera House, the outdoor chorus played up the interconnectivity of music and nature much like a performance of John Cage’s 1972 composition, ‘Bird Cage’. The avant-garde composer pioneered indeterminacy in music and described the need for a space in which “people are free to move and birds to fly.” Easy to do when there’s not a bad seat in the bush. All you have to do is show up.

Enter **Blue Mountains Tours**, a family-owned company headed by Graham Chapman that picks up day-trippers from their hotels in Sydney and takes them on small-group tours to the Blue Mountains. Only 40 miles west of Australia’s capital city, Blue Mountains National Park is part of the Blue



Visitors aboard the Skyway thrill to 360-degree views of the Jamison Valley as they glide toward Scenic World in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.



Graham Chapman of Blue Mountains Tours, poses with a kangaroo in the background during a bush walk in the Blue Mountains.



Sydney’s most iconic attractions include the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.



Off the beaten track in the Blue Mountains, kangaroos are a familiar sight.

Mountains region, a vast wilderness area known for unique rock formations, aboriginal folklore and legendary lookouts. Under the perennial blue haze that gave the park its name, waterfalls plunge into forested valleys and gorges, the world's weirdest animals roam at will, and quaint villages look much as they always have, but fleshed out with modern galleries, cafés and guesthouses.

Of course the mountains aren't actually blue. Neither are they mountains in the traditional sense of the word, but a dissected plateau, like the Catskills in the United States, formed by regional uplifts and carved by rivers

and streams. The blue haze that's visible from miles away occurs when eucalyptus trees release oils into the air, where they combine with fine dust particles and water vapor. The result is a scattering of short-wave blue rays of light that makes the mountains appear as if they are being viewed through blue-tinted glasses.

While there is no shortage of companies that operate day trips from Sydney to the Blue Mountains, Blue Mountains Tours has carved out a niche that includes breakfast in the bush with birds and kangaroos. But the day we were there, the kangaroos had stage fright and dallied in the curtains of the woods, leaving the kookaburras, mynahs, magpies and other avian players to literally "wing it" with or without marsupial supporting roles. Eventually the kangaroos emerged, or rather, we found them during a post-breakfast walkabout through the forest. At first it was hard to distinguish the furry critters from the stumps and peeling trunks of the surrounding eucalyptus trees, but one by one they came into focus, scattered among the ferns and sedges, placidly nibbling at grasses and leaves or standing like tripods on their hind legs and tails. As the sun glinted through the trees dappling their tawny coats, the roos posed like films stars at an awards ceremony, brandishing some serious biceps for the cameras.



A koala spends about 90 percent of the day sleeping in a eucalyptus tree.

When it was time to move on, the ground heaved and crackled with our footfalls as Hayden, our guide led us over fallen detritus: branches and leaves interspersed with grasses, sedges and fallen logs. Here and there we encountered holes big enough for a hefty man to crawl into. Hayden promptly did. "It's okay," he said as he wriggled backwards on his hands and knees until only his head and shoulders were visible. "The wombats aren't home. I checked."

Apparently wombats aggressively defend their burrows by using their rumps to crush the heads of intruding foxes and wild dogs against the roof or wall of the burrow. Out in the open, these cute and cuddly marsupials (like kangaroos, they carry their young in pouches) are generally docile and friendly with people. Nevertheless, startled wombats have been known to charge at people and bite them if they feel threatened.

Hayden had some outrageous methods of sharing wombat trivia with the group, but I don't want to spoil the plot for future tour participants by revealing too much. However, I will divulge this interesting fact: wombats mark out

their territory by piling their cube-shaped droppings in high places—usually rocks—for all the world to see. Yes, there is a perfectly logical explanation for their peculiar dice-like scat: it doesn't roll off the rocks.

Hayden continued his informative discourse during the drive to Echo Point, pausing only to point out a lyrebird on the road, then picking up the narrative exactly where he left off when the bird skittered into the woods, its "lyrate" plumes folded and trailing behind like a ceremonial robe.

Echo Point is the Blue Mountains' most lauded lookout, a ridge with stunning panoramas of the Jamison Valley and the venerated rock formation known as the Three Sisters. From the Point, cliff-edge walking trails lead to waterfalls, monolithic outcrops and an 800-step descent via the Giant Stairway into the Jamison Valley and the spectacular nature attraction known as Scenic World. It takes a full day to hike the entire route, so we took a thrilling shortcut: an aerial tramway with a glass floor. As we floated over treetops from one cliff top to another, we passed **Katoomba Falls** cascading in segments into the Jamison Valley. At Scenic World we boarded a second tramway for the precipitous descent into a rainforest of sassafras, caramel-scented coachwood trees, sweet mentholated eucalyptus trees and 650-year-old ferns big as barns and blazing with fluorescent green fronds. Signposts along a boardwalk over the valley floor describe the flora, fauna, and the old coal mine that once operated at the base of the cliffs. These days the mine's greatest attraction

continue to page 42

At Featherdale Sydney Wildlife Park, visitors can get up close and personal with the resident wallabies.



Towering over the Jamison Valley, the legendary rock formation known as the Three Sisters is one of the Blue Mountains' most popular attractions.



is the railway that in earlier times hauled coal to the top of the cliff. Now, instead of coal, it hauls passengers in a thrilling, glass-roofed ride at an incline of 52 degrees. Gutsy passengers (and at least one crazy travel writing duo) can—and did—adjust their individual seats to an even steeper angle—up to 62-degrees—resulting in a truly “cliffhanging” ride on the steepest passenger railway in the world.

After that ride we needed a wind-down, and Blue Mountains Tours had just the ticket: a leisurely visit to **Featherdale Wildlife Park**, where the tamest Australian creatures wander freely and the wildest stay sidelined in safe enclosures. Visitors can pet koalas and hand feed wallabies, or admire cassowaries, dingoes, Tasmanian devils and other potentially dangerous denizens from

fenced-off vantage points. In the unlikely event anyone missed seeing a kangaroo in the wilds, Featherdale features a variety—from the tiny quokka, billed as the world’s happiest animal, to the six-foot tall eastern grey kangaroo.

To complement the wildlife and scenery of the Blue Mountains, the trip back to Sydney—a 45-minute boat ride from **Sydney Olympic Park** on the Paramatta River—was the perfect denouement. Quiet suburbs with millionaires’ homes and condos vied with beautifully landscaped riverfront landmarks such as the 19th century Thomas Walker Convalescent Hospital, later renamed Rivendell (taken from Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*) and turned into a school for students with special psychological needs.

There’s a strange juxtaposition between Australia’s wooded and watery places and the sprawling metropolis that is Sydney. The city surreptitiously spreads from the harbor, petering up the Paramatta River and into the mountains. As Sydney’s most iconic sights came into view—from the coat-hanger outline of the **Sydney Harbour Bridge** gradually growing larger until we were right under it, to the billowing sails of the Opera House and the city’s skyline silhouetted against the burnished sky of evening, there could be no grander finale to a day well-spent.

But even ashore, one cannot escape Sydney’s kinship with water. Perched on the edge of the world’s largest and deepest natural harbor, Sydney is made up of distinctive neighborhoods, each with its own themed restaurants, theaters, beaches, parks, galleries and coastal walkways.

Circular Quay in the heart of the city is the hub of the big-ticket attractions, the starting and ending point for city tours or boat trips, whether on ferries to nearby islands or cruise ships to faraway places.

It is an unfortunate paradox that in a city brimming with cultural attractions and open-air happenings, visitors still consider Sydney as a mere stopover on their way to somewhere else. They may spend a day or two taking selfies backdropped by the Sydney Harbor Bridge or Opera House, and perhaps throw in a dash to Sydney’s acclaimed Bondi Beach, but too many short-term



The *First Impressions* sculpture at The Rocks commemorates the early settlers of Sydney. On weekends the sculpture is surrounded by the handcrafted products of artists and artisans selling their wares at The Rocks Markets.

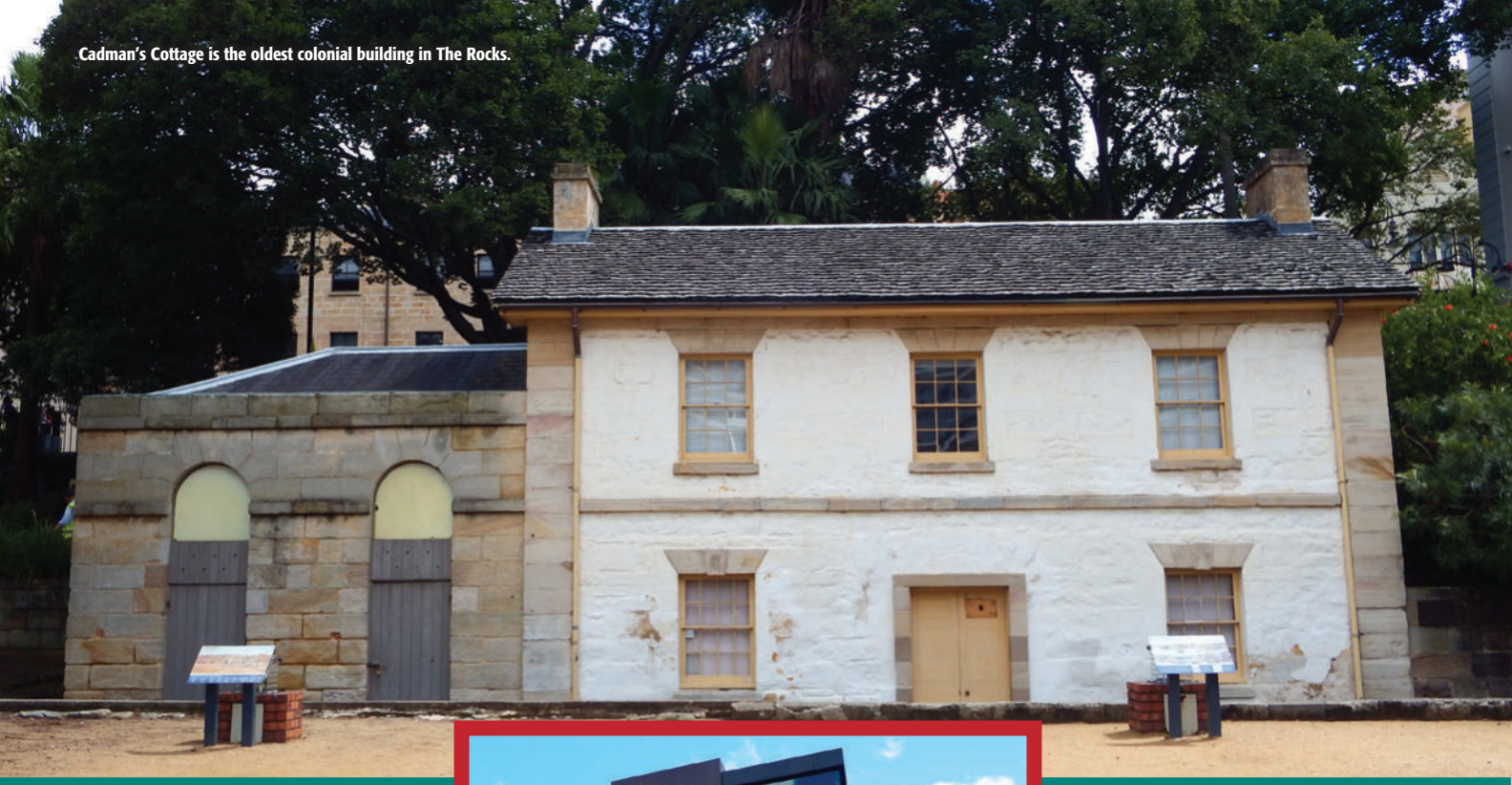
travelers miss out on some of Sydney’s best drawing cards.

Still, it is possible to have up close and personal experiences with both the sophisticated side of Sydney’s downtown core and the city’s rustic counterpart in the Blue Mountains during a short stay. We made a valiant attempt to pack the best into a three-day sightseeing marathon: one day for rusticity (Blue Mountains) and two for urbanity (Sydney).

Fortunately Sydney is a very walkable city with the most popular attractions along routes that radiate in arcs and squiggles or, in the case of George Street with its



Between The Sydney Opera House and Circular Quay, outdoor bars and restaurants provide some of the best waterside views of boats, cruise ships and buildings.



popular shops and restaurants, in a long, straight line from Circular Quay. Walk west and you'll find yourself in **The Rocks**, a tourist spot of narrow cobblestone alleys, heritage streetlamps with iron scrollwork, leafy courtyards and old sandstone buildings built by convicts, now revamped into trendy bistros, bars and boutiques. This was the first European colony on the continent, a place where sailors, whalers, merchants, landowners, hooligans and prisoners all lived in uneasy proximity at the edge of the harbor. The **Rocks Discovery Museum** showcases their records and relics as well as aboriginal artifacts, and is a good place to get a fundamental understanding of Sydney's early character and development.

Most of the early buildings in The Rocks were demolished in the early 1900s after an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Somehow the first residential building, **Cadman's Cottage** survived. Built in 1816, it served as a water police station and sailor's home. Located in front of today's overseas cruise terminal and about a two-minute walk from the **Museum of Contemporary Art**, the home is now open to the public... and reputedly haunted.



The Museum of Contemporary Art comprises the former Maritime Services Board building (left) and a modern five-story wing.

East of Circular Quay, a walkway along the shore leads to Bennelong Point, home of Sydney's most recognizable landmark—and object of both flattering and unflattering comparisons, from sails to oysters to dishes stacked in a drain tray. This is, of course, the **Sydney Opera House**. There is scarcely a person on the planet

who has not seen a photo of this modernist masterpiece of architectural daring, so I am nothing short of amazed at the number of people who barely stop to pose for a selfie before they rush off to the next place on their go-there-do-that list. Granted, not everyone can take a tour or watch a show, but anyone can climb the sweeping staircase or amble through the common lobby areas inside at no charge.

After sitting for a spell on the esplanade with its stunning views of the harbor we walked around the promontory in order to see the Opera House from all sides. It struck me that there wasn't a parking lot in sight. How far away does one park to visit the Opera House? It turns out there's a twelve-story 'doughnut-shaped' double helix car park unlike anything built anywhere in the world hidden under the adjacent **Royal Botanic Garden**. Even

crazier, it was built with unprecedented swift government approval, under the original time frame, under budget and with little to no media coverage. People simply assumed the construction was all part of the bridge tunnel project, which was being built at the same time.

Even today, few people know about the garage. Which means that all those people sunbathing on the greensward between the Opera House and the **Governor's Mansion** in the Royal Botanic Garden have no idea that they are lying on top of cars with only a thin layer of earth between them.

The image highlights the paradox that is Sydney: a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, sun-dappled city of museums, galleries, swanky restaurants and visionary architecture that nevertheless maintains a beach vibe. In Sydney, the word 'culture' refers not only to artsy precincts with



The Gothic Revival-style Government House is the official residence and office of the Governor of New South Wales.

literary festivals and theaters but to surf and sand in places like Bondi, Sydney's most beloved beach.

As we walked the shoreline path from the Sydney Opera House to **Mrs. Macquarie's Chair**, a sandstone bench at the tip of The Domain near the Royal Botanic Garden that was carved in 1810 by convicts, it seemed to me that, in Sydney, art and nature were symbiotic entities, each

conotinue to page 48

A giant fig tree in the Royal Botanic Gardens provides a shady spot for quiet contemplation.



enhancing the other. With Farm Cove lapping at the shore on one side of the path and the Royal Botanic Garden unfolding in luxuriant greenery on the other, we walked over the Wuganmagulya sculpture, a terrazzo work embedded in the pavement to honor the indigenous people. Farther south, an alley of eucalyptus trees teeming with native birds led to the **Art Gallery of New South Wales**. Sculptures, fountains and memorials dotted the greensward as the Royal Botanic Garden gave way to The Domain and eventually Hyde Park with its famous Archibald Fountain and ANZAC Memorial at opposite ends of the park.

As daylight gradually drained into the approaching night sky, birds sang and bats wakened from their naps in the treetops. On this, our last night in Sydney, we made our way back to Circular Quay for a relaxing harbor dinner cruise with Captain Cook Cruises. As we drifted out into the burnished harbor waters, the floodlit opera house on one side, the pastel lights of Luna Park on the other, and the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge silhouetted like a black lace collar against a silky orange sky, we watch the sun dissolve over the city skyline in a 360° panorama. It was a memorable way to bring an idyllic trip to a close. ■



The pedestrianized stretch of George Street, known as Sydney's "premier retail and pedestrian street," boasts some of the city's most important buildings and companies as well as a new light rail.

Diplomatic Connections thanks the following for their support:

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