



Scenic Sydney: Sky, street & sea

With a stunning view of the coastline, Wollongong near Sydney is a popular place for skydiving (Photo: Destination NSW)

When in Sydney, arguably the prettiest Australian city, soar through the sky like a bird, conquer the world's tallest steel arch bridge, have close encounters with cuddly koala bears and soak up the sun on a vibrant beach!

Pallavi Pasricha

After a whirlwind trip across Australia, that has lasted 18 days, I arrive in Sydney for the finale which is headed for a thrilling crescendo as I decided to save the most exhilarating activity on the trip, skydiving, for the end.

Skydiving in Wollongong

Both nerves and excitement grip me as I embark on the one and half hour journey to Wollongong, whose stunning

coastline and vibrant cityscape, makes it a picture perfect setting for the dive. I don a skydive suit, buckle up the harness and then listen carefully to the detailed instructions on how to jump and land. My anticipation builds up as along with my tandem guide, Mich, I board the bus to the airstrip where the aircraft is waiting to take us on what promises to be one of the most memorable flights of my life.

As the harness is rechecked and I enter the plane, my mouth



The Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge form the iconic skyline of this Australian city (Photo: Destination NSW)

turns dry. I am sixth in line for the jump. My heart pounds with ever increasing pace as the plane takes off and goes ever-higher to the cruising altitude, from where we are supposed to jump. My palpitations seem to be increasing in tandem with the altitude of the aircraft.

But the moment when the first person jumps off the plane, my fear melts away. Now I am super excited and cannot wait to leap. Sure enough, before I know it, I am hurtling towards the ground along with my guide from a height of 15,000 feet (about 4600 m). I scream "wow" as the strong wind makes my cheeks flap during the free fall. Mich taps me on the shoulder and I free my hands. I feel liberated as I float like a bird in the air and want this sense of serenity to linger forever. Then there is a sudden pull as the parachute opens. After gliding for about five minutes, I land smoothly near the bright, blue ocean. The exultation I feel will stay with me forever.

Before that giant leap, I spent time exploring Sydney's charismatic mix of fun, food and sights set against a stunning backdrop of sun, sea and sand. Often called 'Emerald City' or 'Harbour City', the capital of New South Wales, is best known for its iconic landmarks like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Sydney Opera House and the iconic Bondi Beach.

Climbing the world's largest steel arch bridge



Scale the top of the world's largest steel arch bridge during the Sydney Harbour Bridge climb (Photo: Destination NSW)

My adventures in Sydney are not limited to air as I find once more undertaking an adventure activity. I was awed by the Sydney Harbour Bridge as I crossed it on my first day in the city, but the real thrill lies in scaling more than 1,300 steps to the top of the world's largest steel arch bridge. Frankly, I found it fairly simple. Strapped in a harness and safety gear, our group was given detailed instructions on the do's and don'ts as each person was latched to a safety line at the base.

I walked along narrow catwalks under the bridge, hearing the hum of traffic above before reaching a set of four ladders, scaling which required concentration. Along the way, the guide kept feeding us with trivia. She told us that about 1,400 people were involved in making the bridge which opened in 1932. During the construction, one worker, Vincent Kelly, fell more than 50 metres into the water but miraculously survived.

By the time I reached the summit, I was out of breath, but the stunning vista made it all worthwhile. I soaked in panoramic views of the Opera House, the harbour and the city, feeling literally on top of the world. Many couples have chosen to propose or get engaged here and celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Hugh Jackman and Will Smith have climbed it. I too proudly took home my certificate.

Sneak peek inside the Sydney Opera House

With its white, sail-like shells gleaming under the sun, the modernist design of this iconic structure is truly breathtaking. I learned that the over one million glazed tiles that make up its roof were manufactured in Sweden and are designed in such a way that they stay clean just with rain water.

While the Sydney Opera House's exterior is bedazzling, its interiors are no lesser. I was excited about my tour of a place that has become one of the world's busiest performing art centres as it marked its 50th anniversary last year. My best moment was watching a Hungarian pianist strumming gentle notes as he practiced for his show at one of the seven performance

■ Experience



Over a million glazed tiles make up the roof of the iconic Sydney Opera House (Photo: Destination NSW)

venues. Awestruck, I listened quietly for a few minutes.

The area around the Sydney Opera House, which dominates the harbour, buzzes at all times of the day. People-watching is a great option here and I did exactly that as I sat at the bustling Opera Bar sipping an Aperol Spritz and watching life go by with Sydney's two icons on my either side. There couldn't have been a better setting.

Among the many dining options is the restaurant, Midden by Mark Olive, that creates dishes with native Australian ingredients like bush honey, saltbush and more. While I was tempted to sample the Indigenous Australian Grazing Plate that comes with local cheeses, smoked kangaroo, emu and crocodile, I opted for the less adventurous Smoked Blue Gum Barramundi fish.

The buzz of Bondi Beach

If the Opera House and Harbour Bridge are the heart of Sydney,

then Bondi Beach is its soul. Even if you are not a beach bum, it is hard not to fall in love with this place. So much happens here with numerous charming restaurants and cafes, surfing and meandering coastal walks and to top it all, its own graffiti wall. I started with a view of the oceanfront Bondi Icebergs Pool located at the southern end of the beach which is naturally filled by ocean waves, making it an iconic swimming spot – after all a dip in the sea without worries about tides and crashing waves is every water baby's dream.

Then I ambled along a 6-km path from Bondi to Coogee that starts near the Icebergs Pool. With gorgeous views of the ocean, it is easy to understand why it is so popular. Sydneysiders were out in their best active wear walking, jogging or working out at an open gym. I was there during the season when one can spot whales easily and I kept my fingers crossed but was not lucky.

As I headed back to the beach, I crossed the colourful and



Oysters in Sydney are a must (Photo: Pallavi Pasricha)

Among the many dining options is the restaurant, Midden by Mark Olive, that creates dishes with native Australian ingredients like bush honey, saltbush and more. While I was tempted to sample the Indigenous Australian Grazing Plate that comes with local cheeses, smoked kangaroo, emu and crocodile, I opted for the less adventurous Smoked Blue Gum Barramundi fish



As Sydney lies along the ocean, fresh seafood is readily available (Photo: Pallavi Pasricha)



A graffiti wall near the beach displays artwork by local artists (Photo: Pallavi Pasricha)



Bondi Beach is a perfect spot for swimming and surfing



The Taronga Zoo is a great place to see koala bears



The giraffe enclosure at Taronga Zoo overlooks the city skyline (Photo: Destination NSW)

quirky graffiti wall that displays artwork by local artists and then settled down for a leisurely lunch at the Promenade restaurant where I sipped a local beer and tucked into pasta and pizza and the most delectable oysters. It is a great place to just chill and watch how the sand and sea is an intrinsic part of this city's life.

A night with the animals at Taronga Zoo

Waking up to a koala bear outside my window is the kind of stuff I had dreamt of when I thought of Australia. That finally came true at Wildlife Retreat at Taronga, a luxury eco retreat with 62 rooms that is connected to the Taronga Zoo. I walked

into the lobby to be greeted by jaw dropping views of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House.

But the highlight here was my animal-view room that overlooked the sanctuary, a secluded habitat created exclusively for guests where resident echidnas, wallabies and pademelons roam around. The close encounters gave me goosebumps as we went around with a guide.

After this it was time to explore the zoo, which is home to more than 5,000 animals. The sight of graceful, long necked giraffes who appear to be framed against the Harbour Bridge is an awesome sight, but the koala bears won my heart. 