

Into the wild

Leave Sydney behind on a tour of New South Wales that goes beyond the city limits, writes Deborah Cicurel



Peering curiously at me, the koala soon loses interest and returns to his fistful of tasty leaves. With no warning, he takes a flying leap onto the next branch. Dozens of thick eucalyptus trees surround him, waiting to be devoured. This normally dozy chap has hours of foodie fun ahead of him, a gourmand with an evergreen menu to enjoy.

The most incredible part of this encounter is the fact that I'm not on a wildlife walk or in a koala enclosure, but in the comfort of a chic hotel room at the Wildlife Retreat at Taronga. This eco-retreat opened in late 2019 within Sydney's Taronga Zoo, part of the upmarket Mosman neighbourhood. It offers eco-friendly design, sweeping views of Sydney Harbour and access to all the eucalyptus-munching marsupials you could hope for – not to mention the rest of the animals living in the zoo, from capybaras and gorillas to giraffes and Tasmanian devils.

Relaxing on a sofa in my room, my nose pressed against the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, I can't tear my eyes away as the greedy – yet adorable – koala tears through branch after branch, his appetite insatiable. His sleepier companions rest indolently on neighbouring trees, lazily watching him through half-closed eyes.

Taronga Zoo was one of my last stops on a whirlwind tour through New South Wales, where I quickly learned there's much more to Australia's most-visited state than Sydney.

When borders reopen and travellers return in search of wide-open spaces and longer, more in-depth trips, the breathtaking mountains, idyllic beaches, undulating sand dunes and rolling vineyards of New South Wales are sure to be top of the list – along with a few curious koalas.

BLUE MOUNTAINS

To be confronted by the enormity and grandeur of Australia's natural landscapes, an ideal first stop is the Blue Mountains, named for the blue haze that rises from the enormous eucalyptus forests, giving them a mesmerising blueish tint.

To learn about the history of this vast area, start with Scenic World in the charming town of Katoomba. The attraction offers an introduction to the region with breathtaking views and is a good option for day-trippers who are short on time.

There are four ways to view this national park that can be squeezed into half a day. They include a cableway that soars past famous sights such as the Three Sisters rock formation and Orphan Rock, and ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Three Sisters, Blue Mountains; Scenic World, Katoomba; Bondi Beach; Stockton Sand Dunes, Port Stephens

PICTURES: Destination NSW/Filippo Rivetti, Mark Bean, Alexandra Adoncello, Eugene Tan



top tip

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a skyway with a glass bottom that offers spectacular views of the Katoomba Waterfall, which is four times the height of Niagara Falls. There's also the world's steepest railway, which has an incline of 52 degrees, plus three walkways through the rainforest and walking trails available within the Blue Mountains National Park.

HUNTER VALLEY

If clients have worked up a sweat in the Blue Mountains, there's no better place to indulge and reward oneself than in the decadent Hunter Valley, Australia's oldest wine region. There are more than 150 wineries to visit, as well as excellent restaurants and luxurious hotels, all set amid a stunning verdant backdrop.

Line your stomach at the memorably named Two Fat Blokes Gourmet Kitchen for the ultimate in stomach-filling fun – a 'cheeses of the world' wine-matching

experience, in which an expert guides you through nine cheeses from around the globe, paired, of course, with nine Hunter Valley wines. Then head to Brokenwood, which offers expert guided wine tastings in its recently renovated, airy and sunny cellar door.


If clients are able to make it out of bed the next morning without a raging headache, they should head out for some fresh air at the family-owned Hunter Valley Resort, where guests can indulge in grape-stomping, horse riding and Segway-touring through sprawling vineyards, spotting kangaroos along the way.

PORT STEPHENS

To appreciate the geographical diversity of New South Wales in just a day, make your next stop the pretty harbour of Port Stephens. After enjoying a fresh seafood lunch at the Little Beach Boathouse Restaurant in Nelson Bay, clients

can board a Moonshadow-TQC Dolphin Discovery Cruise to luxuriate in the sunshine, splash around on the waterslide and spot what seems like hundreds of dolphins leaping out of the water to the delight of those on board.

Less than half-an-hour's drive away, clients can get an adrenaline rush and feel like they're on another planet at the Stockton Beach Sand Dunes. I hopped aboard a quad bike cultural tour with Sand Dune Adventures, operated by the Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council, and was soon zooming across the dunes.

As clients whizz through the ancient site – the largest coastal sand dunes in the Southern Hemisphere – and take in the vastness of the scene, they'll also be regaled with stories of the history and traditions of the sand dunes from experienced Aboriginal guides, offering yet another side to this vast and varied Australian state. 

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SYDNEY HIGHLIGHTS

Sydney Opera House

No visitor to Sydney would dream of missing this soaring sail-like structure, but don't just admire the outside. Go on a backstage tour to learn about its fascinating history, explore the orchestra pit and examine props and costumes up-close.

Sydney Cricket Ground

Sporty visitors can book a guided walking tour through the hallowed halls of this historic stadium, to hear insider stories of the cricket ground, sit in the dressing rooms and run down the players' tunnel.

Bondi Beach

For the quintessential beach experience, head to Bondi. Soak in scenery on the Bondi to Coogee Coastal Walk, a picturesque four-mile trail between sandstone cliffs, and try to catch a wave in a lesson with Let's Go Surfing.

WHAT'S NEW

EcoWalks Tours has introduced a series of half-hour virtual walks around Sydney harbour exploring flora and fauna and historic sites. ecowalktours.com.au

Vivid Sydney will take place from May 27 to June 18, 2022, lighting up the city with colourful installations, artworks and music. vivid Sydney.com

Port Stephens Koala Sanctuary reopened on September 11 with four-star glamping tents. portstephenskoalasancuary.com