

Sydney slickers

Sydney's top attractions are the ideal introduction to an Aussie adventure, finds **India-Jayne Trainor**

I'm lying on my stomach, paddling hurriedly against the waves that are thwarting my attempts to get out to sea. Jett, our instructor, appears like a *Baywatch*-esque rescuer behind me. "Ready? Three, two, one..." he says with a swift turn and a push of my surfboard, and suddenly I'm riding a wave, albeit on my knees, back towards the golden crescent of Bondi Beach.

We've just arrived in Sydney on a Gold Medal fam trip and dived straight into life Down Under with a surfing lesson at Sydney's most famous beach.

Let's Go Surfing is Bondi's only officially licensed surf school, taking small groups out on the waves. As we make our way back after a two-hour lesson, our fam trip group is covered in sand and soaked through – but bonding in Bondi has been the perfect way to break the ice.

CITY ON THE WATER

Sydney is a city that revolves around water. Not only on the sun-soaked sands of Bondi Beach, one of more than 100 beaches in the city, but also ➤

DESTINATIONS

AUSTRALASIA | SYDNEY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Let's Go Surfing lesson at Bondi Beach; Journey Beyond cruise; writer India-Jayne (middle) ascends Sydney Harbour Bridge with the fam trip group PICTRES: Destination NSW/ David Collins, Jeremy Shaw; Journey Beyond; Adam Bruzzone

Sydney Harbour, where ferries, sailing boats and cruise ships navigate under the watchful eye of the Sydney Opera House. Sydney's waterways also offer a front-row seat to its most famous sights via scenic harbour cruises.

Departing from Darling Harbour, Journey Beyond's three-hour sailing welcomes us on board with bubbles and a table on the upper level. When the sun begins to dip, we head to the viewing deck as Sydney Harbour Bridge comes into view.

Along with a laid-back lap of the harbour, passing the Opera House, Botanical Gardens and Luna Park, the tour includes a regional three-course menu with drinks. Plus, those who sail on a Saturday evening can enjoy a free firework show over Darling Harbour at 9pm.

HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

It's bright and early the following day, and I'm standing 134 metres above Sydney Harbour, attached to its eponymous bridge by a sturdy harness. Below, we spot a seal gliding through the water – it looks like a tiny toy, although our guide informs us it's the New Zealand fur seal Benny, a local pinniped celebrity.

During the previous three hours, we had marched up 1,332 steps under the sunshine, stopping for signature photos along the way. Visitors can choose from the Summit Climb, Summit Insider, Ultimate and the Burrawa Climb, the last of which is led by a First Nations guide.



SHANGRI-LA SYDNEY

Shangri-La Sydney is a five-minute walk from Circular Quay. Its 565 rooms all overlook the city's signature sights; my Opera House Executive room was elevated further through Horizon Club, which provides late check-out and access to the Club Lounge on levels 30 to 35, where floor-to-ceiling views frame the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The hotel's high-level restaurants and bars span Australian fine dining at Altitude to theatrical cocktails at Blu Bar on 36. Guests can also make use of the Health Club and Chi, The Spa, which has a treatment menu featuring traditional Aboriginal ingredients, including wattleseed. shangri-la.com/sydney



Clients can maximise their experience by climbing at sunrise, sunset or during events such as the Vivid Sydney festival of light, when the bridge is vibrantly illuminated. Climbs are open to anyone above the age of eight, who is at least 1.2 metres tall.

PAST TO PRESENT

The white sails of Sydney's Opera House have defined the city's skyline since 1973, but its history runs far deeper. Before the Opera House was even a concept in the mind of Danish architect Jørn Utzon, its location at Bennelong Point was a gathering spot for the Indigenous Gadigal people.

On a one-hour tour, clients learn about the area's Aboriginal roots as well as the icons ➤

WHAT'S NEW IN NEW SOUTH WALES?

- In 2026, Sydney will open Western Sydney international airport, with capacity for 10 million passengers a year.
- Sydney's newest hotel, The Eve, opened in Surry Hills in February, featuring a rooftop garden, pool and mezcal bar. In 2026, Waldorf Sydney will join the city's luxury hotel scene in Circular Quay, with 227 rooms, a celebrity chef's restaurant and harbour views.
- Sydney's sprawling fish market will reopen this year, with waterfront shops, restaurants and a three-mile boardwalk.
- The revitalised Powerhouse Parramatta will also reopen, becoming New South Wales' largest museum, with more than 500,000 objects focused on art, culture and science.

AGENTS'
verdict



Chloe Rawlins, Villair Travel

"I'd recommend the Journey Beyond dinner cruise. I also enjoyed Taronga Zoo – not only the animals, but also the Wildlife Retreat, which is a slightly different place for families to stay in Sydney. Overall, I'd suggest mixing Sydney's most famous sights with its shopping, local events and markets."



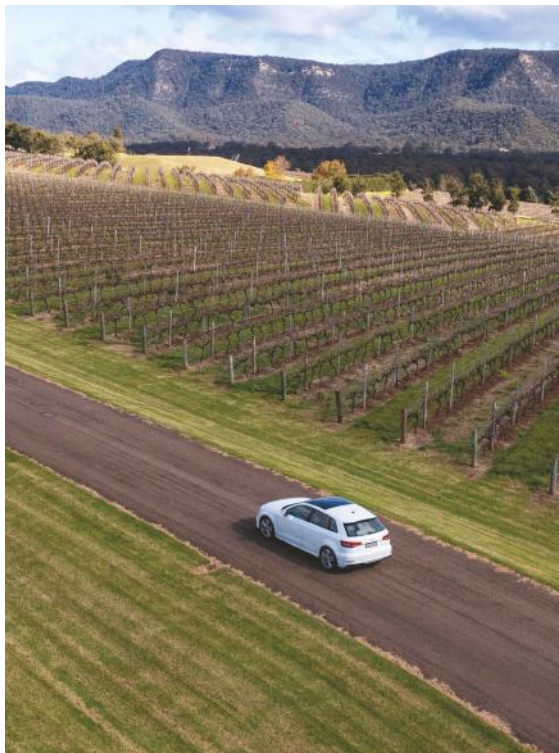
Geoff Wessell, Ginge Tours

"The Sydney BridgeClimb was a wish-list activity. Even if you don't think you're fit or don't like heights, they really take care of you. I hadn't heard about Hunter Valley, but now I'd recommend it for wine lovers and foodies; it's a nice area with lots of different vineyards and wine-tasting experiences."



Lisa Bowman, Howard Travel

"My favourite was Taronga Zoo – late afternoon is best for seeing dingoes, tigers and koalas awake. I was impressed by the food at Me-Gal in the Wildlife Retreat and its view of Sydney Harbour. Sydney Opera House was also a highlight, but clients who do the tour-and-dine package should arrive early as it's a popular spot."



ABOVE: Hunter Valley; a koala at Taronga Zoo PICTURES: Destination NSW/Jeremy Shaw, Guy Dixon

who have performed at the Opera House, ranging from Bob Dylan to One Direction. To soak up the full experience, suggest clients book the Tour & Dine ticket (commissionable via Cultural Attractions of Australia), which includes lunch at the Opera Bar or House Canteen overlooking Sydney Harbour.

Just 12 minutes by ferry across the water lies Taronga Zoo. Known as the 'zoo with a view', tigers, giraffes and lions stretch out against a backdrop of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Zookeeper Ryan takes us round, offering unbridled excitement about the animals and bounding away excitedly to check if the lions are awake. While we wait, we spot at least five koalas – which sleep up to 18 hours per day – snoozing in the trees above our heads.

For clients in search of a unique Sydney stay, consider the luxurious Wildlife Retreat at Taronga. Monika Townsend, trade sales manager, says: "At the Wildlife Retreat, guests will wake up to nature and enjoy exclusive behind-the-scenes experiences. It's the perfect alternative to traditional city stays in Sydney." Clients can enjoy a guided tour, breakfast and complimentary zoo access.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Hunter Valley lies just north of Sydney and is considered the birthplace of Australian wine. The region promises more than 100 wine cellars, farm-to-table restaurants and experiences such as hot-air ballooning or horse riding through rolling vineyards.

Hunter Valley Resort and Farm is set over 40 hectares, with cosy rooms, cottages and a roster of activities. Wine and beer tasting are the top choices, with tasting rooms,

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barrel rolling and even grape stomping also available. Clients looking for a hassle-free option can try the resort's Wine Train package, which departs Sydney daily and includes two nights' accommodation, a vineyard tour and private tasting – with no car required, so they're free to sample the goods to their hearts' content.

On our last morning, we depart for the airport. In just two hours we pass rolling hills, national parks, sandy beaches and, finally, drive right over the impressive Sydney Harbour Bridge. There's a new adventure around every corner in New South Wales. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers a seven-night stay in Sydney from £2,439 per person, based on two sharing, including Etihad flights from Heathrow via Abu Dhabi, four nights at the Shangri-La Sydney, three nights at Hunter Valley Resort and Farm (both room-only), four days' car hire, the Sydney Harbour BridgeClimb and Opera House tour, plus a hot-air balloon ride over the Hunter Valley with breakfast. Departures throughout September. www.goldmedal.co.uk