

The wizard that's Oz

As well as marking the furthest point from the P&O Cruises home port of Southampton on any round-the-world cruise, Sydney is also the jumping-on or jumping-off point for any number of shorter itineraries. Here's how to make the most of all that's half a world away...

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When stood facing the harbour from a street corner in Sydney this could be a UK seaside city, save for the iconic view. And bluer January skies. For a travel destination so far away there is a surprising air of the familiar – from a common language to the sequence of omni-present brands that mark out the global High Street. Down Under, at first glance, looks and feels awfully like up top.

That's no bad thing: familiarity breeds content, after all. But it does mean that to get a handle on the real Australia, the bit that sets Sydney and

its environs apart from, say, Southampton, then you can't simply drift through. Nowhere on earth is the great outdoors greater. So where to start?

If arriving (or departing) other than by ship, then I highly recommend an Emirates flight. Two reasons. Firstly, a wide choice of routes and schedules makes all kinds of stopovers or cruise connections possible – anywhere from Dubai to Singapore. And if travel is to broaden the mind, then it may as well encompass the broadest possible experience, and on a trip of this scale the choice is dazzling. But a brief hiatus

among the desert dunes or in Asia's safe haven is no bad place to start.

Secondly, because Emirates' Business Class is extraordinary, one of the finest of its kind. For a premium that looks modest in context, you enjoy chauffeur-driven transfers at each end, fast-track customs clearance, airport lounges both vast and decadent, sofa-sized seats boasting sufficient knee-room to sit legs akimbo and the highest standards of service – with a smile – in the air. It's no exaggeration to say that even on a journey of this length, you arrive free of agitation – and with a gargantuan luggage



allowance (40kg per person), ship to shore movements were never easier.

Maintain that feeling of space on landing with an entire apartment at Sydney's famed Meriton World Tower – the city's second-tallest building – and enjoy a change from hotel routine. You get all of the trimmings, daily housekeeping and concierge, but a much bigger room (indeed several rooms) with sensational views through floor-to-ceiling windows in all directions. And when the mood takes you, head to level 61 and its heated 20-metre sky pool, spa, gym and sauna. It's like living, rather than staying, in the city – and it's rather lovely.

In terms of Sydney sights there are four key boxes to tick – all of them accessible on foot or via shore excursions offered on board. They range from the gentle to the adrenaline-driven. Let's start with gentle...

The iconic Sydney Opera House, designed by Danish architect Jom Utzon, opened in October 1973 and the vibrant harbour that surrounds it is a must-stroll. You can get a guided tour or take in a performance – not just opera, but everything from ballet and recitals to stand-up comedy – though maybe just sit awhile among this most recognisable of vistas and soak up the atmosphere and the human kaleidoscope that unfolds. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2007, you'd never imagine – sat in the shade of the shell-style outcrops – that the result of a 1956 international design competition that sparked such controversy would today be so at peace with its surroundings.

From here you can walk out a little further, around the adjacent bay, through the Royal Botanic Gardens. Established in 1816, this is the oldest scientific institution in Australia and a fabulous green space dotted with an outstanding collection of plants from

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Sydney's Central Business District; Manly Beach, just a short ferry trip from Circular Quay; Hyde Park, the oldest public parkland in Australia; the Royal Botanic Gardens, with plants from around the South Pacific; The Galleries in George Street is the place to shop; Sydney's coastline is one of the most beautiful and environmentally diverse attractions in the world; Sydney Tower is the city's tallest building; Bondi Beach's golden sands and turquoise waters; (centre) the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia's leading museum dedicated to exhibiting, interpreting and collecting contemporary art; (below) pick up a bargain at the Bondi Beach Designer Market

all around the South Pacific. Gloriously, the entire parkland that surrounds it – known as the Domain – is unfenced and open 24 hours a day for the benefit of visitors. What's known as Mrs Macquarie's Chair (after the wife of a former Governor of New South Wales) provides a terrific spot to look back at the city skyline, the Opera House and the wider harbour.

Including, of course, the Sydney Harbour Bridge. As iconic as the Opera House, this steel arch bridge is the tallest of its type in the world (134 metres from the top to water level) and – at nearly 50 metres – was also the widest until the Port Mann Bridge in Vancouver was built. You can cross on foot on the eastern side, on a bicycle on the western side, by train (two tracks) or by car (six lanes, plus a further two now the original tram tracks have been lifted). Or you can sign up for what's described as an "exhilarating, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity", climb the gantry and walk right over the top of the arch. Yes, you read that correctly. It's perfectly safe in the company of an expert guide, and an experience offered by your favourite cruise line.

A gentler pastime might be to walk the historic area known as The Rocks, where the first settlers hammered together a primitive, makeshift village. There's a real atmosphere of days past here, and some terrific shops, galleries and bars through which to wander. And, since it houses the southern end of the bridge, you can pull up a chair and watch those crossing, by whichever route...

Eating well is a national pastime in Australia, and in Sydney in particular there's a real food culture. But if there's a single dinner destination that calls out, it has to be the restaurateurs' choice – where the great, the good and the Michelin-starred go to eat when their own service is finished. It's called Azuma, named eponymously for its founder Kimitaka Azuma, and is – unsurprisingly – Japanese. It is simply exceptional. Not just for the food – which runs from tantalising to art form – but also for a level of attentiveness you rarely find beyond your mother's table. As a result it's excellence delivered without pretension, and that's the most difficult trick of the trade to deliver.

There's much else to see just outside the city limits, be it the breakers at Bondi Beach (20 minutes by taxi) or the bigger expanse of sand and surf at Manly Beach, a 15-minute ferry ride across the harbour that's an outing on its own. Yet if you are topping or tailing a cruise experience then you have to set some time aside to head up-country (to the Blue Mountains) or cross-country to Uluru (Ayers Rock). And here's why.

Australia is a vast country, more than 31 times the size of the UK. You can no more see all of it in a single trip than flit from Scotland to Cornwall via Edinburgh, Manchester and London while taking in the Yorkshire Dales in a weekend. But you have to get out and see some space to get a sense of perspective.

The Blue Mountains, the foothills of which rise some 30 miles west of Sydney, are an introduction to the Australian bush. Cooler at higher levels, even in the heat of summer, the terrain is home to an environment that's said to house no less than 400 species of wild animal. A straightforward excursion takes in the Featherdale Wildlife Park, the famous "Three Sisters" rock formation, a cable car ride (the Scenic Cableway) ☺



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BREAKS

and the world's steepest perpendicular railway, that plunges some 700 feet.

If you want to stay longer, however, then the Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa is a conservation-based estate to behold. Four thousand acres of land form a reserve located between two national parks at the foot of a range of sandstone cliffs, and within is set a series of private lodges – each with an indoor pool – and a main house with a choice of restaurants, a bar, a gym and a communal infinity pool. The standards of accommodation are absolute, each lodge has a living room, bedroom, capacious bathroom and a dressing room – all replete in earth tones and the kind of furnishings that cosset. Yet it's what's outside that truly impresses.

Field Guides work the land from dawn until dusk. That means safaris day and night to look in on the burgeoning population of wombats, wallabies and kangaroos, work in remote spaces to re-establish koalas and the duckbill platypus that so captivated Charles Darwin when visiting, and in the daily 'conservation hour' cajoling visitors to help plant trees, test water quality or survey plants or animals. If that sounds like hard graft, it really isn't, but it is nice to have made a contribution to an ecological environment – however luxuriously appointed – and to have left a permanent mark. If it's all too much then there's always the excellent spa to soothe any aches away.

You'll need to tread at least as lightly if you are to venture into what Australians call 'the Red Centre', and, most specifically, the dual World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in the Northern Territory. Or the bit of the outback formerly known as Ayers Rock, before the Aboriginal name bestowed by the Anangu culture was reinstated. Shore excursions fly into Alice Springs and take in Kata Tjuta, a sacred

Aboriginal ceremonial site, and the beauty of Uluru bathed in the soft morning light. Learn the creation stories of Liru (poisonous snake) and Kuniya (python) and hear about the Mala people. Subject to your itinerary, some time taken to soak in the best of the environs will be well rewarded.

The remarkable Longitude 131° offers the best vantage point, a luxury, tented encampment facing the magnificent Uluru and offering clear, unfettered views of the rock and the 311,000 acres that surrounds it. Just 15 capacious tent rooms, atop stilts sat on red sand dunes, echo the style of an early explorer's bivouac, but with all mod cons including air conditioning, a king-size bed facing the vista through floor-to-ceiling glass and a well-appointed bathroom. It has to be the remotest oasis on the planet.

But you want for nothing. All meals and drinks are included in your room rate and served in the majestic Dune House, though full value is delivered against that: the food is world class by any fine-dining standard, the Australian wines exceptional and the service impeccable. This is 'glamping' on a scale hitherto unseen.

And if all of that were not reason to stay, then the in-house guides most definitely are. Charismatic and steeped in the history and spirituality of the area and its people, they bring alive the monolith before you and engender a connection that's genuinely uplifting.

There are sunset walks, sunrise walks and base walks around Uluru – if you can, do all of them – but no walks over the rock. There's nothing to stop you, there's a route and even a handrail in parts, but for the locals this is a sacred spot and their leaders ask that you don't.

As we said at the outset, to see all of Australia in a single visit is akin to flying to the moon, but by cruising in or out of Sydney (or both) you get a flavour, at least, that's sure to bring you back. It's a wizard, Oz.



Above, clockwise from top left: The conservation-based Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa; spotting kangaroos on a daytime safari; luxury tents at Longitude 131°, which faces Uluru; inside the tents, you'll find king-size beds and smart bathrooms

ADDRESS BOOK

FLY:

Emirates

Long haul was never so easy.
www.emirates.com

British Airways

www.britishairways.com

EAT AND DRINK:

Azuma

Brilliant Japanese restaurant, a favourite of Sydney's elite chefs.
www.azuma.com.au

Grandma's

Hideaway cocktail bar, perfect for a nightcap.
www.grandmasbarsydney.com.au

STAY:

Meriton World Tower

Enjoy a hotel experience in your own apartment.
www.meritonapartments.com.au

Sofitel Wentworth

P&O Cruises City Stay hotel. Five-star luxury in the heart of Sydney.
www.sofitelsydney.com.au

Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa

Blue Mountains hideaway boasting a unique mix of eco-luxury and animal sanctuary.
www.wolganvalley.com

Longitude 131°

A unique, luxury discovery experience.
www.longitude131.com.au