

Travel

Sydney

Yes, Sydney is far away, but it's well worth a visit. And with Emirates and now Etihad offering direct flights, getting there just got a little bit easier. Words and images *Kate McAuley*



Ask a Sydneysider outside of their natural habitat where they hail from and a whimsical smile will spread across their face and their eyes will briefly gaze off into the middle distance before they snap back to the present and joyfully declare their city of origin. It's even more amusing when two of them face off. 'Sydney, really? Me too.' Each person sizes the other up... 'Which suburb?' 'Paddington', the swanky inner-city area littered with trendy boutiques, cafes and restaurants, one announces with confidence. 'Manly', known for its generous beaches, newly refurbished wharf area and ferry service that connects the suburb with the city centre, the other proudly retorts.

As an outsider, it's difficult to know who is victorious in this entertaining game of one-upmanship, but it's probably a tie. Either way, you have to excuse them both for succumbing to some hometown egotism. After all, out of the millions of people who have visited the city, you'd be hard pressed to find many who didn't like, if not love, the sprawling coastal metropolis. And, if you haven't been, chances are it's on your list of places to go.

Sydney is, without a doubt, a rare city. From almost anywhere in the world, it's an incredible effort to get there – and once you land in Sydney there's little chance of seeing much of Australia if you only have a short amount of time. Everyone knows the country is huge, but the point is really hammered home when, around nine hours into your flight from the UAE, you hit the northern tip of Western Australia, and you're only just over halfway there. Sydney's remoteness makes it mysterious and alluring – and if you're going to go that far, there had better be a gaggle of good reasons for the trip.

How about the sandy beaches and notoriously good weather? The most famous place to cop a sandy squat is **Bondi Beach** (www.go.bondi.com), which sits just east of the Central Business District. It's not so popular with the locals, who'll quip that they need to bring their passport to get onto the beach. On summer days you'll find rows upon rows of scantily clad European backpackers stretched out on colourful beach towels in the midday sun just begging for a savage case of sunburn. The locals know better beaches, such as **Bronte** (a close neighbour of Bondi) and **Whale Beach** on the far north

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side. And with skin cancer being more deadly than a bite from a Sydney funnel-web spider, you won't find many Aussies basking during the hottest part of the day. They're actually the ones covered up, sitting under umbrellas or beach tents, smearing on lashings of factor 50 sunblock and sporting a chalky white streak of zinc across their noses.

Aside from the beaches, the remnants of Sydney's chequered history add spice to any visit. For around the past 40,000 years, give or take a millennia, Sydney has been the traditional home of the Aboriginal Cadigal people. They were joined, somewhat brutally, by the English in the late 1700s, when they famously decided to set up a penal colony as a dumping ground for their convicts. It's ironic that loads of British people now spend vast amounts of time and money trying to secure Australian residency when all they had to do back in the day was steal a loaf of bread.

For a glimpse of the colonial past, a stroll around **The Rocks** (www.therocks.com) precinct is a great place to start. The cobblestone streets that lie beneath the shadow of the Harbour Bridge are lined with markets, souvenir shops and museums that tell tales of Sydney's colonial founders. And the harbour-side restaurants and pubs are an excellent place to grab a bite while you gaze across the water at the Opera House. When you've finished your meal, there's nothing better than walking it off with a stroll past **Circular Quay** to have a closer look at the sweeping white sails of one of Australia's most iconic buildings, and then continue round to the **Royal Botanic Gardens** (+61 2 9231 8111 www.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au) where you'll find picnickers and joggers enjoying the water views from one of the finest kept gardens in the world.

'This cosmopolitan city, with its unique identity, has blossomed into a true international destination'

Nowadays, Sydney is a cultural crucible, with indigenous Australians and the descendants of convicts and early settlers sharing their city with immigrant communities from all over the place. And, as a result, the city is awash with the best that these have to offer, whether it be architecture (take the lift up **Sydney Tower**, the city's tallest building, to get a view of the skyscrapers up close and personal – on a good day you'll see the **Blue Mountains** in the distance too – www.sydney-toweroztrek.com.au), art (head to the **Art Gallery Of New South Wales** (*The Domain*, +61 2 9225 1700, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au) to view the largest permanent collection of Aboriginal art in the country) or cuisine.

Stand in the doorway of the **Marlborough Hotel** on King Street (+61 2 9519 1222 www.marlboroughhotel.com.au) in the colourful inner-western suburb of Newtown, and you'll spy no less than nine Thai restaurants that are all packed with people during meal times. For authentic Italian, head to **Norton Street** in Leichhardt where there are a plethora of



Tourists and commuters on the Manly ferry head towards Circular Quay



The iconic sails of the Opera House

restaurants that'll make you feel like you're dining in Tuscany. And a kebab from a Lebanese or Turkish restaurant has long been the staple food of the late night club scene.

Shopping is world class with boutiques shifting Gucci, Chanel and Prada cosying up next to stores that stock Australian design heavies Sass & Bide, Collette Dinnigan and Peter Morrissey. Art and high culture events are ubiquitous: for an unforgettable experience, ditch the Oxford Street club scene for an evening and head to the **Opera House** (+61 2 9250 7111 www.sydneyopera-house.com) for a performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonia Choirs. If you don't get goose bumps, you're not human. Fine dining at some of Sydney's restaurants, such as **Aria** (East Circular Quay +61 2 9252 2555, www.ariarestaurant.com) **Billy Kwong** (Surry Hills +61 2 9332 3300) and **The Pier** (Rose Bay,

+61 2 9327 6561, www.pierrestaurant.com.au), is just as good. For breakfast, join the locals in the queue at **Bills** in Darlinghurst or **Bills Two** in Surry Hills (www.bills.com.au) to find out what all the fuss is about (hint: the ricotta cakes are to die for). For somewhere to stay, check in to the central **Westin Hotel** (+61 2 8223 1111 www.westin.com.au) for five star luxury with the comfiest beds, or the **Medusa** (+61 2 9331 1000 www.medusa.com.au) in Darlinghurst for a trendy boutique treat.

A visit to Sydney, whatever the time of year, is a must. This cosmopolitan city, with its unique identity, has certainly blossomed into a true international destination. Although its heritage continues to play a part in influencing daily life, it has shaken off the British apron strings, and stepped forward, taking what it needs from the past and amalgamating it into the present to develop something altogether original. And, with all that's on offer in the city, it's not hard to understand why Sydneysiders are just that little bit smug. ●

Getting there

Emirates flies daily to Sydney from Dubai for **Dhs 4,050**. From March 26, **Eithad** flies direct to Sydney from Abu Dhabi three times a week. They are offering an introductory fare of **Dhs2,300** if you travel before April 30. Visit the website for more details at www.etihadairways.com.

Currency
Dhs1=AU\$0.34