

Seven Days of Sydney and Still Not Full

By Nico Earhart

A week can be a strange amount of time to spend in a new, unknown place. Two days there and you know you need to keep up a frantic pace to see as much of it as you can in the short time you're there. A month's long stay and you know the option to approach sightseeing at a leisurely pace is always on the table. Don't feel like getting over to the Sydney Opera House today? That's fine, next week will work. But only one week and you're caught in a limbo between the intense and the prosaic; long enough to make a few new acquaintances, but too short to harvest any new friends, unless you're painfully extroverted. But with the option to spend one month in each of my destinations not on the table, a week would have to suffice. And at least I knew I could always use an excuse to come back to Australia later.

I woke up early on the first day feeling surprisingly refreshed after only a three-hour time difference from where I had come from in Hawaii, as opposed to the eight it would have been had I come from Denver. I find, and I imagine that others would agree, that really large-scale time changes can dismantle the first few days of a trip and leave you in a disconnected, ambiguous haze as you force yourself out of bed and onto the streets to see some of the attractions. But nothing can be farther from enjoyable than trying to walk around a city in the midday when your internal clock is screaming at you, 'It's 2:30 in the morning, what in the hell are you doing out and walking around!?' is what mine usually says. So, I was extremely fortunate to be able to hit the ground running on my first day in the country.

After getting situated in my rental apartment in Zetland, south of Sydney proper, I headed out onto the street. Crossing the motorway, I headed into the Kensington neighborhood, a sort of bizarro-world version of Brentwood in West LA. The houses were of a low-slung, one to two-story Victorian style, composed of dark brick with names in a rainbow pattern above many of the doors. They weren't the last names of the residents, which would be great for the folks in the signage business each time a building changed occupants, but the names of the houses themselves, something that has yet to catch on in the States. I strolled along at a leisurely pace, jotting down notes occasionally and keeping my head on a swivel when crossing the streets, never quite sure which direction the cars would be approaching from. Eventually, I would start to instinctively look to the right before I crossed, but it would take a few days to learn and there's a steep learning curve when it comes to getting blasted by a moving vehicle. Of course, within the first half-hour of leaving my place I was greeted with the growing urge of needing to relieve myself. Nothing can acquaint you with a city more quickly than being out and in it and having to pee so bad you can taste ammonia in your throat. It creates forced interactions, where one needs to go into a bar or cafe so as to find relief, rather than face the rigors of an unfamiliar and potentially convoluted legal system. The Kensington neighborhood being predominantly residential, I was willing to jaywalk across the busy M1 in the middle of midday traffic just to get to the first coffee shop I was able to find back in Zetland. Which brings me to the first major difference between our two countries despite seeming very similar on the surface: coffee.

When you go into a coffee shop in Australia, they do not have coffee. They have a whole galaxy of differently prepared

coffee drinks. Lattes are a hit. Cappuccinos are served in most all the cafés. But ask for a 'cup of coffee' and people look at you like you're speaking to them in Chinese or something. Aussies seem to proudly bask in the fact that they simply don't drink cups of the stuff (despite there being whole isles of insipid-tasting instant coffee in each supermarket) and that they prefer the fancy-pants foamy things. They might even have a little chuckle at your expense if you're foolish enough to ask for a cup of coffee. 'Not strong enough' is usually the reason cited for the lack of basic Joe. But I'm a fan of the strong stuff myself, so the first couple trips I took to coffee shops usually went a little something like this:

"Can I get a cup of coffee, please?"

Hearty belly-laugh, followed by, "Mate, we're Australian! We only drink the strong stuff. We don't just drink cups of coffee like you Americans do."

"Ok... Can I get a triple cappuccino then?"

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND, MATE?!?! YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE A BLOODY HEART ATTACK!!!"

Having accomplished my first long walk as an (un)qualified travel writer, diligent taking of notes included and the rain starting to move in, I decided to head back to the apartment I was renting for the week, which seems to roll off the tongue quite nicely if I do say so myself. This was my first time using a certain apartment rental website (rather than have this seem like an advertisement for them, let's just call the service 'Run-D.M.C.'). And I absolutely loved my Run-D.M.C. apartment. It added a whole new angle to being in an unknown city, both financially and in mentality. With Run-D.M.C. I was just another citizen in obscurity, as opposed to being a blatant tourist, which is one of the most loathsome things I can think of. So, there in my little Run-D.M.C.,

away from the rows of hotels downtown, I had arrived.

In the afternoon, with the sun flittering through a mishmash of crisp, blue sky and monsoonal condensation, a light rain pitter-pattered around the bustle of peripheral Sydney. It always seems like the best parts of cities are in the outlying neighborhoods as opposed to the sterile uniformity of the central business district (CBD). Most of the best restaurants, bars, pedestrian streets, parks and art districts seems to be outside the CBD anyway, so why bother staying down there just so you can constantly take taxis out of it? It always seems like the 'best' things downtown are night clubs and titty bars, both of which sicken me, although both venues seem to attract good looking women for either work at said titty bars, or the succubi who flock to night clubs. But I wouldn't have to look in those sleazy places to find beautiful women here. Sydney is absolutely fully of them. Women of all colors and creeds: blondes and brunettes of your standard variety but also Asian women from all corners of the orient, Italians and Eastern Europeans and points in between. Even the female construction workers seemed to be good looking – like Buenos Aires or Rio, where the women cleaning the bathrooms at the airport could be models in their spare time. And fit as a fiddle most of them, which could have to do with the preponderance of athletic venues that are spangled throughout the city. Weight lifting gyms here, yoga and Pilates studios there, spinning... places? (including one that had the amazingly original, yet low-hanging-fruit name of Vicious Cycle. How no American spinning place owners have not thought of that, I don't know). On every corner, it seemed there was some venue in which you could go build up a sweat. And the men all seemed to be in pretty good shape as well, at least, better shape than me, which didn't alleviate my guilt that the

majority of my exercise for the next month would be occasionally walking 18 holes of golf interspersed with shoveling copious quantities of restaurant food into my face.

Day two would be another rain and wind-swept day in Sydney, killing my ambition to go out and explore. It's never fun getting wet and miserably cold while trying to take in a city for travel writing and force yourself to jot down funny anecdotes. Possible yes, but not advised, and it might even change your perceptions of a place. Any city can be horrid if you are out and get caught in a thunderous downpour. Even the most precious Parisian spring day can turn execrable with incoming rain. The sun crept out occasionally, but never long enough to inspire any sort of long-distance sojourn by foot, so I decided to work on my OzBlog introduction instead in an attempt to not get too far behind on my work. Deadlines, even self-imposed ones, can take some of the freedom away from travel. But that is the difference between a full-blown tourist who has nothing at all to do or worry about and a writer who always feels compelled to go out and see stuff, take notes, find humor and provide some insight as to what you think of a place. But a good travel writer (I hope to be one someday) can wheel a double-edged sword between staying committed to the craft and actually getting out into the field. After a couple hours in front of the computer however, the sun began to peak through the vapor and I headed back out.

You can tell that Australia was once a British colony. Homes here wouldn't be out of place in the outskirts of London, especially with the inclement weather, or set between stands of oaks in the British countryside. I walked around the whole circumference of Moore Park, the massive urban greenspace in the middle of Sydney. Moore Park includes a full 18-hole golf course of the same name, long rows of tennis and basketball courts and some Aussie rules football fields, or pitches, or

whatever they're called. Struck with another urgent bathroom calling I made for one of the public restrooms in the park and found it to be clean, smell decent and seem to be mostly free of any hobo-generated fluids, to my delight. But even away from this mammoth central parkland, the neighborhoods were filled with little parklets like Redfern and Ward, Green and Harmony park. There's even a Hyde Park thrown in as well. No matter where you live in Sydney it seems that you have close access to at least some kind of vegetated area where you can hang out and read a book, walk your dog or just go for a stroll, as I was doing. It was walking around these neighborhoods that I discovered something phenomenal about the Australian postal service. Many of the mailboxes that I walked past had small signs on them stating – no junk mail, please – and to my amazement, the boxes that had this written on them somewhere, didn't seem to have any junk mail in them. It was one of the most commonsense things I've ever seen, so simple yet so impossible for the U.S. to grasp. If the mailbox next to this one didn't have a sign, it would undoubtedly be stuffed with brightly colored gimcracks and bundles of paper. But the ones that simply said, don't put any of this worthless garbage into my mailbox, didn't have any. Now I love the United States as much as the next guy, but if we're the leaders of the free world, and the country that everybody looks to for guidance, how are we still stuffing our in-boxes with advertisements for window cleaning and forty-pound tomes filled with phone numbers we can look up in two seconds?

As much fun as walking around a city can be, you can only physically do so much walking before your feet start to bleed and your shoes

ware thin, and besides, I had some golf courses to get to eventually and would need a car to do it. So, I had scheduled to pick up my rental car from a downtown office on my third day of the trip. I would walk from Zetland the four kilometers to the CBD where I would grab my compact sedan. Making my way from the southern neighborhoods to downtown I headed up Bourke Street through the Surry Hill area to the west of Moore Park. The row houses and brownstones of Surry Hill, long strings of connected buildings that made up dozens of individual houses, were old but beautiful and reminded me of the feel of New Orleans' French quarter. I passed a police station that was built in 1895 and knew that these structures must have been some of the oldest still standing in the country, although the first wooden structure ever built by Europeans in the land that would come to be known as Australia, were gallows, erected in the Houtman Abrolhos islands in Western Australia in 1629 to put to death Jeronimus Cornelisz and the rest of his murdering band who themselves had killed 110 men, women and children after a shipwreck (sidenote: If you haven't heard of or read anything about the wreck of the *Batavia*, go do so immediately). Surry Hill would have been, back then, what Zetland and other outlying neighborhoods are today, wealthy enclaves where people could escape the madness of the inner-city. As a result, it is an amazing part of town almost in the middle of downtown Sydney.

Up Bourke St. and then into Taylor Square, a sort of Times Square meets Broadway type place that is about as appealing as that combination sounds (not very). Taylor Square was definitely a place that appeared to be popular within the homosexual community. Transvestites and effeminate-yet-bulging-with-muscle men walked around holding hands or perched on benches in romantic embrace. That or they just loved rainbows, and have

put up hundreds of flags all over the neighborhood of various sizes to celebrate the multicolored arcs.

Having worked up a good sweat and some sore legs on the hour's long walk into the CBD, I was ready for some motorized transportation. I found the rental office, conveniently located on the busiest street in the most crowded city in the entire country, William Street, and walked in. You might wonder why I choose this location for my first driving experience in a foreign country that drives on the opposite side of the road. Well, I believe it was Hunter Thompson who once said: "anything worth doing, is worth doing right," which was the motto I would be applying to my first drive in Australia.

"Do you want to sign up for this insurance? It's only \$40 dollars a day, and if you get into an accident, it won't cost you any money. Otherwise any accident, even one that isn't your fault, will cost you 4000 dollars Australian," said the woman at the rental counter.

"That's ok, I just won't get in an accident."

With those last words ominously hanging over my head, I walked over to pick up my ride, a little black number with power windows and a fully-functioning AM/FM radio! What the people at the rental office and car pick-up failed to tell me, however, was that on top of the steering wheel obviously being on the wrong side of the car, the indicator and windshield wiper levers were switched diametrically as well. The first four or five turns that I made must have been funny for people to see, as each time I went to signal, the wipers flittered to-and-fro and the windshield washing spray pulsed intermittently. I'm sure all of the pedestrians I almost barreled into thought it was the funniest thing they had seen all day. Luckily, given the soft nature of the human body versus a direct impact from a fast-moving vehicle, I don't think Budget

would have charged me the 4k I would have owed should I be involved in an accident.

Even with my short time spent in the CBD picking up the car, I still knew that the peripheral neighborhoods were the places to be after passing through that dodgy, decrepit part of town. The people down there had a scuzzy look about them and I didn't like it. The historic side seemed as though it would have been interesting had I actually popped into a museum or swung by the Opera House and the Harbor Bridge, which I didn't, but on the street level it could have been any CBD in any major city of the world. It isn't the downtown that gives the city its flavor, but the different outset quarters that come together to form a place's *joie de vie*. Now, with what seemed like at least a seven or eight horsepower engine underneath the hood, I decided to head back to my place and get back on foot as soon as possible.

For the afternoon, the rain having stopped and the sun out in full effect finally, I decided to head south from Zetland, even further into the hinterland. Of course, as I moved away from the city and the street grid began to decline in its uniformity, I was soon lost in what would later be described to me as 'a bad part of Sydney,' although it didn't look any worse from where I had just come from downtown. But apparently, this was what would be considered the bad part. I was lost yes, but I had my phone (still on airplane mode, not yet willing to turn on the navigation unless it was an emergency) with me just in case. Smartphones have killed the art of getting terribly lost in my opinion. People seem to use them as a comfort blanket and can get addicted to staring, zombie-like, at the screens for hours, especially when you don't know where anything is. Don't know where to eat? There's Yelp. Don't have a ride? Uber. Need to get public transportation? There's an app that will guide you to the nearest

station. But getting lost allows you to find discreet, locals-only places off the beaten path that you would never find otherwise. Like the spot I found in Rosebery called Sambag (yes, like a bag that belongs to somebody called Sam) that had a few little shops and restaurants, a nice coffee shop and a little culinary school that was teaching a Pho class later that night. I was tempted to stick around and wait out the afternoon in the coffee shop before learning the time-honored art of making the delicious Vietnamese soup, but I still had hours left of the timeless art of getting lost to attend to first.

My last non-golf

oriented activity in Sydney on this portion of the trip would be, arguably, one of the most touristy things to do, but I had heard from more than a few people that I simply had to get out to Bondi Beach. I had already played my second round of golf earlier in the day, so my dogs were barking (feet sore) and it took a considerable effort to get myself up off the couch, but Bondi was well worth the trip, like, by an absolute landslide it was worth the trip.

Bondi was sort of like a combination of Ocean Beach in San Francisco, Playa Zurriola in San Sebastian, Miami Beach or Venice Beach and Ipanema in Rio, all rolled into one amazing amalgamation. It had the surfers and waves of O.B., be it a substantial upgrade from the frigid conditions there, the high-rise apartment buildings and hotels of Zurriola, the women of Miami and Rio, and the musclebound meatheads of Venice. Or, come to think of it, maybe it wasn't like any of those places. Maybe it's just Bodi.

I walked from one end of the beach to the other a few times, my legs becoming surprisingly less soporific having been fueled by an abundance of bikini-clad

women scattered around the beach. There was a whole panoply of languages being spoken and different types of folks who, like me, had been attracted to the beach for various reasons. There was Australians and Americans as well as Russians, Samoans, Bengalis, Italians, Chinese, Spanish, South American, Japanese, Brits and everywhere in between. There were tourists sauntering and strolling, local school kids in their unis, surfer bros, burn outs on the big grassy knoll above the beach, people working out, dog walkers, ruggle players, practitioners of yoga, swimmers, drivers, diners, picnickers, stoners and slackers. From the beach, I could see the opposite side of the headlands where I had played golf earlier in the day. So close physically, but two different worlds all together – A quiet, unpeopled golf course, only the sounds of the flowing wind, and the calamity and mad cacophony of the beach at Bondi.

The sun sets behind the beach here on the eastern coast of Australia, so I made my way to the north end of the bay at dusk to look back and see as the pallid orb, obscured by a film of thick, cumulonimbus cloud cover, descended slowly through layers of houses and hills, hotels and mansions, before I made my way back to the car.