

THE ROCKS REBORN

The gentrification of Sydney's former slum, The Rocks, has seen the neighbourhood earn its place among the city's high-end locales, where culture, fine dining and entertainment abound

Words Rebecca Haddad





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It's morning peak hour in Sydney, but you wouldn't know it. The bustle of traffic rumbling towards the Sydney Harbour Bridge is just minutes away, but the streets in this part of town are relatively calm, almost eerily quiet. Forget the glitzy skyscrapers of the central business district — here, old sandstone houses and warehouses line dark cobblestone streets in scenes worthy of a Dickens classic. It's not the postcard-perfect Sydney that so many tourists come to see, but this neighbourhood, known as The Rocks, is actually where the city's story starts; an anthology of sometimes-sordid tales of convicts and debauchery, gangs and hardship. I highly doubt that the former inhabitants of this once-slum area would have imagined their home would one day be among Sydney's most well-to-do areas, but fast-forward a few hundred years and the sandstone homes and warehouses are now hotels, cultural institutions, fine-dining establishments and pricey residences. In these silent, cobblestone streets, Sydney's latest luxury enclave awaits.

Modern icons
(above) The Rocks sits so close to Sydney's two main attractions, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House

Picture perfect
(previous page) The sandstone façades of the old wharf buildings in The Rocks give the neighbourhood plenty of character

LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

I am standing along Kent Street in front of a series of white Victorian terraces, which, on first impression, seem rather unremarkable. A first-time visitor will quickly discover that The Rocks is a lesson in not judging books by their covers — or, in this case, buildings by their façades. The homes I am standing in front of are actually The Langham Sydney, a stylish hotel of 96 rooms and suites, all elegantly blending the past with the present via mahogany furnishings, a classic neutral colour palette and 21st-century modcons.

With several hundred historic buildings to see, all made from the sandstone rocks that give this enclave its name, The Rocks is best explored on foot. I start my journey on Hickson Road, which runs parallel to Kent and along the harbour shoreline. Despite myriad stories of British settlement days (the First Fleet arrived in 1788), the history of The Rocks goes back much further — some 40,000 years in fact, when the Cadigal clan of Indigenous Australians lived on the land.



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Archaeological digs throughout The Rocks have since uncovered several ancient campfire sites and a range of traditional relics, while recent development ensures the area's ancient past is not forgotten.

The left side of Hickson Road is dominated by a wharf area, from which the rumble of construction punctuates the quiet. This wharf area is in the process of transforming into an urban space known as Barangaroo, home to parks, retail outlets, offices and a hotel. It's named for a local Aboriginal woman who was the second wife of Bennelong, another local Aboriginal who served as the interlocutor between the indigenous people and the British settlers. The area will become one of the biggest luxury developments in Sydney when completely finished in 2023 (the first stage will be completed by 2015).

CREATIVITY AND CUISINE

During the Depression, Hickson Road was dubbed 'The Hungry Mile' for the men who travelled from wharf to wharf in search of work when employment and food

Urban revival
(above) DFS Galleria on George Street stocks duty-free luxury goods from big brand names

Sublime city
(right) Dawes Point enjoys prime harbour views right under the city's famous bridge

were scarce. These days, the top of Hickson Road, which winds directly under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and around Dawes Point, is now a haven for fine dining. The neighbourhood of Walsh Bay is located at the tip of the peninsula and is commanded by five wharves, which have been converted into luxury apartments (actor Russell Crowe calls one home) and the headquarters of the Sydney Dance Company and the Sydney Theatre Company, the latter of which is currently under the creative direction of actress Cate Blanchett and husband Andrew Upton.

Such a hub of creativity need only be matched by diverse dining options, and Walsh Bay delivers. Off Hickson in Towns Place is El-Phoenician Restaurant, which has just celebrated its second year of serving Lebanese cuisine the way it should be: classic, simple and in banquet form, matched by an equally impressive list of Lebanese wines. Further down along Hickson Road, the trendy set flock to Cafe Sopra at Fratelli Fresh for its authentic Italian cuisine — if you like the food, be sure to visit the adjoining grocer to take some snacks home.





Sydney Theatre Company's headquarters on the Wharf in Walsh Bay



Old meets new in the area around The Rocks Markets

NEIGHBOURHOODWATCH

PYRMONT

A short taxi ride east of The Rocks will take you to Pyrmont. In days gone by, this wharf area of Darling Harbour was a vital hub of the city's maritime industry, home to warehouses and shipbuilding yards. While the industry may have moved on, the suburb has enjoyed new life with restaurants, stylish offices and The Star, an entertainment complex home to luxury shopping, five-star hotel The Darling and award-winning restaurants including Momofuku Seiobo and Black by Ezard.

SURRY HILLS

You'll find this trendy village south-east of the CBD at the start of Sydney's southern suburbs district. In early settlement days, the land in this area was used as farming and given to freemen, before being subdivided from the 1830s onwards as more residents moved away from the harbour. Gentry were soon replaced by a working class, bringing with them larrikin gangs and petty crime. In modern times, the suburb is a haven for Bohemia, home to artisans, designers, writers and students, and is where you'll find many eclectic small bars, restaurants and galleries.

While The Rocks is home to many historic pubs, it does have its fair share of chic watering holes. Nighttime theatre-goers mingle with local office workers at The Bar at the End of the Wharf at Sydney Theatre Company, lingering over a drink and sharing plates in a warehouse-style atmosphere you'd expect from NYC. When you need a place to rest your head for the night, The Sebel Pier One is just down the road, its luxury hotel rooms and suites enjoying prime positioning directly under the Harbour Bridge. A stay in the top-of-the-range Harbour View Balcony Suite comes with that famous harbour vista.

Eventually, Hickson Road connects with the city's first road, George Street, whose position remains unchanged since settlement days. Wandering under the Harbour Bridge, in all its granite and steel glory, and down the western side of Circular Quay, the scene changes quickly: Dawes Point Park, where joggers prance by and tourists capture their all-important snaps of the Opera House and sparkling harbour; the glamorous Park Hyatt Sydney; and the glass-encased Overseas Passenger Terminal, home to the award-winning Quay restaurant. Before I head further down Circular Quay and into the bustle of tourists, buskers and ferry commuters, I turn right, away from the harbour and up the steep path to Argyle Street, which cuts through the heart of this old neighbourhood.

NIGHT MOVES

Come to Argyle Street on a weekend morning and you'll find yourself jostling for space as crowds come to the popular markets, where you can pick up anything from fresh produce to crafts from local artisans. Of evenings, Argyle is crowded with people visiting its many cafes, boutiques and bars.

In days gone by, the streets and laneways that surround Argyle were not places you'd roam after dark. Suez Canal for example, is a narrow laneway between George and Harrington streets, and was the former hangout of The Rocks Push, the local gang who dominated the area in the late 19th century. The larrikins of yesteryear may be gone, but the area is still populated with night owls, who crowd the bars and clubs that have made their homes in some of the heritage buildings.



THE GOLDENBOOK

The Langham Sydney

Tel: +61 2 9256 2222
sydney.langhamhotels.com.au

The Sebel Pier One

Tel: +61 2 8298 9999
www.sebelpierone.com.au

Park Hyatt Sydney

Tel: +61 2 9256 1234
www.sydney.park.hyatt.com

On the corner of Playfair and Argyle streets is the Bavarian-themed Löwenbräu Keller, modelled on the famous bier halls of Munich. A block up is The Argyle, a multi-level bar, lounge and club complex. A few minutes' walk north on George Street is the old Mariners Church, now Bar 100, where revellers dance to DJ-spun tunes and a live band on weekends.

If you're after a glimpse of those famous harbour views, head to the roof of The Glenmore on Cumberland Street. Built in 1921 and renovated just last year, the hotel is home to a trendy rooftop bar that gets crowded on weekends from lunchtime, with patrons eager to soak up the afternoon sun and share jugs of Pimms or sangria while watching the gleaming white sails of the Opera House take on the orange hues of sunset.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

With so much to see and do in The Rocks, you'd be safe in assuming that you don't have far to travel to find luxuries of the retail kind. Not far from Suez Canal is Nurses' Walk, the laneway that cuts across the former site of the colony's first hospital. Here, you'll find many quaint little cafés and contemporary art galleries. The Wentworth Gallery in particular is worth a visit, home to a selection of works from both emerging and established local contemporary artists, as well as works from some of Australia's Indigenous artists such as Evelyn Pultara and Yinarupa Nangala. Further down George Street

The luxe life
(top to bottom) Enjoy a tranquil sunset from The Sebel Pier One; million-dollar views from a Harbour View Balcony Suite

towards the CBD is DFS Galleria, a duty-free shopping mall stocking all the big names in luxury fashion and accessories including Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Burberry and Tiffany & Co.

Were it not for the sandstone buildings and cobblestone streets, it would be easy to forget you are in Sydney's oldest area; such is the success of The Rocks' evolution into a cosmopolitan blend of old and new. Walk back along the harbour foreshore and you'll stumble upon the most evident example of this ideal. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) takes pride of place along the west side of Circular Quay. The original art deco building was completed in 1952 and the Mordant Wing was added in 2012 as part of a AUS \$53 million (\$49 million) redevelopment, resembling a tower of monochrome blocks that present a stark contrast to the sandstone façade of the original building.

Standing determinedly in shadow of the MCA is a small but nonetheless significant dwelling. It's regularly overlooked by locals and tourists, who dash past without realising that it is, in fact, Sydney's oldest building. Cadman's Cottage was constructed in 1816 and was the former residence of John Cadman, the former chief boatman or coxswain of the early colony. The juxtaposition of the two buildings sums up The Rocks perfectly — a place that proudly preserves the tales of Sydney's past and embraces its exciting future in equal measure. ■