

The longer the better, of course – ours was a four-nighter – but you can comfortably zip to Sydney for a short break.

In October 2006, I was part of a lucky group of Singapore journalists taken on a junket to the world's favourite city as guests of Gulf Air and Tourism New South Wales. Sydney has so much to offer – here's just a taste of what's hot right now.

### Climb the Bridge

General consensus has it that the bridge climb is a 'must-do', and it's certainly unique to Sydney. Groups of 12 climbers depart every ten minutes every day, rain or shine. You need to book ahead and allow about four hours. Much of the time is taken up with getting kitted up in special suits, harnesses and other safety gear, but the views of Sydney from the top are lovely.

If you, like me, get impatient with highly organised team activities that require absolute compliance and cheery group-hollering, I suggest you take a leisurely walk across the bridge instead. The views are nearly as good and cost nothing. Then visit the museum in the bridge's Southeast Pylon to learn the fascinating story of the construction of this Sydney icon.

# Sydney Long Weekend



### Go Backstage

Built in 1959 for 102 million Australian dollars (A\$), the wonderful Sydney Opera House was funded by lottery money – “We Australians love to gamble”, said our backstage tour guide.

Like the Eiffel Tower, the Opera House was unpopular at first, but over time its unique design – “Think of an orange broken into segments,” said the architect – crept into the hearts and minds of Sydneysiders.

General half-hour tours of the edifice leave every hour; for special or backstage tours, you need to book ahead.

by Verne  
Maree

## See Priscilla!

For me at least, going to see the live show *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* was the highlight of the trip. If you liked the outrageous 80s movie of the same name, starring Terrence Stamp, you'll love this wickedly camp extravaganza.

The road-trip storyline of three drag queens who cross the Outback from Sydney to Alice Springs in a ramshackle bus is a winner, and the costumes, props and performance are all world-class. The gay anthem *I Will Survive* had the audience singing along, as did *McArthur's Park* and *Go West*, but newer numbers by Kylie, for example, bring things up to date.

We saw the show only two weeks after its debut. The capacity audience at the Lyric Theatre was dressed to the nines – feather boas were fluffing excitedly wherever you looked – and there was a real sense of occasion from the buzz in the lobby to the ecstatic, standing-ovation finish. I'm prepared to bet that it won't come here – though Singaporeans love drag queens, much of the humour relies on allusions that are largely lost on sheltered locals.

So I suggest you fly to Sydney for a weekend, book one of the comfortable rooms or apartments (from A\$150 a night for a two-bedroom) at Star City, home to the Lyric Theatre. Have the time of your life at *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, then enjoy a three-course, post-theatre dinner at the hotel's excellent Astral restaurant.

## Breakfast at Bondi

After a night on the tiles, what you need is a hearty Aussie breakfast. At famous Bondi Beach, the beautiful staff at Trio restaurant served up some amazing fare and excellent coffee; I recommend it highly. You'd better book, as it's a popular spot.

A bracing walk along the unseasonably wet and windy cliff path to Bronte Beach gave us a glimpse of frolicking dolphins and burnt up an estimated five percent of the calories we'd consumed at Trio. It's a great walk with lovely views, and there are some stunning sandstone rock formations to be seen along the way.



Paddington Market

## Go Shopping

Sydney is a great shopping destination and the city centre is not a bad place to start. The QV Building in George Street, a restored Victorian jewel of a building, is worth a visit for its architecture alone. A few hundred metres away is Myers, a superb department store where a whole floor is devoted to local designer boutiques – and the stuff fits!

A trip to the attractive Sydney suburb of Paddington, described as “a village within a town”, gives you a nostalgic sense of historic, small-town Australia.



## Kemah Tinggi

Exclusive 4 bedroom luxury villa for rent in Bali. Sleeps 2-11 in five star comfort. Stunning views, beautiful gardens, romantic sunsets and twelve discrete staff make this a sophisticated and family-friendly hideaway. Rates include transfers, breakfasts, a chauffeured car and laundry.

[www.kemahinggi.com](http://www.kemahinggi.com)



Paddington Market itself has a fairly eclectic collection of offbeat designer clothing and jewellery. If you tire of the market, you can wander off the main street to find dozens more interesting boutiques such as Alannah Hill, Saba, Marcs and sass&bide, all in Oxford Street.

## Snap a Cassowary

I loved the new Wildlife Experience at Darling Harbour – home to the biggest variety of Aussie wildlife in one place, it's an excellent experience for both adults and children.

The animals are presented in a series of habitats, both diurnal and nocturnal. The species include electric-blue butterflies in a rainforest and bull ants going about their business; snakes, skinks, frilly lizards, wombats, wallabies and kangaroos, and a shamelessly camera-hungry cassowary. Many of the exhibits are on two levels – adult height and child height – so that ankle-biters don't have to be picked up. It's an excellent concept and well worth visiting.

## Visit the Blue Mountains

Don't think, as I did on a previous trip to Sydney, that if you've seen one mountain range you've seen 'em all. The scenic Blue Mountains, just an hour's drive away, are both ecologically and geologically unique. Go for the day, or spend the night if you can.

The area became popular in the 20s and 30s with honeymooners and moneyed Sydneysiders escaping the heat of summer in the city. There are classy resorts aplenty: we stayed at the pleasant **Peppers Fairmont Resort**, which offers everything from tennis, golf, mountain-biking and bush walking to spa and hydro facilities. It's a casual, no nonsense place, particularly good for families.

Overlooking the Blue Mountain's most famous landmark, a rocky outcrop known as the Three Sisters, is **Scenic World**. It has three exciting rides: one a steep railway built by coalminers many years ago; the second a cable-car ride in a glass-bottomed gondola across a spectacular valley; and the third an incredibly steep cable-car ride that takes you deep into the temperate rainforest.



*The scenic Blue Mountains*



But the best part of all was a guided tour along the boardwalk; our excellent guide brought to life the arduous conditions that the miners endured, and we marvelled at the idea that the area's rough tree ferns have been in existence for 150 million years – they grew while dinosaurs roamed, and while birds evolved.

Lunch at the nearby award-winning restaurant, **Solitary**, was outstanding – fine dining with wines to match. Again, it's probably essential to book a table in advance.

On our last day, we were picked up at the resort by **Tread Lightly Eco Tours** and taken on a most enjoyable and informative two-hour wilderness walk. Once again, our guide was a font of information about the area's geology, the flora and fauna, and Aboriginal customs. Rather than just seeing the sights, hiring a guide like this gives so much more depth to the experience.

## Where to Stay in Sydney:

You can't go wrong with the Shangri-La Hotel, ideally situated in the historic Rocks district, five minutes' walk from the Bridge and with superb views of the Opera House. You can also walk to the CBD for shopping, to train and bus stations and to Circular Quay Ferry Terminal, from where you can catch a ferry across the river to Milson's Point, or to Manly Beach, Rose Bay, Watson's Bay or Taronga Zoo, or all the way inland along the river to Parramatta.

Recently refurbished to the tune of A\$37 million, this previous ANA hotel has the unmistakable five-star Shangri-La stamp and beautifully spacious rooms. Royalty and heads of state like to stay here because the hotel's main entrance is on a side street, so there's no need for traffic police to close off roads when they arrive or leave.

There's all-day buffet dining at Café Mix on the ground floor, with something for everybody. Level 36 houses the swish Blu Horizon Bar and fine dining at Altitude restaurant. Their floor-to-ceiling windows delighted the shutterbugs among us, who made several trips upstairs to photograph the breathtaking views at various times of the day and night.

## Getting There:

The seven-hour daylight Gulf Air flight arrives in Sydney at 8.15pm. The good news is that you have your full day of departure free, as the flight leaves only at 9.45pm.

We were treated to business class on the way there and first class on the way back. I could get used to this. Both classes give you a super-efficient limousine transfer service from home to the airport and back – the helpers at my condo were *so* impressed! What's more, first and business class passengers are entitled to two transfers anywhere, and as Singapore is so easy, you might want to save your transfer for London, for example, where getting around is difficult and expensive.

You can eat the good food served up by Gulf Air's sky chefs, be it from the fine-dining menu or one of the light meals on offer, literally at any time you like during the flight. And the beds in both classes are blissfully flat – full of champagne and pan-fried cod, I slept for hours.



Shangri-La Hotel

## Contacts:

- Star City and Astral Restaurant  
[www.starcity.com.au](http://www.starcity.com.au)  
1800 700 700
- Tourism New South Wales  
[www.tourism.nsw.gov.au](http://www.tourism.nsw.gov.au)
- Shangri-La Hotel  
[www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)  
+612 9250 6000
- BridgeClimb  
[www.bridgeclimb.com](http://www.bridgeclimb.com)  
+612 9240 1100
- Sydney Opera House  
[www.sydneyoperahouse.com](http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com)  
+612 9250 7678
- Sydney Wildlife World  
[www.sydneywildlifeworld.com.au](http://www.sydneywildlifeworld.com.au)  
+612 9333 9288
- Trio  
+612 9365 6044

## Blue Mountains:

- Peppers Fairmont Resort  
[www.peppers.com.au](http://www.peppers.com.au)  
+612 4784 4144
- Scenic World  
[www.scenicworld.com.au](http://www.scenicworld.com.au)  
+612 4782 2699
- Solitary  
+612 4782 1164
- Tread Lightly Eco Tours  
+612 4788 1229  
[www.treadlightly.com.au](http://www.treadlightly.com.au)