





# AWAY FROM IT ALL WITHIN COO-EE OF SYDNEY

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAR JENSEN

On a busy day, with the traffic pounding around you, who doesn't sometimes yearn to hear the deep satisfying silence of the bush – a silence so profound that the occasional echo of birdcalls or the gurgle of creeks in gullies underlines rather than disturbs it? Of course to enjoy that kind of silence you need to get far away from the city and into the remote bush – unless, that is, you live in Sydney and can escape to Ku-ring-gai Chase. And if you don't live in Sydney, a visit to Ku-ring-gai Chase would make a delightful day out or more on your next trip to the Harbour City.

**W**HEN YOU'RE SURROUNDED by 15,000 hectares of rugged bush-clad hills it's hard to believe you're only 25 kilometres from Australia's largest city. But that's where you are in relation to Sydney when you're in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, New South Wales. Australia's second oldest national park, Ku-ring-gai Chase encompasses the waters of Cowan Creek and is bordered by the Hawkesbury River in the north-west, Broken Bay in the north and Pittwater in the east.

The landscape is dramatic. Hawkesbury sandstone cliffs formed over 200 million years ago plunge deeply into the jade depths of the river. Scribbly gums, bloodwoods and angophoras cling precariously to the hillsides, creating a hazy blue-green landscape that extends to the horizon in every direction.

The forest protects numerous Aboriginal and historic sites as well as being a haven for wildlife. There are over 160 species of birds recorded in the park and you can often see wallabies, echidnas and goannas. Fish are plentiful in the waterways, which are also the occasional cruising grounds for fairy penguins.

Exploring this vast natural playground is easy, thanks to a couple of sealed roads, some amazing lookouts, a network of well-marked walking tracks and easily navigable, protected waterways. You can explore by road, on foot, by boat or even on horseback in certain areas.

By road, you can follow two main drives in

the park, each deserving a full day's exploration. The first, approached from the south-west corner of the park, loops around through Bobbin Head. To take this road you enter the park via Ku-ring-gai Chase Road in the suburb of Mount Colah. This takes you to Kalkari Visitor Centre where you can collect maps, brochures and track notes (some of which are available at the park gates). There is also a theatre showing short film clips on Aboriginal culture and Australian animals.

Adjacent to the centre is Kalkari Discovery Trail, a wheelchair and stroller-friendly track meandering through a variety of habitats. A brochure highlights the main features and identifies where you're likely to see certain flora and fauna. This makes a fun expedition if you have children or grandchildren in tow. The view from the trail lookout is spectacular; the monochromatic green landscape, punctuated by massive rock outcrops, appears endless. Look down and far below is Cockle Creek, another enchanting place to explore.

From Kalkari the road winds downhill to Bobbin Head at the confluence of Cowan and Cockle Creeks. An extensive foreshore recreation area includes 1930s-era picnic shelters and a large modern playground. You can watch ferries come and go or you can wander around the marina, once home to many classic wooden Halvorsen cruisers that were hired out here. That stopped in 2003, and the last of the hire boats was sold off, after the EPA insisted they be fitted with holding tanks.

The park's information centre is located in

historic Bobbin Head Inn and sells gifts, souvenirs and publications on the park. Bobbin Inn Café adjoins the shop and serves Devonshire teas and light meals.

A cable footbridge spans Cockle Creek and leads to Gibberagong boardwalk, which meanders through the mangroves just above the waterline. It's a great opportunity to observe this eco-system without getting your feet dirty, and it's fun watching the crabs scurry through the mudflats. If you follow the track to the end you'll eventually come across some well-preserved Aboriginal engravings.

A side road leads from Bobbin Head to Apple Tree Bay, another popular picnic spot. But to continue the loop, take Bobbin Head Road to North Turramurra and stop off at the Sphinx War Memorial. Modelled on the Sphinx in Egypt, it was carved in the 1920s in memory of Australians who served in the First World War.

The second of the two recommended drives through Ku-ring-gai Chase takes in the central and eastern sections of the park and is reached via Terrey Hills or Church Point. Entering from Terrey Hills you take McCarrs Creek Road. If you're coming from Church Point, you're already on McCarrs Creek Road, which is the continuation of Pittwater Road. From either direction, you'll come to General San Martin Drive, which leads you through the park to the turn-off for Cottage Point.

The only pocket of residential land bordering Cowan Creek, Cottage Point is Sydney's smallest suburb. Its 40 or so houses are a mixture of venerable holiday shacks

*Opposite* Eucalypts cling tenaciously to the sandstone cliffs of Cockle Creek in the Ku-ring-gai National Park. "When you're surrounded by 15,000 hectares of rugged bush-clad hills it's hard to believe you're only 25 kilometres from Australia's largest city," writes Briar Jensen.





**Left** Water falls from a great height onto the beach at Refuge Bay, a secluded inlet near where Cowan Creek joins the Hawkesbury River. Refuge Bay, one of the largest bays on the creek, is almost surrounded by thick bush, which made it an ideal hidden location for commando training in the Second World War. **Top right** The goannas at Hallets Beach sometimes drop in unannounced on picnic parties before sauntering back into the bush. Hallets Beach is on the wide mouth of Cowan Creek. **Above right** Spontaneous waterfalls burst over rocky outcrops after heavy rain in Ku-ring-gai Chase.

perched on the water's edge and newer and expensive mansions cascading down the cliffs. The land at Cottage Point was originally called Terrey's Point after James Terrey, a Sydney merchant grocer, who purchased it from the government in 1879. In those days it could be reached only by packhorse along an arduous bridle path. Not until the land was leased for holiday cottages and a wharf built were ferry services begun.

There are several interesting old buildings at Cottage Point. Right on the point is the Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club, which purchased the property in 1958, despite some members believing it a waste of money. The clubhouse, an original weatherboard holiday house looking out over manicured lawns, commands a magnificent view north up Cowan Creek.

Cottage Point Kiosk, on the eastern side of the point, overlooks the yacht club's moored boats at the entrance to Coal and Candle Creek, a tributary of Cowan Creek. Dating back to 1911 the kiosk was originally one of two cottages built above a boatshed; in fact a

boat business still operates here. The kiosk's verandah, adorned with old photographs of the area, is a good spot for a delicious light meal while watching boaters bustle about below. Take a look over the balcony railing and you'll see schools of well-fed fish waiting for titbits.

On the western side next to the original wharf is Cottage Point Inn, an old boatshed and general store that is now a restaurant specialising in modern Australian cuisine. Its wide deck extends out over Cowan Creek with views over the shimmering waters to the bush beyond. The restaurant is accessible by water, so there are often yachts, cruisers and seaplanes tied up at the restaurant's pontoon.

There is no off-road parking at Cottage Point, so if you arrive at lunchtime on a weekend you may have to park back up the hill – but it's worth the walk. For overnight guests Cottage Point Inn has two apartments adjacent to the restaurant, with private balconies offering magnificent views. There are also some houses available for weekend

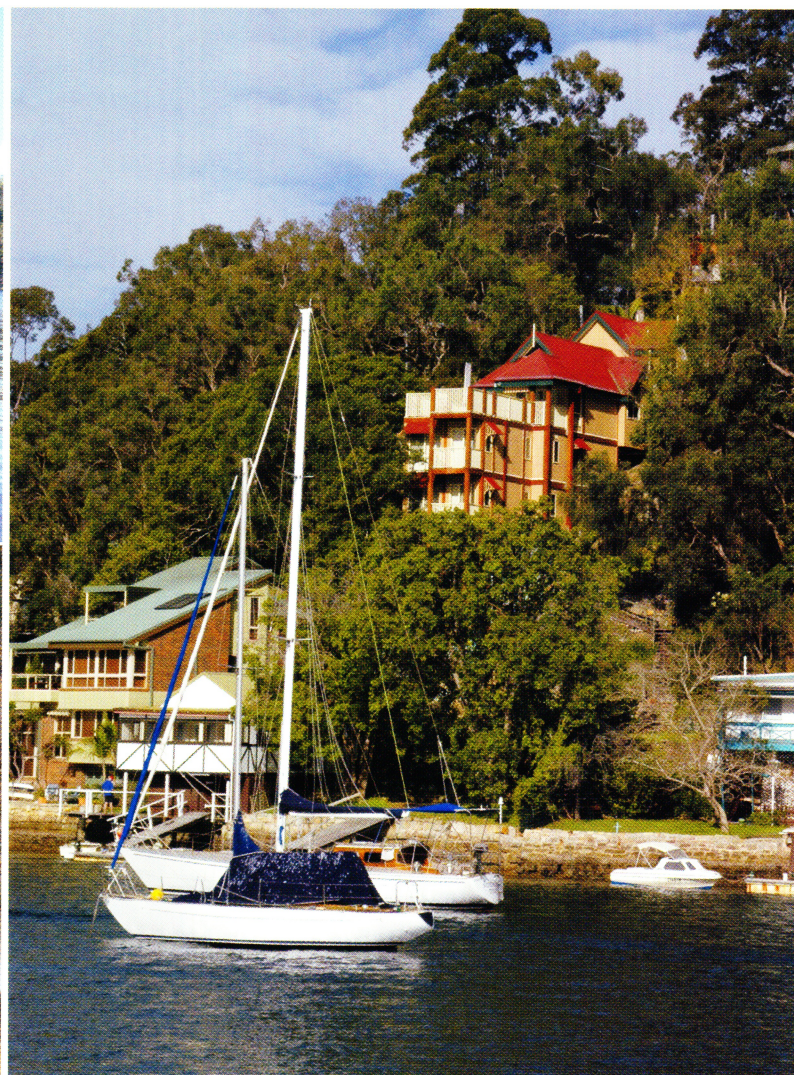
rent (see the accommodation section of the Cottage Point Kiosk website at end of story).

Return to General San Martin Drive and continue down the hill where you'll eventually meet up with Coal and Candle Creek. There's a sheltered picnic spot tucked in the base of the hills at Illawong Bay, which is also a popular fishing spot. Further along the road is D'Albora Marina, tucked away in the tiny inlet of Akuna Bay. Here boat-fanciers can ogle some very expensive motor cruisers and see the forklift manoeuvre small boats in the multi-level, dry-storage racks.

There's a variety of eating options here, including a licensed function centre, café, BYO bistro open Friday and Saturday and a general store. There are also barbecues provided where you can cook your own meal. There are free open-air music sessions on the pontoon every Sunday offering jazz or blues while you eat.

Past Akuna Bay is West Head Road, winding picturesquely through the park and eventually leading to West Head lookout, looking out over Pittwater, Broken Bay and





Top left The waterways in Ku-ring-gai Chase offer lots of little beaches to explore by dinghy or canoe. Middle left Rich colour in the rocks at the base of the Refuge Bay waterfall. Bottom left Clipper cruisers can be hired from Akuna Bay to take you into parts of the park inaccessible by road. Above Cottage Point, one of Sydney's smallest suburbs, is a mixture of holiday shacks and expensively built mansions. It is the only pocket of residential land with a frontage to Cowan Creek.

the Tasman Sea beyond. This is actually the eastern-most spot in the park; the name comes from its position in relation to other points at the entrance of Broken Bay. The views from the lookout are magnificent, so bring your binoculars. Park volunteers "meet and greet" here every Sunday, handing out brochures and sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm on the park. There are seats here, and back on West Head Road is Resolute

Picnic Area.

After returning along West Head Road you can turn left onto McCarrs Creek Road which will take you to Church Point on Pittwater or turn right to return to Terrey Hills.

Of course, a car doesn't let you enjoy that silent sense of remoteness among the bush-clad hills that you get from being on foot. There's an extensive network of walking

tracks within the park, from easy fifteen-minute strolls to more strenuous hikes of up to 14.5 kilometres. Track notes, which outline routes and estimate walking times, are free and available from the visitor and information centres, but for more detailed information it's worth buying Alan Fairley's pocket-sized *Discovering ... Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park ... on Foot*. As well as detailing routes, this highlights points of interest on each track, such as historical sites, Aboriginal engravings, interesting vegetation and wildflowers. For visitors to Ku-ring-gai Chase who prefer to walk in a group or want to ask questions en route there are guided walks led by park volunteers. Walks and nature activities continue all year, but you need to book. Programmes are available at the visitor and information centres.

There are hundreds of Aboriginal sites in the park, with several sites in the West Head





Left Morning mist recedes from a small bay off Smiths Creek. Right Multi-level houses built into the cliffs above the water at Cottage Point.

area being easily explorable. There are rock engravings and cave art – Ku-ring-gai Chase has one of the largest concentrations of rock art in the world – and there are axe-grinding grooves and middens. To get the most out of them, take the relevant brochures with you. These explain the significance of the sites and give background information on Aboriginal culture.

If you enjoy wildflowers you might want to time your visit according to their blooming schedule (Alan Fairley includes a floral calendar in his book). A volunteer botanist conducts guided wildflower walks at certain times of the year and there is a wildflower garden bordering the park at St Ives.

The beautiful waterways that thread

through the park were formed by the flooding of steep-sided gorges at the end of the Ice Age. Consequently they are deep and easily navigable (don't be misled by the term Cowan "Creek" – it's a veritable river). Getting out on the water, whether in a canoe, dinghy, yacht, cruiser or houseboat, gives a whole new perspective on the park and the opportunities for exploration ashore are endless.

The predominantly sandstone foreshores have been worn by years of wind and water, and this has created intricate patterns and dramatic rock "sculptures". There are rock caves to investigate, often leading to the discovery of Aboriginal middens. Numerous waterfalls cascade down the hillsides, some hidden, others, like that in Refuge Bay,

tumbling right onto the beach and providing an invigorating freshwater shower. Refuge Bay has its own little niche in history. In 1891, ten years before Federation, a draft of the Australian Constitution was prepared on board a paddle-steamer anchored in Refuge Bay. In 1943 the bay was used as a secret training area for Force Z, a commando group preparing for a raid on Japanese shipping in Singapore Harbour.

Boating has been a popular pastime in Ku-ring-gai Chase for generations. In Waratah Bay are the remains of Edward Windybank's 1890s boatshed. As well as rowing boats he hired out moored houseboats, which were old steamers cut in half; the larger ones slept twelve and were equipped with pianos and wood stoves.





Above Cottage Point Kiosk was built in 1911 and was originally one of two cottages above a boatshed. A boat business still operates there. Top right A kookaburra surveys its domain. Kookaburras periodically alight on boats in the hope of finding food. Right The tranquil grounds of the Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club at Cottage Point. The clubhouse is one of Cottage Point's original weatherboard holiday houses.

There are lots of public moorings in the park and marinas at Bobbin Head and Akuna Bay, but if you can drop an anchor, you can choose your own spot, with just the sound of local wildlife for company. A hungry kookaburra might even pay you a visit.

There's a canoe launching ramp at Bobbin Head and boat ramps at Apple Tree Bay and Akuna Bay. Boats, from kayaks to cruisers, can be hired from Cottage Point Kiosk and Clipper Cruiser Holidays at Akuna Bay. There are further hire places at Brooklyn and Pittwater. An excellent book by John and Jocelyn Powell, *Cruising Guide to the Hawkesbury River and Cowan, Broken Bay, Pittwater*, gives navigation details as well as some local history.

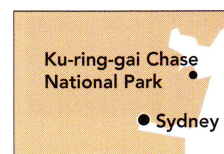
Visitors who don't feel they're up to captaining their own boat can just as enjoyably experience the waterways by ferry or skippered vessel. There are plenty of options, from individual launch trips to rides with Australia's Last Riverboat Postman. Most services depart from Brooklyn on the Hawkesbury further north and there is also a ferry from Palm Beach on Pittwater.

By boat, on foot or by car, regardless of how you explore this natural wonderland, not only will you be captivated by its beauty but you'll have to keep pinching yourself to remember how close you are to Sydney – and yet how far. ■



Discovering ... Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park ... on Foot by Alan Fairley (Envirobook, \$12.95) is available from the park information centre. *Cruising Guide to the Hawkesbury River and Cowan, Broken Bay, Pittwater* by John and Jocelyn Powell (Deerubbin Press, \$24.95) is available at selected bookshops and boating stores or direct from the publisher at [www.deerubbinpress.com.au](http://www.deerubbinpress.com.au).

Cars entering Ku-ring-gai Chase pay a fee of \$11 per vehicle. For further information about visiting the park, consult the website [www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au), click



on "NSW Parks & Reserves", then select Ku-ring-gai Chase from the list of parks.

The Kalkari Visitor Centre (tel 02 9472 9300) is open 9am to 5pm every day except Christmas Day. The Park Information Centre (tel 02 9472 8949) is open 10am to 4pm (extended in peak times) every day except Christmas Day.