

UP THE CREEK

Hidden in plain sight on Sydney's northern doorstep, Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park is an aquatic playground swaddled in 15,000 hectares of native bushland

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN

West Head Lookout's spectacular
view of Lion Island in Broken Bay.

LIKE FORKED LIGHTNING Cowan Creek strikes through the heart of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, its gnarly, kinked branches seeping deep into the steep-sided valleys of the densely forested plateau. This is sandstone country, drowned by rising sea levels after the last ice age. At its entrance the 'creek' is as wide as the Hawkesbury River, whose mouth it embraces as they flow into Broken Bay. Flanked by Pittwater to the east, the park bestows tree-framed aquatic views at every turn. These protected waterways are perfect for messing about in boats, communing with nature, and connecting with the area's first custodians, the Garigal people.

Ku-ring-gai Chase is NSW's second-oldest national park (after the Royal National Park) and was established in 1894 thanks to Eccleston Du Faur, a surveyor and supporter of the arts, who campaigned doggedly for the reserve. Appalled at the "reckless destruction of native flowers", which were being plundered for sale at Sydney markets, he also felt those living north of the Harbour deserved their own recreation reserve. Abutting North Turramurra, the park is on Sydney's doorstep, just 40 minutes from the CBD, yet largely flies under the radar, receiving less than two-thirds the visitors of the Royal.

TAKE A DRIVE

Due to Cowan Creek, Ku-ring-gai becomes a park of two halves when visiting by car, so it makes sense to devote a day-trip to each. In the south-west, Kalkari Discovery Centre is ideal for kids, as wildlife abounds - and not just the stuffed variety inside the building. Cockatoos and rosellas screech overhead while brush turkeys scratch through leaf litter. The wheelchair-friendly Discovery Trail passes wallabies and eastern long-necked turtles, and I've seen an echidna snuffling beneath the scribbly gums. The lookout here gives a sense of the park's scale - a vast stone-washed green vista rippled with ridges and valleys.

Further downhill, Bobbin Head exudes an air of yesteryear with the art deco Bobbin Inn overlooking 1930s picnic shelters in Orchard Park. The Inn houses a café and national park shop stocked with walking maps, books and souvenirs. This is a spot for good old fashioned fun - fishing off the foreshore, crab and bird spotting along Gibberagong mangrove boardwalk, or watching boat ramp antics at nearby Appletree Bay.

Cross Cockle Creek bridge and you're back in the 21st century at Empire Marina. Grab a deck-side seat at Waterside Bistro and watch the fish congregate in the sanctuary beneath you. Waterfront signboards tell of the Aboriginal engravings on the adjacent rock wall and of a humpback whale and calf spotted here in 1957. Head out of the park via Bobbin Head Road to see the Sphinx Memorial, a one-eighth sandstone miniature of the Egyptian original, sculpted by Private W. T. Shirley in memory of his fallen comrades in the Australian Imperial Force.

Ku-ring-gai Chase is NSW's second-oldest national park



From top: Nature's sandstone sculptures line the waterways; old man banksia are in full bloom from summer to early autumn; a little black cormorant rests between diving for fish at Smiths Creek; goannas often appear at picnic areas, but visitors are advised not to feed them.



A sea plane's perspective of Cottage Point surrounded by Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park.

Proposals for a casino, golf course, house lots and country club here thankfully never came to fruition

Cottage Point is a sliver of private land in the park's eastern section, home to Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club and a handful of residences. There are two riverfront eateries built in old boatsheds, one on each side of the point. Fine dining Cottage Point Inn caters to arrivals by seaplane and launch, as well as by car, while Cottage Point Kiosk & Boat Hire caters to early-morning cyclists and hungry boaties (I love their signature chilli mussels and barramundi curry). Owners Angela and Trent Wilson, who worked on private yachts overseas for 10 years, have cultivated a Riviera waterfront feel with colourful tables, flowering baskets and an easy-quaffing St Tropez rosé. Arrive early to avoid having to park up the hill.

General San Martin Drive follows Coal and Candle Creek past Illawong Bay, a popular picnic and fishing spot, then on to d'Albora Marina cocooned in Akuna Bay. Imbibe an afternoon cocktail at SHED before heading to West Head Lookout. With 240-degree views over Broken Bay, Lion Island, Barrenjoey and Pittwater, this is one of Sydney's signature scenes. Proposals for a casino, golf course, house lots and country club here thankfully never came to fruition, and the government procured the land for gun emplacements during WWII, before it was added to the park in 1951.

TAKE A HIKE

Walking tracks range from easy strolls to strenuous thigh-burners, though the plateau only reaches about 200 metres above sea level. Vegetation and wildflowers vary within each walk, but Appletree Bay to Waratah Bay is hard to beat as a water-level riverfront stroll. Part of the Mount Ku-ring-gai to

Berowra Station walk, it meanders along the shoreline beneath grey gums and sprouting grass trees, past ancient middens and bays with creeks dribbling over lichen-covered rocks.

For a more taxing hike, take the 13km section of the Great North walk from Cowan Station to Brooklyn. It dips to Jerusalem Bay before a rollercoaster of ascents and descents to lily-covered Brooklyn Dam. Gibberagong Track, beyond the boardwalk at Bobbin Head, follows Cockle Creek to Gibberagong Waterholes, and Warrimoo Track follows the upper reaches of Cowan Creek before heading uphill to the Sphinx.

Walking tracks trickle down each side of the Lambert Peninsula like waterfalls after a storm. Accessed from West Head Road, you can choose between views of Cowan Creek or Pittwater. America Bay Track leads to cascading rock platforms at the top of a waterfall. Resolute Track traverses creeks and rainforest gullies to West Head, Resolute and Mackerel beaches.

TAKE IN ABORIGINAL SITES

Ku-ring-gai Chase is on the ancestral lands of the Garigal clan and protects hundreds of magnificent rock engravings, cave paintings and grinding groove sites, several of which - like the Aboriginal Heritage Walk from Resolute Picnic Area - are easily accessed and signposted from West Head Road. But you'll garner a deeper understanding if you take a guided tour with Guringai Aboriginal Tours. Laurie Bimson is a Guringai man of the Garigal clan and a direct descendant of Bungaree, the intermediary who accompanied Matthew Flinders on his circumnavigation of Australia from 1801 to 1803.

He's passionate about sharing his knowledge of culture and country. "If you learn more about Aboriginal culture, it'll be better for my people and for the land," says Laurie. The tour starts in Resolute Picnic Area before moving to Red Hands Cave, where he explains how hand stencils were made by blowing a mix of Sydney red gum sap, ochre and saliva around an outstretched hand - right for men, left for women.



From top: Cottage Point Kiosk & Boat Hire; the captivating view of Barrenjoey from West Head Lookout; fishing is always a hit with the kids; the Sphinx Memorial commemorating fallen Australian soldiers in WWI.



At the Basin Track site he demonstrates how the rock engravings were made, first pecking the rock and then scraping to join the dots. This large sandstone platform was a teaching site for passing on traditional knowledge and life lessons. Laurie points out an engraving of a boy with a fish in his belly and a club to his head, illustrating the punishment for greed and explaining how food must be shared. There's signage here, but Laurie gives a far richer and nuanced interpretation while enthusiastically answering questions.

TAKE TO THE WATER

Not all Aboriginal art is on the plateau; some drawings can be seen from the water. Cowan Creek has a fjord-like feel, with bush-draped sandstone ridges pitching sharply into the water. Deep and easily navigable, with yellow public moorings and plenty of sheltered spots to anchor, it's ideal for novice boaters, whether in a kayak, cruiser, tinny or houseboat. With a copy of John and Jocelyn Powell's *Cruising Guide to the Hawkesbury River, Cowan, Broken Bay and Pittwater*, you could spend a couple of weeks on the water and only scratch the surface. I've been boating here for 20 years and I'm still discovering places to explore.

As well as maps and fishing tips, the book has tidbits of colonial history, like boat builder Edward Windybanks who lived in Waratah Bay with his wife and seven children from the 1890s. They hired rowboats to tourists and had moored houseboats, replete with pianos, in what is now called Houseboat Bay. Refuge Bay, filled with club and private moorings, resembles a carpark during summer weekends but is worth visiting for the waterfall that tumbles over the escarpment. A draft of the Australian Constitution was worked on aboard a paddle steamer anchored here in 1891 and it was the secret training ground for Z Special Unit before they departed on the *MV Krait* for their raid on Japanese ships in Singapore Harbour in 1943.

Fishermans and Halletts beaches are great picnic spots, where goannas often make an appearance, but don't feed them and they'll amble away. Some bays feature muddy sandflats, where armies of blue soldier crabs do a synchronised scuttle at low tide. Others hide secret streams beckoning adventurous paddlers.

Nature provides the entertainment here: white-faced herons stalk in the shallows, black cockatoos gorge in she-oaks and white-bellied sea eagles snatch fish for a feast. I once witnessed a male lyrebird bathe at the water's edge in a frenzy of flicking tail feathers and flapping wings that sent up sprays of water droplets. And then there's the soundtrack of cackling kookaburras, whistles and cracks of whipbirds, and the vibration of cicadas - assuming you haven't dropped anchor next to a houseboat full of blokes on a buck's night. ☑

I've been boating here for 20 years and I'm still discovering places to explore



Laurie Bimson of Guringai Aboriginal Tours.

TAKE A TOUR

- Guringai Aboriginal Tours include the Basin Track engraving site and Red Hands Cave | guringaitours.com.au
- Sydney Classic Boat Charters offers short cruises aboard their 1950 Halvorsen Bridgedecker *MV Kalinda*, based at Cottage Point | sydneyclassicboatcharters.com.au
- River Adventures can tailor a day on Cowan Creek with a beach picnic and lookout hike | riveradventures.com.au
- Take a return ferry ride from Palm Beach in Pittwater to Bobbin Head, via Patonga | palmbeachrivercruises.com.au

HIRE A BOAT

- Cottage Point Kiosk & Boat Hire has kayaks, picnic boats and fishing dinghies | cottagepointkiosk.com.au
- Empire Marina Bobbin Head hires four-metre aluminium fishing boats | empiremarinas.com.au
- MyHarbour hires powerboats from Akuna Bay for licenced drivers | myharbour.com.au
- Holidays Afloat and Hawkesbury Afloat hire houseboats, cruisers and BBQ boats | holidaysafloat.com.au hawkesburyafloat.com.au

FUN OVER 50

ALL-INCLUSIVE GUIDED TOURS

HOLIDAY here THIS YEAR

HOLIDAYS OF A LIFETIME
with Fun Over Fifty

13 DAY

Darwin, Kakadu, The Kimberley & Broome

Inclusive of a many extras such as spectacular scenic flights over the Bungle Bungles & Kakadu's Majela floodplains.

- Return flights ex Brisbane, Sydney & Melbourne to Darwin & from Broome
- 2 nights 5-star Darwin
- Litchfield National Park; Wangi Falls; 2 nights Kakadu
- Yellow Waters Cruise
- Cruise Katherine Gorge & Geike Gorge; 1 night Katherine
- 3 nights Kununurra; El Questro
- 1 night stays at Halls Creek & Fitzroy Crossing
- 2 nights Broome; Camel trek
- All meals included

DEPARTS > 3, 19 MAY | 11, 19 JUN | 24 JUL 2021

Per person
TWIN SHARE **\$7899***
SOLE USE **\$9500***

EARLY BIRD DEAL!
\$400 PER COUPLE
\$200 SOLE USE
MAY 2021

14 DAY

Outback Queensland, Gulf & Savannah Sojourn

An epic outback adventure with history, trains & gorges.

- Luxury 'Gold Class' coach travel & all meals
- 1 night Roma & Springsure
- 3 nights Longreach & daily tours
- 2 nights Cloncurry; Mt Isa Mine
- 2 nights Karumba; Sunset cruise
- 2 nights Cobbold Gorge & guided Gorge tour
- Gulflander train journey
- through the Savannah bush travel & all meals
- 1 night Undara Lava Tubes with guided tour
- 2 nights 5-star in Cairns with Kuranda Scenic Rail journey in Gold Class
- One-way flights ex Cairns to Brisbane, Sydney & Melbourne

DEPARTS > 18 MAY* | 15 JUN 2021

Per person
TWIN SHARE **\$6890***
SOLE USE **\$8150***

EARLY BIRD DEAL!
\$600 PER COUPLE
\$300 SOLE USE
MAY 2021

*Early Birds savings are for May 2021 departures only. Included flights are economy class.

CALL FOR FREE BROCHURE
1300 554 505

VISIT OUR WEBSITE funoverfifty.com.au
to browse our portfolio of tours in every State & Territory of Australia