

between Australia's two main cities. Simon Busch dug a bit deeper, and found there's more to both



board houses, clusters of feral daffodils and crocus and nine permanent inhabitants, three of them named Michael: Michael the Melbourne-boy hotelier and the force behind the town's slow revival; Michael the loquacious Cypriot chef who always repeats himself, repeats himself; and "Ginger Mick", the amorous, red-bearded prospector.

I'm glad the mining went. It's a beautiful town now: peaceful as the grave, and the stars at night are a revelation.

Much of the coastal drive winds through national parks with names such as Croajingolong, Biamanga and Kooraban, taken from the first Australian lan-

guages. Pungent eucalypts form archways over the main road, from which dirt tracks lead off to the beach. Fearsome riptides make swimming sometimes unsafe but it is a powerful tonic just to set eyes on these sweeping, majestic, pale yellow capital Cs of sand on which every beach cliché shrivels up in inadequacy.

The espresso and gin aftertaste of Melbourne had given way to the unmistakable tang of the bush but Sydney announced itself with the thickening odour of exhaust fumes. You should fight through the harsh outer suburbs to reach the harbour and the smell of the sea

again, for it is in all things aquatic that Sydney excels.

I began my marine exploration by slipping beneath the water for a supervised dive at Manly with some of its denizens. Grey Nurse sharks are a good corrective to any lingering Jawsphobia because, deadly — and dumb — as they appear up close, their snaggle of British-looking teeth is apparently the wrong shape to get much of a grip on human anatomy.

From above the water you can see how the harbour makes sense of Sydney. I climbed to the throbbing red nodule of the aviation warning light at the very top of that great arched bridge and, between gasps of terror induced by the vertigo from which I had forgotten that I suffered, mapped the main points of the city's maritime soul.

There were the twin granite anvils of the North and South Heads, through which the flotilla in the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race sails out to the sometimes-deadly sea. There was Pinchgut, a fortified islet where they sent recalcitrant convicts for a bread-and-water sojourn (and where you can now, perhaps rather tastelessly, have a picnic).

There were the stacked shells of the Opera House, built where the colonists

found 12m high shellfish middens left by countless generations of lunching aborigines. There were the blond daubs of the beaches, each a microcosm of Sydney society: Bondi for aspirant beautiful people, Manly for families and, further out, Cronulla for the plebs.

A long, suicide leap beneath me (the bridge staged about 40 during the Great Depression), a green and gold ferry crawled across the harbour. Faster craft have moved in on the ferries' patch, snaring tourists at one pontoon and zooming to another, but these old workhorses remain cheaper and superior.

They pull in at obscure coves all around the harbour, dropping you off as if at a private wharf. Their floating terminus is at Circular Quay and it was here that I alighted for my own refuelling stop. Oysters are the supreme Sydney food. Slurping them down at the quay, I wondered whether I could survive on a diet of them and Hunter Valley Semillon alone: it might, I thought, assure a very long life.

Arguing the toss over Sydney and Melbourne is an Australian pastime, and normally I'd be happy to join the fray. But if I do go back I might actually bypass either city — to spend a year or 20 in Walhalla.

**Aussie rules:** the contrasting skylines of Sydney and Melbourne, right

#### WAY TO GO

Travelocity.co.uk (0870 111 7073) has flights from Heathrow to Melbourne, returning from Sydney, from £562. It can arrange accommodation at the Langham hotel in Melbourne, doubles from £154 per night and in the Clarion Suites, Darling Harbour, Sydney, from £132 per night. For more information on the Sydney-Melbourne coastal drive see [www.sydney-melbourne.com.au](http://www.sydney-melbourne.com.au) or [www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com). Walhalla Star Hotel (0061 3 5165 62 62, [www.starhotel.com.au](http://www.starhotel.com.au)) has doubles from £81. Oceanworld Manly (00 61 2 9949 2644, [www.oceanworld.com.au](http://www.oceanworld.com.au)) provides supervised shark dives. Bridgeclimb (0061 2 9255 8210, [www.bridgeclimb.com](http://www.bridgeclimb.com)).



**Gold rush:** the one-time mining town of Walhalla, between Sydney and Melbourne

#### WILLIAM STREET

This tiny residential street off Oxford Street is by far the chicest shopping address in town. Brightly painted Victorian terrace houses with lacey ironwork are home to cute little boutiques. Still zoned as residential, retail is only permitted on the ground floor so there's a refreshing lack of big-brand stores — instead it ranges from independent fledgling designers such as **Sami & Sita** (no 36), who create gorgeous gowns in Italian silks, to haute couture designers such as **Collette Dinnigan** (no 33).

Most fabulous are the vintage and "pre-loved" designer stores; **Melvyn & Doyle** (no 59) is a treasure trove of designer labels — Gucci, Missoni, Chanel from the Twenties to Eighties sourced by Brit Bianca Doyle in the US and elsewhere. Go just to check out the décor, which includes a genuine confession box.

Further down are **Belinda** outlets

(no 39) — Sydney's answer to Browns — and at the bottom of William Street is the wonderful **Pelle** (no 90), for recycled designer footwear (those essential Seventies Gucci heels) and accessories. Next door, scour the rails at **Di Nuovo** (no 92) and pick up second-hand designer bargains from Lisa Ho to Sass & Bide.

#### DOUBLE BAY

Otherwise known as Double Pay, this affluent, manicured neighbourhood is Sydney's answer to Beverly Hills. Proof of its pedigree is **Dogs and the City** (no 15a) on twee Transvaal Avenue, a dog lovers' emporium with everything from booties and bling collars to sofas. Next door is **My Island Home** (no 5), the place to buy homewares to create your own "tropical paradise". Across the street, Julie Lantry's gorgeous **Bulb** (no 10) sells sexy baby-doll loungewear. Don't leave without popping into the

wonderful **Simone Logue** (no 2 Cross St) — where we had juicy carrot cake.

#### BONDI BEACH

It's not all bikinis and Mambo surf wear. A few blocks back from the beach, Jacques Avenue and Gould Street have a few gems. On Gould Street, **From St Xavier** (no 75a) sells trendy Aussie and international women's and men's labels such as Buddhist Punk, Gsus and Huffer. There's another **Tsubi** (no 82) jeans store, starring a display of robot toys.

Across the street (no 85 Gould Street), any girl will love **Shona Joy's**, printed tees and "housewife on Valium" dresses. It may be too hot to contemplate but John Macarthur makes rainbow-coloured bespoke jumpers any way you want them at **Purl Harbour** (Unit 4, 16 Hall St) — his designer yarns range from AU\$40 socks to AU\$500 jumpers.



**Local hero:** Fat, on Oxford Street, sells mainly hip Australian labels such as Sass & Bide