

Bradleys Head offers inspiring views of Sydney Harbour.

FIRST LOOK!
BONDI TO
MANLY WALK,
NSW

HIKING THE HARBOUR CITY

The brand new Bondi to Manly Walk is being marketed as Australia's Cinque Terre and we reckon it's on the money!

WORDS AND PHOTOS_TARA WELLS





Above:
Camp Cove,
Watsons Bay.

Left: Hornby
Lighthouse,
South Head.



A surfer crosses the path after a cheeky morning session; children learn to sail, their boats bobbing in the harbour; and mates pull a kayak down to the water's edge for an arvo paddle. Sometimes there are no people at all, just scrubby coastal heath, delicate flannel flowers, towering angophora, twisting Port Jackson figs and the slap of water against rocky foreshore. Here, there's no hint of the city's petrol-hazed traffic crawl and no mega-mall food courts. Where is this utopia? It's Sydney, but not as you know it. This is the Bondi to Manly Walk, a new 80km track gripping the city's coastline like its coffee-fuelled life depends on it.

Actually, it's been possible to walk it for years, ever since a passionate group of walkers – the Walking Volunteers – waded through the madness of nearly-but-not-quite connecting tracks. But barely anyone did. Logistics were still a puzzle, maps hard to come by and there was no signage. Enter a new group who picked up the “what if...” question, backing it with political nous and an appetite for bureaucracy (Chairman of the Bondi to Manly Walk Supporters is former Labor Senator John Falkiner). The result: 15 local, state and federal bodies actually agreed on something.

So here I am. In the bush. In Sydney.

For walkers, the most noticeable change is that the track is now consistently signposted. And like the Camino's scallop shell, the Bondi to Manly Walk has its own distinctive track markers. The humpback whale, or buriburi, was chosen together with local Aboriginal Land Councils for its local significance. There are many Dreaming stories about humpbacks and plenty of whale watching opportunities along the walk.

Tackling the 80km

Despite its length the Bondi to Manly Walk is life-friendly. No matter how much time you have, no matter how many kilometres you want under your belt at the end of each day, whether you want a bunch of day walks or just one long multi-day inn-to-inn style walk ... the answer is “yes”.

And it's a public transport dream. Although bus routes are never far away, it's easy to pretend roads don't exist. Instead, break up the walk by ferry. Sydney's distinctive green and yellow ferries chug past enough track-side wharves to make this possible.

My goal is to go back and do it in one go but, you know... life. So I did two close-to-the-route hotel stays carrying only a daypack (expect luggage transfers to become available as operators twig), and the rest as day walks using a suburban base. That great disruptor, AirBnb, has opened up places to stay in areas without hotels, particularly on the north side of the harbour. Or you could stay at the same accommodation every night, in which case I recommend near Circular Quay (remember those ferries?).

The view from Cahill Walk.



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Like any lengthy walk, some sections are more spectacular than others, so it’s possible to skip a street-heavy headland every now and then. For those with time and an unwillingness to sacrifice a single centimetre of coast, the full 80km itinerary has it all. You’ll walk Sydney’s beaches, – both the crowded and secret – capture every harbour, city and ocean view, explore significant Aboriginal sites and early colonial remnants, spot darting wildlife and drink (great) coffee with locals.

Bondi Beach to Watsons Bay

The most surprising thing about starting the walk from see-and-be-seen Bondi Beach is how quickly I leave behind the hubbub. And how soon there is a reminder that I’m walking on what was and always will be Aboriginal land. Millennia-old aboriginal carvings depicting sea life and spiritual figures sit high on a sandstone plateau surrounded by golf course and a heritage-listed sewer ventilation tower.

The track sticks to a green belt between houses and dramatic sandstone cliffs. Passing historic Macquarie Lighthouse leads on to Watsons Bay. The highlight here is not the picturesque fish-and-chip village itself, but 360° views over the city and Pacific Ocean

from Gap Bluff. This is the first I’ll walk through the non-contiguous Sydney Harbour NP. The loop walk out to South Head and Hornby Lighthouse puts me right at the tip of Port Jackson’s entrance, revealing what’s yet to come across the harbour.

Watsons Bay to Double Bay

Strolling along streets of prestigious waterfront addresses, where even walking the dog is outsourced, is typical of this semi-urban walk. For a few blocks, the only people outdoors like me are gardening teams and construction workers.

Then – and here’s the constantly repeating surprise – turn a corner and I’m back in Sydney Harbour NP. As if the genteel sanctuary of Parsley Bay is not natural enough, Sydneysiders enjoy swathes of harbourside protected from development. Port Jackson figs are not planted but grow wilfully, banksias battle winds straight off the harbour, and tawny frogmouths use their invisibility superpowers. This contrast with eye-wateringly expensive real estate makes the Hermitage Foreshore Walk all the more remarkable. Until I emerge back to reality where sailboats and sleek cars prevail. At least the locals are walking their own bichon frises again...



Mosman Bay.

WALK NOTES | **BONDI TO MANLY WALK**

Time: 3-4 days | Length: 80km | Grade: easy-moderate



1. Bondi to Watsons Bay: 9.9km
2. Watsons Bay to Rose Bay: 10.6km
3. Rose Bay to Darling Point: 7.6km
4. Darling Point to Kirribilli: 9.9km
5. Kirribilli to Taronga Zoo: 10.42
6. Taronga Zoo to The Spit: 9km
7. The Spit to Manly Wharf: 9.7km
8. Manly Wharf to Manly Beach: 10.7km

Double Bay to The Rocks

This section is less about untamed nature and more about gratitude that in a city of 4.6 million I can walk through so many parks. The most impressive, of course, is the Royal Botanic Gardens. It is nature too, albeit formalised, meticulously studied and generously shared. The buildings around here point to what society aspires to – arts and culture at the Art Gallery of NSW, a music conservatory and those distinctive white sails of the Sydney Opera House.

I try to spot the seal, a repeat visitor on the Opera House steps leading down to the water, but not today. It's a sight only glimpsed by walkers taking their time, looking at the everything-ness rather than the one-frame selfie-takers. No matter how often I walk from the Opera House, past buskers at Circular Quay, around the rejuvenated docks and right up to the shadows of the Harbour Bridge pylons, I think the same thing, every time. I love this city.

The Rocks to Cremorne Point

If there's one way to feel like a tourist, it's to walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I detour up the Pylon Lookout for panoramic views over the harbour, trying to name all the harbour islands. Why have I let tourists keep this to themselves all these years?

For many Sydneysiders on both sides of the divide, the bridge is as much a psychological as a physical barrier. What's worth "crossing the bridge" for? Try these: realising Kirribilli House is more modest than most Point Piper mansions; seeing author May Gibbs' patch of bushland (inspiration behind Snugglypot and Cuddlepig); and breathing deep lungfuls of Sydney red gum, swamp she oak and lomandra in Cremorne Point Reserve, thanks to Bushcare volunteers.

Cremorne Point to Balmoral

This part of the track reveals Sydney's multi-layered history: artists emulating European impressionists at Curlew Camp, alongside ancient Aboriginal middens. A world-renowned zoo next to native bushland sheltering 150 bird species. So too, Georges Head. It was a significant Aboriginal ceremonial site, then European colonists grabbed it as a strategic vantage point for military purposes. Now leisure-seekers like me simply enjoy its expansive views of Sydney Harbour.

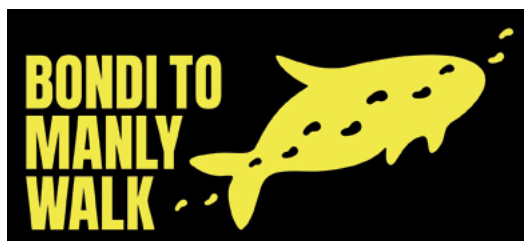
For the walker there's a cost to all that leisure-seeking. Did I mention the stairs? Up and down all day. This is the price to pay for stunning headlands. Far from the reaches of traffic-choked Military Road, I walk along angophora-lined paths. Banksia thrives and brush turkeys scabble, and I appreciate what keeps drawing people back.



Top: Hermitage
Foreshore Walk near
Neilsen Park.

Above: Manly Beach.

Left: The official logo of
the Bondi to Manly Walk.



Balmoral to Manly

I thought I knew beaches. Beaches like Bondi and Manly, with pounding surf, lifeguards and sneaky rips. But Balmoral, like so many of the harbour beaches, is well-mannered and gracious. A gentle shore break here (an easterly notwithstanding), a cautious shark net there. These beaches politely request wading in rather than demand diving under. Two lighthouses along the track remind me though, that the harbour is not always as inviting for ships as it looks now.


The Spit Bridge to Manly track is a section already well-loved by walkers. Protected national park headlands juxtapose with modern harbourside homes and an ancient Aboriginal engraving site at Grotto Point.

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Eastern water dragons are abundant, sunning themselves trackside. There are 220 recorded plant species on Dobroyd Head alone, a prime example of Sydney coastal heath. It's tempting to walk into Manly and feel like I'm done. But there is one more section to go, away from the laidback beach crowds.

Manly and North Head

You'd think I would have learnt by now, that Sydney always has a nature salve close by. But still. Manly is the busiest centre I've walked through in 70km, so again I'm tricked into thinking that's all there is. But then I turn a corner, the crowds thin, there are only walkers here again. (And if I was here between July and February, maybe there'd be a fairy penguin or two, Australia's only mainland colony).

This is a walk through Australian history. It is the area of Sydney's first quarantine site (and necessary cemetery – smallpox, Spanish flu, the plague!), with decommissioned military fortifications. North Head has a hanging swamp, and is home to the threatened long-nosed bandicoot. Standing at North Head, I look back over the harbour to the city skyline. Opposite is South Head, and all the headlands I've walked up, over and between. They reach out across the water, beckoning me to come back and walk it all again. 

Need to know: bonditomanly.com