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DECEMBER 2014

HOLIDAYS IN SYDNEY
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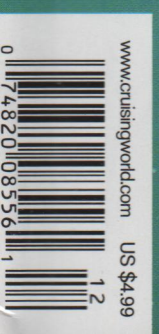
## BAREBOAT CHARTER
## A COUPLE KICKS BACK IN GRENADA

## SAIL GREEN *ACROSS THE PACIFIC FOR SCIENCE*



A FAMILY'S CRUISING JOURNEY CULMINATES UNDER THE FIREWORKS IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

BY NADINE SLAVINSKI

# POT OF GOLD

UPON LEAVING MAINE in September 2011 for points south, we programmed two waypoints into the GPS: one for the Isles of Shoals, 60 miles away, and another for Sydney, Australia — 8,954 nautical miles, as the albatross flies. That waypoint mesmerized us. For the three of us — my husband, Markus Schweitzer, our son, Nicky, and me — it was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Not that we wanted to rush through the bands of color along the way: the incredible islands, cultures and experiences of the Pacific. But since our cruise had to end sometime, we wanted it to end with a bang. Where better than under New Year's Eve fireworks in Sydney Harbour?

Two-and-a-half years later, we sailed under the Harbour Bridge aboard our 1981 Dufour 35, *Namani*, and our dream came true. We quickly realized there's more to Sydney — much more — than "just" the iconic sights of one of the world's greatest natural harbors. We expected expensive marinas; what we got were free anchorages and public moorings, both in the bustling central harbor and amid quiet bushlands, and all with fantastic sailing conditions to boot. Sydney truly is a place where sailors can go walkabout for weeks, even months.

Visiting during the holidays made the occasion even richer, with concerts, Christmas lights and New Year's celebrations — all in summertime, no less. Throw the start of the classic Sydney Hobart Yacht Race race under the Christmas tree and you get 10 days of nonstop highlights, plus a stocking stuffer: the option to hide away from all the action in a quiet nook of your own.

*Sydney, Australia, throws a New Year's Eve celebration that's tough to beat, with not one, but three waves of impressive fireworks. While there are plenty of vantage points on shore, the deck of a boat is arguably the best one.*

# THE ICONIC VIEWS OF MODERN SYDNEY WERE OURS

Our pulses were racing as we rounded the cliffs of North Head and steered *Namani* into the city for the first time. The initial view isn't striking. With a tight corner hiding the inner bay, we could forgive Captain Cook for sailing straight past, making only a passing note about "a bay or Harbour wherein there appeared to be safe anchorage which I call'd Port Jackson." It wasn't until 1788 that convict settlers of the First Fleet stumbled across the inner harbor and laid the foundations of what would become a spectacular city.

The moment we turned that tease of a corner, iconic views of modern Sydney were ours, there for the taking in the form of several hundred camera clicks. The Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, the contrast of city skyline with peaceful swaths of green — all of it doubly thrilling after sailing our own boat from halfway around the world.

Inside the sentinels of North Head and South Head, the harbor immediately splits into three parts: North Harbour, with the beachside city of Manly; Middle Harbour, an oasis of green; and the inner harbor, which narrows, then splits again into the Lane Cove and Parramatta rivers. Each of these areas is a sailor's paradise, scalloped with smaller bays. So where to begin?

Our first instinct was to head for the center of the action, and we spent two nights anchored directly across from the Opera House in Athol Bay, practically choking on the views. The immediate shoreline, part of Sydney Harbour National Park, proved perfect for long walks in the shade. It's also the home of the Sydney Zoo, with close-up views of platypuses, koalas and echidnas, and an easy place to hop a ferry downtown. While it takes luck to snag one of the few public moorings in Athol Bay, we were happy to drop the hook amid a fleet of pleasure craft large and small.

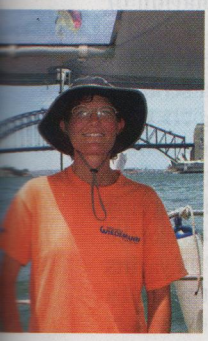
The downsides of Sydney are twofold: The density of boat traffic means that the water is always churning, and almost every bay is packed with moorings. Although Athol Bay has few of the latter, it's plagued by wakes, and the constant roll had us thumbing through our cruising guide for some escape. We quickly discovered a number of bays with enough space — plenty of space, in fact — to anchor in reasonable depths (30 feet, give or take), both in the inner harbor and the side branches. Who needs a $250-per-night marina when you've got sturdy ground tackle? Over our entire month's stay in the greater Sydney area, we anchored for free. When the wind chased us around the harbor, we could always duck into another corner of the maze.

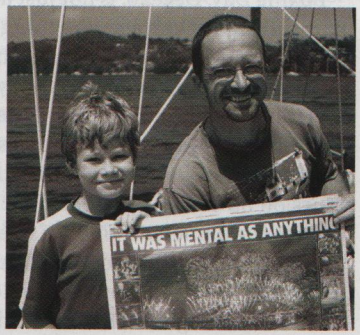
And the wind did shift — constantly — during the December when we lingered in and around Sydney. Tired of the persistent roll and expecting an imminent southerly change (the abrupt wind shift that comes with the passing of a Tasman Sea low), we moved to Rose Bay, just a little farther out from the center of the action. There, we enjoyed unobstructed views of the city skyline with a fraction of the wake wash. Rose Bay offers good protection from the south and east with about a mile of shoreline that's free of moorings. Local amenities include a supermarket, a beautiful public library, waterside parks and easy connections downtown, just 20 minutes away.

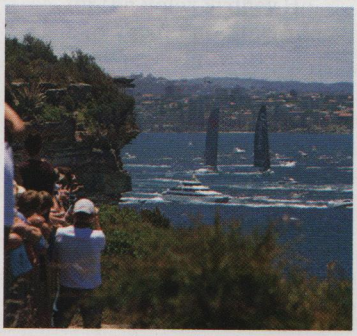
When a high-pressure system piped in wind from the north, we'd head out as if to sea, then pull a hard left into Middle Harbour. It's a quick 6-mile trip that we learned to time just right for the opening of Spit Bridge. Once through, we'd circle into either Sugarloaf Bay or Bantry Bay, serene backwaters encircled by nature preserves. The area is all bushland, full of walking trails where keen eyes might pick out the occasional echidna or swamp wallaby. At night, cockatoos squawk and preen. All in all, it's a world apart from the city, yet still within city limits. Sugarloaf Bay is a place where you really can have it all: a peaceful day in a perfectly placid anchorage, or a day out on the town thanks to nearby bus routes. Where else in the world can you find the same? It's there that we spent a lovely Christmas, tucked away for one special day.

Soon we established a pleasant rhythm of two or three days in the splendor of the city, then two or three relaxing in the peace of the bush. With the holidays upon us, every second day brought a special event. It started with a night at Carols in the Domain, a free city concert with big-name entertainment, and continued with engagements with

*The iconic sights and great sailing conditions (opposite, top) put Sydney Harbour on many cruisers' bucket lists. Author Nadine Slavinski (from left) is all smiles at the helm of her family's Dufour 35,* Namani, *with the Harbour Bridge behind her. Powered-up race boats are a common sight in Sydney. The day after the fireworks display, Nadine's son, Nicky, and husband, Markus, are still reveling in the spectacular event. The annual start of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race is not to be missed.*





STEVE LOVEGROVE/SHUTTERSTOCK (TOP); MARKUS SCHWEITZER (FAR LEFT); NADINE SLAVINSKI (3)

ROLEX/CARLO BORLENGHI

*Boxing Day, Dec. 26, is the annual start date for the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race. This popular event draws a spectator crowd of thousands.*

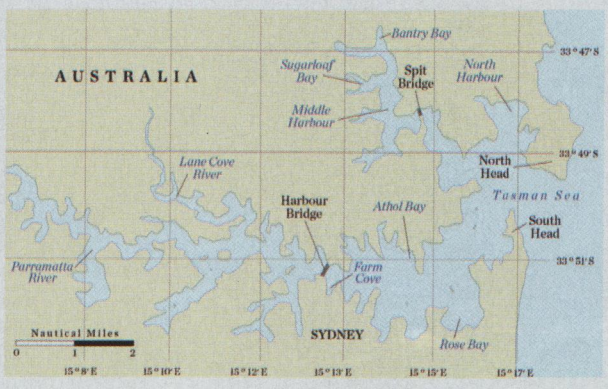
friends. Making up for the lack of a white Christmas were Christmas barbecues and beach outings — not quite what we're used to back home!

Boxing Day, Dec. 26, is not just a day to sort through crumpled wrapping paper — not when you're in Sydney. This day sees the start of the 630-mile Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race in the inner harbor. Entrants range from professionals aboard 100-foot maxi yachts to amateurs on 35-footers — all madly circling the starting line as a fleet of spectator craft attempts to avoid collision. We opted to stay away from the melee and climbed the heights of South Head for an overview instead. There, we could observe not only the start but also the fleet's progress into the open sea.

Given the weather forecast, we watched with the sick fascination of spectators waving gladiators off to the arena, wondering what fate they might meet. The 2013 event headed straight into a gale predicted to bring 70-knot gusts and 30-foot waves. Over the next few days, newscasts showed sobering images of huge racing yachts sporting tiny orange storm sails in a neck-to-neck race for the finish. Eventually, 10 of 94 yachts retired, including one dismasting and a broken rudder.

The next big event had us wondering what damage our own hull might sustain: New Year's fireworks over Sydney Harbor. We'd long dreamed of having front-row seats from our own floating home, but we were spooked by stories of mayhem on the water. Were we willing to risk it? If so, where should we anchor, given the armada of pleasure craft (in various degrees of seaworthiness and sobriety) all vying for prime views? Minding the official exclusion zones, we whittled the choices down to three. You can't get any closer to the action than Farm Cove, beside the Opera House. However, that seemed a little too close. (Indeed, sailors later reported a nightmare of boats anchored on too-short scopes, dragging and bumping all night.) The second option was Athol Bay, which becomes a floating zoo on New Year's Eve.

We opted for the third choice, Rose Bay, where we could sit back and relax until the fireworks started — all three waves of them. Sydney puts on a family show at 9 p.m. as an appetizer, a brief 10:30 p.m. palate cleanser, and a main course at midnight. It's a show that capitalizes on both the lovely harbor setting and the city's architecture. That night made our 500-mile detour to Sydney (off a course to our eventual destination, Brisbane) completely worthwhile.




Between the special events and several quiet days at anchor, we reveled with great sailing in brisk winds, yet protected waters. What can beat tacking from the Opera House to South Head, or gliding downwind under the Harbour Bridge? It's thrilling too given the density of water traffic, from high-speed ferries (which always, always, have right of way) to navy vessels and pleasure craft of all sizes skippered by the brightest and dimmest of bulbs. The good news is that commercial shipping is concentrated well south of Sydney, in Botany Bay. It would be hard to imagine the harbor getting any busier, especially around the bottleneck off the Opera House. Still, I wouldn't trade a minute's worth of winching sheets in this setting for an hour of sailing in any other city in the world.

For all the city bustle and quiet getaways, there's even more just around the corner. I'll borrow a line from Yogi Berra and call it the "third half": the waterways that fan out from Broken Bay, 20 miles north. That's where you'll find Pittwater, home base of many charter operations, as well as the primal world of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Sailing Cowan Creek into the latter transported us into an Australia before the arrival of Europeans: green, thick, wild. A deafening chorus of cicadas strikes up every dawn and dusk, then it's the kookaburra's turn to laugh. This was another side of Sydney, and a lovely one too.

When the time came to sail to Brisbane, we could leave Sydney with a deep sense of satisfaction. There's a special thrill to big-city sailing, that wow-I'm-really-here factor, that doubles when experiencing it all from the deck of your own boat. And city thrills were only part of the fun. The unexpected gift tucked far behind the others was the option of quiet bushland retreats within city limits. It's as if some sail-friendly god took the best parts of the best waterways in the world, partnered them with fair weather and a friendly population, and created something nearing perfection. As I said at the start, for us it was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

*Nadine Slavinski is the author of* **Lesson Plans Ahoy: Hands-on Learning for Sailing Children and Home Schooling Sailors.** *She is currently at work on* **The Silver Spider,** *a novel of sailing and suspense, as well as* **Pacific Crossing Notes: A Sailor's Guide to the Coconut Milk Run** *(see nslavinski.com).*

# FACT FILE

**CRUISING GUIDE**
Alan Lucas' excellent *Cruising the New South Wales Coast* quickly paid for itself as it guided us to night after night of safe (and free) anchoring.

**SERVICES**
Fuel, water and pump-out are available at the marinas that dot the shores of theses waters. A conveniently located chandler in Pittwater is the Bosun's Locker, at Royal Prince Albert Yacht Club (use visitor's dock or an unoccupied mooring for short stops).

**CUSTOMS**
Overseas arrivals report to Customs in Neutral Bay (west of Athol Bay); note mandatory 96-hour prior notification (www.customs.gov.au/site/page4360.asp).

**SUGARLOAF BAY**
Walk 15 minutes to Eastern Valley Way to catch a bus downtown (see www.transportnsw.info).

**EVENTS**
Times and exclusion zones for the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race start and New Year's fireworks are detailed at rolexsydneyhobart.com and www.sydneynewyearseve.com.
— N.S.

MAP BY SHANNON CAIN TUMINO, COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHER