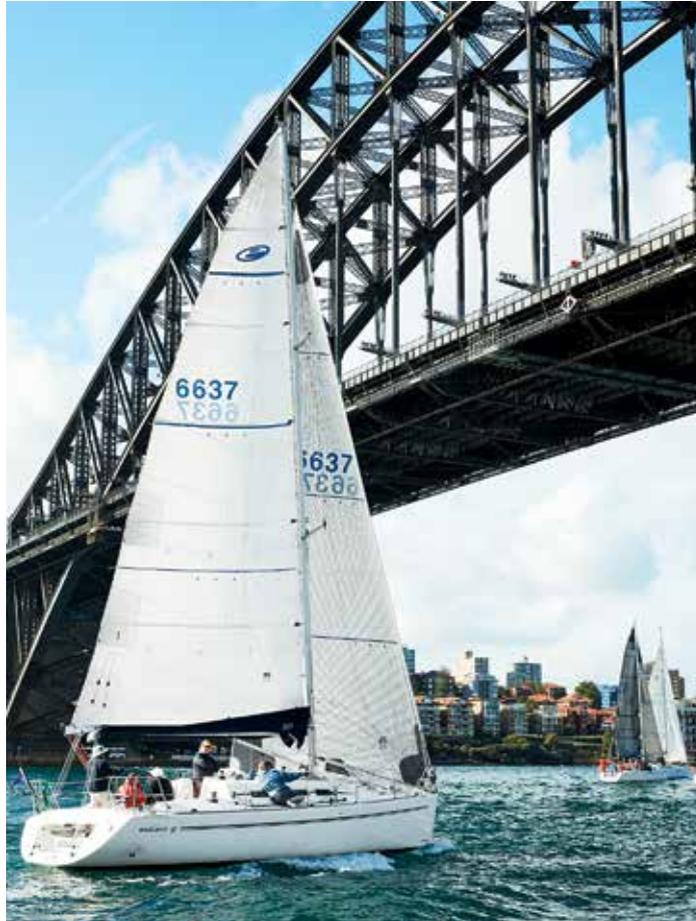


A R T A T T H E

E D G E



Sydney is in the midst of a cultural renaissance, with a booming contemporary art and festival scene that could rival any on the global stage. **Tony Perrottet** explores the creative side of Australia's iconic city by the sea. Plus, where to stay, eat, and drink right now.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PETRINA TINSLAY**

O F T H E

W O R L D



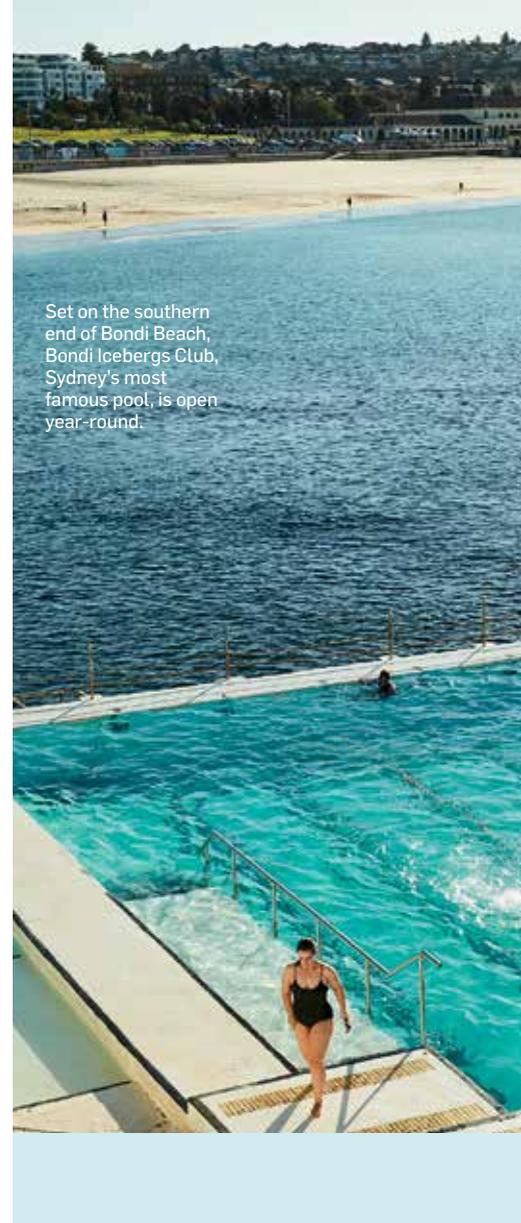
Ai Weiwei's *Law of the Journey*, 2017, a sculpture depicting refugees on a life raft, was installed last spring on Cockatoo Island as part of the Sydney Biennale. Opposite: A sailboat plies Sydney Harbour.

A

IS SO OFTEN the case in Sydney, a whiff of debauchery was in the air. Elinor Wrobel, an Australian art collector in her mid-eighties whose silver bouffant evoked a 21st-century Marie Antoinette, settled in front of a wall of raunchy nude paintings and fixed me with a mischievous look: “Would you fancy some refreshments?”

“Iced water?” I asked naïvely.
“No-o-o-o-o!” She stared at me, aghast. “I was thinking champagne!”
Elinor’s daughter, Andrea, slipped off to get the bubbly. “After all, it’s 3 p.m.,” Elinor sang. “Cocktail hour!”

My afternoon was off to a bohemian start. I had stumbled into the John Passmore Museum of Art, Sydney’s most obscure and charming institution, housed in a majestic former pub in the harborside neighborhood of Woolloomooloo. Its origins date back some 40 years, to when Elinor befriended the eccentric Modernist painter John Passmore, a bearded hermit who lived in a nearby beach shack. He was a difficult bloke, according to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: “Secretive, self-doubting, contemptuous of commercial success, insular, and given to uttering Delphic maxims.” When Passmore died in 1984, he bequeathed 270 of his paintings to Elinor, who later converted two floors of her Victorian home into a shrine. More than 40 Passmore works are now on rotating display, offering evocative visions



Set on the southern end of Bondi Beach, Bondi Icebergs Club, Sydney’s most famous pool, is open year-round.

Below, from left: Elinor Wrobel, who runs the John Passmore Museum of Art; *Welcome to Redfern*, a mural in the Redfern neighborhood by local artist Reko Rennie; *The Arrival of Demons*, a 2017 mural by Afghan refugee Khadim Ali in the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.





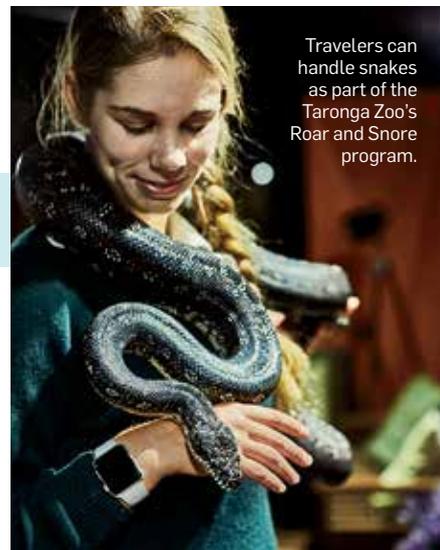
◀ Bondi Beach, the Jet-Lag Cure-All

Flights to Australia may define *long-haul*, but there is a silver lining: thanks to its natural setting, Sydney is probably the world's best city in which to get over jet lag. My suggestion, should you wake up before the sun rises: go to Bondi, go to Bondi, go to Bondi. It's a short cab ride from the city center, and you'll never be lonely. Here, three great workouts.

LA VIE SPORTIF The spotlight sands of Bondi are crowded from 5 a.m. on with cohorts of sporty Sydneysiders surfing, practicing volleyball, kicking footballs, or jogging. There are even workout benches north of the Bondi Pavilion changing rooms.

SINK INTO ICEBERGS Situated on Bondi's south headland, *Icebergs* (icebergs.com/au) is a spectacular saltwater swimming pool. Doors open at 6 a.m. and locals are doing laps minutes later.

TAKE A HIKE The most exhilarating seaside walk in Sydney runs from the southern end of Bondi to Bronte Beach, along sandstone sea cliffs high above the crashing waves. It takes only half an hour, although the more energetic can continue on to Coogee Beach—with, of course, ocean dips en route.



Travelers can handle snakes as part of the Taronga Zoo's Roar and Snore program.

▲ The City's Wild Side

Some first-time visitors still expect to see kangaroos hopping down the sidewalks. They won't, of course, but the city does have abundant wildlife: kookaburras cackle at dawn, white ibis stroll around outdoor café tables, and ring-tailed possums lounge in the eucalyptus trees. The ultimate nature lover's experience, however, is the **Roar and Snore program at the Taronga Zoo**, which takes glamping to a new level. After a guided safari to see koalas, giraffes, and bears, among other wildlife, guests bed down in a comfy tent—with a million-dollar harbor view, no less. The next morning, the behind-the-scenes tour continues in the calm before the zoo opens its doors. The dedicated staff will also bring out snakes to pet, if you so desire. taronga.org.au; from \$258.



of the Sydney waterfront. The museum also has an impressive urn containing the artist's remains, as well as personal artifacts from his rustic studio, including his bunk bed, easel, ragged old clothes, and the wooden fruit boxes he used as furniture.

But the most memorable experience—if Elinor and Andrea take a shine to you—is to be invited into the Wrobel's antiques-filled top-floor residence, where every inch of wall space is covered “salon-style” with their personal collection. On my champagne-fueled visit, Elinor regaled me for two hours with anecdotes about her Aussie artist friends running amok over the decades. It was a reminder that Sydney has long had a self-contained cultural life that the rest of the world knows very little about. It was also living proof that the arts are thriving in the city better known for its hedonistic seductions of surf, sun, sand, and wine, wine, wine.

"Jungle" curry with steamed fish and diamond clams at Chin Chin, a popular restaurant in Surry Hills.



▶ Pub-Crawl Like a Local

Millers Point, a dockworker enclave that dates from the early 1900s, is a character-filled neighborhood best explored by touring its bars. Start with a crisp James Boag's Lager at the **Hero of Waterloo** (heroofwaterloo.com.au), then stroll past the old workers' cottages to the **Lord Nelson Brewery Hotel** (lordnelsonbrewery.com), which brews its own natural ales, such as Nelspresso. A stone's throw away at the **Hotel Palisade** (hotelpalisade.com.au), snag an outdoor seat at the rooftop bar attached to the fine-dining restaurant, which has 360-degree harbor views. Finally, follow the lapping waves to **Barangaroo House** (barangaroohouse.com.au), a multilevel dining destination that is Sydney's latest piece of postmodern architecture. (It looks like three flying saucers have crash-landed on one another.) Needless to say, Barangaroo House has its own stunning rooftop bar, Smoke, with delicious cocktails using local fruits and Tasmanian bubbly.



▲ You Can Have Some of the Best Asian Meals of Your Life in Sydney

In Australia, as in so many parts of the world, immigration, in this case largely from Asia, is a hot-button issue. What isn't in contention: the Asian culinary culture here has flourished. A beloved local ritual is to have weekend dim sum in the cavernous **Golden Century Seafood Restaurant** (goldencentury.com.au), a Chinatown spot renowned for its seafood. For more avant-garde adventures, visit the **White Rabbit Collection** (whiterabbitcollection.org)—one of the Western world's leading museums devoted to Chinese contemporary art—and then stop in at its Tea House for dumplings. Make reservations in advance at **Longrain** (longrain.com; entrées \$17–\$27) in Surry Hills, which spotlights Thai cuisine (think Pacific oysters with red-chili *nam jim*). Nearby, at **Chin Chin** (chinchinrestaurant.com.au; entrées \$12–\$27), the flavors draw from multiple countries, so diners might sample a Balinese roast duck, an Indian butter chicken curry, or a Vietnamese-iced-coffee *panna cotta*.

BACK HOME IN NEW YORK, I've long struggled to convince friends that an art scene exists at all in my hometown. Many seem to think of Sydney as a place with happy-go-lucky denizens, surfing all day and tossing shrimp on the barbie. "If you peel back a layer, Sydney is a very rich cultural city," explained Emilyya Colliver, founder of Art Pharmacy, an online gallery for Aussie artists. "You just have to know where to go." As she spoke, I realized how quickly things had changed on the ground in the past couple of years, which have seen Sydney come into its own as the cultural hub of the Asia-Pacific region. Every time I go home, there seems to be something new and extraordinary. Thanks to decent government funding and a growing sense of confidence, the city is constantly multiplying its plush galleries, thriving theaters, and wacky public art projects, as well as expanding its hectic schedule of art festivals, like the now 10-year-old Vivid Sydney, a monthlong program of art and light installations around key sites, including the Opera House. (The 2019 festival runs from May 24 through June 15.) So I set myself a heroic



The rooftop Smoke Bar at Barangaroo House serves everything from a classic gin and tonic to a lavender negroni.

mission: I would spend a week bouncing around Sydney to explore the scene with fresh eyes, exchanging the wintry avenues of the East Village for an art-filled Indian summer down under.

Shaking off jet lag, I began my cultural crash course with my uncle Brian Turner, who for decades ran the bookstore in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, one of the city's oldest and most revered museums. "We'll start at the beginning," he declared, taking me to the new APY Art Centre Collective, the city's first wholly Aboriginal-owned gallery, with monumental wood carvings and dot paintings on display in an airy town house. Sydney is now one of the world's great immigrant cities, Brian explained, but for much of its history, artists have

struggled to find an identity—perhaps not surprising for a place that was founded 230 years ago as a dumping ground for British criminals. We dipped into this history in the Art Gallery of NSW, which is perched in succulent native gardens on the eastern fringes of the Central Business District (CBD) and has a Neoclassical façade. Its halls show the progression in Australian art from 19th-century colonial paintings, where English artists grappled with the alien landscape, through the 1950s and 60s, when Aussie artists saw the need to escape to London and New York to feel relevant, although they often returned to their roots. Their works, drawing on the international currents of Modernism and abstraction, yet distinctly Australian, include iconic images like Sidney Nolan's stylized retelling of the bushranger Ned Kelly—the Aussie equivalent of Jessie James. We ended at *The Balcony 2*, a lapis blue vision of Sydney Harbour from 1975 by one of Australia's most important contemporary painters, Brett Whiteley, created at a moment when artists had begun to embrace the city's exotic position at the fringe of the Western world. (The charismatic but troubled Whiteley, whose free brushstrokes and sense of the lush antipodean light and color are still exhilarating, died of a heroin overdose in 1992. His studio in Surry



Visitors can camp at Cockatoo Island, a former prison for convicts in the 19th century, now a UNESCO World Heritage site.



The White Rabbit Collection shows contemporary works by Chinese artists, including *The Deluge*, *Noah's Ark*, by Peng Hung-Chih.

Hills is still intact, and visiting it is an intimate experience—it's as if Whiteley had stepped out minutes before your arrival.)

By now, I was realizing that a Sydney art tour is inordinately pleasant. We stopped for lunch at the spectacular Chiswick at the Gallery restaurant, whose wraparound glass walls overlook the wooden “finger” wharf of the Woolloomooloo Harbour, once used to store wool shipments. But I began to feel sorry for Sydney artists when I called in at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia: it has such ravishing views of the Opera House—which qualifies as a site-specific sculpture in itself—that the creations inside struggled to compete. I immersed myself in the challenging artworks (a new video and photo series by Aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt were particularly haunting) before a visit to the rooftop café. There, above the waters of Circular Quay, I savored delicious Sydney rock oysters and crisp Hunter Valley Sauvignon Blanc. The café even hosts a monthly after-hours event named, with bracing directness, Artbar, with performances and DJs.

I had covered some of the more obvious institutions. To peer behind the scenes, I contacted the radio host, quiz-show champion, and novelist Sunil Badami, who suggested we meet at Carriageworks,

▼ The Life Aquatic

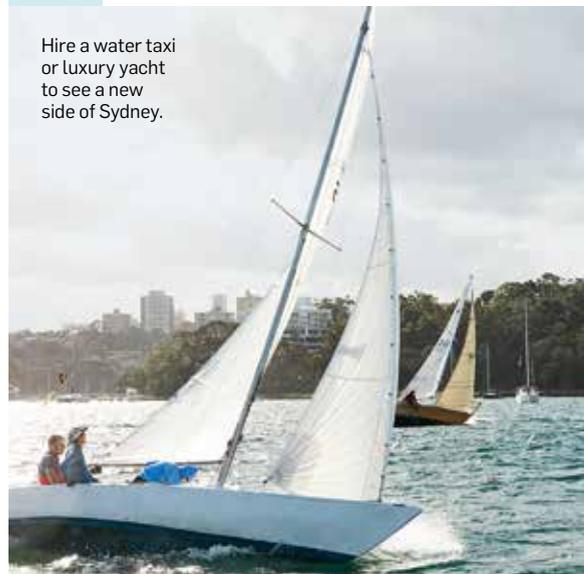
There are more than 70 beaches bordering both the Pacific and Sydney Harbour, from the world-famous Bondi to the lesser-known Lady Martins. But you'd be remiss if you didn't actually get out on the water—and take advantage of the city's idyllic setting.

HIRE A YACHT AND SKIPPER The quintessential Sydney experience is to sail around one of the world's finest harbors with a picnic hamper, sipping iced “chardie” (Chardonnay) and pausing to swim at a secluded cove. Tour operator **Harbour Days Sailing Experience** (harbourdays.com.au; from \$220 per person) offers private sailings that leave from the Aquarium Wharf Darling Harbour.

HOP A MARITIME CAB Break out of Sydney's notorious traffic jams and hire a water taxi to speed across the harbor. A scenic ride from Darling Harbour to the Rocks is about \$30 per person with **Yellow Water Taxis** (yellowwatertaxis.com.au), while luxury service **Water Taxis** (watertaxis.com.au) offers rides that start at \$120 per person one-way to Watsons Beach.

PADDLE THE HARBOR Kayak-rental companies are now scattered around the waterfront, but visitors are better off with a guided four-hour tour of the Middle Harbour, a part of Sydney Harbour that still has pockets of pure wilderness, with **Sydney Harbour Kayaks** (sydneyharbourkayaks.com.au; from \$89 per person).

Hire a water taxi or luxury yacht to see a new side of Sydney.



► **A Hotel Scene
Where Old Meets New**

In recent years, developers have been converting a string of historic structures into imaginative lodgings. The latest is the **Paramount House Hotel** (paramounthousehotel.com; doubles from \$202), located within the 1940s former offices of Paramount Film Studios. In addition to the 29 industrial-chic rooms, the Surry Hills property has a movie theater screening films six days a week and a buzzy coffee bar (the hotel owners run a group of popular Sydney cafés). In nearby Chippendale, the boutique **Old Clare** (theoldclarehotel.com.au; doubles from \$228) has rooms inside a renovated brewery, with a busy retro-chic pub called Kensington Street Social attached. In the heart of the city, **QT Sydney** (qthotelsandresorts.com; doubles from \$312) is in a neo-Gothic department store dating from the 1930s, while the **Ovolo Woolloomooloo** (ovolohotels.com.au; doubles from \$312) sits inside a salvaged wooden “finger wharf” warehouse jutting over the harbor, with a vegetarian-friendly restaurant opened by American celebrity chef Matthew Kenney. The dish to order? Kimchi dumplings with red cabbage and ginger foam.



The reception at the newly opened Paramount House Hotel, set in the film studio's former Aussie headquarters.

an art center in a cavernous former rail yard in Redfern. We went on a Saturday, when the farmers' market was in full swing. To get there, I first filed along with crowds sampling Greek pastries, Thai soups, and gourmet versions of Aussie staples like meat pies, while Sunil expounded on the problems Sydney artists faced with skyrocketing rents and real estate developments. The city's economic boom, he explained, is threatening to turn it into a sun-dappled version of SoHo in Manhattan, where creative types can no longer afford to live. “Sydney has never been considered the most ‘cultured’ city,” he added, “but there are all sorts of private collective spaces like Carriageworks that encourage a kind of artistic underground.”

In the cathedral-like industrial space of

Carriageworks, the main exhibits were hypnotic. I was particularly dazzled by a series of brilliantly colored light panels that evoked high-tech lava lamps, and a vast labyrinth made from walls of hanging cotton. They were typical of the ambitious contemporary artworks that make full creative use of the raw, Victorian-era environment, with soaring brick arches, wrought-iron columns, and the scars of former blacksmith workshops. There were also more quirky offerings. In a side gallery was a special event: “The Art of Divorce,” actor Russell Crowe's auction of his property after the breakup of his marriage. Exhibits included his genuinely fine Australian art collection with paintings from the 1960s by Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, alongside Crowe's own whimsical Hollywood memorabilia, like the ancient-Roman breastplate from *Gladiator*. The mix of high art and irreverence seemed quintessentially Australian.

After our visit to Carriageworks, we set out on foot to explore Redfern, which, together with the neighborhoods of Paddington, Kings Cross, and Glebe, form the heart of the “inner city,” as Sydneysiders call it. These areas, once gritty, are now leafy and charming, filled with restored Edwardian terrace houses. I used to live on Redfern's fringe as a student, but it has

(Continued on page 00)



Sydney, continued from page 00)

changed so much that the only store I could recognize was an old laundromat.

I asked Sophia de Mestre, the program director at a specialist art company called Culture Scouts, to show me around. De Mestre steered me to sites like the Commercial, a former car-repair shop that had been converted into a gallery filled with semi-abstract oils. Redfern, de Mestre explained, which not so long ago was known as a dead end for its racial tension, drugs, and the occasional street riot, is now part of a global art scene. “Sydney artists can show in Tokyo, New York, or Paris,” she explained, “but still live and work around the corner.”

AFTER A WEEK I thought I’d seen it all, aesthetically speaking. I’d tracked down street art in the neighborhood of Newtown by guerrilla painters with names like Captain Earwax and Ox King. I’d attended a convivial art reception at Gallerie Pompom in Chippendale, on the southern edge of the CBD, where the flamboyant cofounder Ron Adams served craft beer to half of Sydney’s bohemia—a party that spilled into the back alley until midnight. And I’d hopped a ferry to Cockatoo Island, a former convict quarry and shipyard that had been taken over by monumental sculptures for the Sydney Biennale, which started in 1973 and has

developed into the largest contemporary art fair in the country. Every stop was combined with Sydney’s gourmet offerings, from superb cappuccinos in waterfront cafés to delicious ramen on rooftops.

But the most memorable combination of food and art came on my last night, when I watched it snow on Sydney Harbour. For a month every year, the Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour, a part of the excellent Australian Opera Company performs on a floating open-air stage at Mrs. Macquaries Point, just offshore from the Royal Botanic Gardens. It is a site with some of Sydney’s best views. This time around, Puccini’s *La Bohème* was playing, and the stage set re-created an icebound Paris in the depths of winter—even though it was 80 degrees and the surrounding eucalyptus trees teemed with birds.

The night was nothing if not cosmopolitan. I started with a three-course French meal at the venue’s pop-up restaurant by the lapping waves. Soon I was being lulled by an Italian love aria sung by a Korean-born tenor while yachts drifted back and forth in the darkness. Suddenly, flakes of snow began to waft from the stage, created by hidden snow machines. Even the fruit bats seemed to be enchanted, circling happily in the stage lights. As I put out my tongue to taste a speck of ice, fireworks exploded above the stage, to gasps of wonder from the crowd.

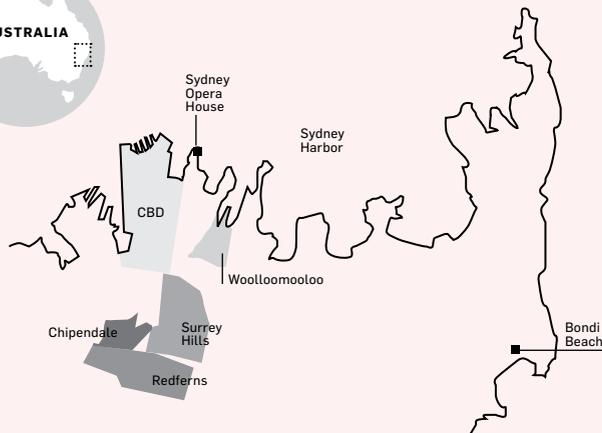
Once upon a time, Sydneysiders may have pined for the revered cultural centers of Europe and the U.S., dying to escape to foreign shores. But I would lay good money that not a single member of the audience that night wished they were anywhere else.

Tony Perrottet, a frequent contributor to Travel + Leisure, just published his sixth book, Cuba Libre.

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AN ART LOVER'S GUIDE TO SYDNEY

Sydney is most famous for its sun and sand—but its cultural offerings are no less spectacular. The contemporary art scene is flourishing, and visitors can see it up close in the galleries of emerging neighborhoods such as Redfern and Chippendale.



Getting There

There are many direct flights to Sydney from the western U.S.; due to the distance, travelers from other parts of the country will have to connect through Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Houston.

Galleries

In addition to a robust permanent collection of Asian-Pacific Islander and Western art, future exhibitions at the **Art Gallery of New South Wales** (artgallery.nsw.gov.au) will include a Duchamp retrospective (April 27–August 11) and a show from Australia's Balgo Hills school (July 27–November 17). The

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (mca.com.au), just a short walk away from the harbor, focuses on the work of living Australian artists, with a special emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions. But the city is also brimming with more indie operations. See the oeuvre of one of New South Wales's most noted native sons at the **John Passmore Museum of Art** (fb.com/johnpassmoremuseum), a quirky tavern turned gallery founded by Elinor Wrobel, a friend of Passmore's, to whom he bequeathed hundreds of his pieces. The Aboriginal-owned gallery of the **APY Art Centre Collective** (apygallery.com) showcases the work of artist collaboratives in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, an Aboriginal area in the remote corner of South Australia. This includes fresh faces in fields from traditional *punu* wood carving to audiovisual pieces and new media. Many of the best underground art spaces in the city are located inland, where they're hard to find. In Chippendale, there's **Galerie Pompom** (galeriepompom.com), a long-running commercial gallery representing artists from Sydney and Melbourne. The **Commercial** (thecommercialgallery.com), a former body shop in Redfern, and **Carriageworks** (carriageworks.com.au), a multiuse space in an old railroad depot in

nearby Eveleigh, are also worth checking out.

nearby Eveleigh, are also worth checking out.

Events

Music lovers should follow the schedule at **Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour** (opera.org.au), the seasonal outdoor venue of Opera Australia. Its next production, a special run of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, takes place March 22 to April 19. From May 24 to June 15, the annual **Vivid Sydney** festival (vivid-sydney.com) will fill the city with interactive street art, public talks, and large-scale light displays on landmarks like the Opera House. And in 2020, the **Biennale of Sydney** (biennaleofsydney.art) will present its 22nd season, this time under the direction of Aussie artist Brook Andrew.

Tours

The art-savvy guides at **Culture Scouts** (culturescouts.com.au) lead walking tours in various districts around Sydney, including an exploration of the graffiti and street art scene in the Newtown neighborhood and a new food tour of Redfern.