



Heavenly Hawkesbury

We take a tour of secret sacred Indigenous and historical sites around the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales.

Words & photography CAROLINE ROBERTSON

The historical Hawkesbury has been home to Skippy, Indigenous Australians, colonists and thriving current communities. With abundant eagles, cockatoos, parrots, pelicans, swans, mud crabs, flathead, blackfish and bream, the Hawkesbury's habitat is surprisingly pristine. You may recall this iconic New South Wales region from shows *A Country Practice* and *Home and Away* as well as the movie *Oyster Farmer*. Author Kate Grenville in her novel *Sarah Thornhill* paints an evocative picture: "The Hawkesbury was a lovely river, wide and calm, the water dimply green, the cliffs golden in the sun, and white birds roosting in the trees like so much washing. It was a sweet thing of a still morning, the river-oaks whispering and the land standing upside down in the water."

But this 120-kilometre river surrounding Sydney from Broken Bay to Penrith has been a place of promise and imprisonment. If the gum trees could talk, they'd tell tales of debauchery, intoxication, murder, incarceration, insanity and pioneering. Known as Deerubbun or "wide, deep water" by the main Indigenous tribes — the Dharug, Wannungine, Darkinung, Eora and Kuring-gai people — it was renamed after Baron Hawkesbury by Captain Arthur Phillip in 1789. Without its rich farmlands the Sydney colony may have failed if the fertile soil wasn't cultivated by 22 settlers on 30-acre allotments in 1794. With no dams or locks, its tide flows from Windsor to the sea, weaving a vital part of the social, cultural and economic fabric of the Hawkesbury's habitants. Sadly, however, disease and destruction annihilated the area's Indigenous population.

Hawkesbury River resident and River Adventures director Daniel Morrison explains why it was dubbed the colony's cornfield: "In the early days of settlement, it was an agricultural highway used to transport food from the farms in the west

of the Sydney Basin along its smooth waters, out through Broken Bay into the sea, before heading a few miles south down the coast and into Sydney Harbour to unload at Circular Quay." Until the 1940s boats carried produce upstream to the Windsor railhead or downstream to Sydney.

Once Sydney's lifeblood, it's now a nature lover's paradise. Much of the river's relatively undeveloped coastline is only accessible by boat, a haven for hermits, holidaymakers, artists, boaters, anglers, oyster farmers and retirees. It hosts colourful annual events including the Hawkesbury Canoe Classic, the Bridge to Bridge Water Ski Classic from Dangar Island to Windsor, the Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series and the Circuit Boat Race. Whether by water or land the Hawkesbury offers endless opportunities to enjoy and explore. Here are some of the highlights.

Lion Island

This sphinx-shaped island off Palm Beach is 8 hectares of protected nature reserve, requiring a permit from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to visit. It is the breeding ground for little penguins and shearwaters, medium-sized long-winged seabirds.

Patonga

Named for the local Indigenous word for oyster, Patonga is a calm cove only a short boat trip from Palm Beach or a 90km drive north of from Sydney on the Newcastle Freeway. Play in the clear bay, feast at the revamped Boathouse, view the gallery or take the 30-minute hike to Warrah Lookout via the Dark Corner track for a spectacular view.

Cottage Point

This unspoilt seaside enclave is perfect for a city escape. Only 38km from Sydney CBD it offers a ritzy restaurant and

a casual kiosk, with a bounty of boats and kayaks for hire. Nestled in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park at the confluence of Cowan Creek, Coal and Candle Creek, it's a water wonderland. Wear sensible shoes as the steep walk from parking is challenging, unless you're arriving via seaplane! Explore the beautiful beaches and look out for Looking Glass Rock, shimmering like a breaching whale.

Bobbin Head

If you want to appreciate authentic Indigenous art head to Bobbin Head. Ray Norris's excellent online resource, Sydney Aboriginal Rock Engravings, provides co-ordinates to ancient carvings including the echidna, goanna, glider bird, wallaby and male and female figure off the Bobbin Head track. Be careful not to walk over them as the desecration of an Indigenous heritage site can attract fines of up to \$1.2 million under the *National*

Parks and Wildlife Act. Bobbin Head hasn't changed much in decades. The spacious waterfront picnic area is perfect for games and barbecues. With a plethora of paddleboats and a playground, kids are in their element. Stroll around the marina superyachts or go bird spotting on the mangrove boardwalk. Absorb the beautiful bushland on the 10km Sphinx Memorial to Bobbin Head loop track where you'll see an impressive memorial to fallen AIF soldiers. It's easily accessible via the Bobbin Head Road through North Turramurra or Kuringai Chase Road, Mount Colah near Hornsby.

West Head

Travel back to the Dreamtime on the Basin Track Aboriginal Site Tour run by Guringai Aboriginal Tours.

Immerse yourself in the Hawkesbury's incredible Indigenous culture with traditional custodian Laurie Bimson,

aka Uncle Laurie. Bimson sits on the advisory committee for National Parks and Wildlife Service Metro North East and is also a director of the Guringai Tribal Link Aboriginal Corporation. After meeting at West Head's Resolute Picnic Area you'll receive a warm welcome to country ceremony and ochre face paint as a sign of respect for the region. Bimson's passion is palpable as he shares stories of how his Indigenous ancestors appreciated the land, living in harmony with the fabulous flora and fauna. Captivating tales bring the rock carvings, traditional tools and instruments to life. Bimson even offers boomerang-throwing lessons and a delicious lunch. You'll leave with an enriched appreciation of Indigenous wisdom and Australian history.

The Riverboat Postman

On the arrival of spring the Riverboat Postman embarks on its virgin voyage after five months off due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Skipper "Salty" Robert Gordon plus crew Nat and Tom are chuffed to be back at the world's best office. Gordon's suggestion to stay "spaced out" is easy as the comfortable cruise is hypnotically relaxing and roomy. Embarking at Brooklyn, an hour's train trip from Sydney, passengers enjoy old-school hospitality with elegantly set tables soon to be adorned with real coffee, steaming tea, homemade Anzac biscuits and a fresh ploughman's lunch. The Riverboat Postman is the last mail boat in Australia and offers a glance at the Hawkesbury's coastal communities living amid the luscious landscape. There are seven stops for mail delivery on the 40km route which takes around three hours. The brief mail drops include Dangar Island, Kangaroo Point, Milson Island and Bar Point on the way up, and Fishermans Point and Milsons Passage on the way back.

As the quiet boat glides past sandstone cliffs, mystical mangroves, verdant





bushland and bridges, abundant birds sweep the sky. Amiable Gordon paints a chequered picture of the area with a wry and captivating commentary. First port of call is Dangar Island.

Dangar Island

"Spotted a 15-metre humpback there a few months ago," skipper Gordon glances towards the sparkling water en route to Dangar Island. There's also a ferry or water taxi available from Brooklyn for the 15-minute trip. Dangar Island is the only inhabited island on the Hawkesbury with around 300 residents. Initially called Mullet Island after Arthur Phillip's successful fishing there in 1788, it was renamed Dangar by the island's 1864 owner Henry Cary Dangar. It takes five minutes to walk across and a few hours to walk around the idyllic island covering 30 hectares, including 3 kilometres of shoreline. The quiet, car-fee

oasis only has wheelbarrows and a few communal buggies. On the island's south side Bradley Beach has as a sandbar for safe swimming. There's a comfortable café, social hall, school library and a bowling club. Enjoy the Indigenous cave and rock art at the island's peak, Kilparra Park.

Kangaroo Point

Passing under the historic Hawkesbury River Railway bridge, Gordon informs us that tragically 11 men died while working on it from 1941 to 1946. Long Island on the left is a natural reserve, requiring permission to visit its thriving wildlife of wallabies, possums, snakes and birds. Spectacle Island on the right has been a nature reserve since 1972 and was listed in the Register of the National Estate in 1978 for its abundant Indigenous sites and diverse vegetation. Its name is either from its shape, or the skipper suggests it

Explore the beautiful beaches and look out for Looking Glass Rock, shimmering like a breaching whale.

expresses Europeans' impression of the large corroborees there as "spectacles". A permit from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is necessary to visit.

Kangaroo Point at the Mooney Mooney Bridge is next with the civilised Estuary restaurant and kiosk perfect for champagne-fuelled catch-ups. Check out the impressive 6000-year-old rock carving of a stingray.

Broken Bay Pearl Farm

Curve right and you'll arrive at NSW's only pearl producer, Broken Bay Pearl Farm, run by the Brown family from Broome in an environmentally sustainable way since 2003. The tours take you to the pearl longlines where you'll learn how pearls are produced and prepared to produce the exceptionally high-quality, rare Broken Bay Akoya pearl. Browse the gallery showcasing a lustrous rainbow of white, cream, yellow, orange, silver, blue, green and pink cultured pearls.

Peat Island

Continuing our sojourn upstream, deep waters darken as we approach Peat Island, previous home to alcoholic women, forgotten children and the insane. Originally called Rabbit Island, Peat Island was an asylum for alcoholics in the 1890s, recording 300 deaths. In 1911 it was a hospital for intellectually disabled boys, housing over 600 cramped residents in the 60s, earning its nickname "hospital of forgotten children". Until 2001 it was a mental health hospital which noted neurologist Dr Ted Freeman who worked there in the 1980s has described as Australia's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The dark dormitories are awaiting rezoning permission to be transformed into a 250-berth marina and multimillion dollar residential resort, though a few heritage-listed buildings will be restored. The spooky dormitories are still scattered with former inmates' possessions and haunting graffiti. Off limits to the public for a century, it's separated from the mainland by a 400m rusting causeway which is closed to visitors. Dr Freeman described Ward 4 as a hell hole with men "shouting, screaming, yelling, banging their heads ... rocking back and forth." Horrific stories





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surrounding the island include young boys drowning, suffocating and being caged and abused. We passed Peat Island by with a prayer and a symbolic sage stick.

Milson Island

This secluded island's Sport and Recreation Centre is a stunning setting for Famous Five adventures including abseiling, archery, bushwalking, high ropes courses, rock climbing, canoeing and kayaking. Originally called Mud Island it was granted to Aboriginal Granny Lewis who sold it to Robert Milson in 1865. Milson Island also has a shady past, having been a bacteriological lab, quarantine station, a hospital to treat World War I soldiers with venereal disease, a mental hospital, a rehab centre for alcoholics and a women's prison. Today with seven lodges — Possum, Koala, Waratah, Kookaburra, Lorikeet, Platypus and Cockatoo — and five holiday units, it's a beautifully landscaped escape for events, school camps and holidaymakers.

Milsons Passage

The Hawkesbury highlight is meeting residents as they collect their mail, usually barefoot with scruffy dog sidekick. Their

laid-back pace and laconic conversation is contagious as passengers let city stresses drift away. The most memorable resident is self-appointed president of Sydney's smallest suburb Milsons Passage, John Carrick, waving from his throne as we slide up to the dock. Resplendent in presidential mud crab crown, sash and guard dog, Carrick cuts an eccentric figure proud of his "republic". His white dog is a "specially bred albino dingo who keeps sharks away". Author of his self-published book *The History of the River Settlement of Milsons Passage*, 2006, Carrick is a wealth of wisdom about the area, inhabited by the Darug people for thousands of years. Today with just over a hundred residents, this isolated hamlet is a happy place to rent an Airbnb and relax. As we chug away Carrick calls out for us not to break the 11th commandment — "Though shalt not get caught!"

One with the water

Another wonderful way to immerse yourself in the enchanting environment is on a jet ski or kayak tour.

River Adventures and Out and About Adventures offer kayak tours to special places: shipwrecks, waterfalls and

bushwalks to breathtaking lookouts. Paddling beneath the towering sandstone cliffs and pulling into a deserted beach such as Refuge Bay for a refreshment, it's enough to forget the woes of the world, and transport you to a land before time. 🌊

Caroline Robertson is a naturopath with a passion for nature and traditional cultures. For skype consultations, courses or retreats see carolinerobertson.com.au.

Things to do and see

- Hawkesbury River Resident and River Adventures (riveradventures.com.au)
- Cottage Point Kiosk (cottagepointkiosk.com.au)
- Basin Track Aboriginal Site Tour run by Guringai Aboriginal Tours (guringaitours.com.au)
- Riverboat Postman (riverboatpostman.com.au)
- Jet Ski Safaris (jetskisafarisnsw.com.au)
- Out and About Adventures (outandaboutadventures.com.au)
- Sport and Recreation camp (sport.nsw.gov.au/facilities/milsonisland)
- Estuary restaurant and kiosk (estuaryrestaurant.com.au)
- Broken Bay Pearl Farm (brokenbaypearls.com.au)