OCEANIA

DIVING INTO SYDNEY

The Australian city's pools are an irresistible place to soak up the local culture and stunning views

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

At Bondi Beach, in an Olympic tank of seawater the colour of mint mouthwash, splashed by surf from the Southern Ocean, athletic bodies darted like sharks. I wanted to be among them, despite a lifelong fear of swimming.

Public pools are to Australia what ice arenas are to Canada. And in Sydney, 35 rock pools grace the city's stunning coastline and its suburbs, and several more pools command prime locations around the majestic harbour.

"There isn't a Sydneysider who can't swim," said my Aussie friend as she handed over the keys to her house. I come here each winter to house-sit, and since I'd already seen the tourist sites, my plan was to dive into a different pool every day and learn to hang like a local. Here, a handful of stunning swims I discovered in and around the city.

North Sydney Olympic Pool Though currently closed for a major upgrade (expected to be done by early 2025), this pool, one of Sydney's most spectacular, merits mention. Ian Thorpe, "the Thorpedo," trained at the North Sydney Olympic Pool to win five Olympic gold medals.

Seawater that is only lightly chlorinated fills a glass-enclosed 25-metre pool and the 50-metre pool harbourside. The eye candy here warrants a visit, and I don't mean the toned swimmers. The massive Sydney Harbour Bridge looms above. The Sydney Opera House lies framed under its span, while yachts, ferries and cruise ships churn the cobalt water.

Dawn Fraser Baths "It still looks like the 1880s," says my local friend, who names Australia's oldest pool as her favourite. Dawn Fraser's laid-back vibe, where locals swim with their dogs, is ideal for newbies. It hides in the leafy inner-harbour neighbourhood of Balmain, 12 minutes by ferry from downtown, where old mansions crowd the inlets and bays. Though Balmain tends to be overlooked by tourists, trendy shops line nearby Darling Street.

Wood decks and National Trust-listed Victorian pavilions corral a pocket of harbour water originally meant for hygiene, not recreation. Bathing took place at night out of modesty. Those Victorians would be shocked at the dental-floss bikinis and "budgie smugglers" now on parade.

Wylie's Baths The insider's Bondi, the beachside enclave of Coogee boasts fewer tourists, calmer surf and several rock pools. The clothing-optional McIver's Ladies Baths is for women only, discreetly hidden from view by sea cliffs and bush. Men need walk just a little further to Wylie's Baths, where genders were first allowed to mix in 1911.

The heritage-listed Wylie's hosted the first Australian Swimming Championships and still sports a Victorian air. Built below high-tide level, the pool is flushed by the sea twice a day. In its shallow depth, I felt comfortable practicing freestyle lengths. Post-swim, go for sundowners at "the Pav," the historic Coogee Pavilion.

Giles Baths A six-kilometre cliff walk, carved into the rocky coast, connects Coogee to Bondi Beach and passes several rock pools. A fortunate confluence of tides and currents make swimming risky, so head for Bronte Baths, one of Sydney's most picturesque.

Bondi Icebergs Club The cliff walk ends with views over the renowned pool at Bondi Icebergs Club, at Bondi Beach. It's been around for over a century, providing a shark-free alternative for swimming. After days of practice in other pools, I came to this icon to test my skills. "Icebergs" should have been a clue: the water is frigid (about 20 degrees when I visit), brought by currents from Antarctica.

I opted to hang out on the sun decks, visited the sauna and lunched at the bistro overlooking the beach. I was not yet a threat to the Thorpedo's records, but I'd done a few confident lengths in some of the most famous swimming spots on the planet, so I toasted myself with a chilled Aussie Chardonnay. Bottoms up.

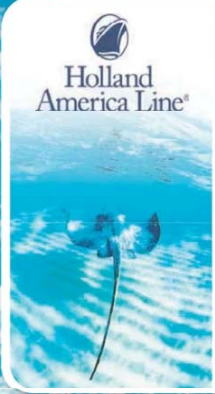


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The appropriately named Bondi Icebergs Club pool, overlooking Bondi Beach.

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