



Where the waters meet

Witness the beauty of the coastal landscape north of Sydney from land and sea

LIBBY MOFFET

It's midday on the waters of Cowan Creek and the time has come for some tough decisions. "Would you like to have lunch on the yacht now, or swim beside the waterfall first?" asks my host, Nicola Billens, pointing to the clear water tumbling down a nearby sandstone cliff face.

There's no wrong answer to a question like that, but on a warm day the prospect of a dip is a winning one. Five minutes later, our yacht has anchored and I'm breaststroking through the tranquil waters of Refuge Bay next to the cascade, a peerless blue sky above.

Only 40km north of Sydney, Refuge Bay is one of myriad gems that can be reached via the winding waterways of the central coast, a glittering treasure trove of bays, rivers, creeks and beaches nestled among three national parks: Ku-ring-gai Chase, Brisbane Water and Bouddi. While many of the coast's popular beaches offer parking right next to their golden sands, other scenic spots require a hike through bushland. But without doubt, the best way to soak up the full extent of the region's beauty is to see it from the water.

My morning on the 38ft yacht Lasal is part of a new premium Walk Eat Sail experience designed by the central coast-based Elixir Journeys to pair the region's natural splendour with good food and wine.

"What I want to do is make people feel they are away from the whole world, yet they're still only 90 minutes from Sydney," says company founder Billens, a former high-end tourism marketing executive who launched Elixir Journeys last year after moving from Sydney to the Bouddi peninsula in 2018.

It's a concept that sees Billens conjure an impressive lunch onboard Lasal after my swim, with platters featuring local Little Creek cheese and a mouth-watering ciabatta from the kitchens of the nearby luxury Bells at Killcare boutique hotel, along with prawns, prosciutto and delicious dates and fruit. Her seemingly bottomless bags also contain a selection of refreshing wines, including offerings from the local Firescreek Botanical Winery.

Even without vino, the atmosphere onboard Lasal is convivial, with the boat's owner and captain, Bruce James, proving a born raconteur as he shares his knowledge of the waterways he's called home for more than 30



ABOVE: LOVECENTRALCOAST.COM; BELOW LEFT: DESTINATION NSW

Lasal at Refuge Bay, top; Bouddi National Park, above; taking a break on the bushwalk, top right; monitor lizard on the trail, right; beach in Bouddi National Park, below



years. We have set sail mid-morning from picture-perfect Hardys Bay ("The jewel in the crown!" James exclaims) before gently weaving our way past Pretty Beach and Wagstaffe in Brisbane Water and through a narrow channel off Ettalong into Broken Bay. James rattles off the names of the waters surrounding us — Brisbane Water, Pittwater, Hawkesbury River, Broken Bay, Cowan Creek and the Tasman Sea — before declaring: "I can't think of anywhere else in the world that six bodies of water meet."

"I tell people we're going to sail Brisbane Water and they say 'Oh no, I don't want to go that far,'" he laughs, pointing out that the area (almost 900km south of the Queensland capital) was named after NSW's sixth governor Thomas Brisbane, who succeeded Lachlan Macquarie in 1821.

There's a great deal of colonial history as-

sociated with the central coast. James Cook named Broken Bay as he sailed past the land mass in 1770, while in the 1790s English settlers ventured up the Hawkesbury River and into a dark chapter of the nation's past that resulted in the death of many Indigenous Australians.

Although the landscape around us is rich with the history and art of the local Indigenous people, Billens respectfully observes these are not her stories to tell, adding that she works with an Indigenous guide to offer tours that provide an insight into the lives of the region's First Nations people.

Many Sydneysiders have rediscovered the beauty of the central coast thanks to COVID-19 restrictions, but the destination is still gloriously quiet midweek. Sailing towards the Hawkesbury River, we see a small pod of surfers catching waves off Ocean Beach, and



IN THE KNOW

Elixir Journeys has a range of premium experiences on the NSW central coast, including its Walk Eat Sail offering, a 5½-hour experience priced from \$396 a person. Itineraries vary, but often incorporate a bushwalk to Patonga, where the sailing begins. Other excursion options include kayaking trips and mystery picnics.
elixirjourneys.com

raise our arms in greeting to outriggers paddling their way to Ettalong and a couple bobbing along in their dinghy. Surrounded by inky blue deep water, thick bushland and rugged honey-coloured cliffs of Sydney sandstone, it's hard to believe we're so close to the nation's largest city.

As we watch a flock of seabirds squawking above a fishing boat, James says he's noticed an increase in bird numbers over the past decade, an indication of the quality of the water, also home to fairy penguins, seals and turtles. But it's talk of the pearl farm at Broken Bay and the lobsters that live under the ledge at the aptly named Lobster Bay that leaves me planning a return sailing jaunt as Lasal motors back to the jetty at Hardys Bay.

The vagaries of tidal movements have altered our itinerary for the day, so while we've sailed and eaten, we haven't yet walked. It's mid-afternoon when I head with Billens to the Bullimah Spur track for a gentle hike along the ridgeline in Bouddi National Park, north of Putty Beach; it's a walk she also offers at as a separate guided sunset experience.

The raucous laughter of kookaburras greets us as we start out under a canopy of native trees. Flannel flowers are dotted along the track, which leads past spiky grass trees and the distinctive red trunks of some spectacularly twisted angophoras. There's no one else on the path and the wildlife appears to be taking a siesta, although Billens tells me she's encountered echidnas and monitor lizards on her regular morning walks along the trail.

While there are flashes of the sea through the bush, it's not until we reach a large rock platform at the end of the trail that I can see the full beauty of the coastline. The golden sands of Maitland Bay, named after a paddle steamer wrecked on its shore in 1898, gleam to the north, while to the south the view extends from Putty Beach and Killcare to Barrenjoey and beyond. Even the Sydney skyline is visible on the horizon.

Billens hands me a cool lemon eucalypt-scented cloth to counter the warmth of the afternoon as I take in the magnificent palette of azure ocean and deep green bushland. Far below, we can see the tiny figures of people winding their way along the Bouddi Coastal Walk from Putty Beach to Maitland Bay.

Right now I'm happy on the high road, enjoying the refreshments Billens has set out on the rock beside us, but I make a note to tackle the walk on my next trip north, exploring more of the beauty on Sydney's doorstep.

Libby Moffet was a guest of Elixir Journeys.