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Sydney, free as the breeze

Sydney Opera House: The architectural masterpiece jutting out into the harbor is seen from a park at the north end of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. MICHAEL MILNE

The Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, the royal gardens — so much to see and nary a fee.

A Year and A World
By Larissa and Michael Milne

SYDNEY, Australia — We stood at the center of the Sydney Harbour Bridge on a breezy, sunny day. Down below us, ferries cut through the turquoise water as they carried passengers to hidden coves shaded by palm trees. White sails of pleasure craft swelled in the wind, mimicking the roofline of the famous Opera House as they passed by. The view was stunning — and it was free.

Sydney can be an expensive place for Americans. The combination of a major world capital with an unfavorable exchange rate makes touring the city a daunting prospect. Fortunately, much of what makes Sydney special is its spectacular scenery, all available at no charge.

There are plenty of opportunities for tours that promise views, but they can be expensive. There are tantalizing glimpses of the harbor from many spots throughout Sydney; so we set out to see what we could without opening our wallets.

We started with the Harbour Bridge. Along with the Opera House,

See **SYDNEY** on N3

Consumer News

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Season's greetings: Changes in air travel

By Michelle Higgins
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

As the holidays approach, many people are finalizing their travel plans and bracing themselves for the usual crowds, long security lines, and inevitable delays.

This season, planes will be even more tightly packed as airlines continue to cut capacity through the end of the year and into the next, even as more passengers take to the skies. But thicker crowds aren't the only differences that holiday travelers can expect this year. Some changes, including modified security screenings for children, will be welcome; others won't.

Here are some of the most notable changes that have been introduced over the last 12 months, as well as a few new options to help

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In Australia, seeing Sydney, as free as the breeze

SYDNEY from N1

it is the most recognized site in Sydney. There is a popular tour that enables the intrepid to scale the arch of the bridge, but it's pricey ($180 and up per person) and restrictive; climbers are clipped onto a lifeline and can't bring a camera. We opted for the pedestrian walkway that is entirely free, and camera-friendly.

Completed in 1932, the bridge is one of the longest, and perhaps most-photographed, single-arch bridges in the world. The approach to the pedestrian path is well-marked. At the center point, the walkway is 160 feet above the harbor, which for us was plenty high enough for good views and several magnificent photo ops. The total distance across is less than a mile and is pretty flat, except for the 50 or so steps climbed to reach the walkway.

At the northern end is Milsons Point, with a small, well-landscaped park that extends under the bridge and provides a sea-level view of the Opera House. We followed the walkway under the bridge and arrived at Luna Park, a 1930s amusement park reminiscent of Atlantic City's Steel Pier. As with other parks of its era, admission is free and tickets are purchased for each ride. We walked around at our leisure, admiring the views — including great carnival art murals — and paid only for a cotton candy (kids at heart that we are).

Crossing back over the bridge brought us to Circular Quay and the Sydney Opera House. Circular Quay is the heart of Sydney Harbour; the city's vast network of ferries is based here, along with a large, modern cruise-ship terminal. This day the cruise ship Radiance of the Seas was docked, dwarfing the nearby ferries. Small cafes, souvenir shops, and street performers dot the Quay, especially on weekends, when a festive atmosphere prevails.

We continued eastward along the Quay to reach the most well-known building in Australia: the Sydney Opera House. Up there with the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, and the Rocky statue as one of the world's great sites, this structure really is magnificent. Since its completion in 1968, the signature serrated white roofline has been likened to sails, shark fins, a snail shell, and — our favorite — a conquistador's helmet.

This architectural masterpiece juts out into the harbor amid a pedestrian plaza that is accessible from all sides. Those unique arched white roofs are made of more than a million glazed ceramic tiles, reaching so close to the ground that we could touch them.

The Opera House complex consists of three interconnecting structures, the two largest being theaters and the third, smaller "shell" a restaurant and bar. Visitors can wander around inside the lobbies and vestibules (and gift shop, natch) at no charge, and view the rooflines from underneath. The Opera House offers a variety of tours, costing $25 to $150. Unless you're really into opera or theatrical architecture, the free offerings are probably enough.

All this construction-heavy sightseeing had us itching for some nature, and we were in luck. At the base of the Opera House steps we walked right into the Royal Botanic Gardens. This 76-acre parcel of green was established in 1816 as a site for horticultural study along the harbor; it opened as public gardens in 1831. Imagine the British passion for gardening coupled with a subtropical climate and you've got a winning combination. The gardens are very welcoming — a sign at the entrance proclaims "The Park is for everyone to enjoy. Please walk on the grass and hug the trees."

A walk took us through a horticultural sampling of the former British Empire. On a hill overlooking the Opera House we meandered through the classic English rose garden, where fragrant blossoms of every color bloom almost year-round in the temperate climate. Further down the hill is the Palm Grove, with one of the finest collections in the world of these stately trees, many native to Australia.

Of particular interest is the Rainforest Walk, where we trod softly on mossy paths amid giant ferns under shade trees. Hundreds of flying foxes — bats with a three-foot wingspan — hung from branches and snoozed in the sun high above. Now and then one would spread its wings as it shifted positions and showed off what majestic creatures these flying foxes are — although it's a good thing it wasn't nighttime because they are a bit creepy.

The gardens are free; brochures detailing self-guided tours are available at all entrance gates. Free one-hour descriptive walks are offered twice daily by volunteers. We opted for the self-guided version, wandering at our own pace to the features that interested us most.

We drifted down toward the reflecting pools at Farm Cove, right on the water adjacent to the Opera House. A promenade for strolling and several benches provide vantage points. We sat and watched the sailboats, their billowing white sails providing a soft counterpoint to the tiled roof of the Opera House. The setting sun lit up those tiles and the Harbour Bridge beyond. As the Radiance of the Seas slowly eased by, headed for open water, we remarked that it was a "million-dollar view." And, like the entire day, it was totally free.

Larissa and Michael Milne are traveling around the world for a year and reporting in regularly about their journey. Follow them at www.philly.com/travel or at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.

Sydney Harbour Bridge and Luna Park, a 1930s amusement park reminiscent of Atlantic City's Steel Pier. Below, the entrance to the park.

MICHAEL MILNE

Gray-headed flying fox bats roost at Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, 76 acres of green right at the base of the Opera House steps — and free.

Information

All attractions are adjacent to the Circular Quay, a main stop for many city buses and trains, and all Sydney ferries.

Sydney Harbour Bridge

Free pedestrian walkway open 24 hours a day, located on the eastern side of the bridge. A bike path, also free and open 24 hours, is on the western side of the bridge.

Sydney Opera House

Lobbies open during box office hours, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Visitors are free to walk around; access to theaters is closed unless taking a tour. The outdoor plaza is open 24 hours a day.

Royal Botanic Gardens

Open daily from 7 a.m. to sunset. (Keep in mind that Australian summer is December to February.) Admission is free.

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