

Rich history in an idyllic playground

Melinda Ham

Pittwater – once home to Aborigines, rum smugglers and escaped convicts – is today a playground for anglers, bushwalkers, sailors, kayakers, super-yacht owners and a burgeoning population of residents drawn by its lifestyle and beauty.

This sparkling waterway – considered by some as more impressive than Sydney Harbour – stretches southwards from Barrenjoey Head, through affluent suburbs on the eastern side to Church Point.

The western shores, with a scattering of water-access-only residences, are mostly the wooded slopes and boundary of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park.

For thousands of years before European settlement, the local Guringai people enjoyed this relatively sheltered bay. Many middens, cave paintings and axe-grinding marks remain.

Governor Arthur Phillip described it in a dispatch as “the finest piece of water I ever saw” and named the area Pittwater in 1788 after the prime minister of England at the time, William Pitt the Younger.

Today the area can be explored by car, boat, foot or even seaplane (see sydneybyseaplane.com). Starting at the top of the peninsula, follow a convict-built track up to the headland to Barrenjoey Lighthouse, built in 1881, where there are views across Pittwater and Broken Bay.

Past Palm Beach Golf Course is Palm Beach Village. It has a sprinkling of boutiques and cafes and a ferry to the Basin, Coasters Retreat, Mackerel Beach and Ettalong Beach.

Around the corner, Careel Bay is a



Scenic ... the pier at Palm Beach. Photo: Peter Braig

haven for kayakers and fishermen. Refuel and get ice at the Careel Bay marina. If you haven't brought your own boat, rent a self-drive one at Boab Boat Hire (see boabboathire.com.au). Beware the shallows at low tide.

After rounding Stokes Point, there's the aptly named Paradise Beach, which has a netted swimming enclosure. Further south, Clareville Beach, with its long, curved strip of sand and lawns, is family friendly.

In front of all these waterfront properties, including Avalon, Newport, Mona Vale and Bayview, a thick forest of silver masts rises from thousands of moored sailboats,

many belonging to residents but also to more than a dozen yacht clubs and sailing schools.

Into the deep inlet of Newport, you'll come across the Newport Arms, boasting a big screen and children's playground. The pub also organises annual New Year's Eve and Australia Day fireworks – best viewed from a boat. Further on is Winnererremy Bay with its flying-fox children's park, cafe, bike and skate track, boat-launch area and off-leash dog park.

Along the waterfront at Bayview, you can rent kayaks and charter sailboats and the Quays and Holmeport marinas provide boat services and fuel. The Church Point

kiosk has just reopened after an extensive renovation.

At the southern tip of the bay is Scotland Island, first settled in 1806 by freed convict Andrew Thompson, who named it after his homeland. From the 1920s, Tilly Devine, an infamous brothel madam, used the island as a retreat for her working girls. Today it is home to more than 500 permanent residents.

The island and the surrounding bays can be reached by a ferry from Church Point.

On the mainland on the western side of Pittwater are the communities of Elvina Bay, Lovett Bay, Towlers Bay, Coasters Retreat and Mackerel Beach.

THE BEST

SWIMMING

Paradise Beach, Clareville Beach and Snapperman Beach are all lovely while Portuguese Beach is popular in the national park.

EATING

For exquisite cuisine in a cosy cottage, try Clareville Kiosk; phone 9918 2727, see clarevillekiosk.com.au. For brekkie, try Q Cafe at the Quays Marina; phone 9997 2800, see thequays.com.au.

PARK/PICNIC SPOT

Clareville Beach is perfect for families, while the lawn beside Barrenjoey Lighthouse has a 360-degree view of Pittwater.

BOATING

The Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club is the most prestigious; see rpayc.com.au. Learn to sail at All Sail at Church Point, see allsail.com.au; or Club Sail at Newport, see clubsail.com.au.

WATER ACTIVITY

Hire a skippered yacht at Smart Boating; phone 9997 5344, see yachtcharter.com.au. For kayaks, Paddlecraft; phone 9997 8015, see paddlecraft.com.au.

FISHING

Try the reefs around Scotland Island, Towlers Bay, Careel Bay and Coasters Retreat.

CAMPING

The Basin is the only place camping is permitted. With its inland lagoon, sandy beach, toilets, showers and barbecues, it's ideal – but avoid public holidays. Phone 9974 1011.

WALKING

All walking tracks start in the national park off West Head Road. The best include Elvina Bay Track and Salvation Loop; see environment.nsw.gov.au.