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GET YE TO 'THE GONG'!

Blessed with beautiful beaches, Australia's oldest national park and lush rolling hills, Wollongong is shaking its steel city moniker and becoming renowned as a haven for lovers of all things outdoors. *Toni Krasicki* explains.



Friends of mine living in Wollongong are constantly gloating, and never fail to remind me that they live in paradise. They say the stunning beaches, not too crowded surf breaks, and lack of gridlocked peak hour traffic, makes city living easy and enjoyable. Over the years I have heeded their advice and spent many weekends exploring the many layers of the city. However, 'The Gong', as fondly known by locals and visitors alike, is highly underestimated and often just used as a gateway to destinations further south. NSW's third largest city is within

cooee distance of Sydney, only 80 kilometres, so sees its fair share of daytrippers, but stay a little longer and you'll unearth a region rich in natural beauty offering an abundance of outdoor pursuits.

Heading south from Sydney, the best way to experience the region and ensure you don't bypass the city is to take the scenic route along the Grand Pacific Drive starting at the Royal National Park, Australia's oldest. Peppered with caves, Aboriginal rock engravings and middens, as well as walking tracks and secluded

beaches, the park is traversed by the 26-kilometre multi-day Otford Track walk. I join Ian Wells from Sydney Coast Walks for a history lesson on everything from the first landowners to how the sandstone cliff faces were formed, while making our way around the northern end of the park at Jibbon Point.

I've walked the Otford Track a couple of times, and one of the highlights, apart from camping in the park, is the heritage-listed cabins built during the Depression to house families. Although only accessible on foot, they are used as weekenders by



lucky owners and fortunate friends. The beaches in Bundeena, at Wattamolla and Garie are accessible by car, therefore popular, but if you want solitude, a few hours walking from either of these places and you'll have one to yourself.

Thrill-seekers should do more than take a break at Bald Hill for a Mr Whippy ice-cream and the mesmerising views down the coast. Hook up with one of the hang gliding companies for a tandem hang glide that'll have you soaring above the cliffs for a heart thumping 20 to 30 minutes and eventually pirouetting down to land on the beach at Stanwell Park.

The Grand Cliff Drive passes through Stanwell Park and has been a long time favourite with motorcycle riders. The opening of the popular Sea Cliff Bridge in recent years is an added attraction for pedestrians keen for a closer look at the Illawarra Escarpment and ocean below. Easily recognisable in car commercials,

the 665m balanced cantilever bridge hugging the cliffs is only a skerrick of the 140km scenic drive that transports visitors all the way to Nowra and is as close to the Great Ocean Road as it gets in NSW.

Ditching the car for two wheels I decide to get amongst the gloating locals and check out the beaches using pedal power. Not having a bike of my own I track down Spinway cycle station, a bike-share station at the Novotel in North Beach. Conveniently located across the road from the cycle path that's part of the 42 kilometres of cycle ways and shared paths that crisscross the city. I head north past Diggies Café, it's lunchtime crowd spilling out over the footpath and twenty metres further on watch as Skydivers land just metres from the beach. Much of this section of the path is flat until just after Bulli, with most of the path keeping you within spitting distance of beaches.

If you're keen to add some Zen to your day or you're just curious to see what the largest Buddhist Temple in the Southern Hemisphere looks like, then add Nan Tien Temple to your 'must visit' list. I've been there a few times - to have lunch in the Dew Drop Inn Teahouse and to wander through the temples especially when I need a temple fix. Next time I'll be staying for the weekend meditation retreat they run once a month.

EAT:

- Sunday breakfast, lunch or high tea at the historic Ravensthorpe Guesthouse & Restaurant in Albion Park. www.ravensthorpe.com.au
- Brunch at Diggies, a North Beach institution. www.diggies.com.au
- Vegetarian Asian dishes and exotic teas at the Dew Drop Inn Tea House. www.nantien.org.au

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SEE AND DO:

- Yoga Spa Day Retreat at Mercure Resort Gerringong by the Sea. www.mercuregerringong.com.au
- Indoor rock climbing at Hangdog Climbing Gym. www.hangdog.com.au
- One-day or weekend Meditation Retreat at Nan Tien Temple. www.nantien.org.au
- Hire a bike from the bike-share station at Novotel Wollongong North Beach and cycle the coastal path. www.spinway.com.au
- Take a guided walk through The Royal National Park. www.sydneycoastwalks.com.au
- Learn to surf. www.pinessurfingacademy.com.au
- Skydive the beach. www.skydivethebeach.com.au
- Hang glide from historic Bald Hill. www.hanggliding.com.au

Heading back to Sydney I stop at the Visitors Centre at Bulli Tops for a final glimpse of the Wollongong coastline. It's hard to ignore the elephant in the room as Port Kembla's bellowing chimneys sit quietly in the distance acting as a reminder that we are definitely in 'The Gong'. **OH!**

