



New South Wales

HIGHLIGHTS

- Floating through the heavenly **Promised Land** (p79) loop
- Riding into history in golden **Hill End** (p60)
- Savouring the view from **Carsons Pioneer Lookout** (p83) before whooshing down into it
- Losing yourself on the vast cycleways network of Australia's most bike-friendly city, **Canberra** (p85)
- Finally catching your breath at Dead Horse Gap, the highest pass of the **Alpine Way** (p74)

TERRAIN

A bit of just about everything, from flats and rolling along the coast and in the vineyards to hills and then mountains in the interior.

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www.bicyclensw.org.au

www.visitnsw.com.au

The people of New South Wales (NSW) are passionate about their state. In pubs, sports arenas, business meetings and arts gatherings, they'll tell you in no uncertain terms just how and why it's the best in the federation. It's got the largest population, churns out the biggest bang for buck in most trades and industries, and has the kinds of A-grade cities and diversity of country that most places can only dream of.

Thrillingly for cyclists, this best-of-the-best-of-everything manifests itself as a rich choice of destinations and a fascinating range of terrain. Sydney, the state's political, economic and cultural engine, measures up again and again to visitors' high expectations, especially given its incomparable setting on Port Jackson. A sunny 2000km-long coastline is freckled with sparkling beaches and lively towns. To the west, the Great Dividing Range separates the populated ocean-front fringe from the scattered towns and villages of the interior. There are World Heritage-listed rainforests, elevated farmlands and, in the Snowy Mountains, alpine wilderness and peaks rising above 2000m. Nestled in its southern hills are the small Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and national capital, Canberra. West of the divide are grazing and farmlands, national parks showcasing Aboriginal endurance and culture, and almost unimaginable light and space.



HISTORY

Aboriginal people inhabited the land now known as NSW for over 50,000 years before the arrival of Europeans. These first custodians were thought to have included about 60 language groups comprising a total population of 300,000 to one million people.

In 1770 the young English Lieutenant (later Captain) James Cook stumbled across the east coast of Australia and landed at Botany Bay, just south of present-day central Sydney. Cook was met warily by the local people; as he noted in his journal, 'All they seemed to want was for us to be gone'. Eighteen years later, though, Arthur Phillip and the 'First Fleet' of 751 ragtag convicts and children, and around 250 soldiers, officials and their wives, landed at Port Jackson, just north, to establish the permanent British penal colony of NSW.

It's believed there were about 3000 Aboriginal people in the Sydney region at the time. They belonged to the Ku-ring-gai, Dharawal and Dharug language groups. Sydney Cove, itself, where Phillip's fleet landed, was home of the Eora people.

NSW was a harsh place in those days. Early attempts at farming were unsuccessful, so the colony bumbled through near-starvation and rum-fuelled political turmoil. As many settlers were convicts displaced from their homelands, they in turn set about dispossessing Aboriginal people, stripping them of their legal land rights and systematically subjecting them to incarceration, death or expulsion by force.

It wasn't until Lachlan Macquarie began his term as governor in 1810 that things improved, made even better by the gold-rush boom times of the 1850s. By then Sydney had been transformed into a well-planned colony, graced by fine civic architecture. It was during Macquarie's tenure, too, that colonists pushed over the Blue Mountains to the broad-acre pasture and croplands that would support the maturing colony – and make some of its settlers very rich.

Transportation of convicts to NSW ceased by 1850, but immigration was encouraged. Meanwhile, new colonies in present-day Victoria and South Australia were carving off areas of NSW, whose boundaries once covered more than half the continent.

In the 20th century post-WW2 immigration from the UK, Ireland and the Mediterranean – and more recently from Asia (especially Vietnam and China), the Middle East and Africa – brought new spirit and prosperity to NSW. The state has maintained its position as the forerunner in terms of both population and economic activity.

A long way from its colonial origins, Sydney today is a confident world city. In 2000 it welcomed the new millennium by hosting a spectacularly successful Olympic Games. Ugly race riots on Sydney's Cronulla Beach in 2005 laid bare long-simmering tensions between some old and new Australians, but overwhelmingly, the people of NSW are warm and open to travellers.

ENVIRONMENT

NSW can be roughly divided into five regions: the coastal strip; the Great Dividing Range, about 100km inland from the coast; the Blue Mountains west of Sydney; the Snowy Mountains in the south; and, west of the Great Dividing Range, farming country that dwindles into pan-flat dry plains covering two-thirds of the state and fading into the barren far-west outback.

The Great Dividing Range runs most of the length of Australia's east coast and incorporates many of the state's natural highlights. The Snowy Mountains in the south include the continent's highest peak, Mt Kosciuszko (2228m). The major rivers are the Murray and the Darling, which meander westwards across the plains and into Victoria. The eastern side of the range forms a generally steep escarpment, usually heavily forested. Most of the ancient range's peaks have been worn down to plateaus.

Despite extensive clearing for agriculture, vast areas of native vegetation remain little changed. Wollemi National Park, less than 100km northwest of Sydney, contains the state's largest officially recognised wilderness area – 3610 sq km. It's so wild that in 1994 the Wollemi pine, one of the world's oldest and rarest plants, was discovered (see boxed text *The Tree that Time Forgot* p63). It's just one example of the enormous floral biodiversity thriving on dry plains, coastal heath and in temperate and subtropical rainforests. Eucalypt forest is especially common, towering above banksias, grevilleas, bottlebrushes and boronias.