

Southern belle takes the stage

Melinda Ham

Port Hacking is often described as "Sydney's forgotten waterway", tucked 26 kilometres south of the city, just below Cronulla. Although it is one of Sydney's smaller waterways (only 11 square kilometres) it's a haven for sailors, kayakers and fishermen.

The exclusive waterfront suburbs to the north and the more isolated communities of Maianbar and Bundeena and the Royal National Park to the south share this unpolluted bay. Visitors and residents alike explore the area by tinnie, luxury yacht, sailboat, kayak, car or foot.

Before white settlement, the Aboriginal people of the Dharawal nation used the area as a site of feasting and celebration. The first Europeans destroyed many of their middens, shipping the shells to Milsons Point to use as mortar for building construction, but at Jibbon Point on Port Hacking's southern shore near Bundeena, you can still see rock engravings depicting killer whales, stingrays, turtles and kangaroos.

Soon after the landing of the First Fleet, the first European to set eyes on the area was Midshipman John Aicken and the bay was known initially as Port Aicken.

A few years later, Henry Hacking, a quartermaster who led many hunting expeditions searching for bush meat to supplement the settlers' meagre rations, stumbled on what later became Hacking River at

the western edge of the water body, in 1795. He told Matthew Flinders about his discovery and this turned out to be a fortuitous tip. In April 1796, Flinders and George Bass were sailing down the south coast in their boat, Tom Thumb II, and reached Lake Illawarra. On their return voyage Flinders ducked in to the sheltered bay he'd heard about to avoid a violent storm.

Flinders honourably named the area Port Hacking instead of Port Flinders because he knew Hacking had been there ahead of him and he spent a few days mapping the area before returning to Sydney.

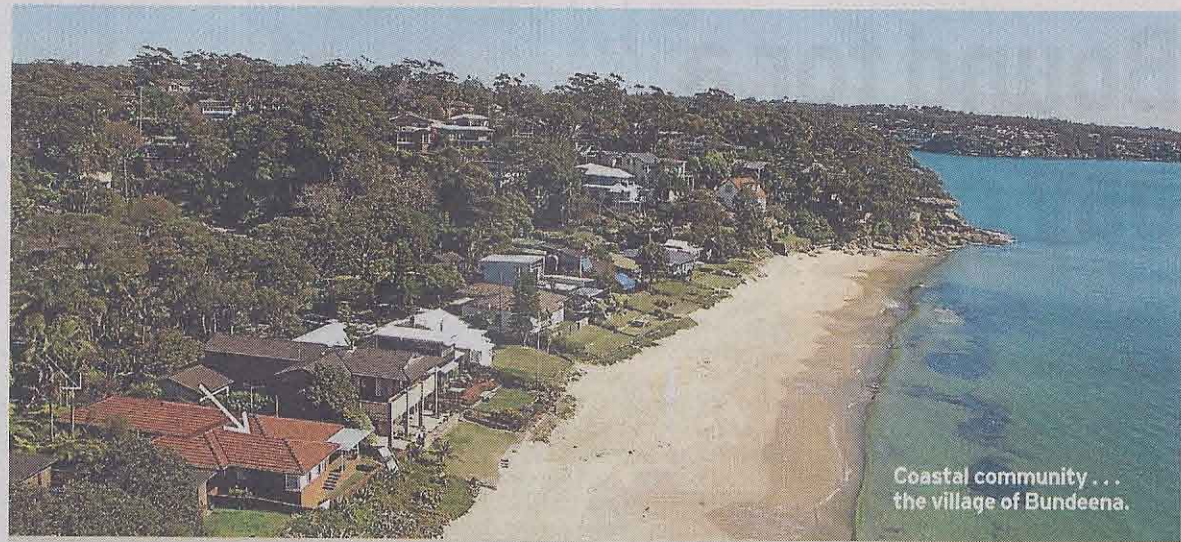
Because Flinders's expedition did not find any source of fresh water, Port Hacking wasn't recommended for settlement. The first permanent European settlers didn't arrive at Bundeena for another 35 years.

Further settlement followed in nearby Maianbar in 1841 and at Simpsons Bay in the 1870s - Simpson House still stands today in the Bonnie Vale camping ground.

This gradual development of the water's edge encouraged the government to preserve the rest of the southern shore of Port Hacking, creating the national park, the country's first, in 1879, encompassing 15,014 hectares stretching inland and south along the ocean.

Today, the northern shore of Port Hacking is built up with the suburbs of Cronulla, Burraneer, Dolans Bay, Port Hacking, Lilli Pilli, Caringbah South, Yowie Bay and Grays Point.

This area also boasts several yacht



Coastal community...
the village of Bundeena.

THE BEST

SWIMMING

Bonnie Vale Camping Ground has a sand spit that extends into the bay, or try Jibbon, Horderns or Gunyah beaches, all walking distance from Bundeena.

EATING

The Royal Motor Yacht Club at Gunnamatta Bay has the Enigma at the Royal bistro and restaurant serving Greek-inspired cuisine. Fine dining with water views, you can eat casually outside or inside. See enigmarestaurant.com.au. Phone 9544 5500.

PARK/PICNIC SPOT

Audley, at the mouth of the Port Hacking River, has flat picnic areas, a visitors centre and boat, bike and

aqua-bike rental at the Audley Boatshed. For boat access only, Cabbage Tree Basin is a secluded picnic area and key place to spot migratory birds.

BOATING

For a choice of tinnies, houseboats and plastic Polycrafts, contact Cronulla Houseboats and Boat Hire at cronullahouseboats.com.au or phone 9523 6919. Beware of the many sandbars and rare seagrass.

WATER ACTIVITY

Rent a kayak or go on a guided tour. bundeenakayaks.com.au or phone 9544 5294.

FISHING

The best fishing is from a boat. At Gynea, Gooseberry, Yowie and

Mansion bays you'll find flathead, bream, whiting, snapper, garfish or mullet. Spear and gun-fishing are prohibited.

CAMPING

Bonnie Vale Camping Ground, in Simpsons Bay near Bundeena, is the only permitted camping around Port Hacking. Booking essential on 9542 0683 and environment.nsw.gov.au.

WALKING

The Royal National Park has a staggering 100 kilometres of walking tracks (environment.nsw.gov.au). Another option is the 26-kilometre coastal track from Bundeena south to Otford. For a private walking tour, see royalcoastwalks.com.au.

clubs and marinas including the Cronulla Sailing Club at Gunnamatta Bay and the Port Hacking Open Sailing Club on the west shore of Yowie Bay. If you don't have your own boat, to reach the southern shore, instead of taking the winding

road through the national park you can hop aboard the Tom Thumb III or the Currannulla, Australia's oldest timber commuter ferry, from the public wharf at Cronulla.

It takes 20 minutes to cross two kilometres of water to Bundeena

with its thriving artistic community. Studio open days are held the first Sunday of the month as well as local markets. See artrail.com.au. Also phone Cronulla Ferries, 9523 2990 or see cronullaferreries.com.au to view the timetable.