



# HARBOR CITY STAYS

A SLEW OF NEW ROOMS IN REPURPOSED HERITAGE HOTELS, BLOCKBUSTER BRANDS AND BABY BOUTIQUES OFFERS EXCITING REASONS TO HIGH-TAIL IT TO SYDNEY RIGHT NOW. **RON GLUCKMAN** BEDS DOWN IN THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST.



The lobby bar at Primus Hotel. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A junior suite in Ovolo 1888; The Old Clare Hotel updates a former brewery; snacks by the pool, Sofitel Sydney Darling Harbour; one of Paramount House Hotel's 29 rooms; a Victorian veranda in Spicers Potts Point; West Hotel's whiz-bang exterior.



SHARYN CAIRNS; CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: COURTESY OF SPICERS POTTS POINT; COURTESY OF WEST HOTEL; COURTESY OF PRIMUS HOTEL; OPPOSITE FROM TOP, LEFT: COURTESY OF THE OLD CLARE HOTEL; COURTESY OF SOFITEL; COURTESY OF OVOLO





the scene. Sydney claimed an astonishing 17 openings last year, and global hospitality consulting brand Horwath HTL predicts another 4,600 rooms will be added in the next four years. It seemed time to check into some of the latest Sydney properties.

First stop is Surry Hills, a leafy backwater that was the center of Sydney's rag trade, and also Australia's own mini-Hollywood. Paramount Pictures and 20th Century Fox had offices here, and many historic buildings survive. Gentrification began in the early 2000s, and Surry has some of Sydney's most celebrated restaurants. And now, a hip heritage hotel to match.

**Paramount House Hotel** opened in April, in the World War II-era Paramount building, which has been buzzing for years. The former film screening room in the basement is the art house Golden Age Cinema. On the main floor is the always-packed Paramount Coffee Project, which is run by partners with more than two decades each in the coffee trade who set out four years ago to expand and restore the old film company's office into a movie-themed hotel.

Their delightfully funky boutique inn reimagines Sydney's cinematic heyday. Over a cup of his celebrated java, co-owner Mark Dundon explained that much of the hotel is in a new addition above the old Paramount warehouse. Designers had to be as inventive as filmmakers creating sets. Hence, the lovely exterior copper cladding and companion piece in the lobby are new, but look convincing as relics from a Hollywood epic.

The 29 rooms feature a variety of layouts, including lofts. Best are Sunny rooms, with lots of greenery and big windows opening out onto one of the hottest Sydney neighborhoods. As befits a first-time hotel launch, there are hits and misses. The metal tub in the center of the room seems clumsy, overly zen for the cinematic concept. But I'm bowled over by the exquisite fabrics sourced by these well-traveled coffee traders, and comfy beds with mounds of pillows.

Food options were boosted when Ester, the heralded Chippendale restaurant, opened a wine bar and eatery in the building, Poly (get it: Poly-Ester). Just outside are two of the country's hottest Asian eateries, Chin Chin and Longrain. Don't miss visiting gorgeous Golden Age's bar, with vintage wraparound seating and brown leather

## SYDNEY WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT FOR ME. VISITING A QUARTER-CENTURY AGO, AS A YOUNG REPORTER

based in Hong Kong, I bounded off the plane, reveled in the clear air and blue skies, knelt down, and kissed the tarmac. Admittedly, there had been many on-board drinks. Still, excitement had been building from takeoff: like-minded people speaking boisterously, spinning yarns, wearing shorts and loud shirts. I'd felt that I'd finally found my tribe.

I quickly obtained immigration papers—which went unfiled, since, like in most torrid love affairs, the spell eventually broke. And, like so many plunges of passion, the end came in the sack. Sydney claimed stately architecture, wonderful parks, wholesome food, and harbor views captivating even a native San Franciscan residing in Hong Kong. But, sorry Sydney, your hotel scene just lacked sufficient world-class stays.

That changed in the run-up to the 2000 Olympics. Sydney reinvented itself, not only with futuristic stadiums but a whirl of hotel and tourism investment. Come curtains-up on those world games, Sydney was dolled up, glistening, a global sensation.

The decades since haven't been so kind. Sydney hasn't so much declined as failed to keep pace. Attention turned to other Australian cities. Melbourne modernized as Sydney stayed status quo. From Brisbane to Perth, breathtaking new concert halls, airports and football stadiums debuted, and buzzy new hotel brands sustained the momentum.

Then, the tide turned, as Sofitel added nearly 600 rooms to Darling Harbour, following a slew of design-oriented and heritage hotels that have greatly diversified

COURTESY OF OVULO. OPPOSITE: TOM ROSS



Paramount House Hotel, a new boutique built in and above an old film studio. OPPOSITE: A buoyant blend of art and design in a room at Ovolo Woolloomooloo.



stools. The tiny cinema sports velvet-backed wooden chairs from the 1940s. The motto, fittingly, is “The Good Old Days are Now.”

[paramounthouseotel.com](http://paramounthouseotel.com); doubles from A\$240.

The biggest splash on the Sydney hotel scene in decades came last November with the opening of the A\$500 million **Sofitel Sydney Darling Harbour**, the city’s first new luxury property of the millennium.

Checking into the gorgeous 599-room glass tower was a chore, with long lines in the lobby. But it’s ideally located beside the new International Convention Centre with insanely stunning views, amplified brilliantly by floor to ceiling windows throughout. The fourth-floor pool is compact, but perched over the bustling harbor, outrageously Instagramable.

Rooms are spacious with an uncluttered modern design, although I’d trade the cute mini-bar in the round cylinder chest for a workstation. Better yet, upgrade to some of the most coveted suites in Sydney. My bathtub was tucked into a glass vestibule, cushioned by clouds, hovering over Sydney’s animated harbor. Even drained of water, that throne-like tub was my preferred spot for luxuriating like a king while taking my morning coffee.

The design here is light and airy, walls filled with art, venues bright. Signature restaurant Atelier boasts a big open kitchen and stacks of glassware, but sitting areas sport a backdrop of light wood that matches the floor, with a nice, natural feel. Suites and luxury club rooms include access to Club Millesime, 35 floors up with sweeping harbor views on three sides.

[softelsydneydarlingharbour.com.au](http://softelsydneydarlingharbour.com.au); doubles from A\$309.

**Ovolo 1888** is just a short walk from Darling Harbour, but a complete departure. Set inside a 19th-century Victorian warehouse, the rustic design emphasizes its heritage as one of Sydney’s old wool stores. Crisscrossing corridors and open beams make it easy to visualize how sheep were moved around and sheered, and the free happy hour allows guest to mingle in a rough-hewn lobby bar where buyers long ago bargained for bales over brews.

Properties by Ovolo, a quirky, fast-expanding brand, mix zippy design with Pop art, Modern furniture, and blaring party tunes. Opened in 2015, this one is a hip lad’s retreat in the image of CEO Girish Jhunjnuwala, an unabashed 1980s British pop fan who confides that he personally programs all the music himself: Radio Ovolo.



Sofitel Sydney Darling Harbour boasts the best bathtubs in town. OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT: By the numbers in Ovolo 1888; The Old Clare kept to its original make up.

A hotel disrupter from Hong Kong, Jhunjnuwala decries cookie-cutter design. Rooms are funky, fitting the original layout of the old building. My room is two stories, with a big bed in an upstairs loft, and what feels like a college man-cave downstairs. Unconventional, but utterly comfy, and my loft has a private terrace with stunning views over the business district.

Ovolo aims not only to remake hotels, but also hospitality, with features like free mini-bar, laundry and complimentary bag of snacks. Beyond the free lollies is a formula frequent travelers embrace: just make everything work, and keep the bed comfortable. Hence, there are plugs aplenty bedside, fast and free wireless throughout, and healthy food at breakfast. Nailed it.

[ovolohotels.com](http://ovolohotels.com); doubles from A\$250.

Chippendale is another long neglected neighborhood transformed into trendy hotspot. A brewing center in the 1800s, Chippendale became a slum renowned for disease and crime. But it now sports spiffy apartment blocks and bustling shopping towers surrounded by parks, thanks to a massive A\$1.5 billion urban renewal scheme. Putting it on the map was **The Old Clare Hotel**, in the century-old Carlton & United Breweries building and adjacent pub.

Part of the Unlisted Collection, a lively set of properties from imaginative Singaporean Peng Loh, the property matches preservation with modern design. The original brewery’s brick walls and creaky wooden floors in rooms above the pub maintain the flavor of the traditional Australian roadhouse. The décor is fun, risqué, often delightfully goofy. Loh straddles the line between cool and kitsch; every nook offers something like oddball dentist chairs, vintage safes hauled from the basement, and custom lighting.

The original dive bar is now hipster nirvana, with mixologists center stage in circular station with bright yellow and orange panels. Customers choose from retro barstools or a wide array of tables, chairs and couches, all mix-matched with antique fans and stand-up lamps.

In a city basking in sunshine, Sydney has inexplicably lacked knockout hotel pools. The Old Clare’s long rooftop pool has a wide wooden deck perfect for grills and parties. Renowned for award-winning eateries, Unlisted went all-out at The Old Clare, perhaps too much, launching three signature restaurants. Silver Eye has since closed, but scrumptious options remain with Automata by Clayton Wells decked out in scrapyard parts, and Kensington Street Social from Michelin-star chef Jason Atherton.

[theoldclarehotel.com.au](http://theoldclarehotel.com.au); doubles from A\$299.

FROM LEFT, COURTESY OF OVOLO; COURTESY OF THE OLD CLARE HOTEL; OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF SOFITEL





The Primus Hotel roof went from boys' club shooting range to glamazon pool deck.

Even amid all the heritage buildings in the business district, **Primus Hotel** stands out. Set inside the one-time headquarters of the Sydney Water Board, the redesign showcases the Art-Deco glamour of the 1930s building. The reddish-pink columns in the lobby might not appeal to every taste, but I adore how the vibrant shades contrast with the darker-hued Wilmot, the adjacent old-world dining hall. And besides, these original columns were the work of the prolific Melocco brothers, Italian craftsmen credited with 90 percent of the marble, scagliola and terrazzo work across Sydney from 1910 to 1965.

Rooms are big and luxurious, from the fluffy bed to thick rug, which stuns in a rich blue-and-gold pattern. The décor seems distinctively masculine, like a men's club from another century. Back in the day, the rooftop actually featured a shooting range, a good-old-boys' perk for Water Board employees.

If it looks familiar, you may remember the building from Angelina Jolie's *Unbroken*. In 1939, it was the tallest building in Sydney—which might make you feel retroactively safer about all those bullets flying around.

[primushotelsydney.com](http://primushotelsydney.com); doubles from A\$300. >>

FROM TOP: JIWON KIM/COURTESY OF PRIMUS HOTEL; COURTESY OF WEST HOTEL

**West Hotel** is further up the harbor by Barangaroo, another urban redevelopment scheme radically reshaping Sydney. On a previous visit, officials had toured me around cranes at the old docks, and businesses already springing up around the 22-hectare site with big parkland. Now, the waterfront is buzzing with bistros and pubs and, as of a year ago, this chic hotel.

Part of the Curio Collection by Hilton, West features an eye-catching exterior design of giant black panels shaped like faceted edges of a jewel. The striking, dark design extends inside with black glass walls overlooking a vast atrium filled with greenery, a cool nature theme that unfortunately doesn't carry into the rooms. These are ultra-modern, with blue-black carpet and dark panels. But rooms seem small and cramped, especially in contrast with that airy atrium.

Best to hang at elegant Solander, the fashionable all-day eatery slash lobby bar. Named for botanist and early explorer Daniel Solander, it offers botanical-inspired cocktails, and a dark-side vibe whether in the blue or purple lounge chairs, or black stools in that cool atrium.

[westhotel.com.au](http://westhotel.com.au); doubles from A\$238.



New-world chic in West Hotel's Solander Bar.



Potts Point overlooks the sea east of Sydney, but has too often gotten lumped in the backpacker sprawl of nefarious King's Cross (itself a neighborhood on the ascendant). Yet it's quieter, and the large collection of historical homes and cafés have earned more than a few references to Paris. In July, a trio of old Victorians reopened as the utterly charming **Spicers Potts Point**.

Inside three wonderfully frilly townhouses dating to 1880, the 20 rooms provide an oasis from another age. Guests sip tea or fruit-flavored water in the library, or sit in the leafy garden. Rooms feature big beds with down pillows, white walls and light décor. Entry-level rooms are small; it is definitely worth upgrading to the spacious suites, some with a private terrace or fireplace.

The atmosphere is friendly, with snacks in the room, and cocktail hours with canapés nightly.

[spicersretreats.com](http://spicersretreats.com); doubles from A\$439.

**Ovolo Woolloomooloo** is a total oddity, not only for the tongue-twisting name. It seems far from everything, but is really an easy 15-minute walk to museums or Circular Quay. It looks more like an airplane hanger than hip hotel fronting a high-end residential project for yachties and celebs like Russell



A trio of frilly townhouses make up Spicer's Potts Point.



The latest incarnation of a historic wharf, Ovolo Woolloomooloo sprawls and buzzes.

Crowe. Called Finger Wharf when it was built a century ago, it laid claim then to being the world's largest timbered-piled wharf.

Another distinguishing quality: the sprawling site never made sense as a hotel. After boats moved to other piers in the 80s, the plan was to demolish the wharf and replace it with a high-end marina. Protests saved the structure, which was renovated into a 100-room hotel. It launched as W Sydney Woolloomooloo, the first W outside the U.S. Later it became Blue Hotel, managed by Taj. "It really should have been called Yellow," joked my taxi driver, as we pulled up to the cavernous property. "Because it's always been a lemon."

No longer. After Ovolo took over and reopened the property at the end of 2015, it's become a trendy address, with a buzzing bar and popular events space. The waterside location is a pull, but hardly anyone comes here to chill. Ovolo is known for its buoyant blend of art, fashion and music, and Woolloomooloo has taken the experimentation—and fun—to a new level.

Check-in is quick and seamless, but pause to survey the art. Over the front desk is a jumble of figures moving relentlessly, an A\$300,000 kinetic clock. In the ceiling nest metallic eggs. Hallways are packed with visuals. If it sounds busy, that's another odd anomaly: it all works. +

[ovolohotels.com](http://ovolohotels.com); doubles from A\$350.