

Whale Watching in Sydney

Anyone who has been whale watching in Sydney during its annual migration cannot help but feel entranced as they romp in its warm waters. Happily, whale sightings in Sydney are common as around 15,000 whales swim past Sydney annually making the whale-spotting season an unusually long one. Each year these majestic giants migrate up Australia's east coast from their feeding grounds in the Antarctic to their mating and calving grounds in the Coral Sea. Now, international visitors can readily see the famous Humpbacks and Southern Right Whales from onboard a whale watching cruise, from the air on a scenic charter flight, from a cliff top trail on North and South Head, which form the entrance to Sydney Harbour, and even occasionally from shore, right in Sydney Harbour itself as the ever-curious whales swim right inside the harbour.

Best Time To Visit

The whale watching in Sydney season is quite long and extends from May in winter through to spring in September and on into November each year. However, in winter months, whale numbers are fewer and rough seas preclude many of the whale watching cruises from leaving the harbour.

There are two major peaks in whale spotting in Sydney. In June and July, Humpback whales are migrating on their annual northerly route for breeding in the warm waters of the Coral Sea. From the end of September until December Humpback whales are returning south to their Antarctic feeding ground in time for the southern hemisphere summer. During this time of year females with newborn calves can often be seen closer to the shore.

Sydney Whale Watching Options

You will not be disappointed in your quest to go whale spotting in Sydney. Whether you prefer to keep your feet on the ground, like to get up close and personal to these ocean giants or prefer to see the full majesty of their migration displays set against a broad oceanic vista there are a host of alternatives for you to select from. This thriving international gateway city enjoys some fine spots to see whales from land, a plethora of boat trip options are available for those who hope to witness these ocean giants play, and helicopter and seaplane tours for those looking for a fresh perspective and a unique experience.

Whale Watching Land Tours

Few natural sights can match a day spent whale watching. Sydney's beautiful coastline is crammed with unrivalled vantage points from which to watch these majestic animals as they frolic in Sydney's warm waters.

Sydney Harbour National Park

Happily, you don't have to venture very far from Sydney's centre to spot whales. A stroll along the scenic Fairfax Walk on North Head takes you to spectacular lookouts, perfect for whale watching. Alternatively saunter around to Dobroyd Head's Arabanoo Lookout for spectacular views across the blue Pacific Ocean. At South Head, The Gap and the Coast Walk's picturesque cliffs provide wonderful vantage points for spotting whales. Occasionally, these inquisitive beasts will even detour right into Sydney Harbour itself for your viewing pleasure.

Royal National Park

Join a guided tour along the Royal National Park Coast Track. Tour operator Sydney Coast Walks will help you locate whales as they swim along the deep channels close to the rugged cliff tops. Guides explain the links between the traditional owners, the Tharawal people and the Humpback whales. On the Coast Track, you will pass 1,000-year-old Tharawal engravings.

Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park

Hike up to Barrenjoey Lighthouse in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park to join the Barrenjoey Head Aquatic Reserve walk. Starting on a beautiful beach, the track swings inland before taking you to the summit, almost 100 metres (330 feet) above sea level. Here, the sandstone lighthouse with its views of passing whale spouts and tail slaps wait. If you're lucky, you may even see some whales breach, or even leap spectacularly out of the water. There are regular tours to the top of the lighthouse for even more sensational views.

Boat Tours

While whale sightings in Sydney can never be guaranteed, it is uncommon for boats to be unable to locate whales. As cruise the ocean waters off of Sydney in search of Humpback and Southern Right Whales, we will often be joined by pods of bottlenose dolphins, common dolphins, pilot whales, Australian fur seals and wandering seabirds including albatross. Whale fans will also enjoy fabulous harbourside views of scenic Sydney Harbour on your way to the open ocean.

Single boats are allowed to within 30 to 90 metres of the whales depending on how many boats are watching the whales. Departing from Circular Quay, whale watching boat tours usually range from around two to three hours or to up to four hours depending on how much time is spent locating the whales.

Aerial Tours

To see whales from a whole different perspective, hop on a helicopter or seaplane in a helicopter to spot them as they cavort in the warm water. Once airborne, you track along the Botany Bay's eastern shoreline towards Cape Banks one of Australia's best whale watching locations. From there you head north along the Eastern suburb beaches towards beautiful Palm Beach and Broken Bay.

Another option is to take one of Sydney By Seaplane's coastal flights departing from Rose Bay to try your hand at spotting humpbacks from the air.

From the air, visitors can see entire families of whales spread out before them. Mother whales with their calves are a particularly touching sight seen from an aerial perspective. Along the way, you will enjoy sublime views of Sydney's iconic beaches forming for an experience you will linger in your memory forever. Flights usually last half an hour or one hour and offer the chance to see whales playing, tail slapping and occasionally breaching in a way that is not possible from a boat.

Types of Whales

Off the Sydney coast, the most common whales are Humpbacks and Southern Right Whales. You can also see killer whales, False Killer whales, Minke whales and the very rare Bryde's whales. You are also very likely to spot Pacific and Bottlenose dolphins.

Good To Know

There is no optimal time of day to spot the whales. Cruise and helicopter operators schedule several trips daily.

- The best way to choose a trip is by checking the weather forecast and finding a tour that fits with your schedule. Whales are active during the whole day and tour departures reflect crew schedules rather than whale behaviour
- It is highly recommended that you to book in advance as you may well find boats fully booked and there is limited air availability if you simply turn up on the day
- There is no guarantee of seeing whales on every trip. However, during the peak whale season, it is unusual for boat and air operators to return without having located whales
- More information about whales can be found at Sydney's Australia Museum, while the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium in Darling Harbour displays more than 700 species of Australia's freshwater and marine habitats
- Sydney is renowned for its cuisine, particularly its seafood and fresh ingredients and excellent regional wines accessible via day tours
- Outdoor enthusiasts can complement their whale watching with a tour of the majestic Blue Mountains and its surrounding national parks.

Whale watching in Sydney combines the attractions and experiences of one of the world's great cities with fabulous whale watching opportunities. Off Sydney's coast visitors have the opportunity to see Humpbacks, Southern Right whales, and dolphins as well as the rare Bryde's whales and pods of Killer Whales. Whale spotting in Sydney can be done either from the land and the sea or from the air.

When people think of Sydney, they may not think of whale watching at first, but for anyone interested in encounters with these gentle giants of the oceans, whale watching in Sydney is a “must do” experience to add to your bucket list in this fabulous city.