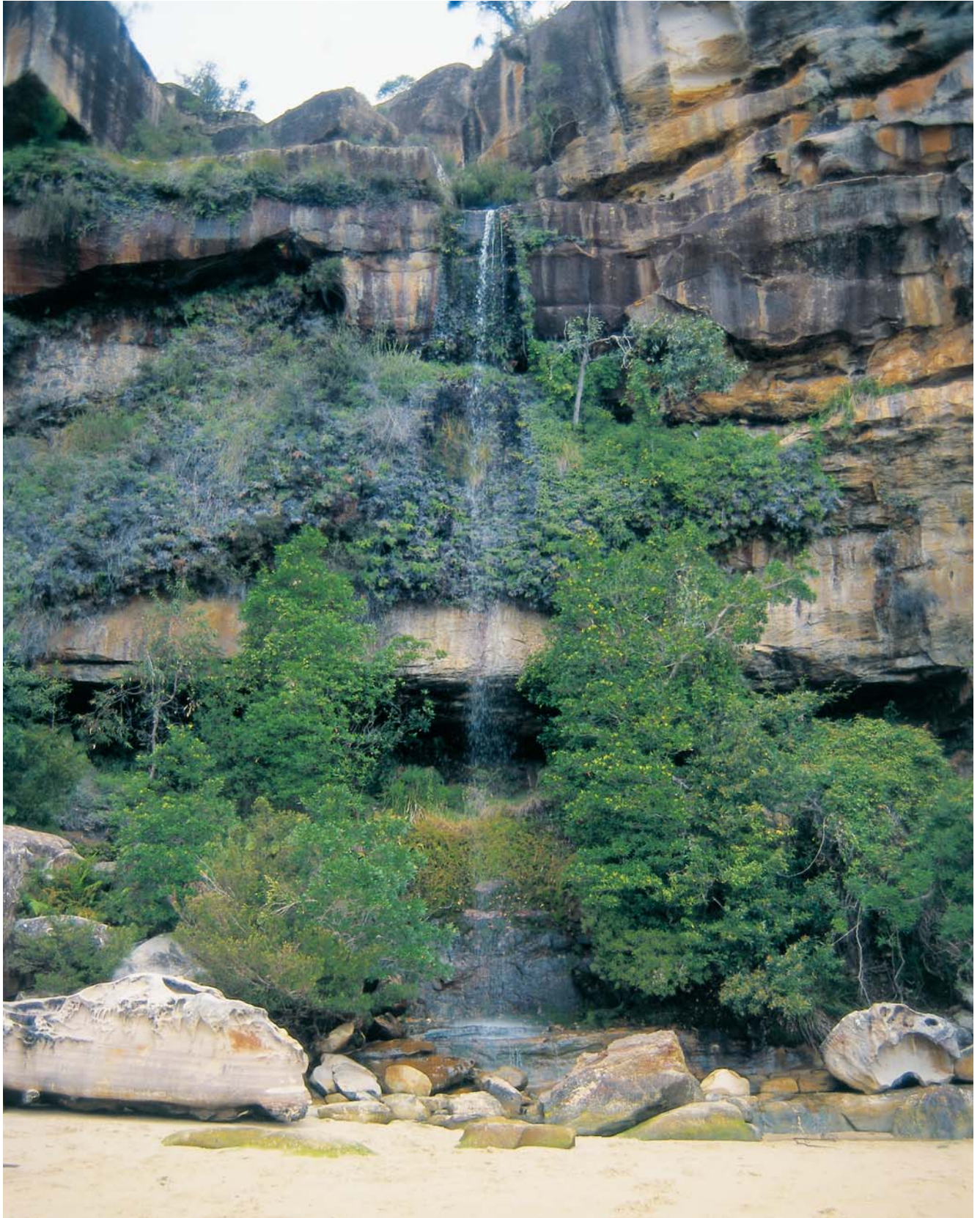




Destination



Dropping anchor in the clear jade waters of one of this creek's secluded bays is like pulling up a chaise lounge in the middle of nature's art gallery. Surreal sandstone sculptures perch on the water's edge, their outlines carved by wind and water over millennia; the warm glow of late afternoon sun enhancing their ochre tones and textures.

The whisper of gum leaves provides subtle background sound, punctuated by the melodic call of whip birds. The steep-sided hills that encompass the bay and enhance the acoustics are home to a variety of native flora and fauna, while beneath the boat lies a constantly changing aquatic exhibit. Welcome to Cowan Creek.

Just 25km north of Sydney, Cowan Creek carves through the heart of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park (KCNP), a 15,000-hectare natural playground (and Australia's second oldest national park). Apart from three tiny pockets of civilization, the entire shoreline is encased by rugged natural bush, providing a tranquil cruising ground for a weekend getaway or retreat.

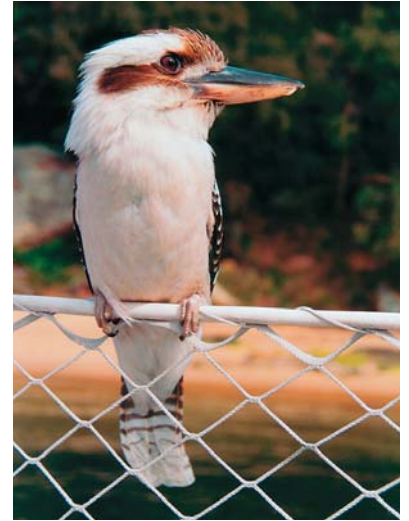
Flowing into Broken Bay, Cowan Creek lies west of Pittwater, adjacent to the mouth of the Hawkesbury River. It offers an entirely different boating option to Sydney's brash and bustling harbour, and a safer one for those not used to giving way to speeding ferries, rivercats, ocean liners and yacht racers.

Don't be fooled by the term 'creek'; this is a veritable river, almost a kilometre wide at its entrance, where it's known as Cowan Water. It extends for 12km to its navigable limit at Bobbin Head, while its numerous tributaries plunge further into the hinterland. Formed by the flooding of steep-sided valleys at the end of the Ice Age, the fjord-like waters are deep – more than 20 metres in parts – and there are few navigational hazards.

HUMAN HABITATION

The escarpments surrounding the creek are predominantly Hawkesbury sandstone, formed over 200 million years ago. As well as displaying interesting and unusual weathering patterns, the sandstone provides evidence of the area's original human inhabitants, the Guringai Aborigines. Their axe grinding grooves, engravings and rock art can be found throughout the area.

Up the creek



Forget your paddle – there is so much to see and do in and around Sydney's Cowan Creek you'll be spending most of your time relaxing and taking in the natural surroundings.

Clinging tenaciously to the cliffs are scribbly gums, bloodwoods and angophoras, underscored by banksias and gloriously spiky grass trees. Oyster-encrusted rocks dominate the creek's waterline, while most bays shallow-out to a mangrove ecosystem. Exploring beyond this on foot usually leads to the discovery of secluded waterfalls and rock pools. If you hanker for a longer hike, there's an extensive network of well-marked walking tracks throughout the park.

By Briar Jensen

While there are many mammals amongst the trees, most are nocturnal. The ones you're likely to encounter when walking are wallabies, echidnas and goannas. Birds are plentiful, with over 160 species recorded in the park. Eagles and kites soar overhead, while lyrebirds fossick in the undergrowth. Cormorants perch on vacant moorings to air their wings, while kookaburras will visit your boat in the hope of a meaty titbit.

Fish species are numerous and include bream, tailor, snapper, mullet, flathead, jewfish and hairtail, though catching a legal-sized specimen is not always easy. Ghost nippers, a transparent marine yabby, can be found in the sandy mudflats, but you'll need a yabby pump if you want to extract them for bait.

If you're planning on cruising the creek, it's worth getting a copy of John and Jocelyn Powell's *Cruising Guide to the Hawkesbury River and Cowan, Broken Bay, Pittwater*. As well as excellent maps and navigational information, it includes interesting details on geology, history, flora and fauna in an easy-to-read format. Also, check out www.cruising-broken-bay.com, which includes satellite images for a great perspective on the area.

BUSY BAYS

If you enter Cowan Creek from Broken Bay or Brooklyn, your first stop will probably be Refuge or America Bay. These large bays offer good protection and are home to many private moorings (and a large rubbish pontoon). This is the busiest spot on the creek and over the height of summer can be packed, but at other times is virtually empty.

A waterfall tumbles onto the small sandy beach in Refuge Bay and makes a bracing

shower surrounded by rocks and ferns. While a pounding torrent after rain, there's usually always a trickle here, even in the height of drought. The beach disappears at high tide, which is worth remembering if you climb to the top of the waterfall. You don't want the magnificent view spoilt by the sight of your dinghy floating out into the bay.

In 1891 a draft of the Australian Constitution was formatted onboard a paddle steamer anchored in Refuge Bay, and in 1943 it was the secret training ground for Force Z, which was preparing for a raid on Japanese shipping in Singapore Harbour.

If you have children on board, then stop at Halletts beach on the eastern side of the creek, as there's always some sand here, even at high tide. There are five public moorings and plenty of space to anchor or run ashore. It's very sheltered and makes a great picnic spot, but keep the lid on the esky as the resident goannas are likely to call past for a sniff. If you don't feed or provoke them, they will soon amble off your picnic blanket and back into the bush.



Page 106: A waterfall tumbles into Refuge Bay.

Page 107: Kookaburras will often visit your boat.

Right: There are rockpools and waterfalls at the head of most bays.

Far right: A pelican perches at the KMYC.



“It offers an entirely different boating option to Sydney’s brash and bustling harbour...”



Top: A Halletts Beach goanna.

Above: Smith Creek.

Opposite page: The view over Broken Bay.

There are several small sandy beaches on the opposite shore, including Fishermans, which are equally as pretty, but not always as comfortable for anchoring, due to the swell that sometimes rolls in from Broken Bay.

From here on up the creek there are numerous inlets and bays to explore, most with a few public moorings (there are 48 in all). Tiny Pinta Bay, off Jerusalem Bay, and Castle Lagoon, off Yeomans Bay, make stunning overnight stops almost completely surrounded by bush-clad hills. Most of the bays shallow-out quickly so don’t venture far past the innermost moorings.

Two tributaries, Coal and Candle Creek and Smiths Creek offer further protected bays, though the latter feels much more secluded, as Coal and Candle Creek leads to d’Albora Marina. Nestled at the base of the hills in Akuna Bay, it features a general store that also sells wine and beer, a café that doubles as a bistro on Friday and Saturday nights, as well as a restaurant (currently changing hands) and soon-to-be-installed BBQs. If you visit on a Sunday, you can listen to live jazz or blues bands playing on the pontoon.

At the entrance to Coal and Candle Creek is the tiny suburb of Cottage Point, the only piece of residential land bordering Cowan Creek. There are about 40 houses here; a combination of ramshackle holiday huts on the water’s edge (some of which are heritage-listed) and enormous multi-level homes clinging to the cliffs. Such is the attraction of this location, some properties have remained in the same family for six generations.

PRIZED LAND

Commanding pride of place on what is probably the most prized piece of land on Cowan Creek is the clubhouse of Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club (KMYC). Although the club was established in 1945 at Bobbin Head, its first official ‘home’ was some tables and benches at Halletts Beach, where the club was permitted by the then National Park Trust to erect a flagpole on Commodore Point.

Members purchased their current landholding in 1958 (despite some arguing it was a waste of money) and converted the original holiday home into a clubhouse. This white weatherboard structure, perched atop manicured lawns, still looks more like a colonial cottage than a clubhouse, which is in keeping with the club’s philosophy of remaining small, social and family-oriented.







Located right on the point, the club's land overlooks Cowan Water to the north, Cowan Creek to the southwest and up Coal and Candle Creek to the east. With tables spread out over the lawn, nautical flags flapping overhead and a view of the sparkling creek in the background, it's hard to imagine a more picturesque setting for a club's season-opening-day ceremonies.

You can savour the views, too, by stopping at Cottage Point Inn. This fine dining restaurant has its own pontoon and an expansive deck that extends over the water. If you arrive early you can tie up, though you'll have to leave room for the seaplanes that regularly drop off diners.

If you prefer a more casual (though equally delicious) meal, then visit Cottage Point kiosk on the opposite side of the point, where you can sit on the veranda overlooking the moored boats and admire the historical photographs on the wall. A free mooring is available for short provisioning stops and the kiosk sells most necessities, including alcohol.

Further up the creek, on the way to Bobbin Head, you'll pass Waratah and Houseboat Bays, which contain remnants of Edward Windybank's early hire boat business. The foundations are all that remain of his 1890s boatshed in Waratah Bay, where there's also a rusty wreck of what is thought to be a steamer or barge. As well as rowboats, Windybank hired out moored houseboats. These were old steamers cut in half; the larger ones slept 12 and included pianos and wood stoves.

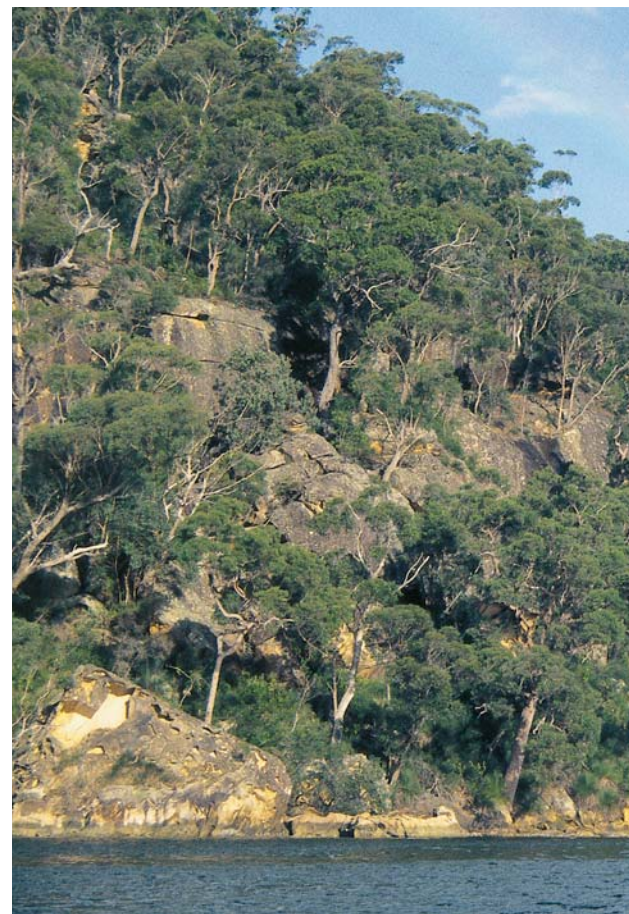
Top: Clipper cruisers are popular hire boats.

Right: Cowan Creek.

Opposite page: Exploring by dinghy is fun for all ages.

HALVORSEN HERITAGE

At the end of Cowan Creek is Bobbin Head, home to Halvorsen Marina. The Halvorsen family purchased the lease on the boatshed in 1945. In



fact, according to club history, it was this purchase that prompted the formation of KMYC. Boaters with moorings at Bobbin Head were concerned the new owners would increase their mooring fees. Deciding a united front would have more influence on the new proprietors, some of them held a meeting on the pontoon and the KMYC was formed. Happily, the Halvorsens chose to standardise the fees, and so were invited to join the club.

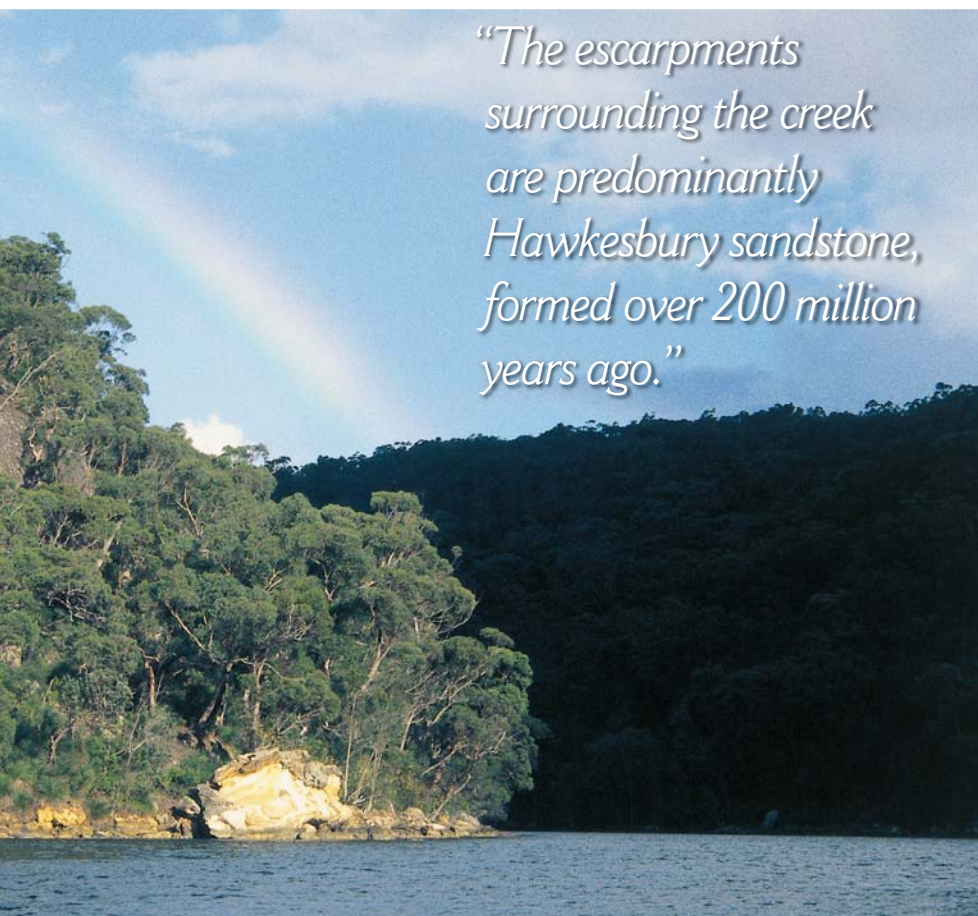
A few years later the family started hiring out Halvorsen cruisers, and in its heyday the fleet boasted 67 boats. Sadly, the last eight boats were sold off in 2003, when the EPA insisted they be fitted with holding tanks. However, many of these classic timber boats still cruise the creek.

The family is now in the process of developing a 200-berth marina. Mark Halvorsen says they are currently up to 174 berths and hope to have the rest completed within two years. There is a kiosk here, currently undergoing renovations, as well as all the facilities of a modern marina.

Across the creek is a large foreshore park with 1930s-style picnic shelters. The old Bobbin



“The escarpments surrounding the creek are predominantly Hawkesbury sandstone, formed over 200 million years ago.”





Above: After rain cascading waterfalls abound.

Below: Cockle Creek.

Opposite page: The Cottage Point Inn.


Head Inn houses a café and the KCNP Information Centre, which stocks excellent publications on the park. There's a footbridge across Cockle Creek leading to Gibberagong boardwalk, which meanders through the mangroves. If you follow the track at the end you'll eventually come across some well-preserved Aboriginal engravings.

There are boat launching ramps at Apple Tree Bay (near Bobbin Head) and Akuna Bay, but if you can't bring your own boat there are numerous hire options in the vicinity, from kayaks to cruisers, tinnies to houseboats, power or sail.

This is not a waterway for rev-heads though, especially of the large cruiser variety, as the damage caused by huge pounding wakes on the shoreline is irreparable. Hurling along will also negate the chances of observing some of the creek's quieter inhabitants. Travelling at a sedate pace you are likely to see – and hear – fairy penguins feeding in the middle of the creek or the occasional large turtle surfacing for air.

If you can't linger in the area, then consider a return trip, for just like an art gallery where the exhibits change regularly, so, too, Cowan Creek offers an oft-changing panorama.

The orange glow of sunset can be replaced by a moist grey mist on a chilly winter morning. As the fog slowly peels off the water and shrinks between the trees, it leaves a landscape tinged with blues and greys. A heavy downfall of rain sees spontaneous waterfalls roar down the mountainsides and burst over rocky outcrops. Bushfires, too, while initially devastating, cleanse the landscape, leaving a dramatic charcoal backdrop for the vibrant lime-green regrowth of grass, trees and eucalypt leaves.

In fact, so captivating is this waterway, some boats just never leave it. 





HIRE BOATS

There are only two companies that operate on Cowan Creek, but a variety of others are available at Brooklyn or Pittwater:

Clipper Cruiser Holidays, Akuna Bay.

(Cruisers, catamarans and houseboats),

ph: (02) 9450 0000, www.clippercruisers.com.au.

Cottage Point Kiosk and Boat Hire.

(Kayaks and aluminium runabouts),

ph: (02) 9456 3024, www.cottagepointkiosk.com.au.

BOATING FACILITIES

D'Albora Marina, Akuna Bay, ph: (02) 9486 3000,
www.dalboramarinas.com.au/bays/akuna.html.

Overnight and short-term berths available. Fuel, water, ice, LPG gas, showers, laundromat, BBQs and pump-out facility.

Halvorsen Marina, Bobbin Head, ph: (02) 9457 9011,
www.halvorsenmarina.com.au.

Overnight and short-term berths available. Fuel, water, ice, LPG gas, showers, laundromat, lounge and pump-out facility.

Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club, Cottage Point, ph: (02) 9456 3538, www.kmyc.com.au. Fuel, ice, and LPG gas.

SHORT OF TIME?

Haven't got time to explore by boat? Then consider a scenic flight over the area in a seaplane, stopping for lunch at Cottage Point Inn or a picnic on Halletts Beach.

Contact the following:

Seaplane Safaris, Sydney Harbour, ph: 1300 732 247 or (02) 9371 3577, www.seaplanesafaris.com.au.

Sydney Harbour Seaplanes, Sydney Harbour, ph: 1300 732 752 or (02) 9388 1978, www.seaplanes.com.au.

Sydney by Seaplane, Sydney Harbour and Pittwater, ph: 1300 656 787 or (02) 9974 1455, www.sydneybyseaplane.com.

Seawing Airways, Sydney Harbour and Pittwater, ph: 1300 720 995 or 0411 704 651, www.seawing-airways.com.au.