

Crack open the shell

In America there are 'fly-over states'; in NSW there seem to be 'drive-past towns'. We stop in at Shellharbour to see what we've been missing all these years

WORDS KRIS ASHTON PHOTOS KRIS & KELLIE ASHTON

GLOOMY WEATHER is a big test for any coastal town and, in my books, Shellharbour is already operating under a cloud. Back in the 1990s, I had a mate who lived in nearby Albion Park, and over the years I watched Shellharbour's jade hillsides, reminiscent of those in Kiama, become housing estate clutter. I must have driven past those hills a hundred times or more, yet I've never taken the exit off the highway to see what lies on the other side. That's about to change.

My family and I meet Biserka Zufic for lunch at Addy's, a seafood restaurant in the old part of town. She has lived in Shellharbour all her life and worked at Tourism Shellharbour for 15 years, so it's no surprise she has seen some big changes. She hopes the relentless drizzle won't spoil our forthcoming experience at the HARS Museum in Albion Park.

The word 'museum' still carries connotations of glass cases, dust and boredom, but this one has a secret: HARS stands for Historical Aircraft Restoration Society and a large part of it consists of hangars with planes in various states of refurbishment. You might remember, for example, *The Southern Cross* replica damaged when it was forced to make an emergency landing back in 2002. It's now, thanks to donations from Dick Smith and unpaid labour from HARS volunteers, almost repaired and ready to fly again.

A few years ago, the museum acquired a decommissioned Boeing 747-438 from Qantas (the pilots had to undergo special simulation training so they could land it on the narrow runway at Illawarra Airport). *City of Canberra* is now the museum's star attraction and I get to sit in the cockpit and manipulate the

bewildering array of controls. The weather then improves enough that I can also go out for a 'wing walk'. The wing is so wide that my harness seems entirely unnecessary, but it's 15 metres above the ground so no one is taking chances.

Our accommodation for our short stay in Shellharbour is Starfish Beach House on Wentworth Street. From the outside, it looks just like a regular modern house, but inside are stylish tiles, spotted gum hardwood floors, luxurious carpets, spacious rooms and colourful-yet-tasteful paintings. In a stylish combination of high-end apartment and beach holiday house, it even has two living rooms and an Xbox to keep curmudgeonly teenagers amused. Location is in its favour, too: it's a one-minute walk down the hill to Addison Street, which is the place to be in the old part of Shellharbour. Cafés, bars, restaurants, a

theatre and the ocean are all within a hundred metres of one another. We dine at Relish on our first night, which has simple and comfortable decor with window seats and balconies that look down Addison Street towards the tree-lined beach.

Good coffee can be surprisingly hard to come by in seaside towns, but we have no such issues at 5th Avenue Café, also on Addison Street. On the footpath outside is a sandwich board with the Millennial credo: "Why would you want a house when you could have avo on toast?" When I try to order a Diet Coke for my wife, the waitress says with a tone of justified pride that they don't stock many soft drinks. It has a relaxed atmosphere, though, and caters for dogs, so it's not hard to see why it's among the most popular breakfast spots in town.

Loaded up on poached eggs and an acai bowl, we drive through Shellharbour up to Lake Illawarra, where we meet Rebecca Dunning from Stand Up Paddle Boarding Shellharbour. Paddle



Visit the cockpit and walk the wing of a Boeing 747 at HARS Museum.



PLANE FACTS

n During the Wright brothers' first flight in 1903, they travelled 120 feet (36 metres) - roughly the length of the economy class section in the Qantas 747-438 at the HARS Museum (see above).

n Ever wondered why there's spiral painted on the turbine of a jet engine? HARS volunteer and retired pilot Phil McDonald explains that a breeze can make the turbine spin, so the spiral is a safety measure to ensure an engineer doesn't accidentally put his hand in the blades.



A bushwalking pit stop in Macquarie Pass National Park.

Loaded up on poached eggs and an acai bowl, we drive through Shellharbour up to Lake Illawarra

boarding marries elements of surfing, kayaking and dragon-boating and, if you have reasonable balance and can listen to a few simple instructions, it's a pastime that Bec says is "easy to learn and difficult to master". She adds that most of her first-timers are surprised to end their first lesson dry. I almost manage it, but then I get talking and start looking at my feet instead of where I'm going, and my whole centre of gravity tips forward.

A water sport with which I'm much more familiar, snorkelling, is supposed to be our next activity, but as we drive towards Bass Point Reserve through the Legoland houses surrounding the new marina development, dark clouds loom in the south. By the time I park the car at Bushrangers Bay (see page 32) the wind has picked up and it's starting to rain. I wimp out and we return dry snorkelling gear to Shellharbour Scuba Centre before snuggling up at Starfish Beach House for an afternoon of board games. That evening we drive in for dinner at The Tavern Shell Cove, a brasserie that overlooks a golf course.

In the morning we have brekkie at Pacino's Café (again walking distance from our beach house) and then drive out of Shellharbour to the foot of Macquarie Pass. Here we meet Paul from Nature Engagement Tours, who takes us for a short bushwalk in Macquarie Pass National Park, before serving up scones and tea. He used to work in childcare so my kids love him, and he has a wealth of knowledge about the area. He explains that Macquarie Pass is so narrow and has so many tight switchbacks because it was originally a bullock track.

More wet weather kills our planned visit to Killalea State Park, so we settle for getting a photo at 'The Farm', which is a mecca for surfers in this area, before setting off home. While it's true some sections of Shellharbour feel like an overgrown housing estate, a good deal of its small coastal town vibe remains. Even in trying weather, Shellharbour turned on its charm for us. And, best of all, it's only an hour's drive from southern Sydney. [📍](#)



MORE INFORMATION

Addy's Shellharbour
addisonsrestaurant.com

HARS Aviation Museum
hars.org.au

Starfish Beach House
visitshellharbour.com.au/starfish-beach-house

Relish on Addison
relishonaddison.com.au

5th Avenue Café
Phone: (02) 4729 0020

Stand Up Paddle Boarding Shellharbour
supshellharbour.com

Shellharbour Scuba Centre
shellharbourscuba.com.au

The Tavern Shell Cove
shellcoveavern.com.au

Pacino's Café
pacinoscafe.com.au

Nature Engagement Tours
natureengagementtours.com.au



The Nissan X-Trail parked outside Starfish Beach House.

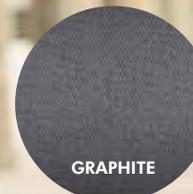
WHAT WE DROVE

It's not hard to see why the Nissan X-Trail is the third-biggest selling medium SUV in the country. Parting ways with its more utilitarian shape and attitude in 2014, the current X-Trail hit an SUV sweet spot at just the right moment. It's large enough for a family but won't intimidate less confident drivers; is priced affordably but equipped with modern necessities; and is frugal on fuel but not underpowered.

During this trip, my wife and I were in the market for a medium SUV and, after a week behind the wheel of the X-Trail, began to second-guess our preference for the more affordable Mitsubishi Outlander. The X-Trail is simply a more refined and competent drive.



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29" (74cm) inside leg 32 34 36 38 40 42 44 46 48 50 52 **AC10038 OFA**
31" (79cm) inside leg 32 34 36 38 40 42 44 46 48 50 52 **AC10039 OFA**
33" (84cm) inside leg 32 34 36 38 40 42 44 46 48 **AC10040 OFA**
35" (89cm) inside leg 34 36 38 40 42 44 46 48 **AC10041 OFA**

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