

TWENTY FIVE

WHAT WILL YOU
CARRY WITH YOU
FROM 2025 OR
JETTISON FOR
THE NEW YEAR?
WE ROUND UP
25 HIGHS AND
LOWS IN OUR
TOPSY-TURVY
25 UNIVERSE

1 AMYL AND THE SNIFFERS

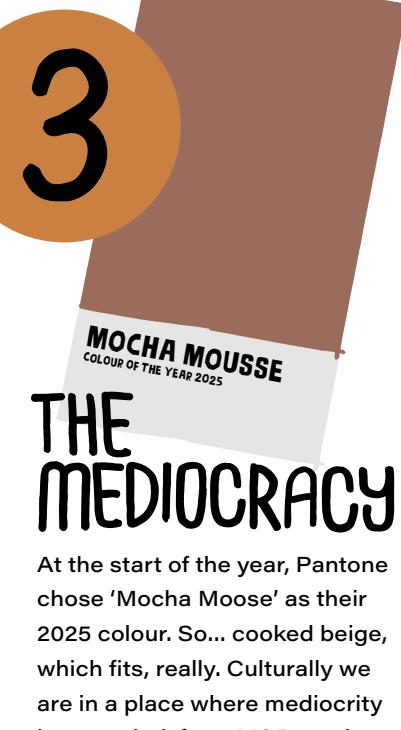
2025 saw Melbourne natives Amyl and the Sniffers take their victory lap for what has been their most successful album yet, 'Cartoon Darkness', where the pub-rockers mix things up, chartering new depths and genres. This Aussie band, fronted by Amy Taylor (right), is a rare shot in the arm for an algorithm-led music industry.

SUMMER
WINTER
2025/26



2 PLASTIC EATING FUNGI

The great survivors of all of history, fungi, remains a mystery to science, with potentially several million species undiscovered. Some which have been identified however, have been shown—completely by accident—to eat harmful plastics. A bio-manufacturing firm is now working to make the strain an efficient digester that could help get rid of plastic waste. Genius!



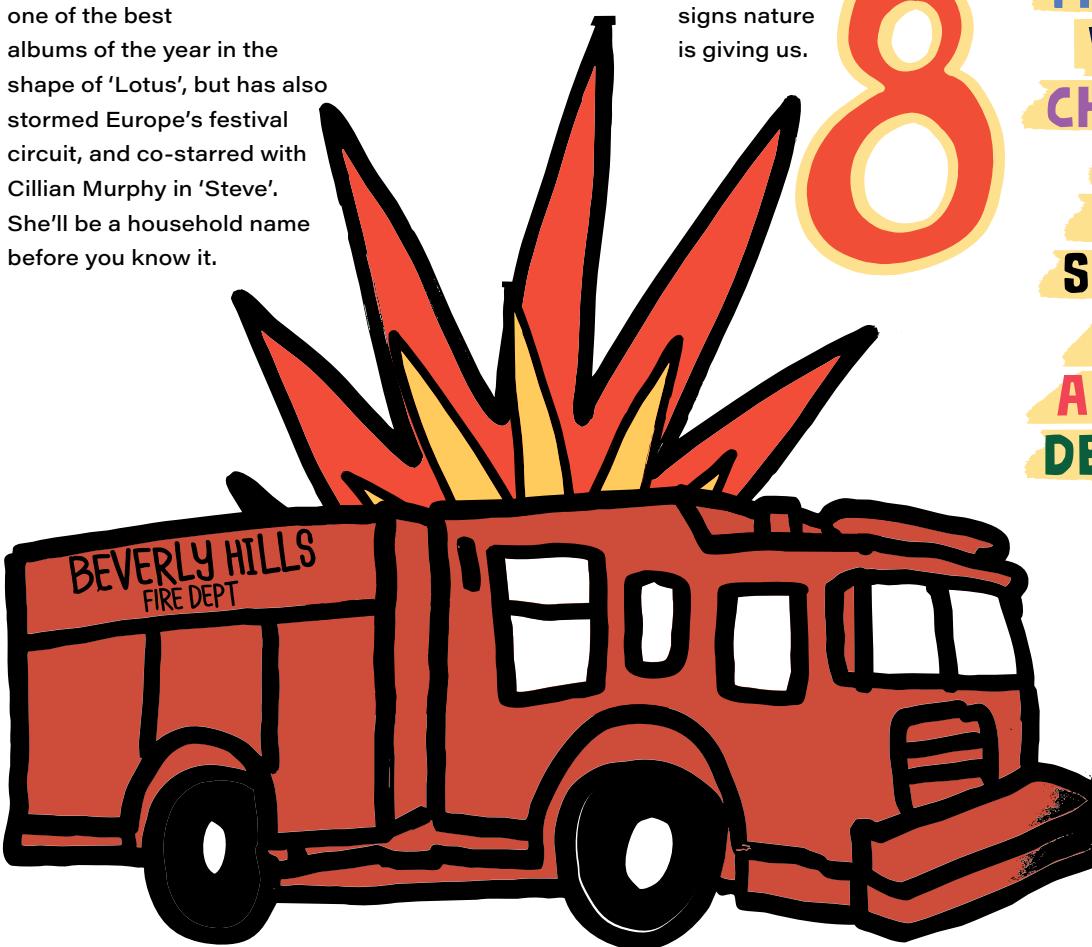
3 MOCHA MOUSSE

At the start of the year, Pantone chose 'Mocha Moose' as their 2025 colour. So... cooked beige, which fits, really. Culturally we are in a place where mediocrity is rewarded, from MOR music dressed up as something more exciting, to blah airport literature, and reality stars saturating television. Surprise and delight us again, please.



7 LITTLE SIMZ

Simbiatu 'Simbi' Abisola Abiola Ajikawo has not only released one of the best albums of the year in the shape of 'Lotus', but has also stormed Europe's festival circuit, and co-starred with Cillian Murphy in 'Steve'. She'll be a household name before you know it.



LA FIRES

The wildfires which raged for the final two thirds of January were a tragedy in themselves, and also the kind of natural disaster that we are going to see more of if we don't heed the warning signs nature is giving us.

8

PISTACHIO EVERYTHING
THOUGH ITALIANS
HAVE KNOWN ABOUT
THE MAJESTY OF THIS
NUT (IT'S A SEED)
FOREVER, SOCIAL
MEDIA GOT WIND OF
THIS LITTLE GREEN GUY
VIA DUBAI, WHERE A
CHOCOLATE BAR, CALLED
'CAN'T GET KNAFEH
OF IT,' IS ON SALE.
SUDDENLY PISTACHIO
IS IN EVERYTHING.
ANNOYING? YES. STILL
DELICIOUS? ABSOLUTELY.



9

THE PEFORMATIVE MALE

We've all seen them in the wild—drinking a matcha latte, wearing a dad cap labelled 'This is what a feminist looks like', reading 'Can Socialists Be Happy?' by George Orwell, and maybe even sporting a Labubu on their Trader Joe's tote bag. All very well and good, but the problem is, they might not mean it—only cosplaying as a sensitive type in order to attract a partner. Yuk.

4



CRINGE

TREND JACKING

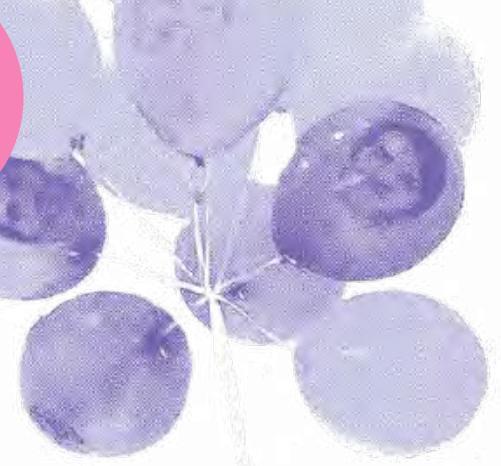
Who knows where this started... the ice bucket challenge? But brands jumping on social media trends is, as Gen Z might say, completely 'cringe'. Basically, once the thing that all the kids are doing and enjoying on TikTok reaches the blue-skying room of the social media department in Unilever, it's over.

5

CURE FOR HUNTINGTON'S DISEASE

A new type of gene therapy given during 12 to 18 hours of delicate brain surgery could be the start of the end of one of the most devastating neurological diseases around. Prof Tabrizi, director of the University College London Huntington's Disease Centre, described the results as "spectacular", with a 75% slowing of clinical progression. Huge.

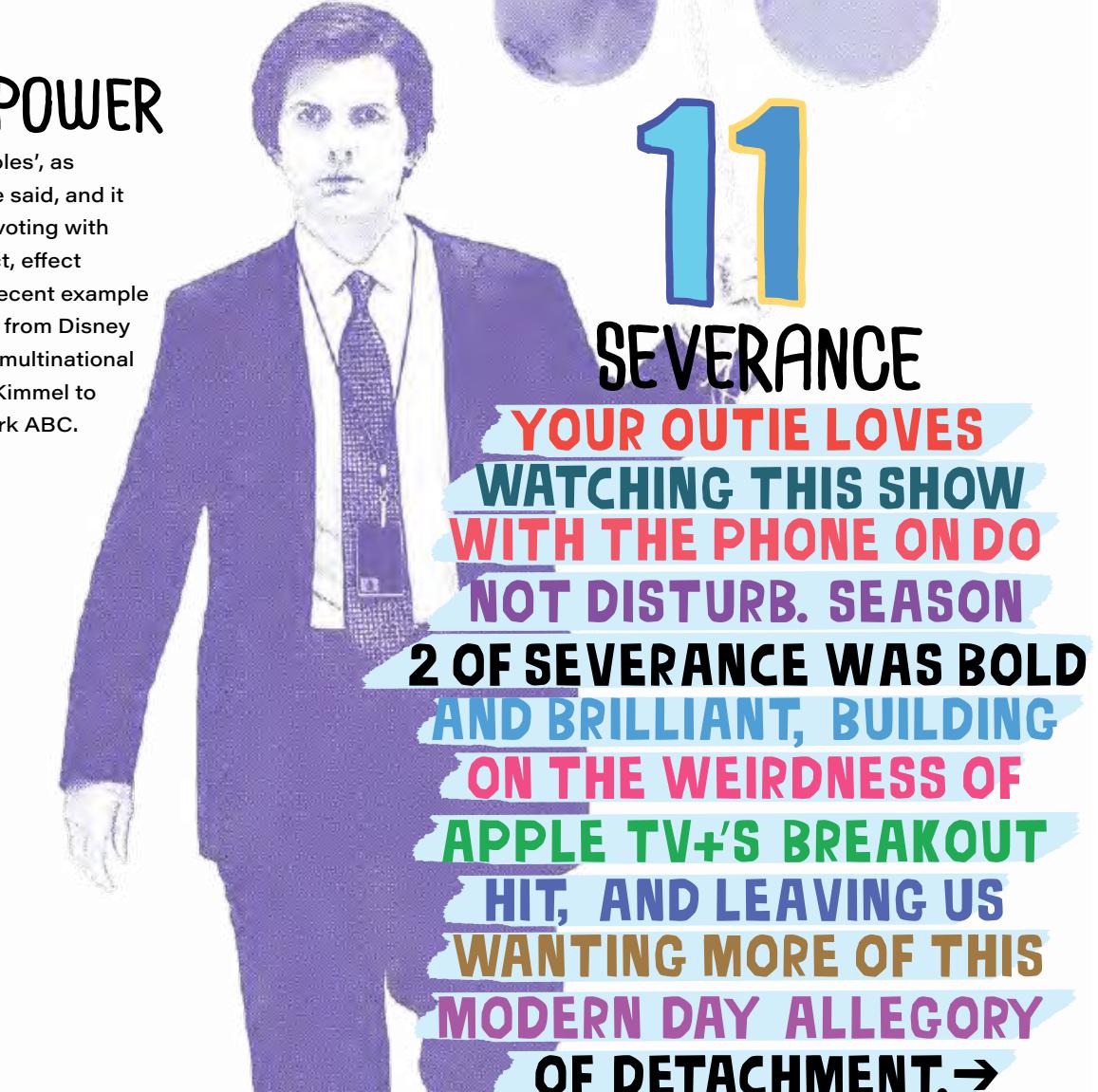
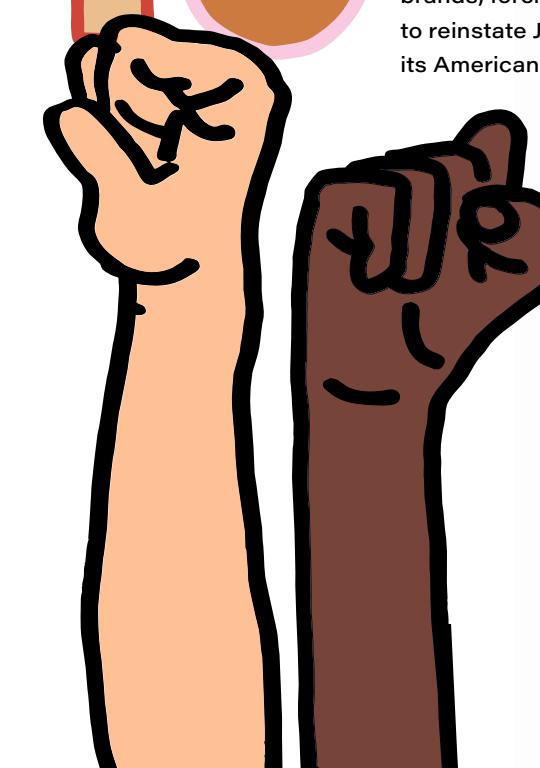
6



PEOPLE POWER

'Hope lies in the proles', as George Orwell once said, and it seems that people voting with their feet can, in fact, effect change. The most recent example is the mass-exodus from Disney brands, forcing the multinational to reinstate Jimmy Kimmel to its American network ABC.

10



11

SEVERANCE
YOUR OUTIE LOVES
WATCHING THIS SHOW
WITH THE PHONE ON DO
NOT DISTURB. SEASON
2 OF SEVERANCE WAS BOLD
AND BRILLIANT, BUILDING
ON THE WEIRDNESS OF
APPLE TV+'S BREAKOUT
HIT, AND LEAVING US
WANTING MORE OF THIS
MODERN DAY ALLEGORY
OF DETACHMENT.→

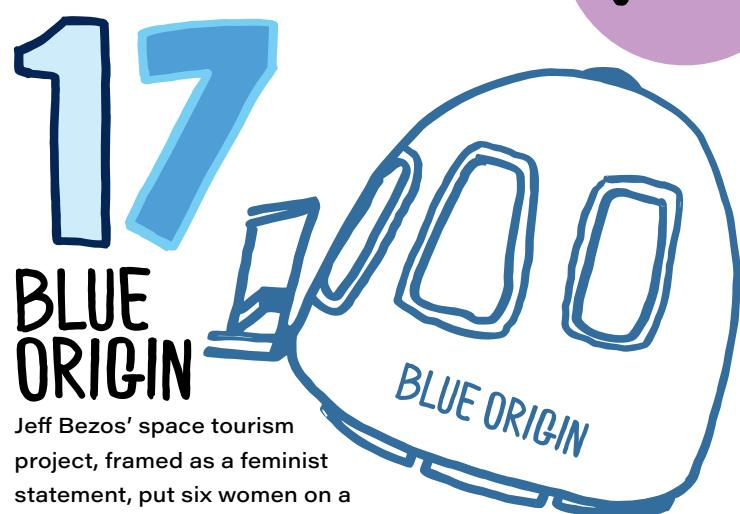


12 MOOMIN TURNED 80

These cute troll-like creatures were created by Tove Jansson at the end of WWII to bring comfort to the displaced children of a war-ravaged Finland. The idea caught the world's imagination, and eight decades later the quirky characters are still bringing joy.

13 V&A EAST STOREHOUSE

The Victoria and Albert Museum's East London outpost—basically a very posh warehouse—simply requires you to search their collection online, place an order of up to five items, and in a fortnight they will be available in a very impressive space for your private delight. This truly changes the museum game across the globe.



Jeff Bezos' space tourism project, framed as a feminist statement, put six women on a fleeting trip to the edge of space which seemingly put an end to Katy Perry's music career. No terrainian problems were ever solved by splashing billions on a space phallus, Mr Amazon.



18 THE NEWSREADER

Far from the days of only being known for wooden soap operas with shaky scenery, Aussie TV is punching on a global scale. From *The Narrow Road* to the Deep North, via *Colin From Accounts*, *'Succession in the Outback' Territory*, it was spearheaded by *The Newsreader*, which ended with season 3. Think of it as *The Morning Show*, but set in the '80s and not ludicrous.



19 A THOUSAND BLUES -CHEON SEON-RAN

This sleeper must-read hit from Korea is warm as well as haunting, and unlike anything else out there. Set in the future and ostensibly about a sentient robot, it unfolds into an exploration of life, human relationships, and the invisible struggles we often overlook. Its gentle pace will close around you like a gloved fist, and leave a lasting impression.

14 THE NIGHT TRAIN

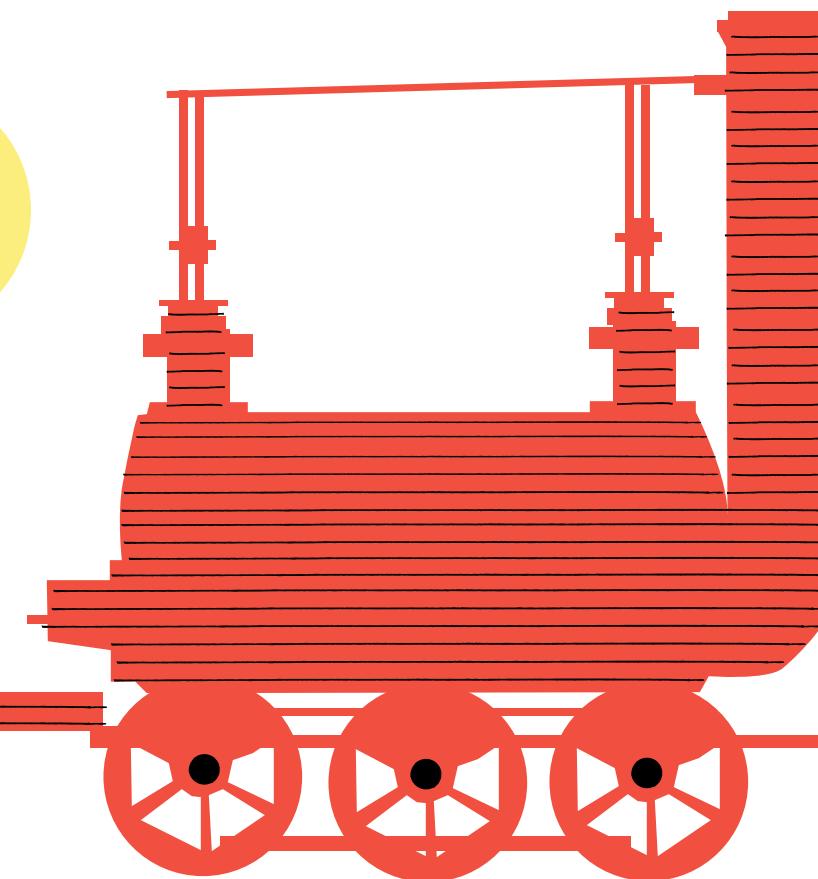
On the 200th anniversary of Stephenson's Rocket, night trains are flourishing across Europe, not only with Eurostar extending their routes, but new kids in town, Berlin-based startup Nox, promising travel to 100 European cities for less than the price of a flight by 2027.



20 LABUBUS

'CUTE' VINYL FACES ATTACHED TO PLUSH BODIES, WITH POINTY EARS, BIG EYES AND A MISCHIEVOUS GRIN SHOWING EXACTLY NINE TEETH HAVE BEEN SELLING OUT ALL OVER THE WORLD, SPARKING CONCERN FROM LEGITIMATE ADULTS WHO JUST WANT TO GET ON WITH THEIR LIVES AND NOT READ THINKPIECES ABOUT THEM EVER AGAIN.'

Illustrations by: RUDE thisisruude.com Photographs: Thimbaut Grevet/Alamy; Shutterstock; Adobe Stock



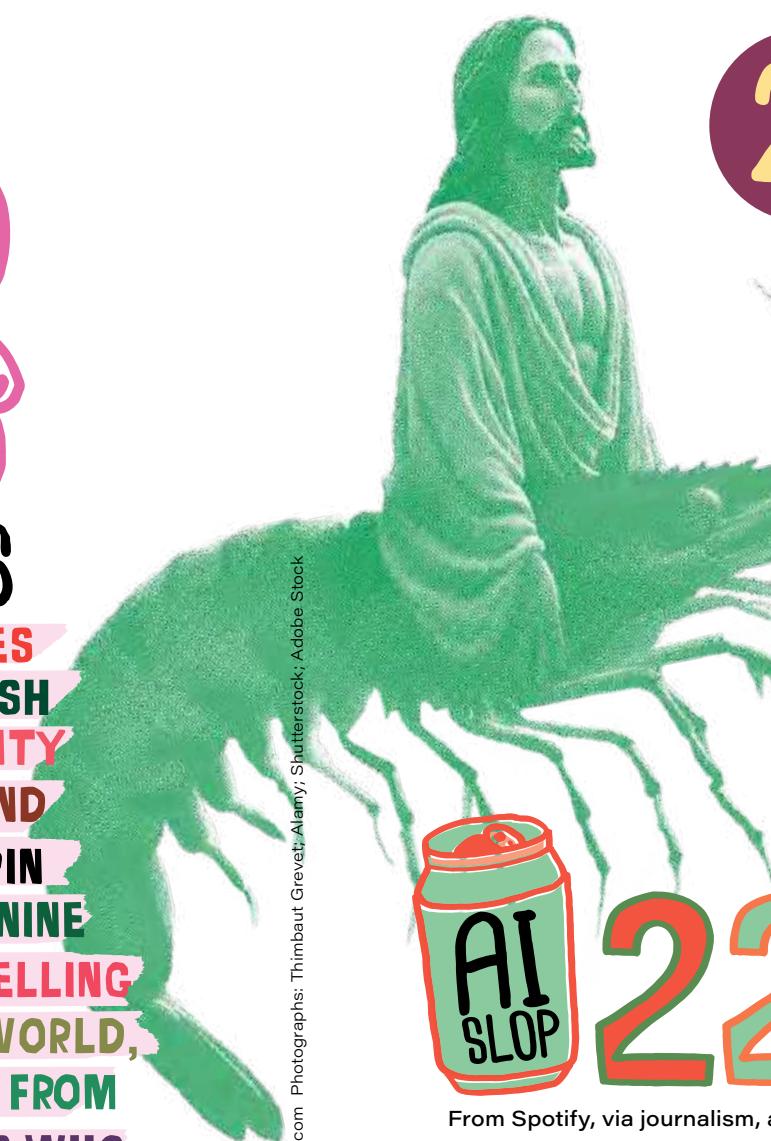
15 REAL BABEL FISH

In 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' the Babel Fish was a small creature which could be inserted into the ear and translate any language. Sci-Fi becomes Sci-Fac, with Apple Translation on the latest AirPods Pro 3 and iOS—the tech only improving with AI learning.



21 COPENPLAY

A SCHEME PILOTED IN COPENHAGEN LAST YEAR MAY WELL ROLL OUT ACROSS EUROPE NEXT, REWARDING TOURISTS WHO ELECT TO TRAVEL BY TRAIN, STAY LONGER, EAT PLANT-BASED MEALS AND GENERALLY GO ECO, WITH PERKS SUCH AS FREE MUSEUM ENTRY, FREE FOOD AND COMPLIMENTARY BIKES.



22 25HOURS SYDNEY

We've landed! All hail the first Oceanic iteration of your favourite hotel brand, and it could only ever have been Sydney. In the former home of the West Olympia Theatre and Grand Pacific Blue Room, this one's for the dreamers and the renegades. With 109 rooms, a cocktail bar, a cafe, a rooftop bar and an excellent restaurant, there's plenty of reasons to come say hi.



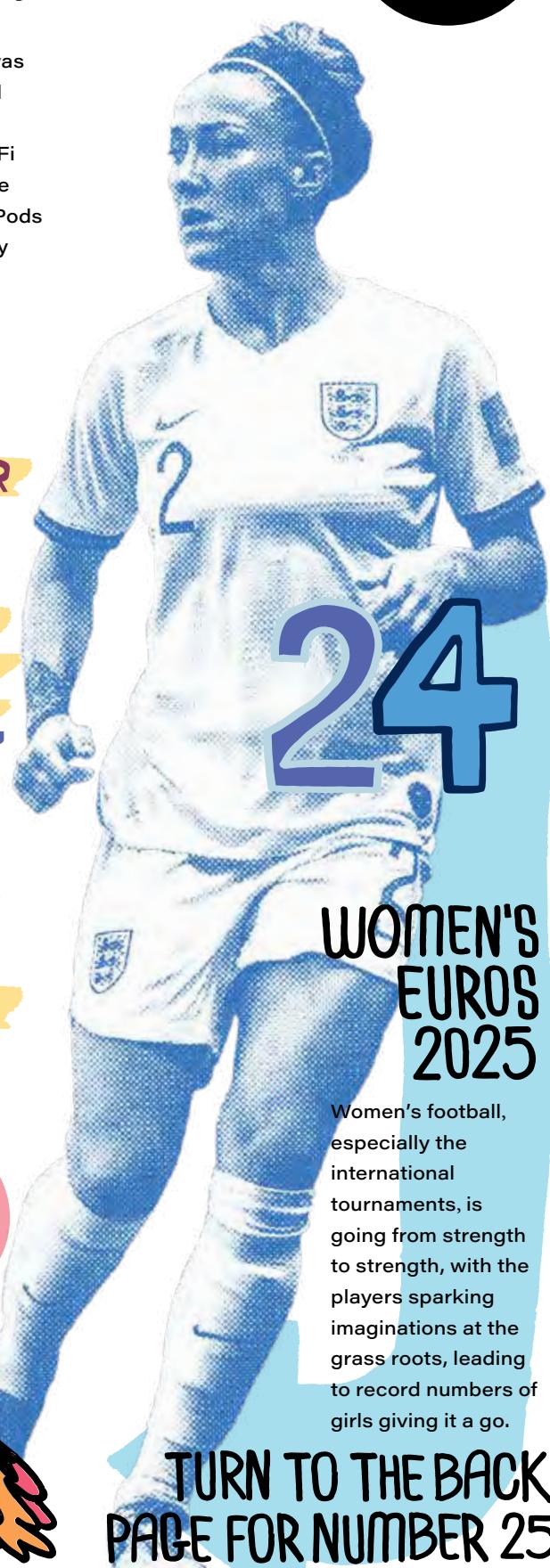
23



NEEDLE-FREE INJECTIONS

Not only good news for those with tyranophobia—no, nothing to do with Jurassic Park, but needles—this is an injection system that uses a laser to heat liquid, propelling high-velocity 'liquid' microjets through the skin. Cuts bio-waste too.

16



24 WOMEN'S EUROS 2025

Women's football, especially the international tournaments, is going from strength to strength, with the players sparking imaginations at the grass roots, leading to record numbers of girls giving it a go.

TURN TO THE BACK PAGE FOR NUMBER 25



V O L V O

Meet the new fully electric Volvo

ES90

Designed for a life in balance.

Learn more about
the new Volvo ES90





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Editor's note

A big sunny welcome to our summer/winter issue of Companion—whatever the weather where you are! 25hours Hotels began in Germany 22 years ago, and is now a truly global brand with its latest opening on Sydney's iconic Oxford Street. Embracing one another's seasonality, culture and identity is what makes travel so enticing. In honour of our new hotel, this issue is dedicated to Australia, with an acknowledgement of its Traditional Owners, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the traditional custodians of the country, and of the Aboriginal concept of 'the dreaming', the spiritual connection to the land and to ancestral spirits that created the landscape and life.

25hours Hotel The Olympia transforms the heritage-listed site of the former West Olympia Theatre into a cinematic-inspired hotel and cultural hub, and we couldn't be more excited. Rooms are split into two design narratives: 'Dreamers' with soft, light-filled interiors, and 'Renegades' with moodier tones and rebellious flair. Other talking points include The Palomar, Sydney's outpost of the acclaimed London restaurant. We chat to head chef Luke Davenport, p20.

Whichever time zone you're in today, and wherever you're from, or going to, we hope you relish this issue of Companion. Don't miss our interview with author Michelle de Krester, p40, the recent recipient of Australia's Stella Prize for Women's Fiction, and our delve into the Aboriginal film world, p50. And check out our new business section which examines the future of music streaming, p56, and one man's efforts to hold back the tide of plastic ravaging our oceans, p58.

Here's to the dreamers and renegades.

Jane Anderson, Editor
✉ Instagram.com/janeandersontravel

Here at Companion, we love your feedback. Email me at jane@enoughmedia.co.uk with your comments. For more articles visit 25hours-companion.com



Photographs: Sam Vollmer; Justin Nicholas



In this issue

12 Bits & Pieces

What's catching our attention

17 Burbangana!

Exploring the Art Gallery of New South Wales

26 City Walk Sydney

Artist Matt Cauchi takes you on a tour of his Darlinghurst neighbourhood

31 Rainbow city

Why Sydney's streets are some of the most vibrant in the world

35 Happy New Year

Our favourite New Year traditions for a positive start to 2026

36 Sand, Swim & Spritzes

Beaches within reach of your 25hours Hotel come rain or shine

39 Friends in high places

Why drones are the new heroes of beach safety

40 Radical words

Companion speaks to award-winning Australian author Michelle de Krester

43 The write stuff

How to get started (and finished) as a fiction writer

44 Aussie rules for a gap year

The things you can get up to on a 'gap yr' Down Under

45 Listen up

Six of your favourite Aussie podcasts

Companion
Trailblazer
Series

20 Cooking up a storm
Chef Luke Davenport brings the buzz to The Palomar Sydney

22 HoMie is where the heart is
The streetwear brand tackling homelessness

24 Habibi
Challenging the stigma of Arabic script one sweatshirt at a time

46 Easy does it
Companion's guide to the Australian fashion labels we can't stop wearing

50 From silence to screen
The rise of Aboriginal cinema

54 Hear me out
Charting the release of listening bars

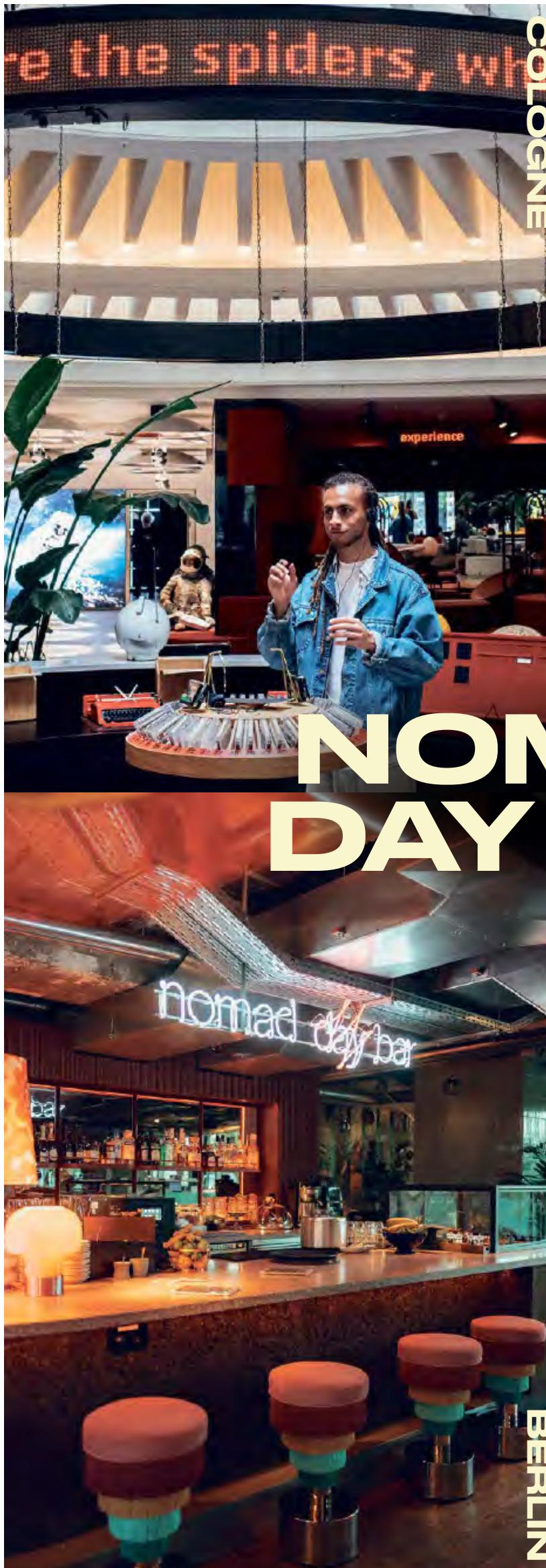
56 Business Section

56 Music for the masses
Investigating the future of streaming

58 Holding back the plastic tide
A look at the work of environmental charity, Plastic Fischer

62 Brothers & Sisters
Why Mondrian hotels make dreamers of us all

Companion is the winner for a second year in a row of 'Customer Content of the Year' at the Travel Media Awards 2025 #longliveprint



CONTRIBUTORS

RUDE

Abi and Rupert Meat are the creative duo behind RUDE, working across many disciplines from murals and prints to fashion, animation and editorial design. As you can see from our cover story their work is always infused with irreverent energy.

Currently streaming:

Abi: Confession, Jacob Alon
Rupert: The Scythe, The Last Dinner Party



Matt Charlton

has been writing for most of his life (starting with crayon) and decided to go professional half way through that timespan. He interviews the forces behind HoMie, a fashion label elevating young people in need, p22.

Currently streaming:

Mind Loaded, Blood Orange



Megan Murray

is a Hamburg-based design-junkie masquerading as a journalist. She rounds up our favourite city beaches, p36. Be it winter or summer, there's always time for sand and sea.

Currently streaming:

Forever, BEKA



Nicki Grahault

is an award-winning travel writer, guidebook author and journalist. She interviews eco warrior, Karsten Hirsch of Plastic Fischer, p58.

Currently streaming:

Beautiful Things, Benson Boone



Photographs: Leonie Freeman; Louise Haywood-Schaefer

Eamonn Forde

is an award-winning music business writer who has been covering the sector for over 25 years for a wide range of publications. Read his feature on the future of music streaming in our new Business section, p56.

Currently streaming:

Girl, So Confusing, Hinds



Anna Smith

is a film critic, broadcaster, presenter and host of the award-winning podcast Girls On Film. Read her feature about Aboriginal filmmakers and the popularity of Australian horror movies, p50.

Currently streaming:

Harmony Hall, Vampire Weekend



Christopher Bone

is a writer and communications specialist with a passion for books. He represents the glorious Hay Festival. In this issue of Companion he interviews Australian author Michelle de Krester, p40.

Currently streaming:

Money to Burn, Jasmine Jethwa

Dominic Bliss

is a London-based feature writer who contributes to multiple national newspapers and magazines on a wide range of topics. He discovers how drones are saving lives, p39.

Currently streaming:

I Guess Time Just Makes Fools of Us All, Father John Misty

BITS & PIECES

THE LONG AND SHORT OF STUFF TO CHECK OUT...



SYDNEY
PEOPLE & BUSINESS

Breaking new ground



The striking new Sydney Fish Market complex (above) is on track to open on 19 January 2026 as the city's most significant harbourside building since the Opera House. The iconic waterfront setting on Blackwattle Bay, has a distinctive wave-shaped and scale-patterned roof, paying homage to the fishing industry and created by renowned 3XN Architects. The market will feature an extensive dining precinct featuring the Southeast Asian LUA restaurant by celebrity Chef Luke Nguyen, and favourites Getfish and Christie's Seafood. sydneyfishmarket.com.au

Opening in late 2026, Powerhouse Parramatta is the largest museum development in New South Wales' history and a major cultural milestone for Western Sydney. Set on the banks of the Parramatta River, this state-of-the-art institution will be a hub for innovation in science, technology, and the arts. The inaugural exhibition is Task Eternal tracing humanity's enduring quest to defy gravity, take flight and journey into space—from First Nations' sky knowledge and early aviation to cutting-edge aerospace innovation, ethics and speculative futures. powerhouse.com.au



INTERNATIONAL
FASHION & STYLE

BEST FOOT FORWARD

UGG has teamed up with Japanese fashion brand sacai on three new styles including this bold thigh-high boot. We love! ugg.com

VIENNA
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

Sing out loud

Vienna will host the Eurovision Song Contest for the third time on 16 May 2026, with the semifinals taking place on 12 and 14 May at the Wiener Stadthalle, marking the 70th edition of the contest. eurovision.tv, stadthalle.com



Photos: Roy Gardiner with Colby Vexlar; Roman Zach-Kiesling; Andreea Michael Badrutt; Tourism and Events Queensland; Stephan Lenke; Visit Frankfurt/Isabella Pach; Visit rheinmain/Christoph Partsch; MESO/Constantin Urban; Destination NSW; Luisa Brimble; Adobe Stock

THE POWER OF ART

CANBERRA
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

An impactful new exhibit at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) in Canberra commemorates the 1966 Wave Hill Walk-off, a turning point in the Aboriginal land rights movement. Gurindji Freedom Banners: Mumkurla-nginyi-ma parngalinyparla (from the darkness into the light) reunites all 10 hand-painted banners for the first time in years. Created in 2000 by Gurindji artists and community members, the banners tell their own story of Vincent Lingiari AM, leading his people off Wave Hill

Station to demand fair wages and the return of traditional lands—a struggle that culminated in the groundbreaking first handback of Aboriginal land in 1975. The exhibit also features a recreated missing banner, crafted in 2025 with artists in communities Daguragu and Kalkarindji. The exhibition is free to visit, and will run until late 2026 at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old Parliament House. → moadph.gov.au

SWITZERLAND
OUTDOOR & ACTIVITY

On the right track

Travellers heading to Switzerland now have the chance to enjoy a little more time on the rails—with the added comfort of First Class. Rail Europe has a new promotion on the Swiss Travel Pass. Buy a 4-day pass and you'll get an extra day for free; choose the 8-day version and it stretches to 10 days. The offer is valid until March, showing Switzerland's golden vineyards in autumn, alpine resorts in winter, or lakeside towns and cultural cities in spring. The Swiss Travel Pass is an all-in-one ticket: unlimited travel by train, bus and boat, panoramic journeys, entry to more than 500 museums, and free travel for children under 16.

raileurope.com


NINGALOO & GREAT BARRIER REEFS
OUTDOOR & ACTIVITY

PATHS LESS TRAVELED

↑ A new eco-tourism experience has launched on the World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia as Ocean Eco Adventures introduces Australia's first electric seagoing charter vessel. Named 'Wirraji', First Nations Baiyungu language for 'Storm Bird', the sleek new boat offers a whisper-quiet, low-impact way to explore one of the planet's most pristine marine ecosystems. Designed for small groups, guests slip effortlessly into Ningaloo's turquoise waters to swim at a respectful distance from manta rays and explore vibrant coral gardens, returning to the tranquility of silent cruising.

oceanecoadventures.com.au



↗ Set your sights on Queensland's coastal wilderness, where two of the state's most iconic walking experiences are newly offered as guided tours. World Expeditions has been appointed the official partner for guided walks on the Ngaro Track and the Thorsborne Trail, both approximately a 32km three-day journey, located within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area—developed in collaboration with the Traditional Owners, the Bandjin and Girramay People.

worldexpeditions.com


BERLIN
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

I SAID A HIP-HOP

Waltz meets street at Berlin's very first Hip Hop Ball, held Red City Hall on 15 November, 2025. Organiser Sajeh Tavassoli brings her Viennese origins, Iranian roots and life in Berlin to bridge worlds, merging the traditional Viennese Ball culture with her own devotion to Hip Hop. If you miss it this year, it will be hopping back for 2026.

hiphopball-official.com


DENMARK
FASHION & STYLE

LIVING ART

"I start with a line and see where it takes me" is the genesis for Emma Kohlmann's new La Pittura tableware collection for HAY. The collection is inspired by European Renaissance pottery, Art Deco silhouettes and Danish traditions. "Often art is seen as inaccessible," reflects Kohlmann. "I wanted to make something people could afford and would want to live with." The result is a collection that sits gently between expression and utility—offering not just function but feeling. Whether on the table, on the shelf, or in the hand, each piece confirms art can be part of everyday life.

hay.com

Common people
In the 1920s, Neues Frankfurt overturned traditional housing ideals by creating light-filled, functional, affordable homes for everyone—a radical departure from status-driven architecture.


FRANKFURT
ARCHITECTURE & LIVING

New designs on life

By making Frankfurt/Rhein-Main the World Design Capital 2026, this German city reveals the shift of design from an aesthetic niche into a driver of societal transformation. Design is about rethinking how we live, not just how things look. Here are four key elements to the city's design message:


Rebirth and renewal

Bahnhofsviertel, the location of 25hours Hotel Frankfurt The Trip, was once a symbol of vice and decline. The district reinvented itself as one of Frankfurt's most dynamic neighbourhoods—a place where contrasts coexist, subverting its own reputation.


Skyscraper with a heart

Sir Norman Foster's Commerzbank Tower defies expectations by integrating gardens and natural ventilation at 200 meters high—turning the idea of a cold corporate tower into a model of sustainable, human-centric design.


New ways of seeing

The Dialog Museum immerses visitors in total darkness, letting blind guides lead. It flips the everyday hierarchy of perception—challenging assumptions and forcing a complete shift in perspective.

wdc2026.org


BERLIN
HOSPITALITY & RETREAT

ENTERING A NEW CHAPTER

Reading and literature is emerging as one of the key travel trends for 2026 according to Skyscanner and Booking.com. More reason to take your favourite novel 25hours Hotel Bikini Berlin where new suites feature their very own library with curated books and reading nook with ambient lighting and comfy circular seating. →

25hours-hotels.com/berlin/bikini-berlin





SYDNEY & ENVIRONS
FOOD & DRINK

Raise a glass

North Coast craft beer pioneer **Stone & Wood Brewing Co** will open the doors of a Tasting Room at its Murwillumbah brewery around a 50-minute drive north of Byron Bay by the end of 2025—the centrepiece of a AUS\$30 million upgrade. Craft beer fans can now go behind the scenes on a brewery tour, sample pilot batches and immerse themselves in the brewing process before trying new brews in the designer tasting space. stoneandwood.com.au

The new Inner West Distillery Trail features nine award-winning distilleries across Marrickville and the Balmain-Lilyfield districts, just minutes' drive from Sydney's city centre. From Blackwattle Distilling Co's gin and vodka to Ester Spirits' World's Best Navy Gin, visitors can explore distilling processes and sample world-class spirits. This free, self-guided trail also lets visitors choose their own adventure via an interactive map. distillerytrailinnerwest.com.au



THE GOLD COAST
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

NO RULES

Gold Coast Home of the Arts (HOTA) is set to burst into colour with Ken Done: No Rules, a major exhibition celebrating one of Australia's most recognisable artists. Running until 15 February 2026, the exhibition showcases



Done's vibrant canvases, playful sketches and bold explorations of the reef, harbour and the Australian landscape. Known for his unapologetic use of colour and unfiltered joy, Done has long defied convention—his motto

"no rules" capturing both his creative philosophy and his impact on Australian visual culture. A dazzling reminder of colour's power to move and inspire. Go see! hota.com.au



NEW YORK CITY
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

HARLEM SHUFFLE

The Studio Museum in Harlem has opened its new, purpose-built home featuring extensive exhibitions and public spaces. To mark the opening, this innovative, community-focused museum will present a comprehensive showcase of Tom Lloyd's sculptures, alongside a historical installation from its permanent collection spanning over two centuries of art by artists of African descent including Barkley L. Hendricks (shown above). studiomuseum.org

BILLUND
ART & ENTERTAINMENT

Brick mania

LEGO House in Billund, Denmark has opened the world's first and only LEGO Masters Academy, a studio-style experience where kids and adults learn real building techniques and take their creations home. Participants can take inspiration from the Masterpiece Gallery featuring 17 fan builders from 12 countries—and for the first time ever—2D and 3D wall-mounted creations, marking a new trend in LEGO builds. Here's to the bricks! legohouse.com



BURDANGAHA!

Take up the invitation to explore indigenous and non-indigenous Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

The Art Gallery of New South Wales is a must-see destination for anyone looking to view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in Sydney. Its Yiribana Gallery is the first space that visitors encounter in the Naala Badu building. Yiribana means 'this way' in the Sydney language and was the name given to the art gallery's dedicated space for the display of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art when it opened in 1994. Yiribana has a rich legacy of highlighting the depth and dynamism of art practice across Indigenous Australia. ➔

Installation views of the exhibition display in Yiribana featuring artworks from the Horton bequest



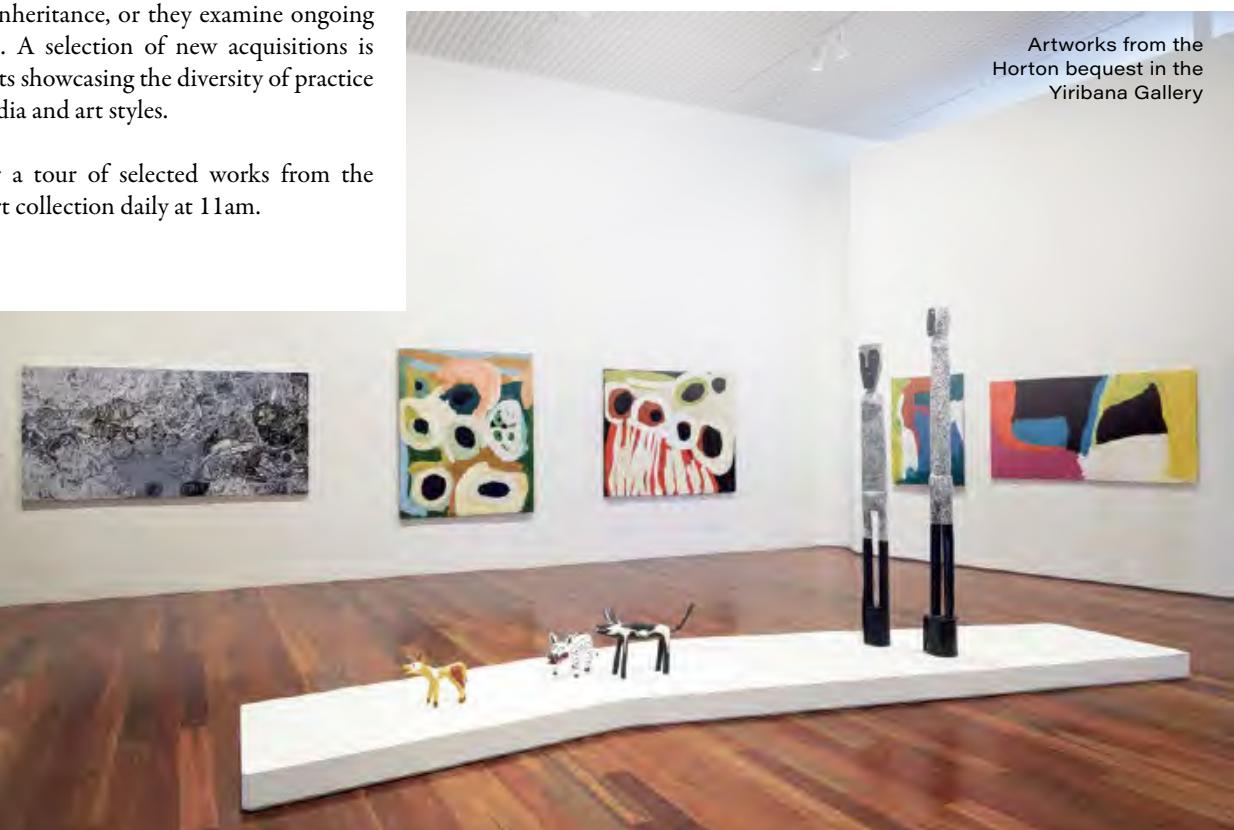
Photographs: Art Gallery of New South Wales/Jenni Carter; Museum Voorlinden Wassenaar/Antoine Van Kaam

The Yiribana Gallery

The display in this gallery is inspired by a word from the Aboriginal language of Sydney 'burbangana'. Meaning 'take hold of my hand and help me up', burbangana is akin to an invitation, imbued with generosity and care, and emphasises the connections between people. The exhibited works touch on moments of burbangana in differing ways. Some consider notions of care and guidance through familial relationships. Others offer philosophies for living and profile the intricacies of cultural inheritance, or they examine ongoing complexities of history and resilience. A selection of new acquisitions is displayed alongside collection highlights showcasing the diversity of practice across the country, and across time, media and art styles.

Visitors can join Indigenous staff for a tour of selected works from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art collection daily at 11am. Entry and tours are free.

artgallery.nsw.gov.au



ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

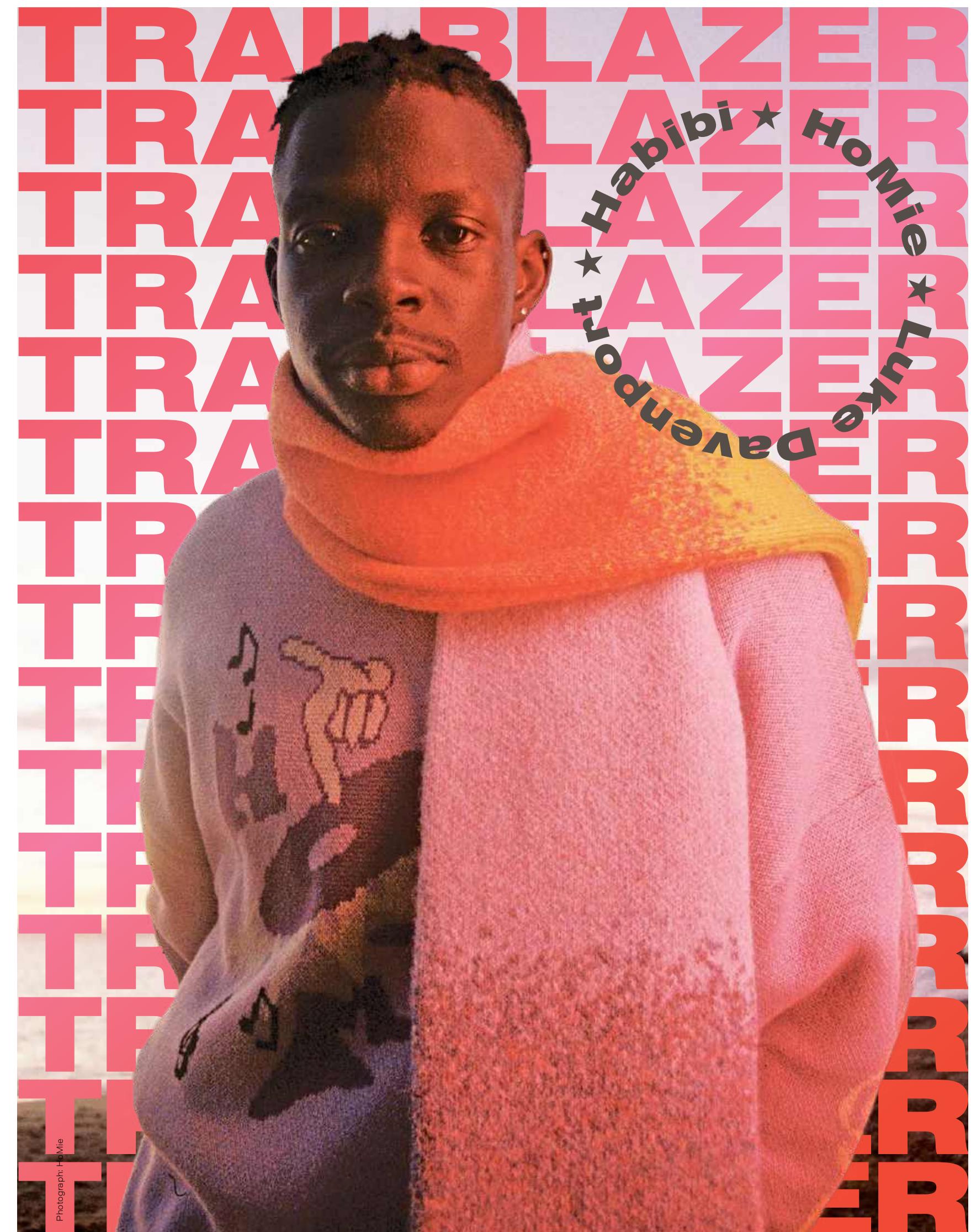
Catch the Art Gallery of New South Wales' major summer exhibition, Ron Mueck: Encounter from 6 December 2025 to 12 April 2026. A Sydney-exclusive, Ron Mueck: Encounter is the first significant solo exhibition on home soil in over a decade by this popular Australian artist, and comprises his sculptures drawn from across the globe.

Since first revitalising figurative sculpture in the late 1990s with his exquisitely crafted realism, Ron Mueck, born in Melbourne in 1958, continues his profound observation of human experiences. His captivating figures, scaled from the minute to the monumental, embody themes such as birth and death, alienation and togetherness, tenderly inviting us to explore our relationship with the world.

This exhibition invites the viewer to form relationships with Mueck's sculptures through encounters that are viscerally physical. Drawing the artist's past sculptures into dialogue with the new, the show reflects on the sensitivity and significance of Mueck's work within our contemporary times.



RON MUECK 'COUPLE UNDER AN UMBRELLA'



Photograph: Homie

COOKING UP A STORM

Head chef Luke Davenport brings the buzz of The Palomar to his hometown of Sydney, as the restaurant opens at 25hours Hotel The Olympia. Jane Anderson gets the lowdown

Nice to meet you Luke! Where did it all start?

Being involved in kitchens is all I've ever done! My very first job was washing dishes in a 20-seat Italian near where my parents live in my hometown of Sydney called Restaurant 16. It was just me, the Japanese head chef Toru Ryu and a sous chef. Just watching these guys cook was incredible. With such a small team they didn't have a staff meal, but they just sat me down and said you can eat one thing off the menu. I was so lucky to have that and was totally inspired. Eventually I asked to work as a chef there, I took a pay cut so I could get in the kitchen and ended up helping prep during the day. From there I started to train as a chef and get jobs cooking in the kitchen. I didn't want to be anywhere else!

How did you find yourself head chef of the new Palomar Sydney?

In 2016 I moved to London. My sister has lived there for a very long time and in my first week she took me out to her favourite restaurant—The Palomar in Soho. I was sitting at the bar, and she's giving me this big speech about how I can't just move over to London and think I can walk into these great restaurants and get a job without at least sending out my résumé, when I leaned over the kitchen bar to the head chef and said hey, you guys looking for chefs, and he said, sure, come in tomorrow for a trial! I worked there for a while, then went to The Ledbury—a Michelin star restaurant which was my goal in moving to London. It had two stars at the time, now it has three!

After about a year there, I got an email from Zoe Paskin [of Studio Paskin, founders of The Palomar], who said come and have a chat about something we've got going on! I've always loved the Paskins—the way they create happening venues. I was part of the opening team of Evelyn's Table, a 12-seat counter diner below The Blue Posts in London's China Town. Here everything was done fresh every day. Produce was the best we could possibly get. We were constantly pushing. From there, I went to Toronto under Patrick Kriss at AloBar. The food scene in Toronto is a great one that

outside of Canada doesn't get as much recognition as I think it deserves. The Michelin Guide wasn't in Canada when I worked there, but they were awarded a Michelin star after I left.

After that I came back to Sydney and wasn't sure I wanted to be in the world of fine dining anymore, so I started running a group of casual Italian restaurants/wine bars—changing the menu every day and having fun with food again—not taking it as seriously. I also got to enjoy my life a bit more, not putting in the 80-hour weeks, late nights and early mornings. But then I decided that wasn't what I wanted at all. I'm a maniac! I returned to fine dining at noma in Copenhagen. After this I headed back to Sydney to be head chef at France Brasserie at Potts Point, but when I read The Palomar was coming to my home town I emailed Zoe, and it didn't take us long to say yes, let's do this!



Bowl to bite
Chef Luke's cucumber salad



The Palomar DNA
Clockwise from left: The Kitchen Bar at The Palomar Sydney; signage; Negroni; blue mackerel with chermoula

'Things should be spicy and colourful, not boring and clinical'

What's your culinary vision for The Palomar Sydney?

The Palomar is all about taste. I'm not worried about tweezing micro herbs onto anything. All the focus is on the flavour. Bringing spice and acid, and heat and vinegar and excitement to the food is my focus for this exciting new venture at 25hours Hotel The Olympia. I think that's something that I always liked at The Palomar in London—the room itself was so energetic and vibrant, and everyone was always having fun, and the music was loud and the lights were dim—the atmosphere was just insane. I'm almost trying to mirror that in the food. Things should be spicy and colourful, not boring and clinical. We're really trying to push boundaries with flavour and not hold back. I've been cooking French food for a long time which can be very buttoned up. Now I'm getting out there and being bold.

What is your favourite dish on the menu?

There's a cucumber salad that's set to be a firm favourite. It's baby cucumber which we dress in herb tahini sauce, lots of fresh herbs, thinly sliced fennel for freshness, topped with a chilli crisp which we make in house, and some candied almonds.

Another one that took a long time to get right is a tahini custard tart. Very classic, but we've put quite a bit of tahini and infused some roasted sesame into it as well to give it a bit more of an interesting savoury flavour. Dishes will change with the seasons. We work with a lot of small farms and single-boat fishermen and small suppliers. I might get a call from someone one day saying, 'Hey mate, I've caught beautiful bonito today,' so we'll just swap one of our fish dishes out. Or one of the farms will say we've got these beautiful tomatoes coming

in and we'll find a way to work them into the menu.

I think the way we're doing things is a little outside the box for what people would consider a traditional hotel restaurant. I have no experience in hotels which is part of the reason I was drawn to this project. 25hours does things a little bit different. They are not copy paste, every hotel has its own personality.

How would you like diners to feel in your restaurant?

I want it to be a fun night out and for guests to interact with the staff. Our kitchen bar is going to be a lot of fun. You'll be able to chat with the chefs while we're working. They have the same setup in London and I always enjoyed that. I hope people will pick up The Palomar Sydney and run with it. I'm not necessarily trying to preach to a certain audience. We're just cook-

ing the food we like to eat. You can't please everyone. If you're happy with what you're doing, hopefully other people will be too.

The Sydney culinary scene is up there with some of the best in the world. It's gone through a lot recently. At one point everyone was opening French bistros, then it seemed to be Greek Restaurant, then Chinese restaurants. What we're doing isn't tied to any one cuisine. We have our own style with so many influences. My house is filled from floor to ceiling with cookbooks and I love taking from everywhere. We'll have Mediterranean, the Levant, North Africa and more, so long as it fits the Palomar DNA.

thepalomar.com.au



HoMie's playlist

Last month HoMie held their first Store Sessions live performance with Tash Sultana, Bad//Dreems, and Big Words playing, with more to come.

Hoping For
Bad//Dreems

Jungle
Tash Sultana

Sunlight
Big Words

Energy
Sampa the Great

H.B.Y
Setwun

You're the One
Kaytranada

Let It Happen
Tame Impala

Swimming Pools
Kendrick Lamar

Music for
a boogie
and a hug

Caring clothes
Above: HoMie
founder Marcus
Crook amongst
the yarn cones



HoMie is where the heart is

Companion discovers how streetwear brand HoMie tackles homelessness and hardship

"It began with trying to break down the stigma associated with homelessness and create awareness of the issue. It then evolved into a pop-up store. I met my co-founders through charity bike rides and volunteering overseas. We were young, passionate, and wanted to do something real. That one-month pop-up has now grown into a decade long project". Marcus Crook is the co-founder and creative director of HoMie in Melbourne, a streetwear store, which, as you may have gathered from his opening gambit, has a bit of a twist in its business plan.

In this era of latter-day capitalism, it's begrudgingly understandable, even sense-making, that businesses exist in order to make money for their owners, maybe with a touch of philanthropy for good show, but this is where HoMie diverts from the beaten track. This Melbourne-based streetwear label is also a social enterprise—not sponsoring, not donating, but very literally putting its money where its figurative mouth is. One hundred percent of HoMie's profits go towards achieving its mission: to support young people affected by homelessness or hardship. "HoMie started with purpose first and then grew into a brand second. We quickly realised there was an opportunity to make clothing mean something more. Profit was never the driver. Impact and awareness were," Marcus continues. But surely having to make a living, and achieving growth, has to come into it somewhere? "As we progressed, we realised you can't be a purposeful business without profit. That really shifted my mindset to focus on making as much money as possible so our impact

team can do their thing," he answers. Some of their initiatives and enterprises include an accredited retail education and employment programme for young people (aged 18 to 25) affected by homelessness or hardship running alongside a 10-week work experience programme. "Paid retail training and education, mentoring, and real work experience... and young people are paid for every single minute," says Marcus. VIP Days, where young people are welcomed into the store to shop for free HoMie garments, haircuts, beauty services, personal care packs, and lunch (have a look on their Instagram page, they look like joyous events); and a community group which creates opportunities for the graduates of the HoMie Pathway Alliance, with an Alumni job club, and special social events. Can Marcus pick a favourite from such an auspicious line-up? "It's hard to separate the three impact programs, but our most in-depth is the Pathway Alliance," he tells me. "It's practical, it's hands-on, and it makes a big impact. Seeing young people go on to build their careers afterwards is pretty incredible."

All these enterprises and initiatives sound like a huge investment of time and resources, which tells me that youth homelessness must be quite the issue to tackle in Australian cities. "It's bigger than people think. More than 44,000 young people aged 15–24 are affected by homelessness in Australia each year," Marcus tells me. "It's not always visible, it's couch surfing, temporary accommodation, unstable living. Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane... all our major cities are impacted."

According to a report from the University of New South Wales and Homelessness Australia at the end of 2024, 10,000 Australians are becoming homeless each month—a 22% increase in the past three

years. This includes an uptick in people in employment coming in for housing help, including part-time teachers and nurses. It can be for many reasons, domestic violence, a generally unhappy home environment... but there is no denying that the Cost of Living Crisis is having a huge impact. Where governments and multinationals fail, it falls to groups like HoMie, who find themselves on the front line. But from bleakness comes hope—does Marcus have a favourite memory so far? "Graduation days from our Pathway Alliance program. Watching a young person walk out with confidence, a job, and a sense of direction... that's better than any big campaign or runway moment. That said, we've also had some incredible partnerships with the AFL, Champion, and Mambo, plus multiple collections at Melbourne Fashion Festival and Melbourne Fashion Week."

Ah yes—the small matter of the clothes. Edgy, high-quality skate fits with street-art designs, pops of colour, and a touch of European kookiness... all very Melbourne. It's time to ask Marcus apparently the most taxing question—does he have a favourite item of clothing? "This is tough! My wardrobe has plenty of pieces from over the years. I'd say the staple heavyweight hoodies for cold winter days, plus knits and RE-BORN upcycled gear are my go to's. We're expanding the range even more this coming season, which is exciting."

A lot to look forward to then.... But, with 3,900 (and counting) young people supported, 15,500 items of clothing gifted, over 20,000 hours of employment, and an employment retention rate of 85%, there is a lot to look back on and be proud of too. Here's to another decade, at the end of which we can only hope there will be no more youth homelessness to fight.

homie.com.au



'HoMie started with purpose first and then grew into a brand second'



Photos: Melissa Cowan

Smart buys
Shopping at HoMie builds hope

Imad El Rayess and Jessica Rees, founders of Habibi, talk to Jane Anderson about their mission to alter the stigma of Arabic script

Habibi all began in 2016 when Imad El Rayess wanted to give his best friend Thore something truly special for his birthday. "Since Habibi in Arabic means darling, friend or beloved, I bought a plain hoodie and had حبّي embroidered across the chest. A few weeks later, Thore told me that people asked him questions like 'Have you converted?' or 'Do you have extremist friends?' Imad was shocked that such a warm, positive word could provoke suspicion—and that's when the idea came to him to launch the hoodie as a side-hustle brand with a clear mission to show its beauty and remove its stigma.

In 2018 Imad met Jessica Rees, as they were both working in advertising having both studied Art Direction at Miami Ad School in Hamburg. As Jessica explains, "We won several creative awards together and recognized how well our strengths complemented one another. I wrote the Habibi manifesto, and we decided to make it our main project. Since 2019, we've been running Habibi together full time. Our philosophy and message as a brand is simple but powerful: we aim to destigmatize Arabic script through art, design, and concept ideas. "Our passion has always been creative concept and branding, skills that now drive everything we do at Habibi."

Imad and Jessica believe Arabic script is too often framed in negative contexts in many Western media narratives—especially in Germany, where their brand is based.

"The more people see Arabic lettering connected to these stigmatized portrayals, the more that perception becomes normalized. That's why our mission is to showcase Arabic lettering in positive contexts: to break down bias and reshape perceptions.

"We often receive stories from our customers about interactions sparked by wearing something from Habibi. Many are heartwarming—moments of connection, curiosity, and meaningful conversations. Others are more difficult, reminding us of the bias and misunderstanding that still exist. Both the beautiful and the painful stories motivate us. They're powerful reminders of why Habibi needs to exist—and how simply being visible, sharing this message in quiet, everyday ways, can create impact."

Habibi is a family business operating out of two locations in northern Germany. "Our creative studio sits on a houseboat in Hamburg—this is where we brainstorm,

develop every idea, and shoot our product photography," says Jessica. "Our production facility is just outside Hamburg in Brake, and is equipped with printing and embroidery machines. We sell exclusively through our online store, shipping worldwide, but we also regularly host pop-ups. These events give us the freedom to creatively express ourselves, build immersive setups, curate unique programmes, and create a space for our 'Habibi Fam'—our growing community."

Habibi's standout piece is undoubtedly the classic hoodie. "This simple black hoodie with 'Habibi' embroidered in white on the left chest not only is our most popular piece, but it also perfectly embodies our brand's message—clean and timeless." One of their biggest milestones as a brand was when they were featured as creatives in the German version of Apple's 'Behind the Mac' campaign. "We were part of one of the biggest out-of-home placements in

'Habibi means darling, friend or beloved'



TRAILBLAZER ★ TRAILBLAZER
ARABIC SCRIPT ACCEPTANCE



HABIBI'S PLAYLIST

Oum Elain Elkahla
Fairuz

Nur ein Wort
Noah Kraus

Alle Märchen sind gelogen
Jolle

How Do You Sleep
LCD Soundsystem

Hazney
Hany Shnoda Ferqet Masr

All Eyez On Me
2pac

Yimkin Law
Racha Rizk, Khaled Mouzanar, Tania Saleh

Busker Flow
Kofi Stone

Oscar Winning Tears
Raye

Stick of gum
Nemahsis



Photos: Jessica Rees & Imad El Rayess, Miro & Cozy, Jakob Nawak

Europe, right by the harbour in Hamburg. "Seeing ourselves at that scale was just so surreal—in the best way!" recalls Jessica.

Imad and Jessica had a big summer with their creative business. "We launched a 'Habibi meets Japan' capsule collection. We travelled to Japan and immersed ourselves in local art and culture, scouting for inspiration, and shooting on location so we can create authentic designs and nurture new collaborations. Stay tuned!"

And as for the future, they plan to keep doing exactly what they're doing—pushing forward on their mission to destigmatize Arabic script. "Our community supports us every day, and we're incredibly proud of how far we've come together. Next up: more designs, more creative projects, more art installations, more collaborations, more pop-up events—in short, more of everything that defines Habibi."

[@habibi.you.know](http://habibiyouknow.com)



Challenging perceptions
Classic Habibi t-shirt; Below:
Jessica Rees and Imad El Rayess at their Habibi pop up



Matt's stroll around Sydney

Artist and Sydney local, Matt Cauchi, takes Companion on a tour of his Darlinghurst neighbourhood

There aren't many people in Darlinghurst that Matt Cauchi doesn't know. As the founder of local favourite Bloodhound Café, and a neighbour just a few doors down, Matt turned regular customers into lifelong friends, building a community around his little corner of the suburb. When he sold the café to pursue his dream of becoming a full-time artist, that same community followed him. Today,

Matt's works hang in Wentworth Gallery (see p30), as well as in iconic local spots including RM Williams at Westfield Bondi Junction and Dovecote. His art also takes its place in private collections worldwide, and in exhibitions across Sydney, Paris, London, Hong Kong and the USA.



1

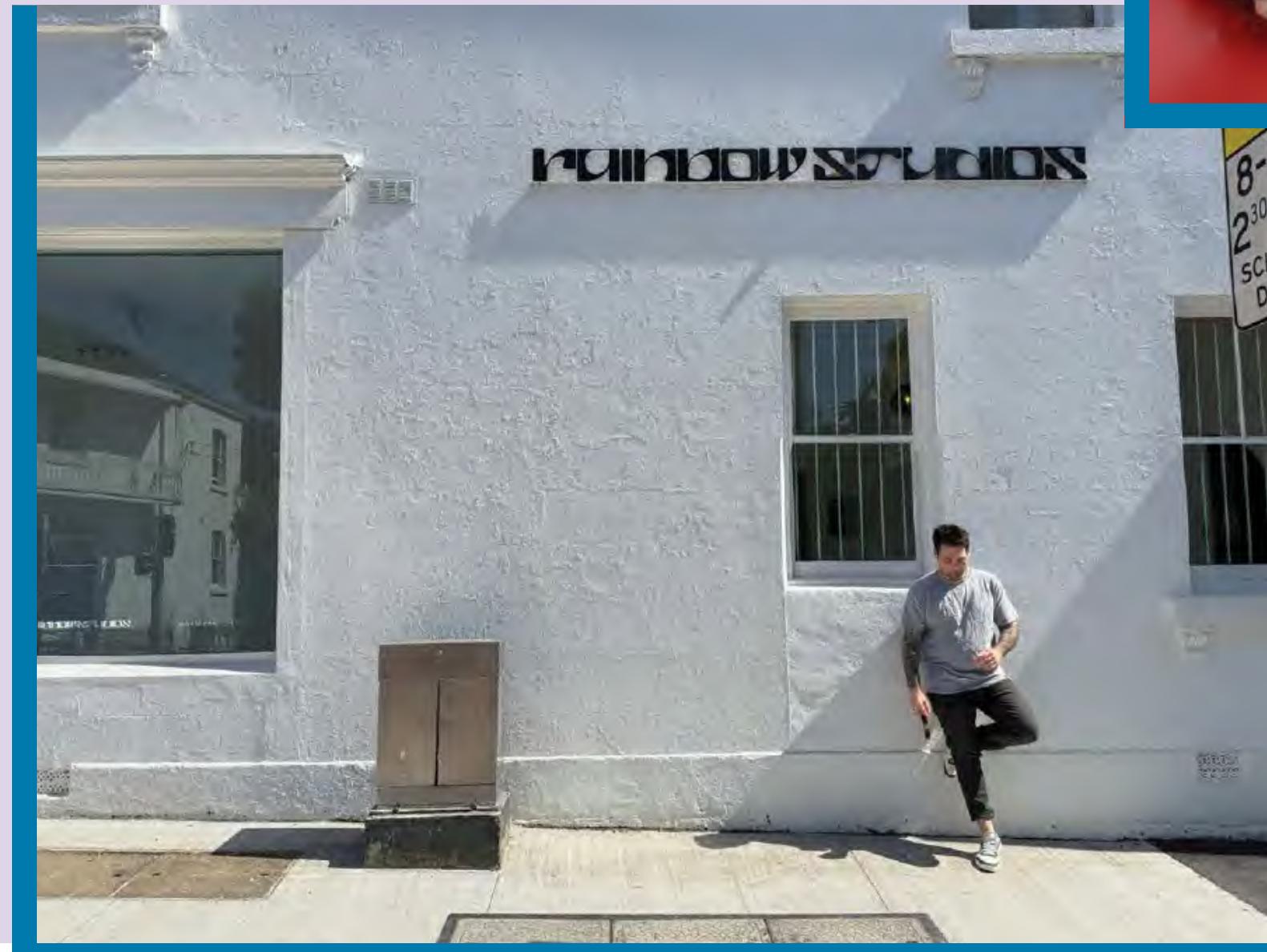
Chaco Ramen
238 Crown Street, Darlinghurst

Rich, complex broths with a balance of umami, salt and fattiness is at the core of what good ramen strives for. I wish I could just tell you about a bowl to try but I can't. If I was sitting on death row and got to choose my last meal, my answer would simply be 'something from Chaco Ramen'. Be prepared to wait in line during peak times. I can guarantee you that it is absolutely worth every second.
chacoramen.com.au

2

Rainbow Studio
348 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst

As an artist, I appreciate the spirit behind Rainbow Studio as a community hub for creatives. Founders Brent Gold and Jade Gillet have made a space where artists thrive. If you want to attend a buzzy art event whilst in town, this is the place to head with a calendar full of showcases.
rainbowstudios.com.au



3

Kaska Eatery & Café
Shop 1/19a Boundary Street,
Darlinghurst

Unassuming, with inside and outside seating, but a rotating coffee programme that'll knock your socks off. A beautiful range of black coffee if you're open to trying a range of floral tasting notes. The guys at Kaska set a very high standard for an area flooded with coffee options. →
kaskaeatery.com

"A rotating coffee programme that will knock your socks off"



4

AP Bakery
32 Burton Street, Darlinghurst

Pastries are pretty much all the same, right? Wrong! The gap between beauty and average with baked goods is wider than you'd think. Don't even bother looking around for something that'll suffice. Just go here. Trust me.

apbakery.com.au

5

Thanks Tattoo
Basement/80 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst

Local Sydney legend Gummy Johnston has been an icon in the Sydney tattoo scene for years. It's where I go for all my inking. Thanks Tattoo is more than just a shop, it's a community built around a whole lot of love for their craft in an environment where you're welcomed like a close relative. Looking for a more permanent type of souvenir from your time in Sydney? Or maybe it's time to mark off that bucket list? Look no further than Thanks

6

September Studio
26 Boundary Street, Darlinghurst

If you're ok with taking mum a AUS\$12 bunch of seven-days old flowers from your local grocery store then September probably isn't for you. More than just a bunch, they're more floral sculptural masterpieces than bouquets. Of acclaimed social media fame, you'll want to spend time here revering what you probably thought wasn't possible in the flower space.

septemberstudio.com.au

7

“More floral sculptural masterpieces than bouquets”

1 **Chaco Ramen**
238 Crown St, Darlinghurst

2 **Rainbow Studios**
348 Liverpool St, Darlinghurst

3 **Kaska Eatery & Café**
Shop 1/19a Boundary St, Darlinghurst

4 **AP Bakery**
32 Burton St, Darlinghurst

5 **Thanks Tattoo**
Basement/80 Oxford St, Darlinghurst

6 **September Studio**
26 Boundary St, Darlinghurst

7 **Cross Section**
32 Burton St, Darlinghurst

8 **Supply Store**
Burton St & Riley St, Darlinghurst

Photographs: Miranda Bryce

7

Cross Section
84-90 McLachlan Avenue, Darlinghurst

A relatively new kid on the block of sorts. Cross Section hit the ground running and for the last year or so have kept the formula simple. Sandwiches and snacks done well. And do them well is exactly what they do. Can you possibly go past the signature NYC chicken caesar wrap? 'Cause I couldn't, and it's not the first time I've tried to either! Do yourself a favour and just add the bacon and egg. No questions asked! →

[@crossectionsydney](http://crossectionsydney)

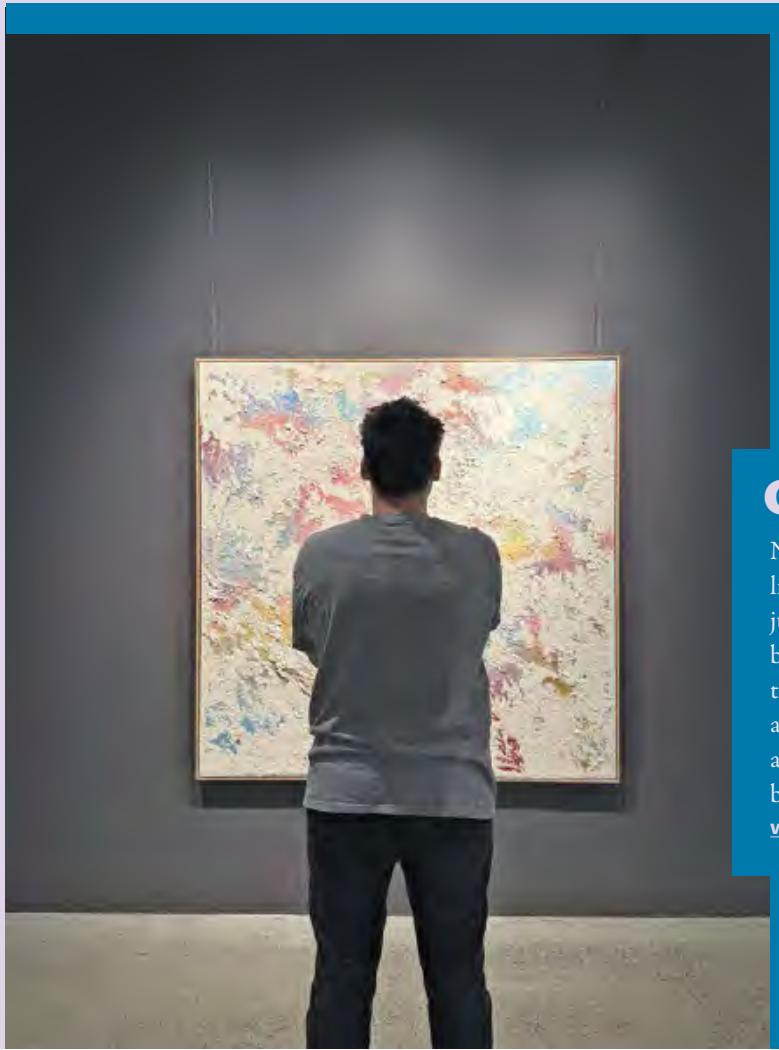
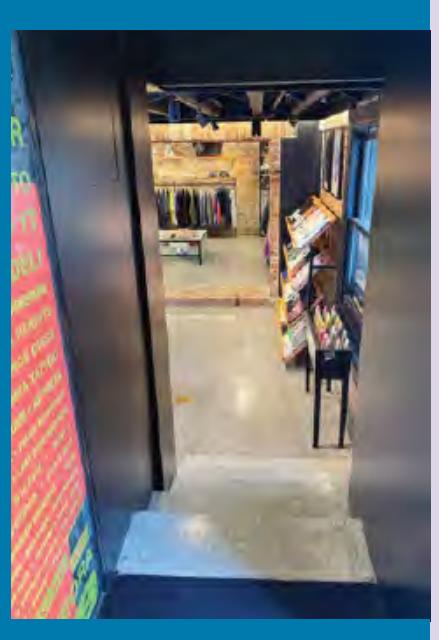


8

Supply Store
Burton Street & Riley Street,
Darlinghurst

No capital city has more of a right of passage than a beautiful unsuspecting store of unique clothing tucked down a hidden alley that you wouldn't find unless someone told you about it. Well, I'm here to tell you about it! Supply Store stocks a range of threads that will have you looking fresher than the prince whom sits atop Bel Air. One-off pieces you won't find anywhere else in Sydney. Guess that's why they make it hard to find.

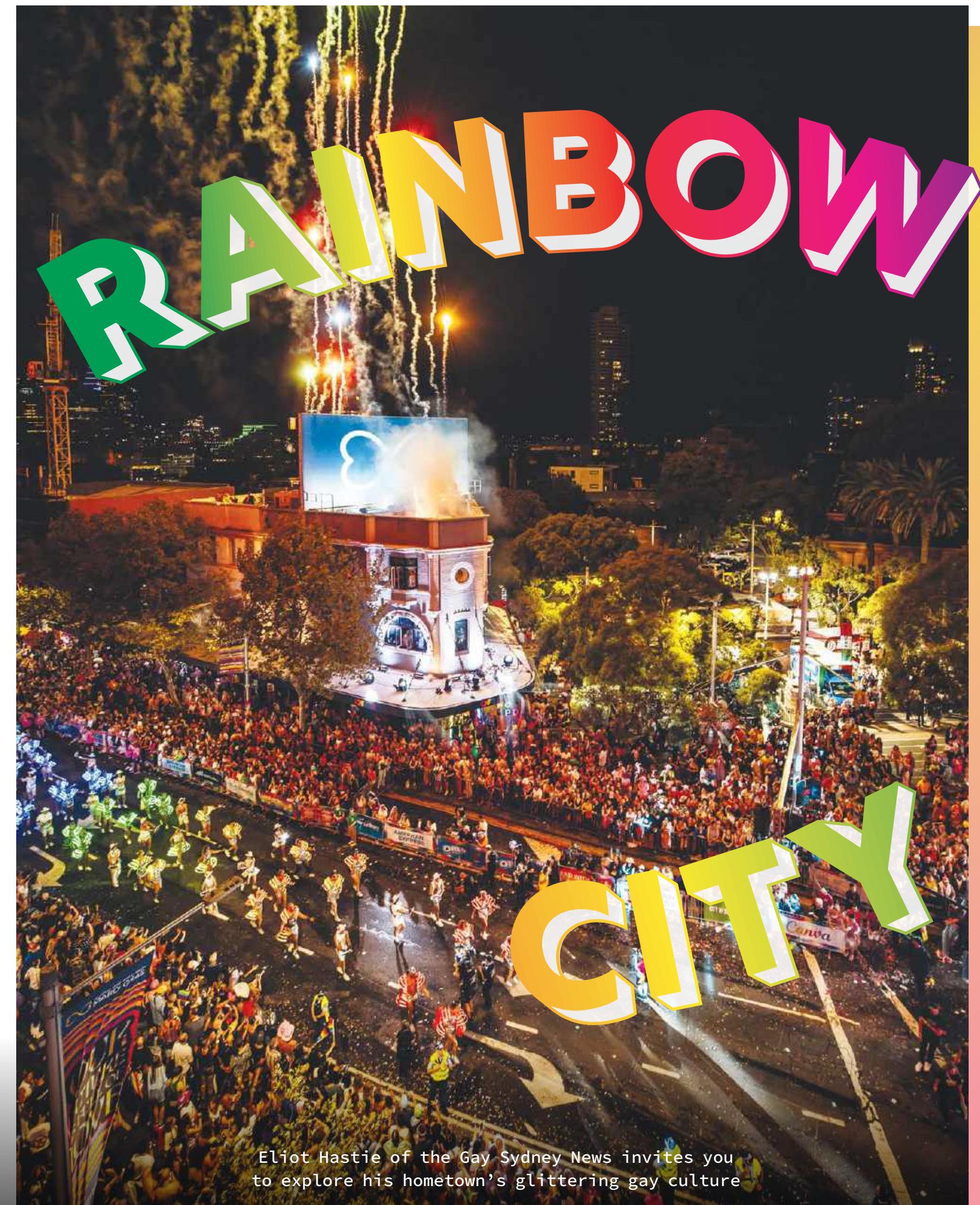
supplystore.com.au



Catch Matt's art

Nestled off Pitt Street in the hustle and bustle of Sydney, lies Wentworth Gallery. I guarantee you'll think you're just entering into any run-of-the-mill office building, but if you navigate past the lobby cafe and follow it all the way to the back on ground level, you'll be treated to a high-end gallery showcasing a range of Australia's top artists. Hot tip! Ask to see the storeroom and you won't be disappointed. A must-see in Sydney.

wentworthgalleries.com.au



Eliot Hastie of the Gay Sydney News invites you to explore his hometown's glittering gay culture



Gaybourhood fun
Sydney Mardi Gras in full swing

You are standing at the doorway of Australia's beating rainbow heart. Colloquially known as the gaybourhood, the surrounding suburbs are the most densely queer-populated, visible and culturally historic suburbs in all of Australia. Potts Point sports the nation's highest concentration of gay male couples, while across the streets and laneways you'll find venues not just queer-friendly, but proudly queer-owned.

The 25hours Hotel The Olympia is in fact part of that tapestry and sits on ground layered with history. It opened in 1911 as West Olympia Theatre before transforming into the legendary Grand Pacific Blue Room in the 1990s, a glamorous nightspot for celebrities and socialites. Kylie Minogue herself performed here, adding a glittering chapter to Sydney's queer folklore.

But the story doesn't end at your doorstep. So let's start with a walk, heading along Oxford Street and up to Taylor's Square, the intersection where Surry Hills meets Darlinghurst. You'll find a rainbow flag flying high as you head towards Bourke Street and see the city's first Rainbow Crossing. It may be a busy street, but the pedestrian lights last a long time if you want to take a photo. Just be careful, as cyclists do whizz past you. Follow Bourke Street to Café Dougie, a queer-owned cafe dishing up the kind of indulgent brunch that made Australia famous. The stroll there is a joy in itself, rows of terrace houses, little boutiques, and the hum of locals going about their day.

Once fuelled, head back up to Taylor's Square and slip into Qtopia. Another picture opportunity presents itself in the rainbow crossing where Forbes

and Bourke Street meet. It's a quiet street so take your time on the crossing and get a photo before entering Qtopia. This is the neighbourhood's history presented in the world's largest centre for queer history and culture. It's situated on the site of the former Darlinghurst Police Station, where many homosexuals were locked in just for being gay. You can even go into one of the old cells and experience it for yourself. There are queer shows put on, lectures with historians and of course exhibitions on HIV, Mardi Gras and many more. Even the former public toilets out front, once a cruising beat, are reborn as a gallery.

Directly across the street, the National Art School stages cutting-edge exhibitions in a space that was once the Darlinghurst Gaol. While not exclusively queer, its galleries often showcase LGBTQIA+

Photographs: Jordan Munns; Joseph Mayers

voices. From there, wander back toward the Olympia until a sign calls out: Read Gay Books. Inside The Bookshop Darlinghurst, a cultural sanctuary since 1982. Opened in a time when homosexuality was still illegal, you'll find queer literature, memoirs, erotica, and the wisdom of staff who know every title like family. But linger while you can, this beloved institution will sadly close its doors at the end of the year.

Shopping here comes with sequins: House of Priscilla is a temple of drag, dressing Mardi Gras floats and divas for more than 25 years. It's more than a costume store, with its famous purple hue featuring on RuPaul's Drag Race and with all manner of celebrities that visit the strip. For something more low-key, Crown Street's thrift shops are treasure troves of queer style. And on hot summer days, ↗

QUEENS OF THE NIGHT

An LGBTI+ community would be nothing without its fabulous drag queens, but what separates Australian drag from the rest of the world? The answer to that says Jackie Daniels is how camp it is.

"I think camp is such a big factor in Australian drag, no matter what kind of facet of drag it is, everything has an ounce of camp to it," she said.

Mention Aussie drag and most people instantly think of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, and sure enough elements of the cult classic, like the infamous thong dress, have strutted their way into the queens who rule the night. "It's silly, it's not serious," says Jackie. "It's really down to earth, it's really fun, and just having a laugh."

Jackie Daniels is a multiple award-winning Sydney queen spotted almost nightly hosting events across the city, but her journey began with far humbler heels.

"The first time I got into drag was in 2017 for Mardi Gras and me and my friend decided we're going to do drag," she said. Two weeks before the parade the pair grabbed some drinks, fumbled their way through a make-up crash course and Jackie's love affair with drag was born. "I thought I was god's gift the first time I ever got done up in make-up...but I was nothing of the sort."

Since then, Jackie's drag has sharpened and polished enough to host trivia nights with poise but always with a dash of ridiculousness. "There's always gonna be a hint of stupid somewhere, because it's just not that serious." And if you're visiting Oxford Street, the real magic happens when you throw yourself into the action. "The number one rule for a drag trip in Australia is get amongst it. If you're giving them all the energy in the world,

they're going to give it back tenfold," she said. "You know you can tip us without money, you can tip us by having fun with us and having a laugh."

Because at the end of the day Jackie insists drag is all about joy, silliness and love. "Never trust anything to be serious that comes out of a drag queen's mouth, they might make fun of you a little bit but it's all in love," she said.



join the locals at the Andrew Boy Charlton Pool, perched on Woolloomooloo Bay, where sunbathers channel Kylie's Slow music video in their budgie smugglers.

Now when the sun dips behind the harbour and the rainbow lights switch on, Sydney's queer neighbourhoods truly shimmer. Head into Potts Point and Kings Cross, once Sydney's entertainment mecca. In the 1930s, jazz clubs and cross-dressing cabarets drew crowds; by the '70s, it was Sydney's answer to Soho with strip clubs, drag shows and late-night dens. Begin the evening with a martini at Dulcie's Kings Cross, a speakeasy that channels the era's scandalous glamour, or enjoy an outdoor pint at the laidback Old Fitzroy Hotel.

Then it's time for the main act. If drag is what you want, then head to Oxford Street where you will find out just how camp it is. Stonewall Hotel and Universal deliver quintessential Sydney drag—camp, political and hilarious. If you're willing to travel further afield however, come see the venue that put Australian drag on the map. The Imperial in Eskineville offers dinner and drag spectacles and was the location for the infamous *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* film.

Queer Sydney is a city that never clocks off. By day, it's terrace-lined streets, coffee, and culture. By night, it's sequins, neon, and dance floors that blur into dawn. Here, the rainbow never disappears, it just shifts shade, hour by glittering hour.

CROWN STREETS SHOPS ARE TREASURE TROVES OF QUEER STYLE



Photographs: Adobe Stock



Dykes on bikes
The spirit of love and acceptance is in the air during Sydney's Mardi Gras

MARDI GRAS

Every year, Sydney bursts into unapologetic pride with one of the world's largest LGBTQIA+ celebrations: the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. It's a three-week city-wide takeover of colour and culture, as iconic to Sydney as the Opera House and Bondi Beach. In 2026, festivities kick off on February 13 with the community-led Fair Day, and ends with a dazzling night-time parade lighting up Oxford Street on February 28.

What began in June 1978 as a political protest turned street party has grown into a global phenomenon. Today the festival pumps cash into the city's economy, injecting upwards of AUD\$30 million annually, while drawing tens of thousands of interstate and international visitors. In 2023, during WorldPride, the city set records with 45 rainbow artworks and installations shimmering across landmarks, proving that Mardi Gras doesn't paint the town red, it paints it with every colour of the rainbow.

During the festival's three weeks, Sydney is alive with performances, talks and of course parties. But the crown jewel remains the Mardi Gras Parade. Just two blocks from your front door, Taylor Square becomes the beating heart of the spectacle as floats glide and performers strut. Expect to see queer lifeguards in their budgie smugglers, global rugby champions bringing the muscle, and of course the legendary 78ers who bravely started it all.

Whether you're in it for the politics, the performance or the pure fabulous fun, Mardi Gras is a love letter to pride, protest and community spirit. A celebration Sydney does like no other.



JAPAN

Known as 'oshogatsu', the New Year is a time to send letters to family and friends, put on your best kimono, attend a year-forgetting party known as 'bonenkai' whilst eating as many soba noodles as possible.

GERMANY

New Year's Eve is called Silvester in honour of Pope Sylvester I who died on December 31, 335. According to legend he choked on fish bones, so best to avoid fish that night! All across Germany small pieces of wax are melted then poured into cold water—the shape formed pondered over to predict the coming year's fortune. And don't forget your marzipan pigs—offered as gifts for good luck.

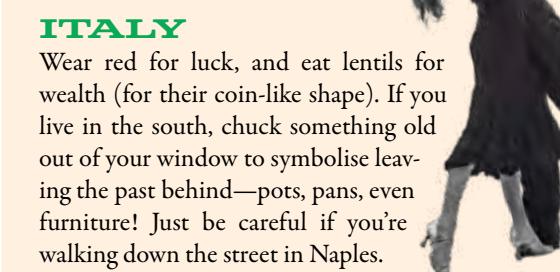
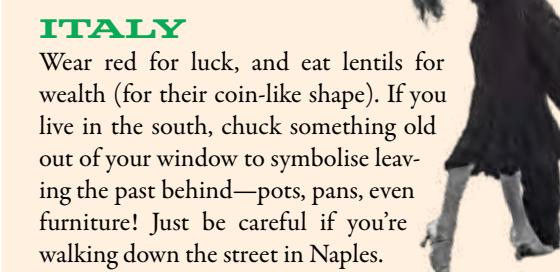
SWITZERLAND

Silvesterchlausen—or New Year's mummers—wear masks and animal skins, carrying bells as they march from house to house wishing you a Happy New Year and warding off evil spirits. Also dropping ice cream on the floor at midnight is said to bring abundance!

IN AUSTRIA THEY SIMPLY DANCE TO THE BLUE DANUBE WALTZ AT MIDNIGHT

ITALY

Wear red for luck, and eat lentils for wealth (for their coin-like shape). If you live in the south, chuck something old out of your window to symbolise leaving the past behind—pots, pans, even furniture! Just be careful if you're walking down the street in Naples.



MEXICO

It's all about the colour of your underwear. And no this isn't a Charlie xcx song. The hue of your pants and bra is said to be a signal of what you'll attract in the New Year. Red for love, yellow for money and happiness, white for calm, and black for dignity. What will you choose?

AUSTRALIA

For Aboriginals, New Year is akin to crossing the river—best to leave everything behind and move on. And for Australians in general, it's the start of summer, so time to get the barbie out!

COLOMBIA

Grab an empty suitcase as this symbolises the hope of a New Year filled with travel as well as financial security.

BRAZIL

Wear white and throw white flowers into the sea—a reference to Lemanja, the Afro-Brazilian Goddess of the Sea, who's known for blessing mothers and children.

NETHERLANDS

Set off fireworks, burn your car and Christmas tree, and eat oliebollen (doughnut-like balls), whilst jumping in the North Sea. Bonkers!



SCOTLAND

Hogmanay, as it's known in Scotland, is the home of 'Auld Lang Syne' written by Scot's poet Robbie Burns in 1788. Scots still honour the tradition of 'First Footing' where a preferably dark-haired visitor brings symbolic gifts like coal and shortbread to ensure good luck and prosperity. Add in a ceilidh—a full-on rave up with Scottish dancing, bagpipes, haggis and whiskey—and you're all set for the year ahead.

IN SPAIN AS THE CLOCK STRIKES 12, EATING 12 GRAPES IN 12 SECONDS SYMBOLISES AN ENTIRE YEAR OF GOOD LUCK. JUST TRY NOT TO CHOKE!

FRANCE

The French keep it simple. Throw a grand dinner party with friends and family featuring foie gras, oysters, lobster, game meats, and lots of fine wines—of course!

DENMARK

Brace yourself to jump off your chair at midnight—literally leaping into the New Year with good luck. Smash plates on your neighbours' doorsteps to show love and friendship. A pile of broken dishes is the sign of good luck. And don't forget to eat a kransekage (marzipan wreath cake).

SAND SWIMS & SPRITZES

the 25hours beach edit

Whenever and wherever you check in, there's a beach within reach. From Bronte to Berlin, Megan Murray rounds up the best beach experiences near your stay

There are a few things about Australia that make the rest of the world green with envy. Gorgeous weather, an easy-going attitude, the best brunches, and Christmas in bikinis all spring to mind—but then there are the coastlines. The new 25hours Hotel The Olympia sits just a stone's throw from world-famous beaches like Bondi and Bronte, yet it turns out the rest of our hotels have their own beach connections, too. To celebrate our Sydney opening, we've gathered the best beach experiences near every 25hours Hotel—whether natural, man-made, or more of a deckchair-and-Aperol affair.

SYDNEY BRONTE BEACH

Bronte Beach, Bronte NSW 2024

Aussie or not, we've all heard of Bondi Beach. Well, think of Bronte as the laid-back little sibling and just a kilometre's stroll south, with fewer crowds, too. Families love it here for the sheltered natural rock pool where kids can paddle safely, while swimmers lap up the ocean-fed pool carved into the headland (arguably Sydney's best saltwater swim, and free). Add in grassy parkland with barbecues, picnic tables and a kiosk, plus that wow-worthy coastal walk linking Bondi to Coogee.

Hot foot it: 25 mins 11 mins 31 mins
waverley.nsw.gov.au/recreation/beaches_and_coast/our_beaches



HAMBURG ELBSTRAND

Elbstrand, 22605 Altona

With the huge Alster Lake at its centre, more canals than Amsterdam and Venice put together, and its bustling port, Hamburgers have always been very proud of their maritime connections. The most surprising, however, might be the urban beach which is just a short bus ride or cycle from the centre. The Elbstrand boasts a strip of sand and beach bars all year around—so whether you're lying back in your swimmers, or snuggled up in mittens and a scarf, it's still popular. While here, you have to try a traditional Fischbrötchen and walk to the picturesque houses of Blankenese.

Hot foot it over:

Hafencity: 33 mins 25 mins
Altes Hafenamt: 31 mins 25 mins
elstrand-in-hamburg.de



JAKARTA ANCOL BEACH

Pasir Putih Pantai Ancol, VVJ3+H5, Ancol, North Jakarta City, Jakarta

Jakarta has many things to see and while it looks out to the Java Sea and enjoys steamy temperatures all year around, beaches aren't the thing to do here. However, if you do want to see a bit of sand and get closer to the bay, Ancol Beach has a stretch of the soft stuff that's well visited by tourists. Here, you'll find lockers, stores and beach bars to ensure you have all the essentials so that you can go paddling to the backdrop of an impressive metropolis. According to locals, the best time to visit is early morning or evening.

Hot foot it over: 41 mins
tripoto.com/jakarta/places-to-visit/ancol-beach



DUSSELDORF UNTERBACHER SEE

Unterbacher See, 40627, Düsseldorf

Who needs the seaside when Düsseldorf has Unterbacher See? Around 40 minutes from the city, this pretty lake serves up 500 metres of fine sand, lidos on both shores, and water so clean it's rated 'excellent'. Families splash in the shallows, sailors tack across the waves, and thrill-seekers tackle the floating Wibit Water Park. When you're done, grab a lounger on the Nordstrand or wander to the harbour terrace for bratwurst with a view. There's plenty more to keep you busy with cafés, beer gardens and even campsites, but remember to bring some change for the entry fee. And as it's the winter season, don't miss a mulled wine cruise before, but preferably after, your cold lake plunge!

Hot foot it over: 32 mins
unterbachersee.de



FLORENCE VIAREGGIO

Viareggio, 55049 Province of Lucca

Italy's beaches are some of the most visited in the world, so it makes sense that Florence doesn't bother faking—why would it, when Viareggio is just an hour away? This classic Tuscan resort town is famous for its endless stretch of golden sand, lined with lively private beach resorts like Bagno Maurizio or Bagno Nettuno, where rows of umbrellas and sun loungers promise la dolce vita. If you're visiting Florence for the weekend but fancy jumping on a lounger, try the beaches here which go on for miles and are perfect for lazy afternoons punctuated by seafood and spritzes. It's the easiest, sunniest escape from Renaissance splendour to Riviera relaxation.

Hot foot it over: 1 hour 20 mins
toscana.info/en/places-to-visit-tuscany/viareggio



COLOGNE BLACKFOOT BEACH

Stallagsbergweg 1, 50769 Köln

Cologne may be known as one of Germany's friendliest cities, so don't be surprised if you end up with a new mate while building sandcastles at Blackfoot Beach. Just a short drive from the city centre, this lakeside lido delivers proper holiday vibes with sand between your toes, cool water at your feet, and a Kölsch in hand from the beachside beer garden. Open between May and September, summer gets surprisingly warm here, perfect for lazy sunbathing, paddleboarding, kayaking or even a volleyball match. Add in loungers for hire and it's Cologne's version of the Caribbean. →

Hot foot it over: 33 mins 18 mins
blackfoot.de



▲ FRANKURT STRANDBAD LANGENER WALDSEE

Waldsee, 63225 Langen

Frankfurt's answer to the seaside? The Langener Waldsee, is affectionately dubbed the 'Hessian Mediterranean'. Just outside the city, this vast lake comes with 900 metres of sandy beach, lawns for sunbathing, and the surreal pleasure of swimming while sailors and surfers skim the water nearby. Open from mid-May to mid-September, it's a proper summer escape with volleyball courts, a snack stand, and even a nudist area if you're feeling brave! There's a small entry fee, but with that holiday vibe so close to the city, it's worth every cent.

Hot foot it over:

The Trip: 47 mins **22 mins**

The Goldman: 55 mins **21 mins**

langen.de/de/baeder.html



▲ MUNICH FERINGASEE

Feringasee, 85774 Unterföhring

Munich's Feringasee is the city's biggest local bathing lake, a 32-hectare summer playground just outside Unterföhring. Its southern shore offers shady meadows, barbecues, and even a nudist peninsula (complete with its own kiosk), while the east brings sandy patches, volleyball courts and a gentle slope perfect for families. Up north, windsurfers skim the water near the surf club's pizza stand. Add in a lakeside beer garden, Corona Beach Club with loungers, and walking and cycling trails around the shore, and you've got Munich's ultimate urban-escape beach vibe. Just remember your dry robe in the winter season!

Hot foot it over:

46 mins 30 mins

feringa-see.de



▲ VIENNA COPA BEACH

1220 Wien

The Danube river runs through Vienna's centre and so you'd think there'd be plenty of opportunities to hang out near the water. The most beach-like, though, has to be Copa Beach—a collection of cafes and bars, laid on sandy ground. You could enjoy a picnic of chocolate-covered strawberries or even cheers with a Negroni, but there's also non-consumer spaces available for those who just want to kick back and soak up the sun. Copa Beach has been designed to be accessed easily by bike and public transport, and is even officially endorsed by the city council as one of the best things to do in summer. We think it's good in winter too!

Hot foot it over: 27 mins

copabeach.wien

Photographs: Stadt Langen; Christian Fürthner; Lisa Knauer; Marc Bertrand; Unsplash/Diederik Smit; Daniel Rasmussen; Lisa Beller; Unsplash/Anna Sullivan; Adobe Stock



▲ PARIS PARIS PLAGES

Parc Rives de Seine, bassin de la Villette, Canal Saint-Martin

Every summer, Paris pulls off the ultimate city trick: it makes its own beaches. From early-July to late August, the Paris Plages transform the Seine's quays and the Bassin de la Villette into sandy stretches dotted with deckchairs, parasols and palm trees. It's the city's most iconic summer pop-up where you can sunbathe by the water, join a dance class, or cool off with an ice cream, all without leaving the capital. With two sites to choose from, it's Paris's best (and most unexpected) beach day out.

Hot foot it over: 30 mins 10 mins

paris.fr/paris-en-seine-2025

parisjetaime.com/eng/event/paris-plages-e013



▲ DUBAI KITE BEACH

Kite beach, Dubai

If you've ever stayed at the 25hours Hotel One Central in Dubai, you'll know we're already big fans of Kite Beach. Close to the hotel (for Dubai, anyway!) you'll find a seaside escape without going too far. Here, you can try kite-surfing, paddleboarding, beach volleyball or just a spectacular Persian Gulf dip with views of the Burj Al Arab. Handy food trucks and cafes line the shore, serving everything from juicy sliders to iced coffees. Come evening, when the temperature eases, get your steps in with a jog along the running track or kick back with a cool drink and watch the sunset from the sand.

Hot foot it over: 20 mins

kitebeach.ae



▲ BERLIN STRANDBAD HALENSEE

Das Halensee, Koenigsallee 5, 14193 Berlin

Slip off Berlin's luxury shopping street Ku'damm's (considered the Champs-Elysée of Berlin) and you'll find Strandbad Halensee, a serene lake retreat with a sandy beach, parasols and shady lawns right in the heart of the city. Once home to Europe's largest amusement park, today it's a calm place to have a swim amongst Berlin's grit and edge. Take a dip in one of three floating pontoons or even just roll up come evening for a spritz by the water. There's plenty of cafes and bars to enjoy. It's a hidden gem where nature and city meet, and you're sure to encounter a friendly local there too, before heading back to the Bikini Bar.

Hot foot it over: 16 mins

visitberlin.de/de/strandbad-halensee

Photographs: Australian UAV Service

Friends in high places

Dominic Bliss investigates the rising hero of Aussie beach safety, the drone

Lennox Head, on the coast of New South Wales, is a favourite spot for dolphin and whale watching. Thanks to the famous right-hand point break, it's perfect for surfers too, with consistently powerful waves and currents. But for the inexperienced, it can be dangerous. As two teenage swimmers discovered on January 18, 2018, when they were dragged out to sea by a rip current. Fortunately, on the beach that day, lifesaver Jai Sheridan was flying a drone, or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). Called the Little Ripper, it was armed with cameras and an inflatable rescue device which it dropped from the air, allowing the teenagers to remain buoyant until the swell washed them safely back to shore. It's believed this was the first time a drone was used to rescue humans from ocean waters. That Little Ripper drone is now an exhibit in the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney.

Since those early days, the technology of life-saving drones has advanced meteorically. Nowadays they feature cameras and image-processing software that can distinguish harmless sea life from potentially dangerous shark and jellyfish. If necessary, they are also strong enough to carry first-aid, survival kits, defibrillators and even self-inflating shields which repel sharks with electro-magnetic pulses. In regions of Australia where thousands enjoy swimming and surfing in the sea, these devices regularly protect beach-users. They may eventually eradicate the need for protective shark nets which can harm marine life.

One of Australia's leading drone operators is the Australian UAV Service, part of a water safety organisation called Surf Life Saving New South Wales. Based in Belrose, their drone pilots have been patrolling dozens of beaches and coastal waters in eastern Australia for the last 10 years, from Victoria in the south to Queensland in the north. They operate mainly at weekends and during school holidays when beaches are at their busiest. In addition, they offer aerial surveillance for various surfing, swimming and rowing competitions.

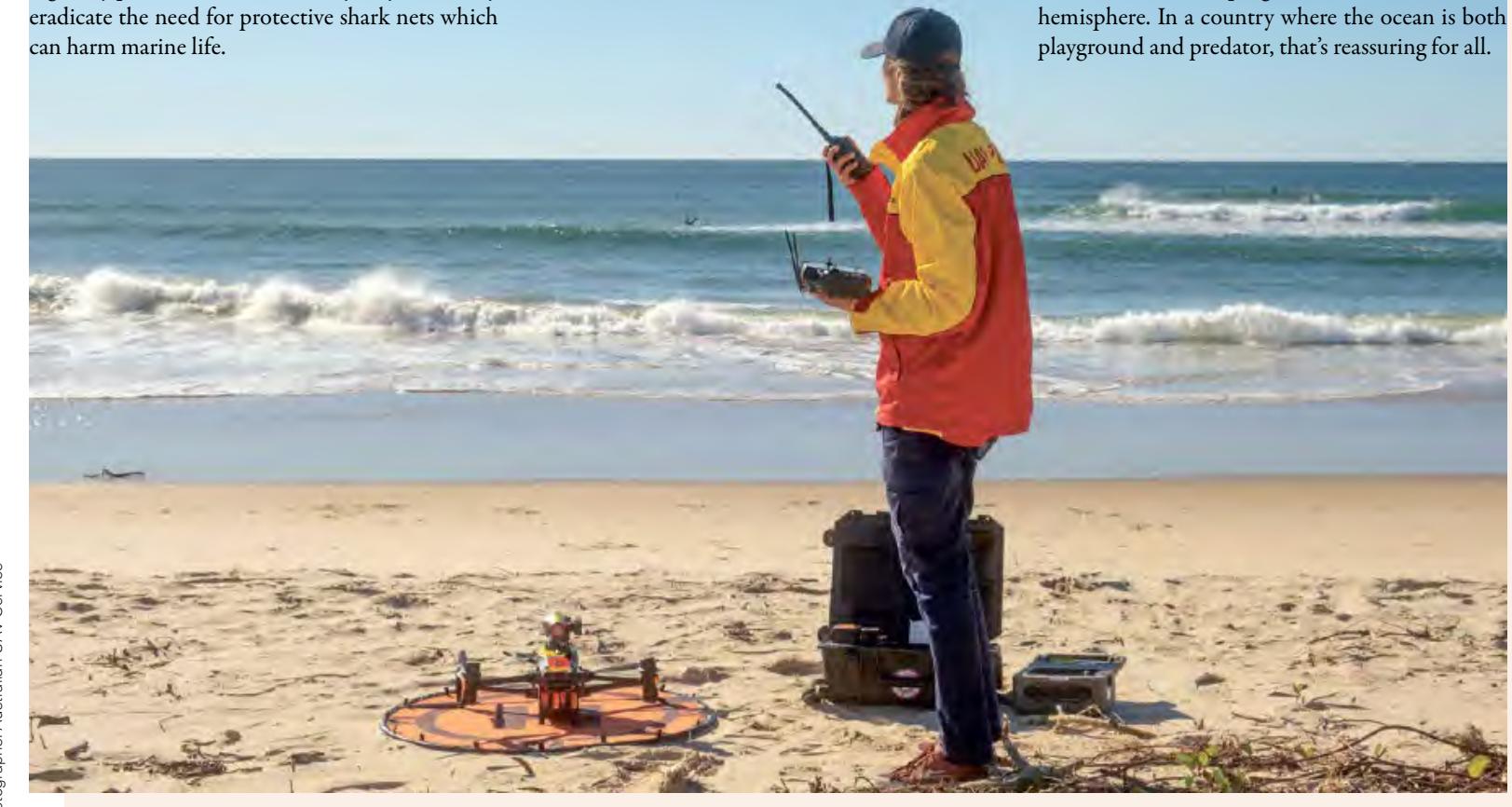
Drone pilot Stuart Jackson explains how the service's lightweight drones feature cameras and loudspeakers, and are designed to look out for sea currents, sharks and jellyfish, using pre-recorded messages to warn surfers and swimmers away from hazardous situations. "If a potentially dangerous shark is spotted, we notify the lifeguards on patrol, relaying to them the species, size, location and direction of travel," says Jackson. "If they determine the beach should be closed, the shark siren is sounded, and an announcement is made over the

PA to evacuate the water. We are also able to use our speaker on the UAV to alert people."

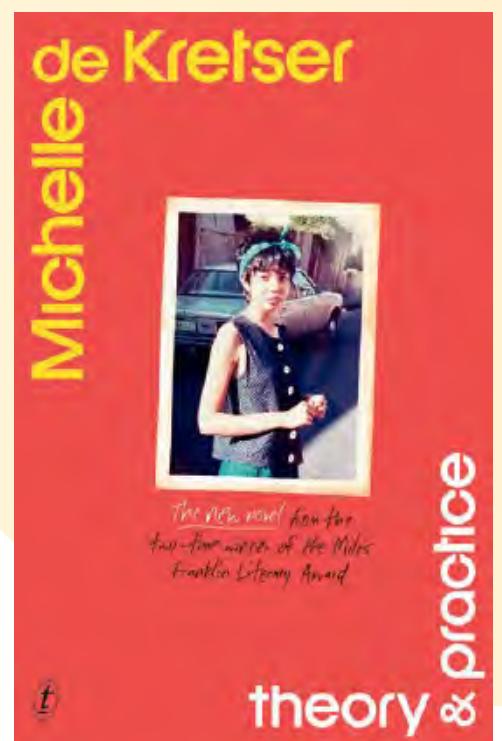
Ultimately, the Australian UAV Service is doing its best to keep man and fish apart. Although shark attacks receive huge publicity, in the grand scheme of things they are very rare. More worrying, Jackson says, are accidents due to rip currents or concussions caused by surfboards or jet skis. In 2022, at a coastal town in New South Wales called The Entrance, a jet ski-rider was out on the water during a huge swell. The beaches had been closed that day due to rough conditions but fortunately a pilot from Australian UAV Service was patrolling the skies above with his drone. Jackson explains that the jet-ski rider was accidentally thrown from his machine and then struck his shoulder against it, badly injuring himself. "Our pilot observed the man and was able to radio through to a nearby lifeguard," he adds.

With the southern hemisphere summer now fast approaching, Australian UAV Service is readying itself for more rescues. The service currently operates from 50 seaside locations, with an additional 30 mobile drone operators. Every year their more than 200 pilots and staff oversee around 40,000 flights—a huge number of eyes in the sky. Altogether it comprises the largest drone surveillance programme in the southern hemisphere. In a country where the ocean is both playground and predator, that's reassuring for all.

'Some drones carry first-aid and survival kits'



award-winning writer Michelle de Kretser



Award-winning Australian novelist, Michelle de Kretser, chats to Christopher Bone about the roots, reality and responsibility of being a contemporary writer

Across three decades and seven novels, Michelle de Kretser has grappled with history, identity and relationships, while testing the boundaries of literary forms. Her most recent novel *Theory & Practice* won Australia's Stella Prize for Women's Fiction 2025 and more recently the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction 2025, reaffirming her place as one of our greatest living writers.

In the award-winning novel, it's 1986 and "beautiful, radical ideas" are in the air. The narrator is looking back at a pivotal moment in her life: she has arrived in Melbourne for graduate school, researching the novels of Virginia Woolf. In bohemian St Kilda she meets artists, activists, students—and Kit—who claims to be in a "deconstructed" relationship, beginning a series of messy entanglements that place her life and ideals at odds.

Experimental in form, she has called the novel 'hyperfiction'—fiction that poses as non-fiction—blurring the lines between truth and drawing into question the storyteller's role. Over Zoom from her book-lined study, she spoke to me about her long career, recent award success, and the responsibilities of a writer today.



Congratulations on the prize! What does the recognition mean to you so deep in your career?

Oh, I feel very lucky. It's great to have your work recognised and awarded by your peers. Of course, the money is fantastic too—not only in helping me to live, but it also means I can help other people.

Let's go back to the beginning – what first sparked your love of reading?

I've been a reader for as long as I can remember.

Growing up in Ceylon in the 1960s, there was no television—reading was all that there was. I read everything that was around in the house and that was a very eclectic mix, from children's classics and comic books to schoolgirl stories inherited from older siblings. Agatha Christie, Just William, Victorian and Edwardian poetry anthologies that I read for the rhythm, for the music.

They were books that were left over from the British Empire. There was almost no English language publishing coming out of Ceylon at the time. So it was that or nothing. I'm sure some of it would've been very jingoistic nationalistic—lots of Kipling, for example—but you would also get slabs of Shakespeare, Tennison, Christina Rossetti.

I think the content to a child hardly matters. I think what you want to instil is a love of reading. Taste comes later.

And when did that love of reading shift into wanting to be a writer?

I studied French literature at university, and I went on to start a PhD, which I never finished. It really wasn't until I was about halfway through my PhD that I realised I don't have the mind for an academic career. I don't have that narrow, concentrated scholarly mind that goes deep. I have a magpie mind that likes to pick up bits of glitter from here and there—that's quite a good mind for a writer.

I started editing a student journal called *Antithesis*, ironically enough. And I loved editing—how a piece could come in, and I could work on it and it would go out better.

I worked for 10 years as an editor. And then when I had a year's unpaid leave from my job, I started writing a story set in revolutionary France in an area my partner and I had been walking the previous year, just to amuse myself really.

I think if I had sat down at my desk and said, I'm going to write a novel, I would not have. It just would've been too daunting. But then after a while I realised that I was writing a novel and that novel was accepted for publication, *The Rose Grower*. →

“I have a magpie mind that likes to pick up bits of glitter from here and there”

So you tricked yourself into becoming an award-winning novelist?

It's what the mind does. Yes, I absolutely tricked myself. But I'm glad that I had a life before becoming an editor, before becoming a writer. I have life experience to write about, to reflect on. You look back on things and their shape changes, their meaning changes. And you can write about that.

You moved to Australia aged 14 and have travelled extensively. How has this experience influenced your work?

Travel has played a large part in my life, so that is always going to be of interest to me thematically. And where a novel is set will often determine its course as much as the time in which it's set.

A case in point is my latest novel, *Theory & Practice*, which starts in 18th century France before jumping to '80s Australia.

Obviously France in 1789 is going to be one set of concerns for the characters and one set of limits of what they know and can see. 1986 in Melbourne is a very particular moment in time, and the place, St. Kilda, a very particular place in Melbourne with a very specific iconography. So, place is woven into the fabric of the novel.

I know there are some novelists who are just not at all interested in place. But I guess for me, having moved around quite a bit in my life, I'm always observing the differences—people behave differently in different places.

Theory & Practice also plays with form—it opens as a classic novel, then shifts into a mix of letters, diary entries, fragments of essays. I've called this genre, 'hyperreal fiction' and define this as a novel that reads like nonfiction basically. I'm happy to have come up with that term. I must say it means that people will not believe that it's not all true though.

What's been the most surprising reaction to the novel?

A lot of young women have really responded to this book, which is fantastic. A friend of mine did it in her book group recently where most of the women were under the age of 35. For the first 20 minutes, they had a very literary discussion about fictional form until one of them said, "You know, I dated a guy like Kit once". And then they all just talked about terrible boyfriends for the rest of the hour.

What advice do you have for budding writers?

First, support your fellow writers. Always. Second. Read, just read everything. Read, read, read. And third and very important, revise, revise, revise. And by revising, I mean cut, cut, cut.



“It took me almost 15 years to write my latest book. Stick with it. Keep doing it. Do not quit.”
Aleksandar Hemon, author and essayist



“Being a novelist is a very lonely thing. While you're writing you're on your own. And so there has to be an inner energy. Whether it's your first book, fifth book or tenth book, you will always go through valleys of doubt, mountains of anxiety. But under all of that there has to be love and faith in what you are doing.”
Elif Shafak, novelist



“Be kind to yourself. Let inspiration hit you. Remember that writing happens even when pen isn't on paper, it's just being in the world.”
Jeffrey Boakye, author



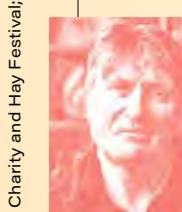
“You should not believe in writer's block. When I started writing, I had tiny kids at home and I would write in 15-minute bursts if I had to. When we get writer's block, it's because we have the luxury of time. When you have a deadline, you will write something. The important thing to remember is that you can edit a bad page, but you cannot edit a blank page. So put something on paper and you go back to it.”
Jodi Picoult, novelist



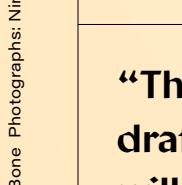
“Just get the first draft done. The best writing comes with the editing. And so the more time you spend with the editing, the better. You'll never get the first draft perfect.”
Nikesh Shukla, writer and editor



“Keep a notebook. Keep a diary. If you're anything like me, you'll always forget things. There are things you might not think are important to you, but write them down because they might be useful to use later.”
Michael Morpurgo, author



“Read. You can't be a writer unless you're a reader. I try to encourage my students to daydream. Let your mind wander. And every now and again you realise an idea is transforming into language—and that's the moment to write.”
Liz Pichon, author and illustrator



“There are no wasted drafts. Everything you will write is building your arsenal for what you're going to write next.”
Téa Obreht, novelist



“Keep a diary. Instead of writing everything you did, write one sentence—the one most interesting thing that day, the funniest, the saddest— and at the end of the year, you'll have 365 interesting sentences. And it will have taught you to pay attention to the world.”
Jacqueline Wilson, novelist

The write stuff

Over the years at Hay Festival events, some of the world's greatest writers have shared tips for how to get started (and finish) a good story...

“Always remember that there is no one like you in the entire universe. Whether you're writing poetry, anime, fiction, non-fiction—all of it—no one can write your story like you can. Always remember you're a miracle.”
Connor Allen, poet



“Live an interesting life. Talk to people, listen to people. Discover the world. Use your eyes and use your heart. Ask lots of questions and never be satisfied with the answers. Read lots of books. And then when you start to write, write from the heart and write about what you want to write about.”
Michael Morpurgo, author



“Show up. You can't get anything done unless you can keep on sitting down every day and adding just that little bit to your manuscript—putting another penny on the pile.”
Hari Kunzru, novelist

“Write. So many people say that they want to be a writer but never have the time, or can't fit it in. Just get to your computer—or your phone, or an old-fashioned notebook—and write some of the things you'd like to do and just carry on, carry on, and carry on.”
Jacqueline Wilson, novelist

AUSSIE RULES FOR A 'GAP YEAR'

Matt Charlton reflects on lessons learnt during his Australian gap year, and examines current work and play opportunities Down Under

The options for ways to fill your time on your 'Gap Yar' have only increased in the [rescinded]-year interim since I was in Oz - my very first long-haul trip at the age of 18 (see right), with the guarantee of 'rellos' (Aussie slang for relatives) in Sydney providing a base for me from which to hop, skip, jump and stumble across the Antipodean landscape like so many Poms before me.

The logical and, dare I say it, mature approach is a working holiday, so you can at least labour under the illusion—and convince your parents that—you're doing something useful with your time, and it can be an incredibly rewarding and integrating experience.

Probably the most important thing to say is that you will need a 'Working Holiday Visa'. These vary from country to country, but if you hold a German passport, for example, this will cost you around €375 (at time of writing). There are a lot of gap year tour packages which include flights, such as Kilroy, Trailfinders and Gap360.

If you're a massive control freak and just LOVE logistics however, you can arrange your own itinerary. If you've opted to work, there are some great options like fruit picking or working in one of the thousands of vineyards throughout Australia, where not only can you pick your way around this vast country, experiencing the many eco-systems from the bone-dry west to the lush north-east, but you can also earn a bit of cash whilst doing it.

The most fun-sounding however (and impressive sounding to those at home) is a ranch job, where you could become a jackaroo or jillaroo (a gender-defined farm trainee) on an outback Aussie ranch. Help with duties such as cattle driving or driving farm machinery, whilst becoming a hardened Aussie bloke or Sheila, with all the repressed emotion that implies.

The Outback is a truly otherworldly option, and highly recommended, even for a short tour before you head somewhere more populous. Alice Springs is an excellent springboard for Uluru,



"BECOME A JACKAROO OR JILLAROO ON AN OUTBACK AUSSIE RANCH"



and make sure you opt to sleep underneath the stars in a Swag, setting your alarm for a sunrise walk around its base, where the rock changes colour around eight times as the sun comes up. Magical.

Closer to the water... well, in it, actually—Australia is of course an excellent place to learn to surf or dive... BUT, maybe leave a bit more of a positive trace by opting into the Great Barrier Reef Marine Conservation Volunteer Program, gaining experience in reef monitoring, marine debris data collection and sea turtle conservation... and definitely becoming a better person. Volunteers will take to the water as snorkelers and emerge divers (not on the same swim), as you will complete a Liveaboard Dive Course on the outer reef.

Days are spent on tropical islands where volunteers spend either the morning or the whole day working on the Great Barrier Reef. Spare time is spent at a resort, restaurant, bar, walking trails, glass bottom tours, kayaking and snorkelling. Sounds terrible.

If you don't have the (under the) sea legs, you could head to Kangaroo Island in South Australia... though we're not sure why the kangas get the title role, as you'll also be participating in the monitoring and preservation of koalas, tammar wallabies, possums and echidnas. You're required to commit to at least two weeks, and (I love that they have to say this), not have animal allergies.

There is of course the classic backpacker option of a booze-soaked bus tour. When I was there, it was called The Oz Experience and ran up the well-trodden east coast route. It now looks to be run by American company Greyhound, but the old backpacker cliches are still there to fall into if you so wish. I would recommend the hostel I wound up in in Cairns, but it was demolished in 2005. I don't think I had anything to do with this.

There is SO much to do and SO much to take into account, and we've not even talked about road trips, rainforests, or (checks notes) feral camels. This is just an amuse bouche... though Aussies would probably call that pretentious. Hooroo!

Photographs: Matt Charlton, Adobe Stock



Candid as ever, Australian podcasts are well worth a listen. Here are six of our favourites



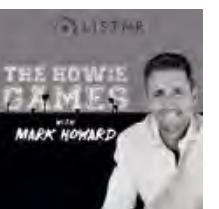
Hamish & Andy

Australian comedy duo Hamish Blake and Andy Lee's artfulness comes in a long line of twosomes—Beavis and Butt-Head, Wolverine & Deadpool, Hamzah and Martin! Hamish and Andy continue to taunt each other and their button-pusher Jack, with a weekly show that's more about their listeners than it is about themselves. It's all in the minutiae.



Mamamia Out Loud

Billed as Australia's number one podcast for women, this show covers news, pop culture and big ideas. It tries not to sweat the small stuff but does discuss it! Hosted by journalists and authors Mia Freedman, Jessie Stephens and Holly Wainwright, topics range from Chatfishing to Victoria Beckham's new docu-series. Grab yourself a coffee and listen up!



The Howie Games

You couldn't do a roundup of Australia's top podcasts without a sporto. Mark Howard fronts this broadcast where the biggest names in world sport show up to inspire and motivate listeners, not only about sport but life in general. Howard's two children, Skye and Mack—nicknamed The Pickle and The Big Penguin—make regular appearances too.



The Teacher's Pet

Lynn and Chris Dawson appear to have the perfect marriage. He's a star footballer and popular high school teacher. She's a devoted wife and mother. They share a gorgeous home above Sydney's northern beaches. But when Lynn goes missing, dark secrets are dug up. This Australian podcast created by journalist Hedley Thomas has become a cult classic.



Self Help(ed)

Secondhand therapy between besties Tully Smyth and Maggie Kelly is a surprisingly cathartic examination of the things that are bugging us all—or the things you didn't know were bugging you, but do now! Sleep deprivation, makeovers, are you truly ever ready for kids? If you're a millennial in need of advice, listen up! Tully and Maggie are here to get the conversations started.



Casefile

This long-running true crime Aussie podcast with its anonymous host 'Casey' remains a firm favourite. Just a few months after its creation in 2016, Rolling Stone (USA) listed it as one of their top 10 true crime podcasts. Millions of fans are now hooked on Casey's respectful treatment of real people's stories and measured, compelling delivery of both solved and unsolved cases from around the world.





← ST. AGNI

This design studio, founded in Byron Bay by Lara and Matt Fells, has five stores across Australia and over 90 retailers across the globe. The studio explores the appeal of a modern uniform and considered wardrobing through beautiful design and precise tailoring, that speaks to a minimalist aesthetic. St. Agni has seen a natural evolution from hand woven leather accessories to premium ready-to-wear that lives by the philosophy of 'less is more'. Grown up and effortlessly chic, pieces are staples with an edge.

st-agni.com



→ DINOSAUR DESIGNS

Established in 1985 by co-founders and creative directors Louise Olsen and Stephen Ormandy, this brand is known for its handmade resin and metal jewellery, and homewares that celebrate colour, form, and tactility. The brand originated from art school in Sydney where the founders developed their signature process of hand-sculpting forms in clay, casting them in resin, and finishing each piece by hand to create vibrant, one-of-a-kind designs. From market stall to high fashion, this is statement jewellery with a capital S.

dinosaurdesigns.com



→ ALIX HIGGINS

Alix Higgins pieces harken back to a childhood spent scrolling on Tumblr, typeface phrases splashed across expertly draped dresses, and striped polos in a nod to blogging's glory days. The digitally scanned prints that traverse the silk started out as physical paintings. Alex worked at Marine Serre as a print designer but is now based in Sydney and all his garments and upcycled pieces are produced and sourced locally. With just two collections a year, he stocks his pieces in a limited selection of independent boutiques that share his values.

alixhiggins.com



Photograph: Lucas Dawson; John Jason; Wendell Teodoro

↓ LEE MATHEWS

Lee Mathews was an illustrator and art director for Vogue Australia and started making clothes for herself and her friends on the kitchen table, upgrading to a small workshop in Sydney's Newport. "If I had to be pinned down to a wardrobe philosophy", she says, "it would be to design clothes that resonate deeply with people's lives, clothes that are functional and beautiful, that are ageless and simple and manage to add ease and confidence every day."

leemathews.com.au



← LIANDRA

Liandra is a lifestyle and eco-conscious swimwear brand founded by Yolngu designer Liandra Gaykamangu. The brand is known for its bold reversible swimwear in culturally significant prints that blend contemporary designs with indigenous Australian art and culture, often featuring positive storytelling in the prints.

liandraswim.com

→ AJE

Founded in 2008 by best friends Adrian Norris and Edwina Forest, AJE is stocked internationally at Harrods, Selfridges and Neiman Marcus. Designs are inspired by a 'coastal to urban cities aesthetic', and the duo devote themselves to producing effortless style with elevated every day pieces, and the odd killer evening piece.

ajeworld.com



← NGALI

Wiradjuri woman Denni Francisco is behind Melbourne-based silk-printed label Ngali, which splashes simple, formless silhouettes with colours and swirling dynamism. Francisco works with First Nations visual artists to create designs which she transposes to flowing tunics, diaphanous scarves and silk button-ups, so the clothing becomes a canvas. Ngali is wearable art, intended for everywhere.

ngali.com.au

→ JOSEPH & JAMES

This menswear company was established in 2021 and is loved for its generous touch of streetwear mixed with timeless sophistication and wearability. Designer Juanita Page is a proud South Sea Islander and she shared her excitement at being one of a handful of Aboriginal designers to take part in Australian Fashion Week 2025 to the National Indigenous Times saying, "This isn't just about the clothes, it's about taking up space in a part of the industry where menswear, especially from First Nations designers, is still emerging."

josephandjames.com.au



From silence to screen: the rise of Aboriginal cinema

WARNING: this article may contain names, images or voices of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Whether they're hard-hitting dramas or joyful musicals, Indigenous stories are a crucial part of Australia's film scene, writes Anna Smith

Samson & Delilah
2009



Australia has a rich cinematic history—in fact, it beat Hollywood to producing the world's first feature length drama. The silent movie *The Story of the Kelly Gang* came out in 1906—and just five years later, the West Olympia Theatre cinema opened in Sydney. The grand building could seat an audience of 2,500—and that building has now been transformed into The Olympia Sydney, a new 25hours Hotel. Situated in the hip Paddington district, The Olympia pays tribute to the building's cinematic heritage in its concept and design.

After the cinema first opened its doors, the Australian film industry gradually evolved: not just with the invention of talkies, but in telling stories of Aboriginal people. After offensive 'blackface' stereotypes dominated in the 1930s-1950s, the ensuing decades finally saw an emergence of authentic stories exploring the experiences of Indigenous Australians. Not before time, the government began to support the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander filmmakers. And while there is still a very long way to go, the last few decades have given audiences many gems to savour.

One of the most successful Aboriginal filmmakers is Warwick Thornton, who won the Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for the 2009 film *Samson & Delilah*, becoming the first Indigenous Australian to do so. Telling the story of teenage runaways, it's a tough but riveting watch that explores themes including racial hatred and substance abuse—Thornton has called it a "survival love story". Both stars, Marissa Gibson and Rowan McNamara, were first time actors, proving that big names aren't necessary for global acclaim.

While his first drama was contemporary, Thornton explored Australia's past in *Sweet Country*, set in 1929. The film exposes racism

The Art of Incarceration
2021



through the style of a western, a genre typically blighted by racial stereotypes. Thornton's subsequent feature, *The New Boy*, followed a young Aboriginal orphan boy who was brought into a Christian monastery in the 1940s, and starred Aswan Reid alongside Cate Blanchett.

Many Australian filmmakers have turned to the documentary format to explore Indigenous culture. *Ningla-A'na* (1972) spread awareness about Aboriginal land rights, while Madelaine McGrady filmed Aboriginal protests about the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982's *We Fight*. More recent docs include *The Last Daughter* (2022), Brenda Matthews' personal reflection on the devastating impact of the 'stolen generation', and *The Art of Incarceration* (2021), which explores how art and culture can empower those who have been imprisoned.

Many people's first experience of an aboriginal story was the film *Walkabout*, in 1971. Helmed by the British director Nicolas Roeg, it comes from an outsider's perspective, but introduced the world to one of the most recognisable Aboriginal actors: David Gulpilil. Then 16, he went on to appear in a slew of mainstream →

Ningla-A'na
1972



Sweet Country
2017

Storm
Boy
2019



The
Sapphires
2012



The
Drover's
Wife
2021

movies, from *Crocodile Dundee* to Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*, as well as acclaimed stories that centred on Indigenous characters, such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, and *Ten Canoes*. The latter was Australia's submission to the Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film. All protagonists speak in Indigenous languages of the Yolŋu Matha. Gulpilil's final film before his passing was the novel adaptation *Storm Boy*, a family drama with an environmental message, starring Geoffrey Rush as a businessman who reconnects with his childhood roots.

Several film companies have been set up with the specific intent of telling Aboriginal stories. One of these is Blackfella films, founded by Rachel Perkins. Her directorial debut, 1998's *Raindance*, tells of three Indigenous sisters who reunite for their mother's funeral. Perkins went on to helm the musical comedy-drama *Bran Nue Dae* (2009), a 1960s coming-of-age story.

Another charming musical set in the 60s is the film *The Sapphires* (2012), a feelgood story of four Aboriginal singers who form a girl group and tour Vietnam during the war. It's currently streaming on Netflix in many territories. And if you enjoy that, check out *Jub Clerc's Sweet As* (2022), a coming-of-age road trip movie about a trouble teen on her way to a youth camp.

Another filmmaker turning tropes on their heads is Leah Purcell, who made the revisionist western *The Drover's Wife: The Legend of Molly Johnson* (2021). Purcell wrote, directed, co-produced and starred in this gripping reimagining of Henry Lawson's short story, using an Indigenous feminist lens to tell of a tenacious mother protecting her children in the outback. I spoke to Purcell for the Girls On Film podcast, and she told me she was inspired

Photographs: Penguin Random House; John Platt

"We are driven people, I think that comes back to our Aboriginal mothers who never had voices"
Leah Purcell

by stories from her family, including her great-grandfather's diaries. "As an Indigenous woman, our stories are all that we have left, and it's for us to tell these stories. I say to all the audiences in Australia: Ned Kelly... he's up on a pedestal... We need to knock him off and put Molly Johnson up there as the new heroine of Australia."

The *Drover's Wife* was co-produced by Purcell's partner, Bain Stewart, and together, they co-founded Oombarra Productions to create Indigenous-focused film, TV and theatre. "We are driven people," Purcell says. "I think that comes back to our Aboriginal mothers who never had voices, who were a generation of lost people because they weren't allowed to practice their culture and traditions, but they didn't quite fit into white society... And if we didn't work hard, put our Indigenous voices at the forefront, that's a crime. So that drives us to be truth tellers of our Indigenous stories."

This year, more change is afoot. The *Lost Tiger* recently became the first animation to be written and directed by an Indigenous woman filmmaker, Chantelle Murray, while Warwick Thornton's latest, *Wolfram*, has been met with more acclaim.

As for the future, let's hope more and more filmmakers have the opportunity to tell stories about Aboriginal culture. Leah Purcell's words about her own work seem apt for the industry. "We've been hustling for 30 years and there's a door that's open to us now. I don't think anyone's holding it open yet—but the door is there."

Anna Smith is a film critic, broadcaster and host of *Girls On Film*, the world's leading podcast about women in film. For more info on Australian film: screenaustralia.gov.au



Australian horrors

From aboriginal ghost stories to backpacker thrillers, 10 films that demonstrate the Aussie talent for bone-chilling genre fare

**Picnic at
Hanging
Rock
1975**



Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975)

Peter Weir's haunting mystery thriller about disappeared schoolgirls is a timeless classic.

Dead Calm (1989)

Nicole Kidman, Sam Neill and Billy Zane star in the story of a couple out at sea with a dangerous stranger

Bedeiv (1993)

A horror anthology directed by artist and photographer Tracey Moffatt, the first Aboriginal woman to direct a feature film



**Bring
Her
Back
2025**

Talk to Me (2022)
A group of teenagers discover how to conjure spirits with terrifying consequences. An impressive debut from twins Danny and Michael Philippou

The Royal Hotel (2023)
Julia Garner stars in Kitty Green's tense story of backpackers working in a rough, remote Australian bar



**The
Moogai
2024**

The Moogai (2024)
A young Aboriginal mother fears an evil spirit is intent on stealing her child

The Surfer (2024)
Nicolas Cage puts in an unhinged turn in this trippy tale of a man who is obsessed with surfing on the beach of his childhood

Bring Her Back (2025)
Sally Hawkins is terrific as a scary foster mother in this chilling saga from the directors of *Talk To Me*



ART & ENTERTAINMENT

Music writer, Matt Charlton charts the release of listening bars

There is something to be said for the modern need to shelter from the ever present neural assault. We were never supposed to be bombarded like this; contemporary society means our fight or flight is in constant use; we were just supposed to be hunting and gathering for goodness sake. To quote the theme tune of a popular comedy, 'taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot...'

If you were making a wish list for everything you required out of a good bar or restaurant, where would high-quality audio sit on the list? I'll be honest, even as a music writer—the sonic quality of the ambient music in a venue is something I'd never even considered before. Of course—the choice of tunes, and whether you have to shout yourself silly to have a decent conversation would be on there, but even then, it would very much be a secondary consideration. This is speaking as someone who gazes in admiration at people with the ability to have involved conversations in the middle of the dancefloor, whereas it's all I can do to lip-read, 'Do you want another drink?'

Yet, at listening bars, the audio is paired and prioritised with the fare in the same way a fine glass of wine would be paired with a high-end menu. This is an idea—a philosophy really—which originated in Japan, and is now catching on in Australia: spaces for audiophiles with an appetite for great music, excellent libations and sometimes even fine cuisine, encapsulating the pursuit of multi-sensory satisfaction under one roof.

Listening Bars have been an institution in Japan since the 1950s, a country which prides itself on refuge, retreat and meditation—from the reflective experience of a water garden, via the womb-like nature of capsule hotels. This national mindset goes some way to explaining why this is the country where the listening bar was born—immersion, isolation, and the correct use of precious personal time are all of tantamount importance... that, and excellent audio technology.

Sequestered amongst the sensory overload of Japan's neon cities, these bars are typically a lowly lit, darkly painted, hug of an experience. Immersing the patron in the deep-end of audio quality, finely tuned drinks are served with base-notes of precision-made and carefully sourced sound systems,

allowing a singular sensory experience which, when you think about it, appeals to one of the most primal states which exists within us. A comforting, endorphin-releasing blanket—engulfing the human body in good sound feels primordial—like coming home.

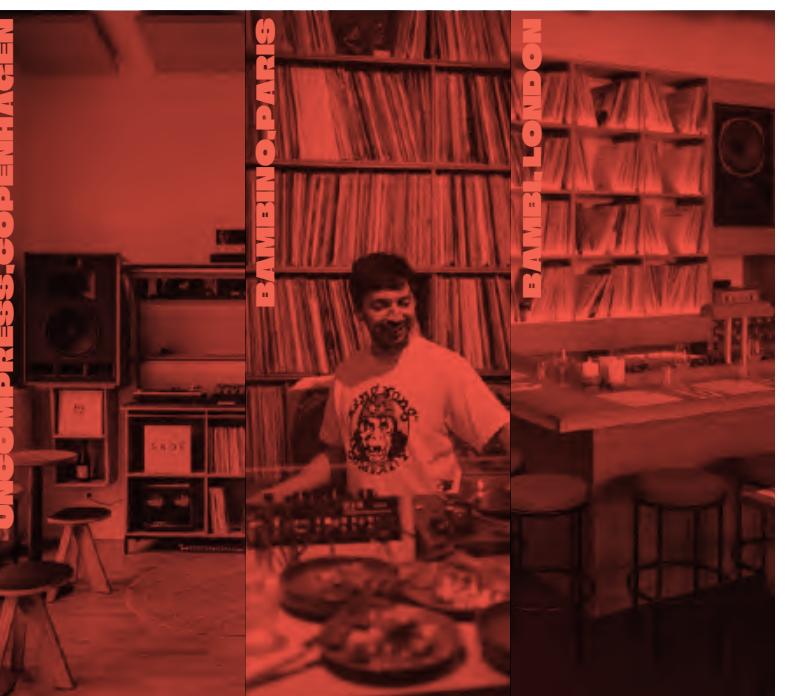
"It's a real mix, which is what makes it fun. Sure, we get some collectors and hi-fi nerds but it's by no means just that crowd, there's all kinds of people coming through, and that variety keeps the vibe fresh." Nick van Tiel is Head of Music and Nightlife at Merivale, the owners of Jam Record Bar, one of a handful of listening bars leading the way in Sydney. "We spent 12 months carefully curating the records, shopping far and wide to build a wide ranging collection that spans every era and genre, but all fits within the ethos and vibe of the venue. Additionally we have a tight roster of Sydney's best and most experienced crate diggers who form part of our nightly DJ offering," Nick continues.

The fundamentals, from Shibuya to Sydney to San Francisco, are the same: entire environments are curated to a fine point, far beyond the usual interior design mood board which goes into opening a new establishment. The positioning of the speakers, the colours, the wine menu, the cocktails and—when there is a culinary element—the flavours of the food, all feed (pun intended) into a complete

Listening bars are now starting to capture westernised imaginations too—in Sydney with Rekōdo, Busby and Anti; Brilliant Corners, Bambi and Moko have recently popped up across London, with Fréquence and Bambino to be found in Paris's 11 Arrondissement, Unkompres in Berlin and Bird in Copenhagen. Of course, the US had to call it something different, which means you should ask for 'Hi-Fi Bars' when you're there... but the principle remains the same. For a country quite in love with the sound of its own voice, however, an establishment where one listens and doesn't talk is still a novelty.

It is a question of fostering a different kind of dialogue, an unspoken one car-

"THE AUDIO IS PAIRED WITH THE FAIRE IN THE SAME WAY A FINE GLASS OF WINE WOULD BE PAIRED WITH A HIGH-END MENU"



Photograph: Tim Salisbury

Listen Here
Eddie Harris

Supernatural Thing
Ben E King

Sure Thing
St Germain

Ms Fat Booty
Mos Def

Dirty Harry
Gorillaz

They Reminisce Over You
Pete Rock & CL Smooth

Take the L Train
Brooklyn Funk Essentials

What Cha' Gonna Do for Me
Chaka Khan

I Get Lifted
KC and the Sunshine Band

Rock Steady
Aretha Franklin

Home
LCD Soundsystem

For your
vinyl
pleasure



ried on musical notes which develop a different, possibly more fundamental, type of connection a cut above small talk. Of course, if you still need to talk to your mate after a break-up, or bitch about your line manager to an equally perturbed colleague, the dive bar or pub will always be just down the road. As an antidote to loneliness and isolation however, the growing phenomenon of the listening bar may well feel, to a large swathe of adrift people in challenging times, like a new home from home. "It's great to see a younger generation engaging with music in a new way and discovering the richness of analogue sound" says Nick.

As long as they keep appealing to one of the most fundamental needs within us, people will certainly be keeping their ears to the ground.

Business Section

Music for the masses



Music business expert, Eamonn Forde, investigates the good, the bad and the ugly of music streaming, an industry that continues to open up music fans' wallets with greater frequency

Streaming both saved and split the record business. Globally, recorded music revenues tipped into sharp decline between 2000 and 2014, in part due to digital piracy and in part due to legal downloads via the likes of iTunes undermining the enormously lucrative CD album format. Subscription streaming dates back to 2001 with Rhapsody, but it took until 2009, with the launch of Spotify, to push the idea of accessing music rather than owning it into the mainstream. This was helped by the smartphone revolution started by the iPhone in 2007 where instant access to music became the norm.

Streaming, according to record label trade body IFPI, now makes up 69% of global recorded music revenues, helping the sector double its value from a \$14 billion low in 2014 to \$29.6 billion in 2024. The remainder of recorded music revenues is primarily made up of physical sales (CDs and LPs) and performance rights (revenues from public performance and broadcast use of recorded music). Streaming has also turned many markets and territories that were previously seen as 'lost' to piracy—notably China, India, Russia, and parts of Latin America—into growth engines.

While record labels (and heads of streaming services) will gleefully pat themselves on the back for the success of streaming, many artists and songwriters are loudly critical about how little of the revenues, based on fractions of a penny per stream, actually trickle down to them. It is now

a volume business. Unless your music streams in the tens or thousands of millions, you are unlikely to become rich on streaming alone, nevermind making a living wage. It has created a two-tier system where the top 1% of artists sponge up most of the money.

Spotify, as the biggest name in streaming, issued its own numbers in March 2025 in its Loud & Clear report that inadvertently proved this disparity, revealing that only 2,940 artists generated over \$500,000 from it in 2024. It was never a given that recording artists would become rich as most acts have always lost money, but the gulf between profit and penury has never

The top 1% of artists sponge up most of the money

been wider. There are growing calls from artists and their representative bodies to have streaming become more equitable for the creators. Many say the model is iniquitous and makes it utterly impossible for them to make a living. Some feel they have to accept that streaming today is merely promotion rather than a revenue source, hoping to parlay interest there into concert tickets or merchandise sales.

There are a multitude of factors pulling and twisting the streaming world, hinting at possible new futures for not only how we listen to music but how the musicians we listen to make (or do not

make) a living. The most assured change in streaming is a rolling increase in what you pay to access music every month. Netflix can regularly increase prices as it has exclusives on many shows and films, a luxury music streaming services do not have. Music companies want to increase revenue (labels and publishers usually get around 70% of your monthly subscription fee), but services do not want to price consumers out of the market or into the arms of rivals, making price rises a delicate science. Prices might not rise every year, but expect rises every other year.

Streaming is rapidly reaching saturation point in the world's leading music markets, such as the US and Europe. As growth starts to flatten out there, the emphasis will be on moving into more non-Western territories. That said, monthly subscription costs will have to be significantly lower and sensitive to the economic reality of these markets, possibly leaning more on ad-supported free models rather than paid (what the industry calls 'freemium'). China, India, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), and Sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly being looked to as the motors for streaming's second growth phase. The major global services are in many of these markets, but local services are also proving to be important catalysts, such as Anghami in MENA, Claro Música in South America, and Boomplay in Africa (although it has recently lost music from Sony in a dispute over payments). In China, however, it is a closed shop, with Tencent Music (a shared venture between Tencent and Spotify) dominating with a brace of localised services, notably QQ Music, KuGou, and



69 Streaming makes up 69% of global music revenues

KuWo, as well as rival service NetEase Cloud Music. Given India and China are the two most populous nations in the world, they represent streaming's biggest potential leap forward.

From the perspective of musicians and rightsholders (namely labels and publishers), the biggest existential crisis facing them is around generative AI music. The case of The Velvet Sundown, a wholly fictional band with a catalogue of AI-generated music, put this whole issue in focus in summer 2025. They experienced a short but significant spike in streams and became a controversial talking point in music streaming. Was this an art prank? Did this threaten to steal money from 'real' musicians? Would it fizz out as a gimmick? All valid questions that symbolise a deeper concern about the scale of AI-generated music and the ease (and cheapness) with which it can be made. Deezer, a key streaming service in France and Latin America, said in September it "is receiving over 30,000 fully AI-generated tracks every day—accounting for more than 28% of the total daily delivery".

More worryingly, Deezer had detected that up to 70% of streams generated by fully AI-created music were fraudulent. This leads into wider debates about not just 'AI slop' but also the intent of the creators. If music can be cheaply created and cheaply distributed to streaming services, this leaves it open to be manipulated by bot farms, where tracks are put on repeat to generate micropayments that, in aggregate, can amount to significant sums of money. Apple Music announced in early 2025 that it had sophisticated systems in place to detect fraudulent streaming and "less than 1% of all streams are manipulated" on its platform. Even at 1%, this could be syphoning out hundreds of millions of dollars from a sector that, in 2024 was worth \$20.4 billion globally according to IFPI numbers.

For many years, acts lobbied against and even boycotted streaming services over payment rates, but now politics and ethics are shaping if they want to have their

music on such services. Spotify co-founder and CEO Daniel Ek created a furious backlash this year when it emerged he had invested money in Helsing, a German defence technology company. A number of acts, including Massive Attack, pulled their music in protest. This came three years after major acts like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell pulled their music from Spotify in protest at its exclusive hosting of the Joe Rogan Podcast, accusing it of pushing an anti-vaccination message. They returned their music in 2024, but it raises a multitude of questions about the ethics underpinning music streaming.

Outside of politics, the next biggest changes coming to streaming services will be around improved customer experience. The record business had hoped that services would use lossless audio—song files that have not been compressed so are affectively streaming at CD-quality—as the hook to increase (i.e. double) their subscription fees. Tidal and Deezer tried this and charged a premium to access hi-fi-quality streams, but in 2021, Apple Music announced it was vastly improving its audio quality across the board but at no additional cost. Spotify, long rumoured to be looking to use improved audio as a hook to increase subscription prices, followed Apple's lead by treating it as a user upgrade at no additional cost.

Price and catalogue will not be the main battleground, it will be around features and services, notably what are termed 'superfans'. A 2024 report by Goldman Sachs whipped up the hype here by forecasting, across all categories (like live, merchandise, physical products and digital), that superfans will bring in an additional \$4.3 billion in revenue per year for the music business by 2026, potentially rising to \$6.6 billion by 2035. This could include exclusives and offers only available via a particular streaming platform for an act's biggest (i.e. most willing to spend) fans.

How such exclusives are priced and apportioned out between competing music services remains to be seen, but streaming services shifting to create premium tiers for superfans is the future.

Death (and birth) on the Nile

All eyes turn to Egypt as the Grand Egyptian Museum fully opens this November (2026) on a scale never seen before. Expect epic views of the Pyramids of Giza along with Tutankhamun's treasures assembled all in one place amongst the tens of thousands of artefacts. For Agatha Christie fans, 2026 marks the 50th anniversary since the author of Death on the Nile's own passing. Time to head to Cairo and book a cruise down the River Nile?

25hours Hotels is set to open in West Cairo in 2029 at Junction, Majid Al Futtaim's upcoming business and lifestyle destination. The hotel will feature approximately 250 keys, comprising both hotel rooms and 25hours Heimat branded residences. Guests and residents will have access to three distinctive dining venues, coworking areas, spa and wellness facilities, and flexible spaces for meetings and events. A range of unconventional amenities will reflect 25hours Hotels' bold reimaging of how hotels contribute to urban culture. Junction itself spans more than 129,000sqm across two interconnected plots. The development includes 13 cutting-edge office buildings, curated retail and F&B experiences, and sustainable infrastructure designed to meet LEED Gold certificate standards. With 97,000sqm of workspace, Junction is purpose-built for future-ready enterprises in this ancient land. →

visitgem.com

ennismore.com



Business Section

Holding back the plastic tide



Nicki Grahame talks to Karsten Hirsch, CEO of Plastic Fischer, an initiative which aims to capture plastic in rivers, so it doesn't end up in the ocean

Plastic Fischer began in 2018 when Karsten and two friends went on holiday to Vietnam, to celebrate his graduation from law school. Staying in a holiday apartment which overlooked the Mekong River, they were shocked to see so much plastic trash floating towards the ocean. Returning to their German city of Cologne they looked to see what was being done about it. The answer was nothing.

"I wasn't born an environmentalist," says Karsten. "I spent a lot of time on the ocean, so I had a natural affection for it, but I was going to be a lawyer. But, having seen the scale of the problem with my own eyes, I was willing to try to fix it."

Plastic pollution is a global crisis. The OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] Global Plastics Outlook estimates 1.7 million tonnes of plastic ends up in our oceans each year. This has a devastating effect on marine life and ecosystems, and when it breaks down into microplastics, it can enter the food chain and endanger human health. As rivers are the major source of plastic waste reaching the oceans, in 2019, Karsten, Georg Baunach and Moritz Schulz founded Plastic Fischer, the first company worldwide to focus on rivers, to stop plastic reaching the ocean. "It was such an exciting mission," laughs Karsten, "that I stayed."

They travelled to test their ideas on The Citarum in Bandung, Indonesia, the world's most polluted river. And, with the support of the Indonesian army, came up with the TrashBoom, a simple and inexpensive floating barrier made from locally available materials which prevents the flow of plastic waste on the surface of the river. "Living in Indonesia was a great, if tough, experience," says Karsten. "And coming up with a solution to stop river plastic destroying the ocean, is one of the biggest successes of my life."

Then Covid hit, so they hired a local team to manage operations. Returning in 2022, they began projects in India,



The OECD estimates that 1.7 million tonnes of plastic ends up in ocean each year

starting in Varanasi, on the Ganges, with 315 tonnes of plastic (equivalent to 79 elephants) floating down it each day. A local shopkeeper describes how in industrialised Kanpur, the polluted drainage systems were once choked with waste, and the stagnant water a breeding ground for mosquitoes. It smelled so bad, that people had to hold their noses as they walked by. Non-organic material found in rivers can include straws, bags, packaging material, textiles, and even fridges.

People are proud that their rivers are once again clean, and some locals are using their first trash can at the age of 60. "It's easy for Europeans to point the finger and say, 'Why are these guys throwing trash in and around the river?'" says Karsten. "But what would you do if the waste trucks didn't come regularly or at all? People need sufficient infrastructure as well as education, to give them an alternative. Our organisation is based on one principle, to have local people solving local problems with simple technology."

Behind the scenes, Plastic Fischer supply free trash cans, provide waste management services, run education and awareness campaigns, and host round tables for Governments, NGOs and locals. "The

315 The Ganges has 315 tonnes of plastic floating down it each day

last six and a half years has been a real adventure," says Karsten. "I knew nothing about waste management, how to run a start up, and working in India. I've learned a lot, and with a dedicated team, we have created a big impact."

To date, Plastic Fischer has partnered with over 40 organisations to collect 2,145,604 kilos of river plastic (and counting), installed 43 systems and created 90 full-time jobs in India and Indonesia. They have spoken at World Economic Forum conferences, and received a prestigious German Sustainability Award in 2024. The approach to custom build on the ground to fit the river, means that Plastic Fischer's technology can be replicated anywhere. "I get requests from all over the world," says Karsten. "We'd like to do more to contribute, but our work requires funding. What we do is tough," he adds. "We are fighting a global crisis fuelled by the oil industry and protected by powerful lobbies. It takes the commitment of many to stand a chance of winning the battle, but I believe we can do it."

Plastic Fischer are currently working on 50 rivers across eight cities in India and Indonesia, with three new locations—Mumbai, Bangalore and Vadodara. In Bangalore, the organisation stops hundreds of tonnes of plastic entering a lake that provides drinking water to residents. In Varanasi, they're working around the crocodiles who live in the river, cleaning the banks and drainage systems, overrun with invasive plants, while in Mumbai, the goal is to protect Thane Creek, one of the world's most important habitats for flamingos.

"I wouldn't trade this job for anything," says Karsten. "But I realise we're at the beginning of our journey." Plastic Fischer aims to be present in cities along the 10 most polluted rivers in India by 2030, and to extend their activities along the The Citarum River in Indonesia. And what about the Mekong River? "It's on the radar," ponders Karsten. "Working there will feel as if we have come full circle."

plasticfischer.com

Photographs: Louise Haywood-Schaefer; Plastic Fischer; Adobe Stock

The Great Bubble Barrier

This Amsterdam-based social enterprise stops riverine plastic using a Bubble Curtain, which works by pumping air through a perforated tube on the river/canal bottom to create an upward current, directing plastic to the surface. By placing it diagonally across the river, the natural flow pushes the plastic waste into a collection system. The Bubble Barrier Vila do Conde in Portugal, stops plastic pollution from flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

thegreatbubblebarrier.com

The Ocean Cleanup

When scuba diving on holiday in Greece, 16-year-old Boyan Slat saw more plastic bags than fish. When he came back, he studied plastic pollution for his school project, and thought 'Why can't we clean this up?' He founded non-profit The Ocean Cleanup in 2013, using interceptor technologies to halt the trash flow from rivers and remove 90% legacy plastic floating in the ocean by 2040. It operates in rivers around the world including Jamaica, Malaysia, Vietnam, USA, Thailand and Guatemala.

theoceancleanup.com

Seven Clean Seas

The turning point came for Tom and Pam, co-founders of award-winning Seven Clean Seas, when ocean plastic washed up onto their beach while on holiday in Thailand. At home in Singapore, they organised ocean clean-ups, and founded the company via kickstarter in 2019. They also produce customisable coasters, roof tiles and building bricks from recycled plastic waste.

sevencleanseas.com

TONTOTON

Tontoton uses a community-centred approach to tackle plastic pollution at source in rural Cambodia. Providing training, equipment and income, they support independent waste collectors and local families to safely collect all types of plastic waste. This 'community-barrier' empowers the people and prevents the flow into rivers, oceans and illegal dumps.

tontoton.com

The longest-haul flight is nigh



PROJECT SUNRISE

Next year Qantas receives its first Airbus A350-1000 aircraft, operating the first non-stop services from Sydney and London to New York from 2027. Codenamed 'Project Sunrise', due to the fact that passengers will witness two sunrises, the A350-1000 will reduce point to point travel time by up to four hours by losing the stop-over. How will passengers fair with the 20-hours-plus flight time? Cabin design takes on board medical and scientific research. Cabins will be ergonomically designed with just 238 seats—a mix of First, Business and Premium Economy. First blurs the line between air travel and boutique hotel with a 2m long flat bed and separate reclining chair. All passengers can access the onboard Wellbeing Zone, a dedicated space for movement and refreshments.

qantas.com

Skyscanner's 2026 Travel Trends report tracks the biggest flight price drops, likely due to new routes and more frequent services from low-cost carriers. Check out 25hours Hotels' city Cologne at no 1.



Arrivals and departures

Western Sydney International Airport (WSI) is over 90% complete and on track to open in late 2026. Designed to accommodate 10 million passengers annually from day one, it has a 24-hour licence already approved—unlike Sydney's existing curfew-bound airport. WSI is set to become the city's largest airport, eventually handling over 80 million passengers a year, rivalling London Heathrow in scale.

wsiairport.com.au



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BROTHERS & SISTERS

STAY WHERE CULTURE LIVES

Companion explores what's next for the art-led world of Mondrian hotels

Much like the 20th century Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's work, Mondrian Hotels are designed to make dreamers of us all. On check-in guests step into a world over over-sized imagination with groundbreaking interiors and sleek design, immersive art installation and inventive culinary experiences. The dream-like spaces reflect the cultural hubs they inhabit, striving to be at the beating heart of their locale's cultural calendar. Enjoy a walk-up art show at the Mondrian Hong Kong's bodega-style Corner Shop space, savour Dario Cecchini's signature tableside steak tartare at Bottega di Carna at Mondrian Singapore Duxton, or soak up the Miami sunshine at the expansive pool scene at Mondrian South Beach.

Hot of the blocks last June, Aussie newcomer, the Mondrian Gold Coast is already creating a buzz. Set along the shores of Burleigh Heads, on the southern Gold Coast, this 208-room landmark by architects Fraser & Partners, introduces Mondrian to Australia for the first time. Rising between the pines and pandanus of Burleigh's beach-front esplanade, Mondrian Gold Coast offers a design-led escape anchored by the region's relaxed rhythm. With rooms twice the size of the national average and panoramic views across the Pacific Ocean, Burleigh Headland and the hinterland, the hotel redefines the experience of beachside accommodation. Along with a range of rooms and suites, are two spectacular private Beach Houses with plunge pools, and the spectacular Sky House crowning the 24th floor—all designed by California-based Studio Carter.

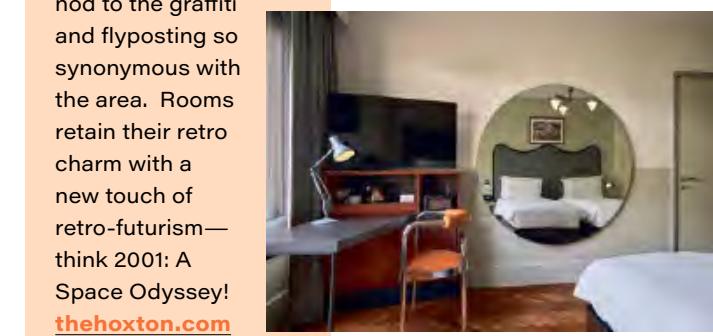


On the ground floor, LiTO blends Mediterranean character with Australian ease, with alfresco tables, coastal beats and interiors by Alexander & CO. Led by Italian-born head chef Andrea Morigi, the all-day restaurant serves vibrant, produce-driven fare from wood-fired breads, lobster bucatini and rotisserie chicken, to tableside tiramisu.

Upstairs on the third floor, Haven captures the pulse of Burleigh's sun-kissed days and after-dark energy. Executive Chef Aaron Teece curates a refined yet approachable menu anchored in provenance and shaped by seasonal produce, with an emphasis on seafood, woodfire cooking and regional sourcing. A dedicated agave menu, premium wines and champagne enhance the experience, paired with a curated soundtrack and live performances from emerging and national acts.

And if all that that doesn't convince you to become a Mondrian groupie, hot on the heels of Mondrian Gold Coast are 2026 openings in Abu Dhabi and the Maldives—followed by Business Bay Dubai, Riyadh, Tulum, Cancun and Bucharest!

mondrianhotels.com



THE HOXTON REBOOT

Twenty years after kicking off The Hoxton, this pioneering Ennismore group, now with 19 hotels, is updating its very first property which remains a cornerstone of the cool Shoreditch scene in East London. The in-house design team at AIME Studios is retaining the lux warehouse feel with a nod to the graffiti and flyposting so synonymous with the area. Rooms retain their retro charm with a new touch of retro-futurism—think 2001: A Space Odyssey!

thehoxton.com

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NOT LIVING THROUGH THE EASIEST

OF TIMES, BUT YOU'VE JUST SPENT

A FEW MOMENTS READING,

MAINLY, ABOUT THE BRIGHT SIDE OF

HUMANITY, AND CHOOSING A LITTLE

BIT OF HOPE OVER FEAR. IF THERE'S

ONE THING THAT WE NEED TO TAKE

INTO NEXT YEAR, IT'S TO GIVE

YOURSELF A PAT ON THE BACK

-YOU'RE DOING FINE. AND YOUR HAIR

LOOKS REALLY GOOD TODAY.



For more information and articles, visit 25hours-companion.com

Free for guests of 25hours Hotels