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## SYDNEY TO HAT HEAD NSW.

If ever you needed a short break away from Sydney and just wanted to sit on a beach for a couple of days and let the world pass you by then perhaps you should visit Hat Head. The village of Hat Head is 460kms north of Sydney, 32kms north east of Kempsey and is right in the middle of Hat Head National Park.

We took a few days off for a short break at Hat Head during the April school break and with young son, Sean, set out to explore one of our less well-known vacation spots. The Hat Head Holiday Park is just a few steps from the beach, its campsites are all grassed and are big and roomy, and the amenities are modern and clean.

This was not our first visit; we'd stayed here on our return from Queensland in 2003 and had promised ourselves then that we'd be back. There's so much to do here with fishing and surfing very popular, and plenty of walking trails. Some of these trails are longer and more strenuous than others but the view from the lookouts makes the walk more than worthwhile. Spectacular is an understatement! And what a great vantage point for whale watching or seeing dolphins at play.

We arrived late on a Monday afternoon and by the time our tents were up the sun was starting to go down. But that didn't stop us from going for a walk on the beach. The waves were softly lapping at the shore and the water was, surprisingly, warm.

Tuesday dawned with one of those glorious sunrises you see so often in magazines or on television; the cloudless blue sky, the sun coming up over calm water, and not even a hint of a breeze. So it was down to the beach for some fishing on this perfect of mornings, driving along the sand until we found a good place to stop.

Smoky Cape Beach stretches from Hat Head to Smoky Cape, about



Hat Head from Smoky Cape Beach

15kms, and a beach-driving permit is required; permits can be purchased from the caravan park. The boys threw their lines in and I set off for a walk along the beach. By the time I came back Sean was in for a swim but John was persevering with the fishing, without much luck I

might add. Not that that mattered to him; we've often said that the art of fishing has nothing whatsoever to do with catching fish! Even so, eventually John gave up too and joined Sean in the water.

The weather, like the water, was warm. A little too warm, in fact. I could feel myself starting to burn in spite of the shirt and hat that I was wearing so I retreated to the car and left the boys to their own devices. But apart from that, for me it was a good day. There's a lot to be said for doing nothing occasionally. Late in the day it started to get breezy and a little cloud rolled in.

What a difference a day makes! Wednesday morning was very overcast and the breeze of the evening before had become wind as we set off along the beach to Smoky Cape Lighthouse and South West Rocks.

The beach this time was in sharp contrast to the day before and there had obviously been some rough seas during the night. There were several washouts of the sand along the way, most of which we avoided but one or two crept up on us and we hit hard. We weren't worried; the Landrover is made to take that kind of punishment. I just wish my body was!



Smoky Cape Lighthouse from the beach

The last  $\frac{1}{2}$ km of the beach is closed to vehicles and we left the beach to take the track up to the lighthouse, stopping to have a cup of coffee while we pumped up the tyres. It's always advisable to deflate the tyres a little before driving on sand but then you have to re-inflate them once you leave the beach.



Smoky Cape Lighthouse is the tallest lighthouse in NSW; it's also one of the oldest. It's a very steep path to the top but well worth it for the views. Did I say very steep? I walk every day but by the time we reached the top I was almost gasping! Yes, it's steep but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. What an outstanding view! The ocean seems to stretch into infinity. It's a shame there weren't any boats out there to give some sense of the distance.

Lighthouse and the path leading to it.

This is the beach as seen from the lighthouse. We'd driven along that stretch of sand to get here. In the distance you can just see Hat Head.



Trial Bay Gaol

Leaving the lighthouse we drove through Arakoon State Conservation Area to Trial Bay Gaol. The gaol, on Lagers Point, was built in 1886 and housed the prison labour used to build the seawall between 1886 and 1903. The wall, however, was beset with construction

problems and never completed. The gaol was then used as an enemy alien internment camp from 1915 to 1918 before being abandoned.

On the hill are some graves of internees and a memorial to those who died during internment. Today, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW administer the gaol and its museum. There's a small entry fee of a couple of dollars and we did ask if we would get our money back if we left Sean behind. They took one look at Sean bouncing about impatiently and said they'd double the price!



Inside the gaol

We decided on lunch at South West Rocks in a park by the beach and sat for a while watching the snorkellers coming and going. East of Smoky Cape there is a place called Fish Rock and this is reputedly a snorkellers paradise.

We took the highway back to camp and made a much too brief stop, at Sherwood Estate Wines; and a very nice drop it is, too. And then it was on to Frederickton, the home of the famous Fredo Pies, and into Kempsey before turning onto South West Rocks Road. The road takes us through the village of Gladstone with its galleries and antique shops; these are always worth a look. You can pick up some really nice pieces here.

Heavy rain and winds that night looked like putting dampeners, literally as well as metaphorically, on the rest of the break but next morning the rain was gone and the wind had dropped to a strong breeze.

For our last day here we decided to go for a walk around the headland. We set off just after 10:00 on a path that is pretty well defined but only for part of the way. After that the track was still there but overgrown and with a lot of rocks to climb over.

Still, the scenery is beautiful, there's no denying that. The sea was a little rough and the wind had picked up. This track is not for the faint hearted; there are no fences or a guide rail along the way; too close to the edge and it was a sheer drop.



The surf at the base of the cliff

Several fishermen were perched on precarious spots along the cliff face. We didn't ask if they were catching anything, they looked pretty busy just keeping their footing!

At one point in our walk we came to what looked like a gorge with smooth rock on both sides and the surf crashing through an opening at the end. It was really quite spectacular, that foaming water almost looked like it was boiling.

Finally we reached the headland, the very point of Hat Head. A large boat, a tanker or container ship, was cruising past in the distance, too far away for a photo but the waves were crashing onto the rocks, sending their spray high into the air and what little sunshine there was created rainbow patterns in the spray.



Just trying to catch a photo of it was almost impossible; it was all too fast for our little camera.

We didn't stay out there long as it was getting quite cool. Sean decided to continue on around and over the headland and would meet

us back at the other end; he has more energy than we do! But at about the halfway point it started to rain; a brief but heavy shower left us dripping and the wind chilled us to the bone.



Hat Head beach from the point.

promises of a fish dinner tonight!

We met up with Sean at the start of the walking trails and went back to camp for dry clothes, a late lunch, and a very welcome hot cup of coffee. John and Sean dragged out the fishing rods again and I groaned inwardly, so much for starting to pack up the camp! At least there was none of the usual

More rain and wind throughout our last night and it looked like continuing as we packed up camp in the morning and left for home. In spite of the rain and the wind it had been a terrific few days and we've promised ourselves to do it again soon.

You can read about our first visit to Hat Head in our journal "Beyond The Black Stump".

