

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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## Sunday at La Perouse

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A narrow wooden bridge connects the mainland to Bare Island, home to a fort steeped in history. Picture: Renee Nowytarger Source: The Australian



Macquarie Watchtower is La Perouse's oldest building. Picture: Renee Nowytarger Source: The Australian

**THE man waiting for the L94 bus at Sydney's Circular Quay tells me he's going to spend the day at the nudist beach at La Perouse.**

"Little Congwong Beach has been a popular naturalist haunt for over 40 years," he adds.

La Perouse is full of surprises; 14km from the CBD, it used to be a tram terminus, and when the bus pulls up at the Loop, where the trams used to turn, it definitely feels like the end of the line.

Immediately, I am struck by the open space. On a huge grassy area sits La Perouse's oldest building, Macquarie Watchtower, and below, La Perouse Museum, originally the cable station. Straight ahead are Botany Bay and Bare Island, which got its name because Captain James Cook mentioned it in his journal as a "small bare island" when he anchored here in 1770.

The name La Perouse comes from the French explorer Jean Francois de Galaup La Perouse, who came to observe the founding of the British colony and arrived on January 26, 1788, just as the First Fleet was departing Botany Bay for Port Jackson. The French expedition remained for six weeks before setting off, never to be seen again. It was 40 years before it was discovered that La Perouse's two frigates were shipwrecked in Solomon Islands.

This usually quiet suburb comes alive on Sunday when visitors flock to savour all it has to offer. I start at the museum - the building was constructed in 1881, five years after the laying of a submarine telegraph cable from here across the Tasman to Nelson, which provided the final link in the telegraph service between England and New Zealand. It was a busy cable station until 1917, when the telegraph cable landing site was moved to Bondi Beach.

In 1944 it became a women's refuge and on display is its old sign. The museum guide tells me that occasionally she gets a visitor who grew up here. It was at Bare Island Fort that Tom Cruise rode a motorbike over the ramparts in Mission: Impossible II. I book a tour and walk across the narrow wooden bridge that connects the island to the mainland. Teenage boys are jumping off into the water below and divers in wetsuits swim around the rocks, taking advantage of this popular scuba-diving area.

The fort on Bare Island was built at the same time as the cable station, in anticipation that the Russians

might attack Sydney. It was a fort only for 30 years before becoming a war veterans' home. Our tour guide is passionate about the place and its guns, and upset that many are no longer here.

The war veterans obviously felt the same way about the removal of the guns from the fort, because in 1939, she tells us, they buried one weighing 18 tons and then put a billiard table on top of it. Years later, on one of the early fort tours, someone mentioned their grandfather had buried a gun, and it was subsequently dug up.

Back at the Loop a snake show is about to start and a crowd has gathered around the large enclosed area known as the snake pit. Out of a canvas bag drops a red-bellied black which, the snake man assures us, is shy and placid. However, he also tells us that most people get bitten when they're trying to kill snakes, and that this one definitely bites when it comes under attack.

The snake show at La Perouse has been running for 112 years. Until recently it was in the hands of the Cann family, and John Cann, who retired in 2010, used to recount stories of his grandmother, grandfather and father all working with snakes. John Mostyn has been doing the show since last November and combines the sensation of the snakes with plenty of advice and education, explaining what to do if bitten and how to apply a compression bandage.

It's the huge tiger snake, whose bite turns the blood to gelatin, that I find particularly unnerving. However, the eight-year-old girl next to me gasps with delight. "He's adorable," she exclaims.

The snake show relies on donations, so the hat is passed around before the highlight: Australia's most dangerous snake, the eastern brown.

As it heads straight in our direction, I back away in terror while the young girl leans into the pit, murmuring, "He's so cute ... "

A queue has formed at the nearby ice-cream van, with people buying those soft whips synonymous with beach days. I join the line and watch the man in the van covering cones in multi-coloured sprinkles or dipping the swirls in chocolate and nuts.

Having decided against the naturalist option, I have a quick swim at Congwong Bay Beach before walking through the national park to Henry Head. Here the Endeavour Lighthouse marks the north side of the entrance to Botany Bay and I find the now-disused 19th-century artillery battery. I don't come across many walkers but the little striped skinks sunning themselves on the path scuttle into the undergrowth at my approach.

On my way back I pass the area of bush known as Happy Valley, where there were unemployment camps in the Depression era, and from there to Yarra Bay I follow the Guriwal Bush Tucker Trail along a path through banksias and she-oaks and past beautiful wooden carvings of snakes, fish and turtles.

I reach Yarra Bay House, which was originally built as a cable station to replace the smaller one at La Perouse, and today is an administration centre for the local Aboriginal community. Indigenous singer and entertainer Vic Simms runs bushwalks and Aboriginal history tours; he's a Bidjigal man from this area, was born on the La Perouse Aboriginal Reserve and is privy to a wealth of information about the significance of the region.

As I walk with him through the bush, he points out a species of tea tree known as a calendar tree to Aborigines as its flowering in September-October means it's time to gather pipis.

He picks a native fig for me to taste and tells me his sister uses the fruit to make jam. He also takes me to the Coast Golf Club. Near the 15th hole overlooking Little Bay, he shows me rock carvings, worn by wind and weather, and believed to be thousands of years old.

My final stop is the Yarra Bay Sailing Club. On the stage beside the beach in front of the club a man is

setting up speakers. Then on goes the backing music and, microphone in hand, he's belting out Brown Sugar and then, as he breaks into Stand By Me, my toes can't help but tap along.

Three women are wiggling their bottoms and dancing as the sun's golden rays lengthen over Botany Bay. It's a glorious end to a Sunday at La Perouse.

#### Checklist

La Perouse Museum is open Sundays 10am-4pm. More: [mgnsw.org.au](http://mgnsw.org.au) (<http://mgnsw.org.au>).

Tours of Bare Island Fort take place on Sundays at 1.30pm, 2.30pm and 3.30pm; tickets from La Perouse Museum. More: [visit.heritage.nsw.gov.au](http://visit.heritage.nsw.gov.au) (<http://visit.heritage.nsw.gov.au>).

The snake show runs every 20 minutes from 1pm to 4pm on Sundays and public holidays, weather permitting. Vic Simms's bushwalks and Aboriginal history tours: (02) 9667 1510 or 0407 035 962. More: [sydney.com](http://sydney.com) (<http://sydney.com>)

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