

Differen Strokes

Story by Rosamund Burton

Cover Feature

Photos: Rosamund Burton & Lindy Hardcastle; Jay Platt, Jim Knight, Gab Scanu (aerial).

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In the 1920s baths were carved into the rocks along the Northern Beaches, and they became popular swimming places. A decade later in the 1930s, providing work for the unemployed during the Depression, the ocean pools started to be built. There are seven pools between North Narrabeen and Palm Beach, and over a couple of days life-long swimmer, Lindy Hardcastle, and I visited each one...

North Narrabeen

'Pool Closed' the sign says when we arrive at North Narrabeen (*right*) at 7.30am. However, a man appears from the direction of the pool with

a towel over his shoulder.

"Don't pay any attention to the sign," he says, "The pool gets cleaned on Tuesday night, and the cleaners have forgotten to turn it around."

Size-wise North Narrabeen is the most impressive of all the Northern Beaches ocean pools. It's a 50-metre by 18-metre pool with a wooden boardwalk built within a larger 70-metre by 40-metre wading pool. It's located at the entrance of the Narrabeen Lagoon at the north end of Narrabeen Beach.

We reach the changing rooms as three men - Yorkshire-born Bob Gibson, Garry Smith and Greg Johnson -



Cover Feature



ABOVE: Braving the elements - Lindy Hardcastle at North Narrabeen pool; CENTRE: author Rosamund with (l-r) Bob Gibson, Garry Smith and Greg Johnson; RIGHT: Mona Vale pool in a lull between ocean surges.



Cover Feature

emerge from the water looking chilly.

"The water is around 15 degrees today," says Manly-born Johnson, who has been swimming at the pool daily for 38 years. He is an accountant and from here heads to his office in the city for the day.

"I usually swim between 500 metres and a kilometre; I've done 500 metres today, because it's cold and also rough."

He tells us that the pool was built in the 1930s under the Unemployment Relief Scheme. It cost [then] Warringah Council £494 to build and opened in March 1934. In 1933, in anticipation of the pool opening, the Narrabeen Ladies Amateur Swimming Club was formed - now known as the Narrabeen Lakes Amateur Swimming Club. The pool is also home to the Shivering Sharks, a club which formed in the 1960s, and in

winter hosts the Charlie Brady Memorial Narrabeen Shield in the pool (and doesn't allow competitors to wear wetsuits).

Greg Johnson also mentions Joe Crowley, who passed away two years ago. "He was known as the mayor of the pool, and taught swimming here for over 55 years."

Next to emerge from the water is Leon Wickens, 77. Pulling a large piece of blue tac out of his ear, he tells us with a grin: "I was born in Lakemba and moved to Narrabeen in 1951. I've been swimming here, on and off, for 60 years." He joined the NAB in 1955 and for

many years was bank manager at the local branch.

"Starting the day with a swim is excellent for the physical health, and spiritually as well. It makes you feel so good. We swim and then all go to the surf club and have a cup of coffee... it doesn't really matter what happens for the rest of the day."

The tide has now come up over the edge of the pool and the surf is crashing into it. So, in a lull in the waves, we walk quickly along the wooden boardwalk to the far end, then plunge into the cold water and do a fast 50 metres back towards the beach.

Mona Vale

We pull off Surfview Road at the north end of Mona Vale Beach. A hundred metres from the headland across the sand on the rock promontory which divides Mona Vale Beach from Bongin Bongin Bay is the 30-metre pool and also a kids' pool. Ocean baths were built here in 1914 and then improved in the 1930s.

However, a sign saying 'Beach Closed' has been planted into the sand, and the concrete walkway to the pool, and the pool itself are hidden under spume and spray, so we can't swim today. It only dawns on us now that the pool at Narrabeen might have been closed today because of the rough conditions and unusually high tide due to the 'super moon'.

We return at 7 o'clock the following morning, and walk into the change rooms to find it full of women dressing after their swim in the pool.

"We're the Buckettes," they chime. Eighty-two-year-old Jenny Lewis is the oldest and the founding member of this group of 20 women. Ten years ago she was swimming

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LEFT: Mona Vale's 'Buckettes' (l-r) Jenny Lewis, Maggie Perdrian, Mina Pontello and Pauline Unsworth; ABOVE: the concrete approach to Mona Vale pool; RIGHT: The long, thin Newport pool on the beach's southern tip.

in the pool, and started talking to Pauline Unsworth, and then they introduced themselves to Margot Yorke. The three of them began having coffee after their morning swim, and going to the movies together. A couple of other women joined the group, and it grew from there.

"People were attracted to our laughter and happiness," Pauline explains. "Rain, hail or shine we swim. In winter we put hot water in our bucket

and stand in it after swimming to warm up."

"We share clothes," adds another Buckette. The change room is affectionately called the Shed and the clothes, including a purple bra, are known as 'The Shed Brand'. They have also had Buckette shirts printed, which several of them are wearing.

"Every July," continues Pauline, "we go up on the train to Moree to the hot spring baths. We've been through so much together - life experiences,

births, deaths and weddings. You get to know each other so well. And," she adds, "when you're naked there's no hiding from each other."

The Buckettes head to the Bronze Kiosk at Mona Vale Surf Club for coffee, and Lindy and I walk onto the beach and along the narrow concrete walkway to this pool nestled in the rocks in the between the two beaches. Water is breaking over the edge and it's exhilarating to do laps in the clean water.

Newport

We walk down the walkway on the corner of Calvert Parade and The Boulevard onto the beach, and follow the track at the southern end of Newport Beach around the rocks to the pool. It's not hard to pick our way over the rocks, but we're told later by a regular swimmer that the path has been destroyed by recent storms. A couple of people are swimming up and down this 50-metre pool with its natural

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rock bottom, including David Hodkinson, who has only lived in the area for a couple of years, but cycles down regularly to swim his laps. "This is the best rock pool," he says. "It's always quiet."

However, it wasn't always quiet. From the 1860s onwards steamers brought people from Sydney to Newport Wharf, and they would walk to the surf beach. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 31 January 1926 the opening of 'the new rock baths', which had cost £560. An ocean pool was built in the current location in the 1930s.

This pool and Mona Vale's have no electricity, so the council workers who clean all seven ocean pools have to wear headlamps when they are cleaning the pool at night.

In August 2012, early morning swimmers arrived to find an 11-metre, 30-tonne young adult humpback whale carcass had broken the post and chain where it had washed over, and lay lodged in the pool.

The high tide and big swell that evening washed the car-



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walk down the steps and just submerge myself into the maelstrom of white water.

Sitting on a bench above the pool, like the Socrates of the ocean pools, is Michael Ossipoff. He lives on Clareville Beach and tells us he wets his gills daily in either Whale Beach, Bilgola, Newport or Avalon ocean pools.

"They have different personalities," he muses. "In this pool, like Newport, you feel closely connected to the surf and the ocean in general." The three of us gaze down at the pool awash with surf. "The pools have a value beyond the mental and physical health they provide. They also draw community together. They should be viewed as being one of the jewels of the area," he says.

Whale Beach

It's six o'clock in the evening when we park on The Strand, and walk south along the beach to the shallow 25-metre pool.

There is no breeze and no longer sunlight on the pool. A single swimmer is doing lengths, 73-year-old Maria Salome from Guatemala who came with her husband to Australia in 1984, and who has lived in the area since 1994.

"I swim every day except Sundays, because there are usually too many people. Even in winter I swim. I love it.

"I usually come at half past seven in the morning, and there are about 10 or 12 other people," she says. Then her eyes well with tears. "My husband has cancer and is in the Royal North Shore Hospital. My



ABOVE: Colour contrast of rocks and pool at Whale Beach; RIGHT: Maria Salome swims six days a week but avoids Sunday crowds.



son had flown from Germany and my daughter from Holland. I'm here at this time today because I just wanted a swim."

She is so strong in the face of such sadness, and yet again I am reminded of what sanctuaries these ocean pools are.

We place our bags on a rock ledge, before sinking into the still water and, aware of its healing power, do four slow lengths. Tiny whiting flit through the water.

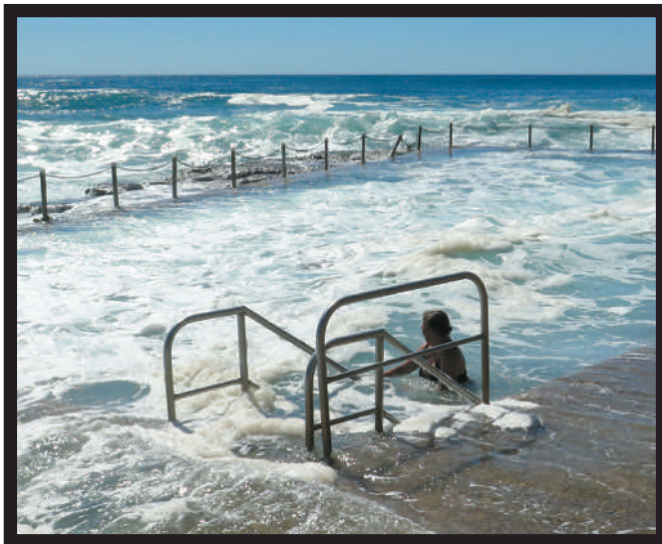
Palm Beach

We reach Palm Beach at half past four. The 50-metre ocean pool is nestled into the southern end of the long beach, and accessed from Ocean Road.

Seventy-two-year-old Tina Horkan swims here twice a day. "Years ago they were filming

Home and Away here. There were all these cameras and lights, and Chris Hemsworth was standing in the middle of the pool. I was doing breaststroke and he was in my way, so I gave him a kick. He gave me a devastatingly beautiful smile and I felt so bad."

Christina Webber and Jackie Green are sitting on the sandstone steps below the changing rooms soaking in the warm afternoon sun after their swim. They have been friends for 16 years, are house painters and currently paint-



ABOVE: Lindy struggles through the 'washing machine' at Avalon pool.

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LEFT: No black line - swimmers get into a rhythm at Palm Beach pool; CENTRE: Tina Horkan had an encounter with actor Chris Hemsworth; RIGHT: Christina Webber and Jackie Green swim after work every day.

ing a house in Bilgola. They are both speckled with white paint after their day's work.

"We finish work at four," Jackie explains, "and come down and swim a kilometre, then sit and talk for as long as we can before going home. It's a fantastic way to finish the day."

"It's beautiful here in every sort of weather," Christina explains. "It changes our outlook. Even if we're tired we know we'll feel so good afterwards. We look forward

to it, and doing it consistently keeps us in good shape and also a good frame of mind."

Christina moved to Avalon 25 years ago, and Jackie has lived in the area her whole life, growing up in Avalon, and now living in Clareville.

"We meet lots of people here," Christina tells me. "People are very friendly. I think swimming opens people up to conversation. You're happy after a swim."

This is also the pool, where for over 65 years Jack Carter,

who is now in his 80s, has taught kids to swim every summer. He taught Kerry and Ros Packer to swim, and then their son, Jamie.

In the distance is Barrenjoey headland, and the lighthouse, and then the long expanse of Palm Beach's red sand. Gazing at the idyllic view we lower ourselves into the water. And we are both filled with that great sense of well-being which comes from plunging into ocean pools as we swim our final lengths.

The ocean pools are cleaned

weekly during the summer months, and fortnightly during the winter months of June, July, August. Cleaning times depend on the tides and the weather, and people are not able to swim in the pools three hours prior to cleaning and 12 hours after.

** For the pool cleaning timetable go to northern-beaches.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/rockpools.*

Sources trove.nla.gov.au; for more information visit oceanpoolsnsw.net.au

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