

travel diarywith
Mike Smith**Deals come thick and fast**

THE improved value of the Australian dollar coupled with rising confidence about home ownership and job security has created an optimism travel companies believe will lead to an upsurge in bookings for the dream-of-a-lifetime long-haul international holiday.

Travel agencies say all the gloom and doom of the global financial crisis seems to be a thing of the past, judging by market interest.

And with airlines continuing to discount their fares, the future is also looking rosy for those who want to save up for some extra spending money on their travels.

Even the escorted tour prices are below those of the previous year.

"Early indications from our business to the US, which is up by 21 per cent on last year, show people are prepared to travel again," Trafalgar Tours managing director, Paul McGrath, says.

"There's a confidence that wasn't there earlier this year. They realise that they still have their house, still have their job, and the dollar is strengthening. Why not take the trip?"

McGrath was speaking at the launch of Trafalgar's Europe and Britain 2010 holiday program and its new global branding "rediscover the romance of travel".

"It's not just about couples having a good time," he says. "It's about nostalgia, about the dream of travel."

And to support the comprehensive 224-page booklet filled with holiday itineraries are return air fare deals such as \$1399 from Sydney to Paris, Frankfurt, Rome and Athens flying Emirates (bookings and payment by December 24 for travel from February 1-24, 2010), \$1907 from Sydney to London flying Qantas/British Airways, including a night's stay in the capital and transfers (bookings and payments before December 18 for travel between October 4 and November 11, 2010).

Further good news is that tour prices have been reduced by around 6 per cent.

And two new itineraries — 10-day Ultimate France and 17-day Wonders of the Ancient World — have been added.

By popular demand, Trafalgar's Be My Guest program, where travellers are invited by locals to share traditionally prepared meals in a range of dining locations, has been extended and is now included on two Irish regional tours.

Details: trafalgartours.com.au



Culture vultures: Paris is on the itinerary

The ripple effect

The Hawkesbury River offers an ideal place to soothe the senses, writes **Grant Jones**

UNDER the surface of the water, by tiny little Bar Island on the Hawkesbury near the Mooney Mooney Bridge, you can see the large flat body and broad fins. It is clearly a water creature, many thousands of years old.

But while talk of Hawkesbury River plesiosaurs may have made the news recently, this ancient beast is an Aboriginal rock carving, surprisingly still visible under the tide line of the island's shore.

Just 90 minutes from the CBD, the Hawkesbury, with its rocky cliffs carved by the river out of sandstone, contains a wealth of Aboriginal, colonial and modern history.

A group of workers on the island had just packed up and were on their way home, via Tom's Taxi, after a hard day of identifying all the native trees and bushes on the island and clearing everything else out, including the lantana which strangles some of the surrounding national park.

The local council is paying for the clean-up of the island, which is also the location of 70-80 graves, several restored gravestones, and the sandstone fireplace of the old church.

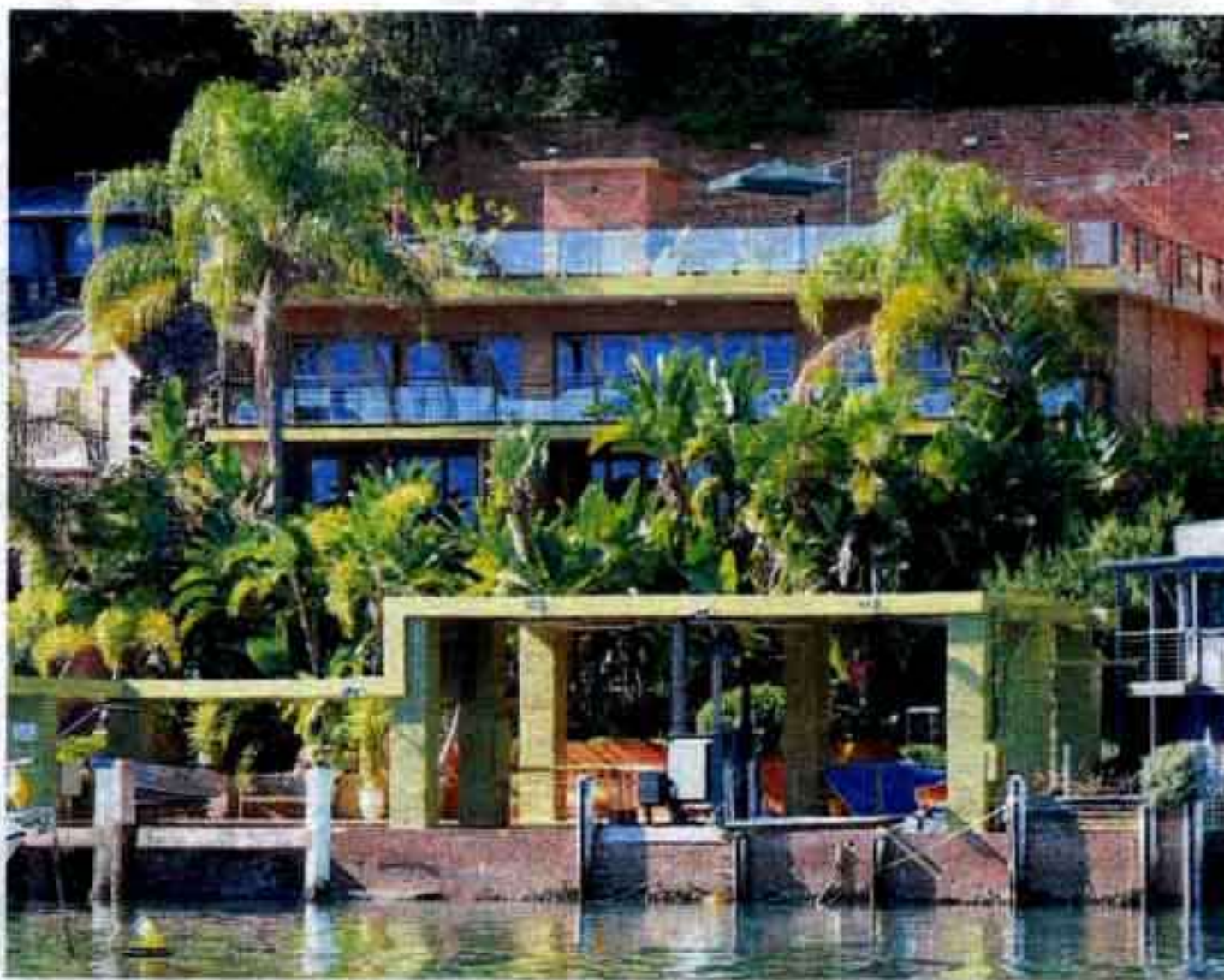
One of the most famous gravestones belongs to "Granny Lewis", the Aboriginal wife of German-born convict John Lewis, who died in 1880. The pair were Hawkesbury pioneers. Lewis was a limeburner, who took his cargo to Sydney in his own small boat. The couple had a large family and their many descendants still live in the area.

There are plenty of other things to see in this beautiful ancient waterway and a trip on Tom's Taxi, with its twin 225hp outboards, is just the way to do it.

Earlier, Tom had picked us up from Hawkesbury River Marina and dropped us, our friends and our supplies on the pier at the Boat House on Hawkesbury, an imposing six-bedroom house accessible only by water.

After an excellent barbie on the bottom deck, Tom picked us up again and gave us a guided tour of the islands, oyster leases and a little potted history.

A native of Dundee, Scotland, Tom intended to stay for a few days. That was in



Lap of luxury: The Boat House on Hawkesbury at Little Wobby Beach (above) and (below) the indoor pool at the six-bedroom retreat

Pictures: Grant Jones

1979. Since then he has built up a couple of businesses and quite a bit of local knowledge.

The Boat House sits on Little Wobby Beach, and while there is no beach to speak of, any one of the private spa baths in the six rooms, or the indoor swimming pool, and the big spa beside it, will satisfy any desire to have a soak.

There is also a large spa on the roof of the house, built in 1987, which has sweeping 180-degree views, including to the west towards Dangar, the Marina and towards the Mooney Mooney Bridge. If the scenery looks familiar, some of *Wolverine* was filmed here.

About 100 houses dot Little Wobby and most, by the looks of things, are weekenders and holiday homes. The island residents of Dangar, some CBD commuters, live their own semi-isolated existence in the middle of the Hawkesbury bay.

The current owners of the Boat House purchased the property four years ago.

While it has an air of the 1980s about it, with the occasional plastic flower and a touch of timber veneer, the property still has a pleasant feel and the mind boggles at the possibilities of holding one big party here, given its size.

The kitchen has several ovens. There are enough wine glasses to start on champers and end on a sticky and not even turn on a tap. Cooking utensils, pots and pans, cutlery and crockery could cater for a dozen or more guests, both at the dining table, lounging on the balcony, having a spa on the top deck, or taking advantage of every other square centimetre of the 1400sq m property.

A mid-week break is just the tonic as traffic, on both road and river, is at a minimum.

It's not suitable for children, given its open-plan nature, multi-storeys, stairs and access to the water. But as evening brings about a glorious sunset, I suggest you crack a bottle of champagne, or a beer, drink in the views — and forget about the kids.

need to know

Getting there: **Follow Pacific Highway or Pennant Hills Rd to North Coast Freeway, take Brooklyn exit and head to Hawkesbury River Marina. Or take the train to Hawkesbury River Station.**

Stay: **Boat House on Hawkesbury, rates from \$600 per room, per weekend, boathouseonhawkesbury.com.au**

Worth seeing: **Take the ferry from Brooklyn to Dangar Island, or even better, Tom's Taxi (0410 554 777) for a private tour of Dangar and Bar Islands.**

Dine and wine: **Tom is also a dab hand on the pans as he runs Lifeboat Seafood (9985 7005) at Hawkesbury River Marina and can supply a seafood feast on request. There are also several other eating options at the marina, including top coffee at Monks and beers at the pub. Just remember, you have to get back to the house.**

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