

A person in a kayak is silhouetted against the ocean at sunset or sunrise. The sky is a deep blue with wispy white clouds, and the water is dark with gentle waves. The person is in the center of the frame, holding a paddle.

WANDERLUST

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25. Swimming in Salt

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Sydney, Australia

It's 6 a.m. on a beach north of Sydney, Australia. The sun inches over the horizon, shooting sparks of orange and yellow into the new day. My husband and his two sons stand in silhouette with the rising sun around their bare backs. Boom! A giant column of water hits their bodies. The three determined males dig their feet into the slim wall between the ocean and the pool. The air is filled with the smell of fish and salt and seaweed. The only sound is the crash of the waves pounding the wall and splashing around them into the rock pool.

The three stand, facing the Pacific Ocean on a narrow concrete wall clinging to the heavy iron chains separating them from the huge advancing waves. The rusty thick loops are strung between waist high steel pillars lined along the wall. Behind them sits the man-made rock pool carved into the ancient stone cliffs. In front is the endless ocean at dawn.

This tradition of going to the rock pool at high tide is passed from father to son to son. They wake up before sunrise on a summer's day in January for the drive to Newport Beach to hold onto the chains and let the surf pound their bodies. My husband, with no care for the danger, did this when he was seven. He took his older son when he was young. Now he and his 30-year-old son are bringing the much younger one at age 12 as a rite of passage. The conditions have to be perfect — high tide for maximum wave height and the rock pool in Newport — for this specific position directly facing the Pacific.

These men in my life practice this uniquely Australian ritual. The tide, or rock pools are a special feature in this part of the world. The Sydney area beaches have at least 30 of them, also called

ocean pools or sea baths, carved in the rock along the ocean. These pools — ranging in size from small to Olympic length — were constructed beginning in the late 1800s to protect swimmers from shark attacks and riptides. These small bodies of water are tucked away at the either end of most of the beaches. Constructed out of the rock usually with cement, the pools provide smoother water to swim in, flushed full at high tide. Each pool is unique. Most are free for the public, though a few charge a small fee. Visitors include Olympic swimmers in training to small children navigating the water for the first time.

My husband, a native of Sydney, described this beach culture to me, a native Mississippian, before I visited Australia for the first time. He told me stories of the tide pools. They were as big a part of growing up to him as the kudzu, which grew along the highways of my Mississippi childhood, was to me. His grandfather promised each child a new wristwatch for swimming the length of the tide pool at Palm Beach, where the family had a beach house. As the oldest grandchild, he was the first to transverse the pool and win the coveted watch and the pride that came along with it.

His older son — born in London, raised in America, currently living in Sydney — now has the grandfather's wristwatch and the distinction of being the oldest grandchild in this generation. The younger son is American born and bred, but can stomach the disgusting Vegemite as only a real Australian can. Now he is trying to really prove his heritage by passing the test of letting the surf pound his young body at sunrise. He was born for this Australian ritual.

Among the Northern beaches, rock pools to visit include Newport, of course, but also Palm Beach, Avalon Beach, Whale Beach, Mona Vale. Then in Sydney, local favorites are Bondi, Bronte, Coogee, Clovelly, among others. Each pool has its own distinct personality and you have to find your favorite. At all these pools, you'll see the dedicated daily lap swimmers in the water at sunrise all year and the splashing families in the afternoons in the summer.

Some of the first rock pools built in Sydney in the late nineteenth century were in Coogee, Bronte, and Bondi municipal

beaches. Newcastle and Wollongong pools were older by several decades, but these city ocean pools had an early influence on Australia's beach and swimming culture, as well as the surf lifesaving movement, according to my research. These early rock pools had restrictions on mixed gender swimming. Coogee Bay even had a women's pool on one side and a men's on the other. Waverly set different hours for men and women. Swimming clubs were formed in the early pools along with competitions and carnivals started which still continue to this day.

Surf lifesavers clubs, another unique Australian tradition, were formed officially in 1907 and helped to develop pools at many beaches that didn't already have one. The pools became training facilities for the surf lifesavers and provided more access to safe swimming when these volunteer lifeguards were not on duty. A wave of new pools were built at Sydney beaches between the world wars and gender-segregated swimming ceased at all locations, enabling women to train for swimming competition along with the men. Lights were also added at several pools for nighttime swimming. In the postwar years, many larger, public in-ground pools were built for year round swimming but the ocean pools remained recreational swimming playgrounds for all ages. To this day, families and swimmers alike enjoy these unique pools along the Sydney beaches.

The chill of the water braces my husband and his sons as their bodies become warmer with the rising sun at the edge of the rock pool. Pleased with their adventure and invigorated for another summer day, they strut back along the pool wall raising their arms in a collective fist pump. The tradition has been completed. They feel strong and invincible.