

After Hours

A friendly local: one of 27 species of bird on Dangar Island.



The Bathers Boatshed ... one of many private rentals on the island.



River retreat

Escape the city and set your watch to island time on a weekend break along the Hawkesbury River.

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THERE are 27 different species of birds on Dangar Island, and it seems like they're all outside my window, warbling and screeching a raucous welcome to a new day. But we're here to relax, so we ignore them, and pretty soon the dawn chorus quiets down and we get back to the business of sleeping in.

Home to a vibrant community of artists and writers, painters and potters, Dangar Island is just 90 minutes north from Sydney's bustling heart by road or rail, and then a boat trip up the Hawkesbury River. Its history precedes European settlement by hundreds, even thousands of years.

Once a birthing island frequented by the women of the Guringai tribe, today it's the only residential island on the Hawkesbury River, with a permanent population of about 200, and a steady flow of visitors — day trippers and weekenders who come to wind down on its 30 hectares of bush and beach.

There are no cars on the island, which means there's no morning traffic to interrupt our slumber, and by the time we finally arise, morning has well and truly broken.

We're on island time, so the day is ours. What to do?

Take a morning constitutional around the island? Lie in a lounge and read a book? Settle in at the local cafe for brunch, and perhaps a friendly game of Scrabble? Go for a Sunday afternoon game of bowls? Swim at the beach? Kayak on the river? Charter a boat to explore neighbouring islands and national parks?

We opt for the walk and take a comfortable 45-minute stroll around the island.

Our base for the weekend is a 1950s bungalow nestled in the shade of the gums and wattles, and basking in the sun along the beachfront. The weekender dominates the low-lying north side of the island.

Heading south, the island

From almost any vantage point on the island, the magnificent Hawkesbury is evident.

inclines steeply. The houses here tend to be expansive and modern, with generous windows and wraparound decks designed to make the most of the views up on high.

Many of the locals are keen gardeners, so in addition to the lush green foliage and blossoming wildflowers fringing the pathways, there are terraced gardens and lovingly tended vegetable patches to admire.

We marvel at the all-round

river views, as well as the displays of guerilla knitting wound craftily around street signs.

From almost any vantage point on the island, the magnificent Hawkesbury is evident. Like us, a gentle breeze is circumnavigating the island, spurring the tidal river's waves into glimmering peaks.

Later in the day, after a brunch of Dangar Island Cafe's famous summer fruit pudding, we swim. The

water lapping gently at the island's beach is refreshingly cool, and we're ready for some evening entertainment: drinks, dinner, music, and dancing to a live band at The Fifth Lane restaurant and adjacent bowling club. We're here to relax and recharge, and we do.

Dangar Island is a stunning, family-friendly reminder that you don't have to travel far from home to find respite from the busyness of city life. ●

With no cars on the island, wheelbarrows are the ideal transport for luggage.



FACTFILE

Getting there: From Sydney, travel 55 minutes north to Brooklyn by car or train, then it's a 20 minute boat trip by water taxi or regular ferry service to Dangar Island, which is 1km from the mouth of the Hawkesbury River and Broken Bay. www.hawkesburyriverferries.com.au

Where to stay: Private rentals rule the roost on Dangar Island. There is a range of homes to suit varying needs, with an average price of \$750 per weekend (two nights) for a four-sleeper in the peak season. Contact Hawkesbury River Boatshed and Weekender Rentals (www.hawkesburyriver.com) or

Hawkesbury River Real Estate (www.hawkesburyriverrealestate.com.au) for details and bookings.

Facilities: Dangar Island has EFTPOS and credit card facilities, but no cash machines. The local cafe serves breakfast and lunch, and sells some basic, if a little pricey, provisions. If you plan to self-cater, come prepared. For weekend lunches and dinners, visit newly opened The Fifth Lane restaurant at the Bowling Club.

More information: www.dangarislandcafe.com