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News

The DIY Guide to Rugby Tours Down Under

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How do you follow a Grand Slam? With an epic, three-test series in Australia, of course. David Walsh has the travelling fan's survival guide Ireland last won against the Wallabies on Australian soil 38 years ago, a record the team will be looking to set right when they arrive down under for a three-Test series in June. For fans embarking on their own Antipodean odyssey, we've come up with the ultimate survival guide to the host cities in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney, complete with insider intel on where to grab a bite to eat and a cold beer before the rivalry heats up on the pitch.

BRISBANE Game on: June 9, Suncorp Stadium Set the scene: If Australians are known for one thing, it's for not taking themselves too seriously, and here in 'Bris Vegas', the relaxed Aussie approach to life is more apparent than anywhere else Down Under.

The city basks in some 300 days of sunshine per year, going some way to explaining why Brisbanites flock to the bars and beer gardens along the Brisbane river, a wide serpentine waterway which eases its way through the high rises and lush green spaces of this understated northern gem.

What to eat: If there is one thing easygoing Brisbane knows how to do well, it's street food. Eat Street Northshore (eatstreetmarkets.com), occupying an historic former dockyard on the riverside, sees over 70 vendors selling their mouth-watering wares from shipping containers every weekend. LONGTIME (longtime.com.au) in Fortitude Valley serves up jaw-dropping Thai cuisine, while the classic burgers at DA'Burger (daburger.com.au) in New Farm - made according to the Holy Trinity of locally-sourced meat, salad and bread buns - will slake any hangover.

The beer: Beers from Byron Bay-based craft brewery Stone & Wood are the poison of choice in these parts. Schooners of Pacific Ale cost \$12 (€7.50) at Riverland (riverlandbrisbane.com.au) - just a 30-minute walk from the Suncorp Stadium.

Don't miss: Brisbane is encircled by expansive national parks. Just fifteen minutes out of the city sees you transported into the middle of some incredible bushland landscapes, perfect for mountain biking, wild swimming, hikes or just picnicking. Mount Coot-tha is accessible by public transport and gives spectacular views over Brisbane, especially at night.

What to buy: Producing spirits using lemon myrtle and eucalyptus gum leaf, you can guarantee no one else will have uniquely Australian-flavoured liqueurs from Tamborine Mountain Distillery taking pride of place in their drinks cabinet back home.

Where to go next: Queensland is a thriller seeker's paradise. Just an hours' drive south of Brisbane is the Gold Coast, a surfers' nirvana. Get Wet Surf School (getwetsurf.com) runs lessons in Surfers Paradise for novices, or if you're an experienced surfer, shredding the waves at Burleigh Heads should be top of your list.

The Great Barrier Reef - stretching 2,000km parallel to the Queensland coast - is in a state of decline but it remains one of the world's last natural wonders and is a must-visit for diving and snorkelling. The southernmost tip can be accessed near Bundaberg which is just over four hours' drive north of Brisbane.

MELBOURNE Game on: June 16, AAMI Park Set the scene: "Melbourne is the capital of sport; undoubtedly the best sports precinct in the world." It's hard to argue with Catherine Murphy, a former RTE Sport journalist from Cavan who has worked in the city for the past 11 years covering rugby for Australian broadcaster ABC.

When it's not hosting the Australian Open tennis, the Formula One Grand Prix or the Melbourne Cup (horse racing's most lucrative race), Victoria's state capital is seducing visitors with its cosmopolitan European style, a city replete with enough rooftop bars to give Manhattan a run for its money. The soul of Melbourne, though, is encapsulated within its unique patchwork of 230 laneways, the gritty home of world-class restaurants, bars and street murals.

What to eat: Catherine's top tip? "I'm a pasta addict so my absolute favourite is Il Solito Posto (ilsolitoposto.com.au) on George Parade just off Collins street," she says. "You won't have room for dessert after one of their pastas!" A succulent porterhouse steak is also a standout option on the excellent pub grub menu at the Richmond Club Hotel (richmondclubhotel.com.au), a stone's throw from the AAMI Stadium.

The beer: If you want to pass for a Melburnian, having a local Carlton Draught lager in hand should do the trick. A pint will set you back \$7 (€4.40) at the Richmond Club Hotel during their midweek 'Happy Hour' from 5pm till 7pm.

Don't miss: The perfect way to wind down after a big Ireland win over the Wallabies is to take in an AFL match in its home city. Reigning champions Richmond Tigers take on Geelong Cats on Sunday 17th June at Melbourne Cricket Ground.

What to buy: You can't visit the city where Aussie Rules football first started and not take home an AFL Guernsey as a souvenir (that's a short-sleeved jersey for the uninitiated).

Where to go next: You shouldn't leave Melbourne without renting a car and cruising along one of the world's most venerated coastal driving routes. The 250-km Great Ocean Drive sweeps west from the city, taking you from rainforest vistas to the enigmatic 12 Apostles sea stacks towering over Victoria's dramatic coastline.

With 300 vineyards, the understated Yarra Valley is often overlooked despite its proximity to the city. If you consider yourself in any way an oenophile, get rapping on the region's cellar doors for a taste of some outstanding cabernet sauvignons and chardonnays.

SYDNEY Game on: June 23, Allianz Stadium Set the scene: If there's one thing Sydney isn't, it's subtle. Australia's largest city doesn't do things by half measures, from the wow factor of Sydney Harbour to the swathes of native bush that cuts through its modern, pulsing streets. Loud, dizzily energetic, Sydney is incomparable to some of its more reserved and sedate siblings. Celebrations are what the city does best, so where better to end the test series; whether in the sweet ecstasy of victory or drowning our sorrows in defeat.

What to eat: Sydney has a bit of a fixation for seafood. Bondi's Best (bondisbest.com.au) combines freshly prepped maki rolls and sashimi with bubbly, beer-battered flathead fish and chips, all within easy reach of the beach. For the epitome of Sydney dining, you can't go wrong with the Australian-Chinese dishes at Billy Kwong (billykwong.com.au). Think oriental spices fused with Australian ingredients like wallaby and spanner crab.

The beer: The wares of the city's many craft breweries, including Modus Operandi and Batch Brewing Company, are showcased at The Taphouse (taphousedarlo.com.au), with its sprawling three floors and rooftop bar, which is also only 15 minutes walk from the Allianz Stadium. Or try DOG Hotel (doghotel.com.au) for a \$10 (€6) tasting paddle of your choice of three of the 59 Australian and local craft beers on tap.

Don't miss: Scaling Sydney Harbour bridge is one way to blow away the cobwebs after the inevitable test victory celebrations. Latching on to the steel colossus, you'll ascend to 134m above sea level for an unparalleled 360-degree panorama over the entire city. Sydney also boasts 100 beaches; from busy surf beaches to secluded coves. While Bondi is the most famous and closest to the city centre, your best bet is to catch a ferry to Manly or Watsons Bay to swim or snorkel in the 20C water in relative peace.

What to buy: Forget boomerangs, cork hats and kangaroo paw keyrings. You'll want to get a lasting souvenir from your time in Oz, and you can't get anything more enduring than a pair of iconic R.M. Williams boots. Sydney has seven R.M. Williams outlets, stocking all the latest designs.

Where to go next: You should factor in a few days of downtime at the end of tests so you can rent a lodge in the idyllic Hunter Valley. With a glass of the region's best wine in hand while watching mobs of kangaroos graze in the vineyards, you'll never want to board that plane home. Or, if you're still in 'après ski' mode, rent some skis and hit the slopes in the Australian Alps. The ski season on Mount Kosciuszko - a 5.5 hour drive from Sydney - starts in June.

GETTING THERE Packages: Rugby Travel Ireland (rugbytravelireland.com) is offering three different packages, taking in the first and second tests (€3,695 per person), the second and third tests (€3,995 per person) or all three tests (€4,995 per person). Each option includes international flights from Dublin with Emirates, internal flights between the host cities, 4* accommodation throughout, match tickets and

breakfasts. Other extras include excursions, with a trip to the Great Barrier Reef, a highlight of the latter two package offers.

Killester Travel (rugbytravel.ie) has both a two and a three tests package on offer starting from €3,695 per person. The two tests package starts in Melbourne on June 13 and ends in Sydney on June 24. The three tests package starts in Brisbane on June 6 and leaves Sydney on June 26. Prices include international flights from Dublin via Dubai with Emirates and internal flights within Australia, as well as 4* accommodation, transfers, match tickets, excursions and meals where noted in your itinerary.

Flights: All three host cities are accessible from Dublin via four international hubs; Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com), Dubai with Emirates/Qantas (emirates.com), Abu Dhabi with Etihad (etihad.com) and Doha with Qatar Airways. One-way flights for the first test in Brisbane start from €932 with Cathay Pacific, €879 with Emirates, €850 with Etihad and €1,058 with Qatar Airways.

If you're planning on moving between cities, the cheapest internal flights from Brisbane to Melbourne start from €57 one-way with Qantas' low-cost carrier Jetstar (Jetstar.com). Intercity services between Melbourne and Sydney start from €52 one-way. A 20kg hold bag can be added for €11 per bag when booking online.

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