

The ABCs of Travel Dating in Sydney

SHAI NIELSON



WRITER'S COMMENT: To me, traveling abroad can be one of two things: a picture-perfect replica of everyone else's time in that same place, or a unique experience of curiosity and exploration. Both can provide amazing memories and the quality of each depends on the traveler. I don't believe I can tell someone exactly what they should do to have the best time in a foreign country, but I do believe options are a good thing for people who want to go outside the guidebook. So, when I started this travel feature for UWP110, I knew I wanted it to give people insight into an unconventional way of enjoying the beauty of Sydney. While dating abroad isn't a new concept, it is something with more potential than one might originally think. As long as you're safe, what comes out of it is up to you.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Shai Nielson's "The ABCs of Travel Dating in Sydney" exhibits all the characteristics of an engaging travel feature article. The evocative description, details, and figurative language transport the reader to a variety of Sydney locales, and the strong narrative arc—structured around a number dates—effectively conveys Shai's travel experiences. The article serves not only to give the reader a sense of place, but also a sense of Shai as a character in her own story—a traveler whose sense of humor is equal to her sense of adventure. Overall, Shai manages to strike a balance between the lighthearted and the informative in this travel feature—something that is quite difficult to achieve. Further, while this article makes a great case for travel dating, it also demonstrates why getting out of one's comfort zone is an invaluable travel experience. It should be

assigned reading for every student who is about to embark on one of UC Davis' study abroad programs.

—*Melissa Bender, University Writing Program*

The best thing about dating while traveling is that you don't have to feel guilty for re-wearing that same one cute outfit you brought with you on every first date. The second best thing about dating while traveling is that you occasionally get free meals from your dates, which makes your travel budget eke a bit further. The third best thing really only applies if you're from California and traveling abroad, but it's when your date likes your accent because you sound like "people from the movies."

I suppose I should preface this piece by saying that I've never done "real" dating before, where you meet with a stranger or a minimal acquaintance and resort to, "What's your favorite era of art?" when you run out of conversation topics. All my past relationships were with people I had known for a while beforehand and some were even my best friends. The idea of using a dating app to meet strangers in a foreign land seemed completely out of my comfort zone, so that's why I did it. Safety was my priority, but even with that in mind I was able to get out there and make memories. In fact, travel dating, in my limited experience, was a good way to at least see new places and try new things, even when my date was boring and actually gave me time to ponder art eras to answer the aforementioned question.

As a single person, it was a way to experience a different side of travel. While tourists snapped photos of the Sydney skyline, I shared a kiss on a night ferry just as fireworks went off on the Harbour Bridge. While classmates in my study abroad program paid \$20 each to split a meal at an Internet-famous tourist restaurant, I visited a food market in an undiscovered part of the city with a local who knew where to find the best and cheapest tacos. I still had to weed out a lot of the people who sent messages asking if I wanted to come over for wine at midnight, but travel dating had many more perks than downsides and is how I know my experiences in Sydney can never be replicated by any other tourist.

Adventures in Nature

Hiking is a great date idea because you don't have to wear heels or a tie and silence is just time to ponder the nature around you. In Sydney, there are numerous hiking options that I've done with groups or pairs, but the Spit Bridge to Manly Walk lends itself best as a good date option. It's six miles to finish the entire route but closer to ten if you take every detour and lookout opportunity, which was useful since the date was going well and I didn't want it to end. If the date goes sour, though, there are also numerous escapes along the route to get back to civilization.

Now, six miles may seem like a lot since that's multiple hours of hiking, but, not only is that plenty of time to connect with a date, it's also more than worth it for the stunning views of beaches, bays, and boats.

From the first steps on the dirt path, I was graced with a glistening blue opal shoreline to my right and a dense greenery to my left. Yellow ascotted bush turkeys aerated the land with their digging and burying while water dragons and blue-tongued lizards acted as mile markers with their frequent off-path poses. Butterflies danced through the trees like ballet fairies, stopping to do pirouettes and leaps in front of my nose, and invisible birds enlivened the soundtrack to my journey. Cliff edges formed the boundaries, but every possible opening in the trees was a portal to a hidden white-sand beach or a hilltop view of the harbor.

I caught a first kiss at Arabanoo lookout and held hands with a fellow adventurous spirit as we traversed rocks and roots along the shoreline. Given more dates came after this one with other people, it clearly didn't work out how I imagined. It's as though our chemistry got caught on a eucalyptus branch and was left behind as we entered reality outside of the bush, but I can still relish that I at least got one photo of just myself in front of a cliff-side view and that I saw a parade of pups throughout the journey.

Speaking of dogs, they are a fantastic way to stimulate conversation on any hike in Sydney. While the Karloo walking track is not as stunning as the Spit Bridge to Manly Walk, it does lead to a great spot for relaxing and talking on a second date with a Kiwi (New Zealander) who also thinks space is just as fascinating as it is endless. After a bit of rock climbing and tree branch limbo through a less dense screen of green, we arrived at the Karloo Pools where we were nestled nicely in a field

of pretzeling eucalypts that made it impossible to tell where one began and another ended. They surrounded the freshwater pools like Mother Nature's security guards protecting giant geodes in the ground. My date and I laid in the sun with our toes touching the edge of the water and watched white clouds float by overhead as we talked about our pasts and passions. But then, it gets even better. Picture this: a dog appears.

A couple of girls arrive at the pools with a pup as black as obsidian with as much energy as the volcanos that create such a gemstone. He scrambles down the boulders of the dry land and leaps into the largest geode as soon as his feet feel the edge of the pool. He races through the water like a doggie paddle boat and barely slows down enough to snatch the stick that was just thrown onto the water's surface. He zooms back to the rocky shore, heaves himself up onto solid ground, and sprints right to the overhang you and your date are sitting on, just to give you a bit of a dog shake-shower before presenting his stick and begging for it to start all over again.

After an hour and a half of throwing Snoop a stick the size of half his body, it's like you've adopted the living form of kinetic energy. But at least he gives you and your date motivation to discuss all of your dog stories and watching him run around keeps you paying attention to the beauty around you, which may or may not include your extremely good-looking date.

Beach Vibes

Sydney's weather is so frustrating there is no appropriate simile for it. Even if the forecast is correct for the day, I can never trust it because it was terribly wrong the last three days in a row. It says it's going to rain so I wear jeans and a raincoat, but then it's actually 78 and the non-ozone-shielded sun roasts me like a plastic raincoat-wrapped hot dog. Naturally, I then begin to ignore the weather forecasts and wear whatever I very well please because I'm going to get it wrong anyway. However, sometimes, it actually is beautifully sunny and warm on the day of a planned beach date with the Kiwi who is going to look astonishingly good in a cozzie (swimming costume).

We started the morning with a ferry ride from Circular Quay, the main wharf in Sydney, to Manly, a beach haven north of the city. The

ferry ride is thirty minutes long with sublime views of never-ending cliffs, shoreline, and open ocean. Conversation is easy on such a gorgeous voyage: we talked about the migrating whales in the distance, our desire to catch a ride on one of the sail boats in the harbor, and the astounding fact that, for however long it is, we live in such a breathtaking place.

When we arrived in Manly, the sun was already toasting our unscreened skin, so fuel was necessary for what was to be a warm day. Breakfast consisted of Tasmanian smoked salmon eggs benedict for myself and pineapple pancakes for my date. The restaurant was Hawaiian-themed and it was aloha-mazing. Subsequently, food comas after breakfast meant that a walk along Manly Beach was necessary before anything more strenuous. Even with a decent crowd of people littering the sand and waves, holding hands while the water tickled our toes made it seem like no one else was around. I could have happily kept walking that shoreline for an unlimited amount of time, but adventure was calling to us.

After a stop at a cheap rental shop along North Steyne Street, we strolled over to Shelly Beach for some snorkeling. It took a couple minutes to get used to the chilly water, but eventually we were chasing fish and free-diving through the seaweed. Snorkeling isn't an ideal situation for deep conversations, but it's an excellent way to see how likely your date is to scare or tease you. Thankfully, my date and I had a tendency to grab the other's foot only a few times, which made for good laughs and just the right amount of a flirtatious vibe while swimming through mild ocean waves. It would have been much less fun to bake in the heat and freeze in the water alone, and going with a group would have inevitably meant compromising on schedules and missing out on a mid-ocean kiss.

Clubbin'

Leaving the art-era date for my last anecdote may be a bad decision, but I had to keep my subheadings consistent with the alphabet and, regardless, this episode is one where I feel travel dating is perfectly championed. No matter how endlessly boring a companion may be, experiencing an amazing place in a foreign city is worth it. This date is more than proof of that.

Art-era date had no job, no interests outside of Netflix, and filled

lulls in the conversation with lines like, “So what else haven’t we talked about?” Despite me not learning until we had already arrived that this person had no interest in jazz music, we ended up going to Venue 505, a jazz club in the Surry Hills suburb of Sydney. I’d been eyeing this place for quite some time and was beyond excited when I finally had official plans to visit. Our date was on a Monday night, which just so happens to be the night of the week when Venue 505 has board games and jam sessions, so I was ready for the best first jazz club experience I could imagine.

As I entered the venue, I walked in through a low-hanging curtain just inside the front door. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dim lighting and I surveyed the room to find every table adorned with a flickering candle (the real kind, not those fake plastic ones). Short velvet couches—too roomy for one person, but just spacious enough for a couple to always be touching—replaced what would usually be wooden chairs in any other restaurant. The bar was unobtrusively tucked away in the back corner and everything in the place faced the grand piano, double bass, and drum kit that all sat on the elevated floorboards that made up the stage.

My date chose a table that was closest to the stage and I melted into the couch, ready for groovy tunes and stimulating conversation. I only got one of those, but that one was good enough. The house band leader strummed, plucked, and bowed his double bass with a smile that radiated through the shadows of the club and personified his magnificent melodies. The pianist tickled the keys with such ease that he made everyone in the place want to join him no matter how complex the chord progressions became. And the drummer laid his beats with such smooth elegance that they could have been white marble flooring.

There are definitely people back home I would have rather experienced Venue 505 with, who would have been more present in my descriptions of the place and just as engaged in the music as I was, but I was abroad so they weren’t available to come. Maybe others would be fine with going alone or with a noisy group of friends, but I know I wouldn’t have gone to Venue 505 in either of those situations, so I’d rather have gone with a dud date than not have gone at all.

So, yeah, there’s always going to be a dud date, even when travel dating. Not every person will understand my obsession with dogs or indulge my addiction to ice cream. They won’t always sweep me off my feet just because I’m in an exotic land and they have a cute accent. There’s

no guarantee of having a story of true love beginning in a foreign country to tell the grandkids someday. But, at the end of the day, travel dating is more about the travel than the dating. I saw places from the perspective of a local and I experienced things outside of the assigned study abroad schedule. Even being left on read or having to forego a goodbye that would inevitably be sad wouldn't stop me from wanting to explore the rest of the dating alphabet in other countries.