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BACK TO SYDNEY AFTER 34 YEARS

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Travel Writer Mark Cummings moves from the BBC to the ABC

From BBC Breakfast Show Host to Travel Writer – There are two major passions in my life – broadcasting and adventure travel. They don't mix. To build a radio audience and survive in a

tough industry you have to commit 100% of your time. In order to travel extensively I have therefore twice quit the BBC – in 1991 (before having children) and in 2023 (becoming an empty nester).

In 1991 I stopped off in Sydney and ended up staying for a year. I have just returned for the first time in 34 years and ironically ended up back on the radio. I joined Renee Krosch on ABC Sydney to discuss how the city had changed.



Love story. In 1991 Margaret Thatcher had just resigned, the first Gulf War had just started, Ed Sheeran was born and Bob Hawke was the Australian PM. I was in Sydney with my girlfriend, now wife, Jo. This special time involved working crazy hours to fund the next leg of our world trip and in so doing we really got under the skin of the city and created magical memories. With so many other countries to explore we thought we would never return. Then our globetrotting 28-year-old daughter moved to Australia and provided the perfect incentive to come back.



The three elements needed for the perfect return visit:

Complete Confusion. Part of me wanted Sydney to be exactly as I remembered it – the comfort of familiar streets, bars, cafés and bumping into friends in the street. This whimsy was shattered in the suburb of Chatswood where we first lived and worked. The tiny station has morphed into a huge modern transport/retail hub. The skyline is full of skyscrapers and in an hour of searching we couldn't find a single recognisable feature, not even our house or the café we worked at. The total discombobulation was deflating in one way but curiously exciting as it made us more determined to discover our old haunts.



Joyful revelations. Our first eureka moment happened unexpectedly on a train to Hornsby as we retraced our journey to work. The stations we passed through felt like old friends – Warrawee, Wahroonga, Waitara. The hypnotic rhythm of those names has never left me. On our arrival we spotted the building where we worked flogging insurance and later in St Leonards we walked down the completely unchanged Plunkett Street and stood outside the cosy Victorian house that had been a “party house” for several months. At the Royal North Shore Hospital, I discovered the running track we slogged around training for the annual City2Surf 14K run.



Anchor Points. Finally, you also need those big, sturdy, iconic landmarks to have remained solid and unchanged through the past three and a half decades. Sydney Opera House, The Harbour Bridge, Manly and Bondi beaches and those evocative yellow and green ferries have all remained constant.



Back on the radio. I told Renee that the Aussie laid back nature, warmth and sense of humour is just the same. The Sydney Metro is a revelation, as good as Singapore or Tokyo. The high-rise skyline has evolved dramatically. The city has become increasingly multicultural. The impressive Barangaroo District is a perfect celebration of the area's rich indigenous history coupled with ambitious modern development. Craft beer, artisan coffee and global cuisine is everywhere but in 1991 I existed on Victoria Bitter and pies. When asked if it will be another 34 years until my next visit my answer was simple. "No because I'll be dead by then."

And Finally. To complete the love story element, I'm writing this and an article for The Sydney Observer in my daughter's house near Perth on the day she announced her engagement. Ah! I'm pretty sure we will be back.

This article was written by [Mark Cummings](#) and published on Saturday, November 22, 2025.

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