



Daytripper Simon Webster Harbour cruise through history

For a genuine sense of Sydney Harbour in the early days, spend a few hours aboard the Deerubbun

CIRCULAR Quay is a dangerous place these days. You've only got to glance at the wrong person and before you know it you're being bludgeoned with videos, flyers and sales patter. Half an hour later you wake up on a jet boat, a coffee cruise, a showgirls cruise or a Rivercat to Parramatta.

So many tour craft operate on Sydney Harbour it's a wonder the tourists on board get to see anything but other boats. It's like the Bicentenary except without the fireworks. That's unless you're on a fireworks cruise, of course.

All these vessels may be of different shapes and sizes, but they look at the harbour from the same angle: through the eyes of the whitefella. Their commentaries have little time for the freedom fighter Pumulwuy or the fact that the Opera House is the same colour as the shell middens that sat on Bennelong Point before it.

The Deerubbun is different. Beneath the Aboriginal flag, we crawl along the shoreline like a ghost from the past. As we pass Mrs Macquaries Chair our guide Ronnie tells us Mrs Macquarie was compassionate towards the Aborigines, helping them through times of sickness and violence. She would have had plenty of that to ponder as she sat staring out to sea.

A former navy torpedo recovery vessel, Deerubbun is owned by the Tribal Warrior Association, a charity that trains young people for careers in the maritime industry. The boat also takes tourists around the harbour, though today the only paying customers on board apart from me are a group of Koori kids from Lewisham Public (who, by the way, are a credit to their school and should all be given gold stars and let off homework for a week).

Woolloomooloo lives up to its name, meaning place of plenty, as the children lean over a rail to admire a cormorant that is struggling to force down a fat fish.

"Pretty deadly fisher, isn't he, kids?" Ronnie says. The men of the local tribes were pretty deadly fishers too. They used natural rock

formations on Clark Island as fish traps, and Fort Denison was a favourite hang-out before the Brits started flogging each other there, and hanging bodies from gibbets for years on end.

The Aborigines steered clear. If that's what the whitefellas do to each other, they thought, what are they going to do to us?

They were right to be wary. The rifle and smallpox decimated the five local tribes of the Eora nation.

"Hundreds of bodies lay in the water," says Ronnie at one point.

Fortunately, the kids are too busy getting stuck into their cans of Fanta to be traumatised

The multitalented Ronnie then does an impersonation of English Lieutenant Ralph Clark, whingeing about having cobs of corn stolen from his island vegie patch in 1789. He sounds like the Queen Mum with constipation. Must have been the lack of roughage.

On Clark Island, crew member Dallas, who has the kind of beard and missing teeth that makes you think he should know about these things, leads us on a bush-tucker walk. He points out banksia cones that were set alight and stuck on the head with mud, like miners' lamps; Sydney black wattle flowers that were used as soap; and casuarinas that were known as guardian trees and served like meeting points in shopping malls: young fellas who got lost in the bush would stand by them and wait to be found, safe in the knowledge that snakes couldn't move over the needles that lay on the ground.

Ronnie, from Cape York, drops the tour guide's microphone and picks up a didgeridoo and clapsticks to perform a dance about the rainbow serpent, which told people their job was to look after the land. The message appears to be travelling as slowly as Aboriginal boats: after 40,000 years it still hasn't made it to Macquarie Street or Kirribilli.

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> TRIP NOTES

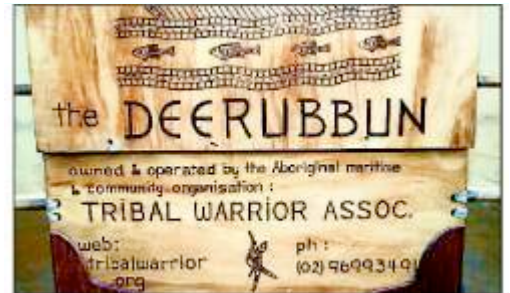
■ Deerubbun harbour cruises leave East Circular Quay at 12.45pm Tuesday to Saturday. Phone (02) 9699 3491. See www.tribalwarrior.org. Adults \$55, children/concessions \$45.





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STORIES AFLOAT: Former navy torpedo recovery vessel Deerubbun, complete with New Year's Eve decorations (left); the plaque indicating its ownership by the Tribal Warrior Association. Picture: BRENDAN ESPOSITO