

Harbour City suffers an information relocation



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INTERNATIONAL and interstate visitors to Sydney could be forgiven for being confused as they attempt to explore our beautiful city.

There are at least two forlorn street signs in The Rocks — for many decades a must-visit destination for tourists — pointing to a nearby visitor information centre.

Unfortunately, that visitor information centre no longer exists.

Instead, a hard-to-find and limited hours centre is many metres distant, tucked away inside Customs House adjacent to Circular Quay.

Outdated signs and a hidden visitor information centre are sad symbols for more widespread current inadequacies when it comes to the help we offer visitors.

Visitor information centres also fulfil a role as welcoming zones that show visitors we feel honoured they've chosen to come to see what Sydney has to offer.

It's a two-way relationship, because helping visitors to discover Sydney's special gems is a boost for our economy and local businesses — particularly in the hospitality sector, which is still struggling to rebuild following Covid lockdowns.

To this end, Sydney really needs two professionally staffed full-service visitor information centres operating with extended opening hours.

One centre needs to be in the heart of The Rocks and highly visible.

Another, equally prominent and well-staffed, needs to be located in the international arrivals hall at Sydney Airport.

A centre of this kind is definitely needed at The Rocks during the height of the summer cruise season when thousands of international visitors arrive on cruise ships at the nearby Overseas Passenger Terminal.

Cruisers with experience of visiting overseas ports where visitor centres are commonplace — and obvious — would be absolutely amazed that they can't easily find anything like it here.

The call to consider visitor services comes as tourists return to Australia in numbers following the reopening of international borders a year ago.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that international arrivals in Australia in December 2022 ran at 60 per cent of the pre-pandemic number in December 2019.

Let's be clear. Sydney and tourism are still in recovery.

On a positive note, the number of international visitors is expected to keep surging. This, of course, is helped by major events such as the recently completed WorldPride 2023

celebration.

But the world is a big place and visitors can choose other cities to visit so we must try even harder to ensure they choose Sydney. Excellent visitor information services are part of the equation.

As things stand, travellers are being let down by the lack of professional services in accessible locations.

Visitor information services in the city and at Sydney Airport are currently provided by enthusiastic, public-spirited volunteers who are to be commended for their service.

However, services of this kind should be on a professional footing with all of the services visitors need and with the opening hours to match.

No one is closer to visitors or better able to tap into their impressions of Sydney than the tour guides who help them discover our wonderful city.

It is no surprise that Business Sydney's call for more visitor services is backed by the Institute of Australian Tour Guides and its president, Ann Lorenz, who says her members want to give visitors the "best Aussie experience" offering sound local knowledge, up-to-date

information and accurate history.

As Ann says, professional visitor services can help with smooth transitions from airports and seaports to city hotels, attractions and restaurants. Experienced guides also ensure that conferences and events run on schedule when visitors are supported with good information services.

As it happens, the Institute has identified other areas where we could be doing more to assist visitors. Inadequate coach access to the Sydney Opera House, insufficient parking time outside city hotels for visitors to load and unload luggage and inadequate transport and other facilities at White Bay Cruise Terminal are among the Institute's concerns.

It is good to see that the number of international visitors is increasing steadily but we need to focus on the services we provide to visitors. This is a challenge for government, local councils and the private sector to address.

We could start by putting visitor services on a professional footing. Services of this kind should be far more multifaceted with all of the services visitors need and with the opening hours to match.

They can't just be open nine-to-five because the provision of visitor information is also vital to the night time economy.

As visitors continue to stream back and as Sydney roars back to life, let's shout "welcome" with services that make our visitors feel special — and loved.

Paul Nicolaou is the executive director of Business Sydney



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