

Australia's French place names

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1477 words

September 2024

Bestowed by French explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they hint at some intriguing tales.

Flying into Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport on a fine day, you will probably traverse Botany Bay. The airport sits on its north-western bank, with runways protruding into its calm, shallow waters. Directly opposite the airport, on the southern shore of the bay, you may spy Kurnell, where James Cook first made landfall in April 1770. From there, you can look north to the picturesque La Perouse peninsular, two and a half kilometres distant, and Frenchman's Bay, a little beach on the western shore of the peninsula, also named for Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse.

This is where La Pérouse landed in 1788, just days after the English Captain Arthur Philip had arrived with his fleet of convicts to colonise New South Wales and serve as its first governor. He would shortly decamp to Port Jackson, a deeper and more sheltered estuary, fourteen kilometres to the north. La Pérouse took the opportunity to entrust his scientific notes to one of Philip's vessels that was returning to England, freeing him to continue his exploration toward the west of the continent, alas never to be heard of again.

Today, La Pérouse's presence is remembered by La Perouse Point, Frenchman's Bay and the suburb of la Perouse. Visit La Perouse Point and you will find an obelisk and enclosure, together with a small museum preserving maps, scientific instruments and relics recovered from subsequent French explorers, together with the grave of Father Receveur, the Franciscan scientist with La Pérouse's expedition, who died shortly after their arrival from spear wounds he had sustained in Samoa.

From the vantage of La Perouse Point, look south-west to the opposite shore of Botany Bay and you may just perceive a long stretch of sand south of the airport, giving on to an azure estuary. This is the aptly-named suburb of Sans Souci. Yet this Sans Souci bears no direct connection with France. It is in fact the work of the English Thomas Holt, who named the house built there for his German wife after the famous Potsdam palace of the Prussian king Frederick the Great.

While you were preparing for landing, your plane may have skirted Sydney Harbour, and if so, you would have had a splendid view of Vaucluse, a fashionable Sydney suburb, named by the Irish convict Henry Brown Hayes after Fontaine-de-Vaucluse in France.

These examples do too little justice to the legacy of French explorers and scientists, much of which is recorded in the names of hundreds of places you almost certainly flew over on your way to Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide.

If you passed through or near Perth, you almost certainly followed some of the path of Amiral Antoine Raymond Joseph de Bruni, chevalier d'Entrecasteaux, whose

expedition landed near Cape Leeuwin on the south-west coast of Australia in December 1792, having been sent by Napoleon to find news of La Pérouse and to record and document Australia's environment and its people.

As you fly east from Perth, you retrace some of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition and the places he named, such as Point d'Entrecasteaux, on the southern coast of Western Australia; Cape Le Grand, the d'Entrecasteaux Islands, now known as the Recherche Archipelago, and nearby Esperance, named for the shelter it afforded when the expedition was caught in one of the storms for which the region is noted.

You will also have flown over the verdant Naturaliste Peninsula, now one of Australia's best wine-growing regions, as well as Cape Naturaliste and Géographe Bay, named after the ships commanded by Nicolas Baudin and Jacques Félix Emmanuel Hamelin respectively, who set sail from le Havre in October, 1800, also on Napoleon's orders, also to find trace of La Pérouse.

Their mission also was scientific discovery, and they were accompanied by an impressive team of scientists, including nine zoologists and botanists, including Jean-Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour, François Péron and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur as well as the geographer Pierre Faure and Louis Claude de Saulces de Freycinet, the cartographer-geometrician who would circumnavigate the Earth from 1817 to 1820 and go on to publish the first map to show a full outline of the coastline of Australia. Many are still remembered in Australian place names.

You may, also have flown over the north-west coast of the continent, and if you did, then you will have passed over many of the places named by Baudin and Hamelin, who, from their initial landing in Cape Leeuwin, proceeded separately, albeit in the same general direction. You can trace their voyages north by the names they left along the way: Hamelin Island, Boullanger Island, Peron Peninsula, near present day Perth, Depuch island, now at the gateway to one of the world's most prolific sources of iron ore; and further north still, Cape Missiessy, Cape Levillain, near where the Dutch trader, Dirk Hartog of the Dutch East India Company, in 1616, having been blown off his course to India, had inadvertently reached and set foot on the continent's west coast; further north lie the Bonaparte Archipelago and Joseph Bonaparte Gulf.

Heading east from Perth toward Melbourne, you will gaze down on the spectacular, but foreboding and largely uninhabited coastline of the Great Australian Bight. As with their voyages along the more than 10 000 km of the western coast of the continent north of Cape Leeuwin, Baudin and Hamelin would find few places to take on supplies of fresh water between Esperance and Cape Thevenard, nearly 1,250 kilometres further east.

If the view from your window is clear, you will see just how inhospitable this part of Australia is. Yet Baudin and Hamelin visited and named numerous places along its long expanse of continuous, sheer cliffs, 60 to 120 metres high.

Your flight may then continue south-east toward Encounter Bay, south of Adelaide, where Baudin and Hamelin chanced upon the English Matthew Flinders, who told them about Kangaroo Island, 160 kilometres to the west, and where Baudin and

Hamelin named at least twenty places. In directing Baudin and Hamelin toward Kangaroo Island, Flinders successfully diverted them from Saint Vincent Gulf and the mouth of the Murray-Darling river system that irrigates large parts of the south-east of the continent, which would have been a more valuable discovery. You might then have continued toward Melbourne, as did Baudin and Hamelin, before they charted different courses, with Hamelin proceeding along the coast toward Ile des Français, now French Island, near the mouth of Port Philip Bay, on which sits Melbourne; while Baudin continued south toward Tasmania. Baudin's would have been an especially rewarding experience, as Tasmania is a rich and temperate place, quite unlike most of the mainland. There, his understanding of the Australian continent benefitted from numerous exchanges with indigenous Tasmanians.

Had your flight taken you to Hobart, Tasmania's capital, you might glimpse the stunningly beautiful Freycinet Peninsula, north of Hobart, named by Baudin after his celebrated cartographer-geometrician. You would also be re-encountering the voyage of d'Entrecasteaux, whose ships, La Recherche and L'Espérance, gave their names to Port Esperance and Recherche Bay, on which Hobart sits. Other Tasmanian places that bear witness to the d'Entrecasteaux expedition are Bruny Island, Huon River and Cygnet, in appreciation of the elegant black swans unique to Australia that defy the popular logical aphorism. If you ventured far enough south, you may have spied the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, that separates Bruny Island from the southern tip of Tasmania.



- Places visited and named by the Baudin-Hamelin expedition
- Places visited and named by the d'Entrecasteaux expedition

Being mostly voyages of geographic exploration and scientific discovery, relations between French and British expeditions were recorded as cordial, even friendly. Yet rivalry between the two powers was ever-present, as witnessed by Flinders' ruse to direct attention away from one of the most economically significant features of the continent. It remains a matter of conjecture why French explorers concentrated on the southern part of the continent, and appear to have shown little interest in the north-eastern regions, other than Bougainville's discovery in 1768, when he named the Bougainville Reef near what is now the popular resort town of Cairns in Far North Queensland. Certainly, he would have found mostly dense tropical rainforest and an impassable reef, so may have concluded that the region offered little that was worthy of further exploration.

Many historians believe that the activities of La Pérouse, Bougainville, d'Entrecasteaux, Baudin and Hamelin were important in propelling the British, having recently lost control of what is now the United States of America, to hasten to establish colonial settlements in Hobart, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin, so as to pre-empt French endeavours to control the strategically important landmass between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In that sense, the

influence of the French explorers is present today, not only in the French names they endowed, but, indirectly, in the extension of British colonies that now bear witness European exploration of the new southern continent.