

Sydney ends coronavirus lockdown after 106 days

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Elated Sydneysiders celebrated the end of almost four months of coronavirus lockdown on Monday, putting behind them a period of "blood, sweat and no beers" in Australia's largest city.

Sydney's more than five million residents were subjected to a 106-day lockdown, designed to limit the march of the highly transmissible Delta variant.

With new infections now falling—New South Wales state recorded 496 cases on Monday—and more than 70 percent of over-16s fully vaccinated, the city is dusting off the cobwebs.

From midnight pubs, restaurants and cafes began throwing open their doors to anyone who could prove they were vaccinated.

They included 32-year-old Garth Diemer and his team of high-spirited construction workers who were making the most of a rain day.

"We knew the pubs were going to be open about 10 am 'cause it's Freedom Day, so I thought I'd take the blokes down for a couple of schooners,"

he told AFP.

"I'll tell you what, mate, it is bloody beautiful just to have a beer right in the middle of the heart of Sydney, at the Circular Quay and have a beer with your mates. I'm over this lockdown."

Cafe-goer Peter Morgan, 35, was also relishing his newly regained freedoms.

"Even though it's like freezing outside, it's so good," he said.

"The first thing I'm going to do is see my parents. Actually no, not see my parents. I'm going to go to Lakemba to get a Lebanese mixed plate and then go see my parents."

Across the city, shaggy-haired customers lined up outside hairdressers to get eyebrow-raising home cuts and dye jobs repaired.

"I couldn't wait to be in here to get the hair done," said Brett Toelle, a salon customer in Surry Hills whose last trim was 15 weeks ago. "That's the longest time I've ever been without a haircut."

For many, the end of lockdown was a chance to get into the shops.

At midnight, hundreds of people poured into a discount Kmart store in the western Sydney suburb of Mount Druitt, with social media images showing long queues inside.

For others, it was a chance to put their business back on track.

"It's a great vibe this morning," said Hannah Simmons, owner of Gordon's Cafe in the beachside suburb of Clovelly whose business survived the lockdown by offering takeaway.

"The outside seating will be a little bit dreary but

that's OK. We are really excited to be back there and open."

Since June, shops, schools, salons and offices have been closed for non-essential workers and there have been unprecedented restrictions on personal freedom.

There were bans on everything from travelling more than five kilometres (three miles) from home, visiting family, playing squash, browsing in supermarkets to attending funerals.

'You've earned it'

For most of the pandemic, Australia successfully suppressed infections through border closures, lockdowns and aggressive testing and tracing.

But the Delta variant put paid to any dream of "COVID-zero", at least in the largest cities of Melbourne and Sydney which are now pivoting to "living with COVID".

"It's a big day for our state," said New South Wales' recently appointed conservative premier Dominic Perrottet.

After "100 days of blood, sweat and no beers," he said, "you've earned it."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison hailed the day as one to celebrate things once taken for granted: "Being with family and friends, getting a haircut, grabbing a meal together, going to the pub and having a beer with your mates."

There will still be limits on mass gatherings and international borders and schools will not fully reopen for a few weeks yet.

But otherwise daily life is beginning to look more like normal, with crowds again gathering at bus stops and the hum of traffic growing a little louder.

Despite the celebratory mood, there are lingering concerns that reopening will bring a surge in infections.

The Australian Medical Association warned that

reopening must be gradual "otherwise New South Wales may still see hospitals become completely overwhelmed despite high vaccination rates."

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