AUSTRALIA’S ALLURING ISLAND ESCAPES

Swaying coconut palms, powdery beaches and aquamarine seas are probably the first things that come to mind when you imagine an island paradise. In Australia, add koalas and echidnas, sheep, cows, eucalyptus and pine trees, gourmet food and wine, and some of the world’s finest luxury lodges.

PHANG NGA REMINISCENCE

Without prior knowledge of what happened in Phang Nga province’s Khao Lak, one would never be able to tell that this peaceful neighbourhood was hit hard by the tsunami in 2004.

YAP: AN UNDISCOVERED PARADISE

Nestled in the western Pacific, this small group of islands is rapidly developing yet determined to remain connected to its cultural roots. A land of stone money, captivating Pacific customs and an underwater world home to majestic manta rays, Yap offers a travel experience like no other.

TOP 10 PLACES TO UNWIND BY THE WATER

Practice the art of doing nothing by the water. Lie on a beach, dip your toes in the sea, swing in a hammock by a river or take an amble around a lake — whatever you do, make sure it’s very little at all.
AUSTRALIA’S
ALLURING ISLAND ESCAPES

Text by Lara Dunston | Photos by Terence Carter

Opening spread: Lord Howe Island from the top of Mount Eliza.
Swaying coconut palms, powdery beaches and aquamarine sea are probably the first things that come to mind when you imagine an island paradise. In Australia, add koalas and echidnas, sheep and cows, eucalyptus and pine trees, gourmet food and wine, and some of the world’s finest luxurious lodges.

You can still swim, snorkel and sunbathe on Australia’s islands, but if you’re after something more than the usual big resort-based beach holiday, you’ve come to the right place. You can also go bushwalking, bird watching and wine tasting, stroll a sandy beach where sea lions bask, cuddle a koala and feed a wallaby. You can taste locally made cheese and honey, sign up for a cooking class, and, come cocktail hour, sip sparkling wine and snack on canapes in a paddock full of kangaroos.

The island-continent of Australia is colossal, covering a monumental area of almost 8.5 million square kilometres, with some 8,222 islands within its maritime borders — the Great Barrier Reef alone is home to over 100 islands — so the range of experiences and variety of islands shouldn’t be surprising. Dotted all around the country are islands as diverse as you’d expect them to be, from remote, barren Macquarie Island, halfway to Antarctica and home to an abundance of penguins, to the verdant, tropical coral cay of Green Island, surrounded by turquoise waters and home to just a few huts.

Whatever shape or form they come in, each of Australia’s islands is enchanting in its own way. But, as I discover on a trip that takes in two very special islands, they also offer so much more than the typical beach getaway. These are my favourite island escapes and they just could be Australia’s most alluring.

**KANGAROO ISLAND**

If you only get to one Australian island, make it Kangaroo Island — or KI, as the locals like to call it — off the southern coast of South Australia and two hours’ drive or a thirty-minute flight from Adelaide. Australia’s third largest island, KI boasts 21 National and Conservation Parks, and it’s a microcosm of the country with a quintessentially Australian interior of old growth bushland with towering eucalyptus trees, impenetrable mallee scrub, and golden pastures speckled with sheep. Its dramatic coastline is skirted by sheer soaring cliffs, rock formations that resemble art works, and boulders smoothed by the wild sea. When its sandy beaches aren’t being beaten by pounding surf, they’re punctuated by serene bays and estuaries bobbing with fishing boats.

Aside from its rugged natural beauty, Kangaroo Island teems with animals. There is such a wealth of wildlife that KI is called Australia’s Galapagos Islands. Kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, echidnas, goannas, possums, bandicoots, sea lions and fur seals are everywhere you look, climbing trees, crossing roads and latching on beaches. I watch Australian Sea-lions and New Zealand Fur Seals, both native to Kangaroo Island, frolicking on the rocks at Cape du Couedic, where some 7,000 fur seals live and breed, and telling about on the splendid sandy beach at beautiful Seal Bay, where a guide leads us on a tentative walk around them. They look friendly but they can get foxy when their sleep is disrupted.

After the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House, Uluru, and the Great Barrier Reef, most tourists visiting Australia want to see a koala, however, these cute, chubby bear-like creatures — which aren’t bears at all, but marsupials — are next to impossible to see outside zoos and wildlife parks in Australia. Their grey-brown fur blends in with the bark and leaves of the eucalyptus trees in which they like to hide and dine, and they spend most of their time still — sleeping and eating — making them difficult to spot.

Yet on Kangaroo Island I see koalas every day, and I also see a couple of the lazy creatures, on two different occasions, leap from the ground onto trees and energetically bound up the branches — a rare sight on the mainland, but not on KI. I become so hooked on spotting them — they are just adorable — that Bill, our passionate, knowledgeable guide from Kangaroo Island Wildlife Tours who is showing us around the island, takes us to Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary where they are supposedly plentiful. Ironically, we see fewer of them there than we have in the wild.

On mainland Australia, it’s unusual to see kangaroos and wallabies outside of sunrise and sunset when they come out of their hiding places to feed, yet as Bill drives my photographer husband and myself around KI we see hundreds sprawled out in paddocks in the sunshine or sleeping under leafy trees, both the Kangaroo Island kangaroo, a smaller, darker, fiercer sub-species of the Western Grey kangaroo found on the mainland, and the tiny Tammar Wallaby, which has a pretty face with fine features. Almost extinct on the mainland, there’s an abundance of the things on KI.

One of my most vivid memories of the trip will be seeing these majestic animals grazing in the golden light of sunset on a straw-coloured paddock, sprinkled with the grass trees the locals call yakkas, at Kelly Hill Conservation Park. We were with a guide from Southern Ocean Lodge, our home for a few nights, on our signature Kangas and Kanapés tour. This must-do outing involves little more than an easy stroll to get as close as possible to the animals to silently take in the scene, and, if you’re lucky, to spot a baby joey in its mother’s pouch. The sublime experience is celebrated with glasses of sparkling wine and scrumptious canapes that the guide serves from the back of the luxury four-wheel drive as the sun’s natural energy to power the property, and outdoor boardwalks minimise guests’ damage to the vegetation.

The 21 spacious suites feature sunken lounges, heated floors, fireplaces, complimentary mini-bars packed with snacks and wine from South Australia, and fantastic bathrooms with bathtubs boasting jaw-dropping views of the sea. The most luxurious of all, the Flinders Suite, at the far end of the building, has a curved lounge and outdoor deck with expansive ocean views. The problem with the lodge, however, is that the public spaces are equally as alluring. An enormous lounge area, scattered with sofas with floor-to-ceiling windows giving way to those same wonderful views, is the perfect place to distractedly read a book or sip a glass of KI wine before dinner.

The restaurant, meanwhile, has equally magnificent views, as well as friendly knowledgeable staff, and food as fine as any you’ll find in Sydney, Melbourne or up and coming foodie city, Adelaide. Specialising in creative, contemporary Australian cuisine, with a set menu that changes daily depending upon what’s fresh and available, the dishes showcase South Australian produce with a focus whenever possible on KI products delivered straight from the producer to the Lodge’s kitchen.

Opposite page (from top): The wild Southern Ocean, as seen from Southern Ocean Lodge; a kangaroo crossing warning sign on a Kangaroo Island road. This page: Kangaroo spotting at sunset at Kelly Hill Conservation Park on Southern Ocean Lodge’s “Kangas and Kanapés” activity.
Highlights include the South Rock Lamb reared by locals Andy and Kate, fantastic fish and crays from Tina and Eddy’s Kangaroo Island Fresh Seafoods, marron from Ademet Marron Farm, sheep’s cheese and yoghurt from Island Pure, honey from Susan and Peter Davis’ Island Beehive, Kangaroo Island Spirits made by John and Louise Lark, and an array of wonderful wines from local wineries, including Bay of Shoals, Two Wheeler Creek, and, the finest of all, Islander Estate, where Frenchman Jacques Lurton, originally from Bourdeaux, is making elegant European-style reds and whites. The Lodge offers a half-day Epicurean tour to visit these producers and a few times a year hosts a longer five-day Food Safari led by South Australian cooking legends Maggie Beer and Simon Bryant.

While many of the property’s guests come to KI specifically to experience the sleek lodge, fortunately SOL, as they like to call it (Aussies love shortening names), offers plenty of opportunities to experience the island as part of its all-inclusive programme. Activities might include a coastal cliff-top walk, some southern stargazing, and a spa treatment such as The Dreaming, which incorporates ancient rituals and ingredients used by Aboriginals, including cleansing earth ochres and purifying desert salts. A half-day Wonders of KI tour takes in the Cape du Couedic Lighthouse, Remarkable Rocks, Admirals Arch, and a playful fur seal colony that I could have watched all day.

Of course, you don’t have to stay at Southern Ocean Lodge, as sublime as it is. We also spent a night at the lovely, laid-back family-owned Seascape Lodge which is where Bill, our guide from Kangaroo Island Wilderness Tours dropped us after a day visiting producers and collected us the next morning before another day on the road doing everything from watching sheep shearing and chatting to farmer Des Pratt at Dutton Park farm to having a barbecue cooked by Bill. I didn’t need a professor to tell me that though — the picture of a powdery white-sand beach lapped by aquamarine sea, was as splendid as that of any island anywhere.
There’s no doubt that Lord Howe Island’s cows are free range! They have the run of lush green pastures on a property in front of Capella Lodge.

Lord Howe Island is miniscule. It’s only 11 kilometres long and less than two kilometres at its widest point. We can make out one main road that runs the length of the island, and a smattering of houses and small buildings. There are no high-rises on the island, very few cars, a handful of shops on the charming main street, and the dozen and a half low-rise accommodation options are mostly owned by island families whose ancestors, mainly British whalers, settled here in 1833. Only 400 visitors are allowed at any one time and the local population numbers just 350. Everybody knows everyone it seems, making for a warm, friendly community — most of whom appear to be at the small airport to welcome the latest arrivals.

It’s just a two-hour flight northeast of Sydney, off the coast of New South Wales, yet sub-tropical Lord Howe Island couldn’t be more different, its pristine environment more closely resembling that of New Zealand than mainland Australia. The lush-green UNESCO World Heritage-listed Island is recognised for its unique natural beauty, native habitats and species of bird and marine life not found anywhere else, such as the flightless Woodhen that we’ll see running around the island, the White Gallinule, a bird almost eaten to extinction by early settlers, and the Phasianid, a stick insect once thought to be extinct. If that weren’t enough, the island is home to 500 fish species, 90 species of coral, seven native bird species, and 241 plant species, including the Kentia palm, the world’s most popular indoor palm.

We get a taste of these natural wonders on a nature walk with the island’s renowned naturalist Ian Hutton up to Mount Eliza and a glass bottom boat trip to North Bay with Peter Tisdale of Islander Cruises. Ian takes our small group for a stroll along North Beach where we see hundreds of Sooty Toms hovering above the sand dunes, protecting their young in the nests below. They sweep down and drift about our heads, warning us not to get any closer. The Sooty Tom, Ian tells us, will head to the Coral Sea after they’re done breeding here. Able to filter salt water and surviving on a diet of seafood, they’ll stay at sea for six months until they return to Lord Howe Island again. We help Ian check some data on a Kentia Palm experiment he is monitoring, visit a colony of Black Noddy in a colossal pine tree, and learn that the lofty pine trees that line the picturesque waterfront are native to Norfolk Island, not Lord Howe. And we climb to the top of Mount Eliza for sweeping views of the island.
On the cruise back, through the glass bottom of Peter's boat, we see loggerhead turtles, a sort of sting ray called a Bull Ray, countless varieties of rainbow-coloured fish and blue-tipped coral beds that look like fields of lavender. Some slip on snorkels and dive in for a closer look. Back on shore on a picnic table outside Peter's boathed chocolate cake and tea are served, but we hop on bikes and cycle back to Pinetrees, the family-owned accommodation where we're staying the first couple of nights in a comfortable apartment with kitchen. Dani Rourke, one of the owners of Pinetrees, has organised our bikes. Dani is a sixth-generation islander and her family has been on the island for 150 years — our plane was named after her mother, something of a legend on the island. She also organises a barbecue for us at an agreed location, arranging for the drop-off of a cooler and picnic basket packed with fresh fish, salad, cheeses, cold beers, and a box of matches at one of the many barbecues with firewood dotted around the island that the local municipality maintain. We eat our barbecued fish sandwiches, with lemon juice and salt, at a picnic table under the Norfolk Pines, overlooking that aquamarine lagoon. Magic. Also special are the sunset drinks on the wooden deck of Pinetrees Boatshed overlooking the striking silhouette of Blackburn Island.
An old weatherboard building and antique car parked by the port are the sorts of things that make Lord Howe Island so charming.
Heated by one of the other owners, Jim McFadyen, who, barefoot, serves canapés to guests on the beach. It’s something of a ritual for locals as much as tourists, who help themselves to a drink from the fridge (there’s an honesty bar), pull up a chair, settle into a seat on the dunes, or even spread out a picnic blanket on the sand to savour every second of the sun as it sinks slowly toward the horizon.

The sunset drinks — minus the Blackburn Island vistas, with magnificent Mount Gower views instead — are also memorable from the wooden deck at Capella, a luxury lodge where we spend a couple of nights, so we can explore every inch of the island. We ride Capella’s bikes to Kings Beach, wading to the cows on the way, where we leave them for a lovely walk along the water’s edge to Little Island beneath the 777-metre high Mount Lidgbird. We cycle back to the opposite end of the island again and we walk. Walking is the main activity for visitors and there’s a good walking map identifying routes and distances, as well as good marked tracks. We walk as many trails as we can in our short time, rewarding ourselves with wonderful vistas and lunch at Humpty Micks, where we feast on locally caught Kingfish with chips and schooners of icy beer.

We also eat well at the stylish luxury lodge, Capella, where, like at its sister property on Kangaroo Island, Australian cuisine is the specialty. We eat locally caught trevally sashimi, spanner crab with a papaya salad, and seared kingfish with homemade fettucini served at Capella Lodge; the welcoming staff at family-owned Pinetrees offers guests fresh fruits for breakfast; the Islander Cruises boathold overlooking The Lagoon at Lord Howe Island. This page (from left): The friendly birdlife greet visitors on walking trails on Lord Howe Island; garfish caught by local fishermen off the beach on Lord Howe Island.

Lord Howe Island is easily as alluring as KI. Each island is unique, so don’t try to choose between them. Do them both. They’re magic.