

COOK'S PARADISE

APRIL 13, 2007

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

When Captain James Cook landed at Norfolk Island in 1774 he accurately noted its natural beauty, but somehow overlooked the island's potential for mountain bike and sea kayak adventures. Neither did any of the several-thousand convicts who served time on Norfolk take the opportunity to snorkel above the kaleidoscope of colours in Duncombe Bay's rock pools. Instead it has taken 150 years of settlement by the Pitcairn Islanders to finally establish an active holiday itinerary on Norfolk.

Cook proclaimed the island of Norfolk to be a "Paradise" – with almost nothing in the way of dry land between the Australian coast and Norfolk Island, the sight of green hills and a landing strip several thousand miles out to sea is indeed welcome. Like any good paradise the island is largely self-sufficient for fruit and vegetables, while cows and chickens roam with freedom. As for the fish that fill the coastal waters, with the help of rod and reel they literally leap out of the water and quickly find their way onto the barbeque.

The most elegant display of Norfolk produce is found at Two Chimneys, a new winery on an historical site that hopes to produce its first vintage next year. Their platters balance the freshest of organic ingredients with modern cuisine, set against the young vines and well selected wines.

The clincher to the label of paradise is the generous nature of the locals. There is no surf-board hire on the island for example, because there's always a local to lend you theirs. Even the drive from the hotel to the beach will be greeted with a casual gesture from every oncoming car; the Norfolk Wave. This phenomenon has been immortalised in poems, most likely written on lazy sunny days while the author was waiting for the tide to drift in.

Only 1800 people reside on the island, half of whom claim direct descendency from the mutineers of the Bounty and their Tahitian wives. With such a modest population even a small-sized island like Norfolk can boast privacy and solitude for residents and guests.

The most popular location for swimming is Emily Beach, yet for most of the day these reef-enclosed waters are visited by more ducks than people.

Around the corner at Slaughter Bay the reef extends for over a mile. Peter Cassidy is a local tour operator on the island who has found the site ideal for Sea Scooters. These battery powered underwater propellers take about 15 minutes to master, and from there on you can spend several hours gliding along the lower reaches of the reef, popping up for air as you go. Peter is one of the new breed of tour operators on Norfolk who are taking advantage of the rugged geography to create adventure activities that focus on wildlife and wilderness.

Like most other locals on Norfolk Peter wears several hats. He not only runs a tour business but has started a Thai restaurant and offers budget accommodation. His passion for the Island is infectious, and we found ourselves following Peter down a narrow cliff-trail. With a rope to ease our descent we headed for the rocky shores below to climb into sea kayaks. This is one of the best vantage points on Norfolk, paddling between the wave-drenched outcrops and drifting above the dolphins and

turtles. Ever curious terns buzzed along with the kayaks while high on jagged plateaus Gannets and Boobies tended to their chicks.

When you have satisfied the call of the wilderness Norfolk caters to a gentle pace as well. We found nourishment for the senses and the soul with a yoga session by the beach. The old Salt-House at Emily Beach provides a stunning backdrop for the class, with the sound of waves crashing near-by and the sun-light mottled by Norfolk Pines. Our instructor, Candida, is firm and diligent with her application of the 90 minute lesson, but rewards participants with a sumptuous and healthy breakfast after a swim in the ocean.

When the sun goes down across the Pacific Ocean the convict past of Norfolk comes to life. Ghost tours operate in the ruins of the penal colony at Kingston, beginning with a period dinner lit by candles and the informative company of Elizabeth Robertson. Norfolk has not been home to convicts for over 150 years, but the presence of those unfortunate souls who perished on the island, both convicts and officers, is palpable in the vivid tales of our host.

In the dim light of a kerosene lamp the ghost tour takes in the grounds of the historic precinct and what is not visible to eye is quickly filled-in by the imagination.

The good news for wannabe travellers to Norfolk is that penal servitude is no longer a requirement for making a visit to the island. The leg-irons and tall-ships have been replaced with a weekly flight schedule via Sydney, and all accommodation packages include a rental car for the duration of the stay – perfect for couples and families who want a blend of rest and fun. The best places to stay are just a few minutes out of town and offer unequivocal claims to ocean views.

You'll need your passport and Australian Dollars to spend an adventurous week in paradise, and expect a warm welcome when you land.

