

Adventure Island

JULY 2007

OUTDOOR AUSTRALIA

Standing on the lookout at Captain Cook's Monument the past and present of Norfolk Island are brought into contrast. This spot marks the landing of Cook and his men over 200 years ago, but today we can only see kayaks paddling along the shoreline, poking in amongst the cliffs and nesting birds.

Norfolk Island is not just for history buffs anymore. The remnants of convict settlements and colonial heritage grace the fringes of the island while recently improved national parks have made it possible to preserve a little natural history as well.

All the better for outdoor adventure seekers.

Our first exploration of the island begins with unique rock formations locally known as 'The Chord'. These naturally protected rock-pools link through a narrow channel to the ocean, providing shelter from the waves.

We have to clamber down an exposed cliff trail and dangle off a few ropes to safely reach the bottom. Once we reach the rock-pool we cool-off with a swim and a quick snorkel to enjoy the colours beneath the water.

The Chord is not just a great place to get wet, but also helps you keep dry when you're in a sea kayak. Calm conditions inside the break water make it easy for us to settle into our craft and get some rhythm to our paddling, without the threat of waves crashing into rocks.

For first timers in a solo or tandem kayak this is a perfect introduction.

Our guide for the day, Peter Cassidy, gets everyone launched and then heads out through the channel into the open ocean. The rest of us follow behind like little ducklings.

The transition into the swell is one of the safest I've experienced and as we paddle away from the shore the conditions get even smoother. A little swell is always better than breaking waves when you're trying to stay upright in a kayak.

Dolphins and turtles scoot about below the water, occasionally curious about the kayaks above but mostly focused on locating some food. The smaller outcrops of rocks offshore provide nesting zones for gannets and boobys, and our guide knows the best spots to get in closer for a look.

Further along the coast the rocks themselves are the highlight. Hexagonal columns rise up from beneath the waves and form cathedral-like ceilings and walls. With a little skill, and a demonstration from Peter, we navigate our kayaks deep into the chasms and use the falling waves to help back-paddle a retreat.

A little more care is exercised when nosing towards the blowholes, but the sudden release of compressed wave action is dramatic and even more exhilarating.

A definite advantage to joining a guided sea kayak adventure is leaving the kayaks behind at the bottom of the cliff when we start the trek back to the top. Another bonus is having a cold drink and hot lunch ready and waiting when you get there.

Peter is typical of the Norfolk Island locals and their tendency to wear many hats. He's guiding kayak tours one day and then mountain bike rides the next. At night he keeps himself busy with a Thai restaurant, and if our spicy picnic lunch is anything to go by we'll enjoy that too.

Most of Norfolk Island's residents have to be multi-talented. The 8km by 5km spec in the South Pacific Ocean is inhabited by just 1800 locals, servicing a small number of tourists who arrive on one of several weekly flights connecting the island with Australia and New Zealand.

The drive from our post-paddling picnic to the lodge accommodation is a short one. It doesn't really matter where you stay on the island, it's always going to be a short drive to get there.

From the veranda of our lodge we enjoy a secluded view of green hills and distant ocean. The grassy slopes are kept tidy by grazing cattle, narrow roads

disappear into stands of Norfolk Pines and the ocean fills the horizon. Not a bad spot to watch the sunset and bring the day to an end.

Mornings start with the option to sleep in a little or join a morning yoga session. The release of muscle tension and a little stretching sets a good tone for the whole day.

I certainly felt relaxed by mid-morning when we drove to the top of Mt Pitt. The lookout offers views of Norfolk Island in every direction, and somewhere below the tree tops is a forest trail that will lead us back to sea-level. We could walk the track, but what a great location to get on mountain bikes and head for the coast.

Not surprisingly the ever-talented Peter Cassidy is on hand to dispense the bikes and offer his services as guide once again.

More surprising is the high standard of the bike themselves. All the frames are reduced-weight alloy with front suspension and a simple configuration of gears to suit downhill traction and slow climbs. Glad we didn't bother to bring our own.

The newest series of bikes have full shock-suspension front and rear for those who like to push themselves a little harder. A few extra suspension coils come into their own once we leave the forest, as some of our group take the scenic route for a little rock-hopping along coastal trails.

We regroup at Emily Beach, on the southern end of Norfolk Island, and for those who took the long ride around it seems that Norfolk isn't as small as it first appears – You can get a good work out if you want it.

With a few spare days on Norfolk Island ahead we had time to walk a few trails and get familiar with some of the 160 species of birds.

Rocky Point Reserve on the south-western tip of Norfolk Island is typical of the coastal environment for walkers, with a wild blue sea crashing into high cliffs on one side and stands of Norfolk Pine rising above the Hibiscus shrubs on the other.

We quickly got used to the feeling of being watched, as Emerald Doves and Scarlet Robins monitor our progress from high above.

There are many other sections of coast where the scenery exceeds the imagination. The lookout at Simons Water is an ideal location for sunset watching, while Anson Point provides wide open views of the rugged coastline along Anson and Selwyn Reserves.

It's not hard to imagine how so many square-rigged sailing ships have come to grief on these shores as we watch the swell pound into jagged cliffs.

My favourite little treasure on Norfolk Island is Bumbora Reserve, a popular location early in the morning for mad keen surfers who don't mind braving the rocks to get into the water.

As the sun comes over the horizon the rock pools and sandy beach take on a range of colours, from deep amber to sky blue. To the west a trail connects with Point Ross Reserve, and to the east we watch the waves breaking along the reef at Kingston.

It's a great vantage point to pause while you plan out the day in your head. Do we want to venture out beyond the reef for a spot of fishing, or stay inside the sheltered waters for a little more snorkelling?

Maybe if we ask Peter nicely he can take us out for a little of each?

