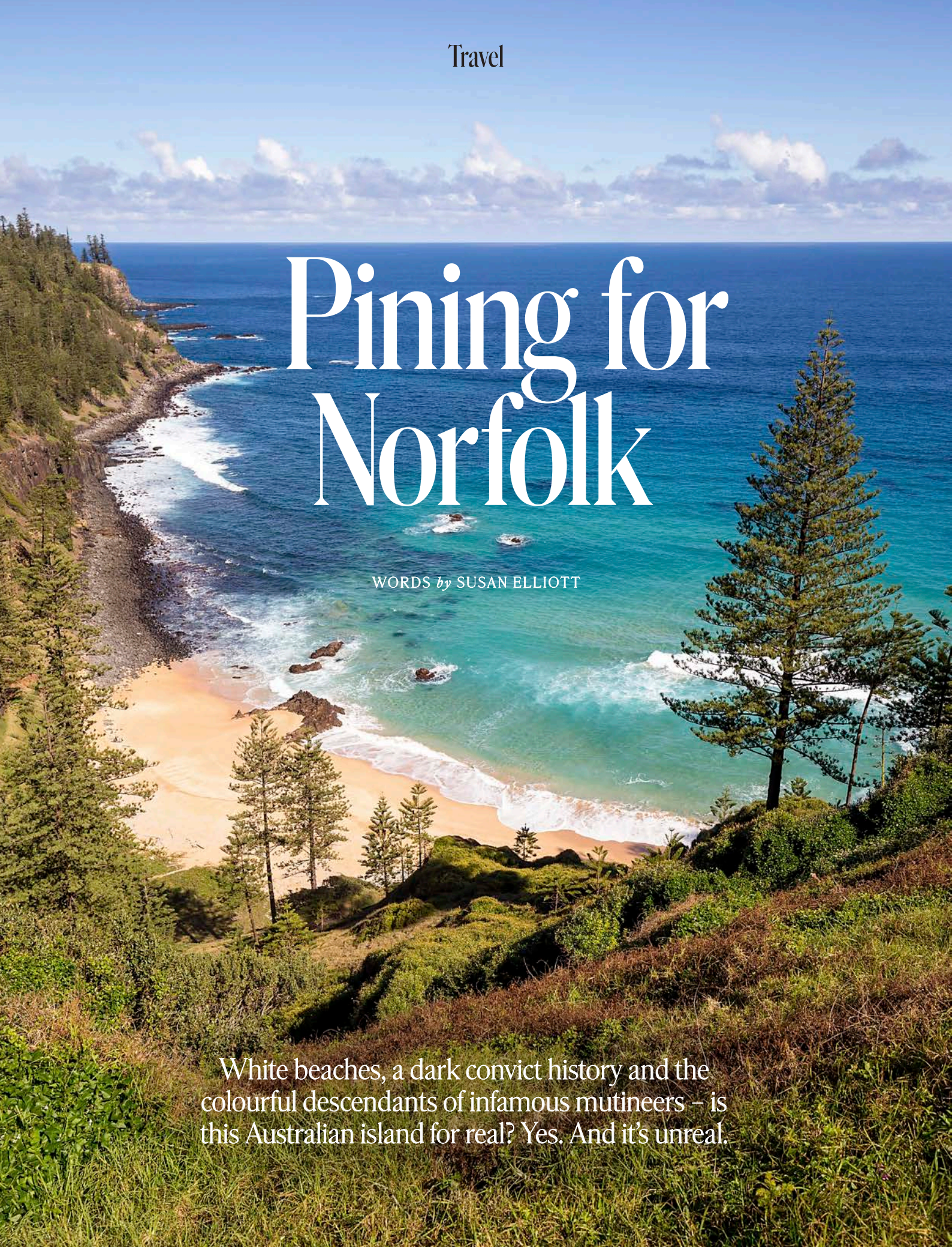
Pining for Norfolk

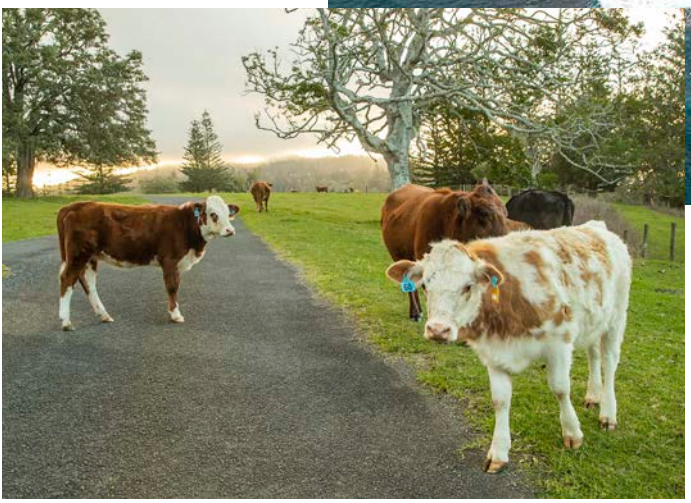
WORDS *by* SUSAN ELLIOTT



White beaches, a dark convict history and the colourful descendants of infamous mutineers – is this Australian island for real? Yes. And it's unreal.



From main: Norfolk Island's iconic pines beckon from granite cliffs; cows graze along the verge; Slaughter Bay is great for the historic sites – and for snorkelling.



I'm late for lunch and a herd of unhurried cows is to blame. A dozen heifers are nose-to-kerb grazing the verge, their hefty hindquarters a random traffic hazard on the road to town.

And chooks don't get off the hook. Feral chickens zig zag all over the lane while, overhead, hundreds of White Terns flit through the branches of Norfolk pines – weighing up where to balance their one precious egg.

It's a bizarre scene. But Norfolk Island is an unreal place. A two-and-a-half-hour flight from Sydney or Brisbane, 1600 kilometres offshore, Norfolk is a small volcanic outcrop in the South Pacific, one of Australia's seven external territories. It's an international flight which means going 'overseas' without a passport.

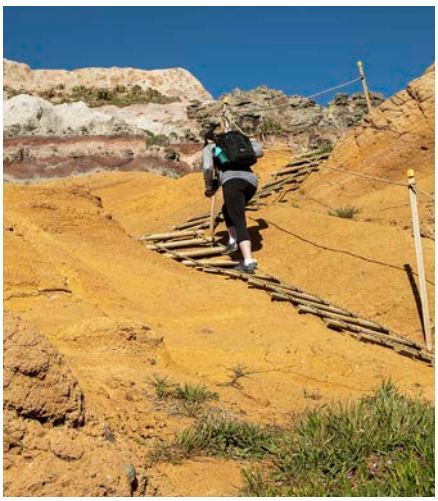
Coming in to land, I see granite cliffs that plunge to tiny beaches and the fronds of Norfolk's iconic pines swaying like a stadium cheer squad. I feel I've escaped to somewhere very special.

"Watawieh!" (pronounced wot-a-way) echoes around the arrival hall of Norfolk's tiny terminal. I'm still in Australia, though feel I'm not. Watawieh is Norfolk for "hello" – it's one of the rarest languages in the world, a mix of old English and Tahitian.

I'm holidaying here to reconnect – with friends, family and nature – but to connect with locals all I have to say is "watawieh". A reply is "kushu" (koo-shoo), which means "great".

Back to lunch. I'm on my way – but Emily Bay stops me. A crescent of white sand edges the lagoon, a pontoon lures toe-dippers off the beach and, like a supermodel, Lone Pine poses on Point Hunter – ever ready for a photo. It's not the finest specimen of a Norfolk Pine, but knowing it was seen by Captain Cook in the 1700s gives it rock-star status.

Captain Cook set foot on the island in 1774, then chose to sail on. But just



Above: The climb up and down the cliff on Phillip Island is arduous, but worth it for the unreal landscape. Below: Gallows Gate in the old gaol at Kingston, which is a UNESCO World Heritage-listed site.



NORFOLK ISLAND TOURISM. TOURISM AUSTRALIA. GETTY IMAGES.

four years later Norfolk was deemed perfect for convicts. For the next 67 years Norfolk was a penal colony.

Next came the descendants of the Bounty mutineers – seamen who had been living with their Tahitian wives on Pitcairn Island for nearly 70 years. It's one of the world's most-loved nautical tales and why this tiny island has its unique language.

Ever been kissed by a fish? If you're swimming in Emily Bay it's bound to happen! Norfolk's cheeky territorial Aatuti dash out from the coral bommies, their tiny mouths pecking like famished feral chickens. I pick a bunch of 'sea grapes', the local seaweed, to feed them, and enjoy a few myself – the gas-filled beads popping in my mouth like bursts of salty caviar. Emily and its neighbour, Slaughter Bay, are great to swim in, snorkel and surf. If you don't want to get wet, you can drift over the reef in a glass-bottom boat.

But Anson Bay (pictured top right) is Norfolk's big charmer. At the base of a steep cliff, it's one of the most remote stretches of sand in the world and worth the steep walk down – and back up!

If you want really remote, there's a day trip to Phillip Island – known as the "Uluru of the Pacific" (right). It's a massive rock in the ocean appreciated only when you've puffed up rope climbs and timber-ladder paths to see the unreal landscape at the top. It's Mars, Uluru and a movie set all in one – valleys of red, purple, ochre, white and yellow earth swirl around you. Feel special, you're one of the few people on Earth who get to visit.

Back on Norfolk, I join a tour through the ruins of the old gaol in Kingston, a UNESCO World-Heritage listed site. Towering walls enclose the cells that each housed up to eight prisoners. Our guide invites us to try to squeeze in – only three will fit.

The stories are gory and the lantern-lit Ghost Tour is sure to terrify. We walk through the convict cemetery to Number 2/3 Quality Row, one of Australia's most haunted houses. The Georgian cottage was built for officers setting up the penal colony and – sceptic or believer – you'll be second-guessing every shadow!

A single pass gets you into all four of Kingston's museums. The favourite is Norfolk Island Museum – dedicated to HMS Sirius, the flagship of the First Fleet, which in 1790 hit the reef and sank. The ship's anchor, carronades, cannonballs and other treasures were salvaged.

I rebook lunch for dinner so I can complete nine holes at Norfolk Island Golf Club – the only course in the world within a World Heritage-listed site. I drive to Captain Cook lookout for one of the best views in the South Pacific, photograph St Barnabas Chapel with its timber ceiling like an upturned boat and scamper through Hundred Acres Reserve where I am the sole spectator for an aerial seabird ballet. Petrels, Terns and Red-Tailed Tropicbirds dart, swoop, loop, dive and romance each other and I ponder how extraordinary it is to be sitting on this speck of an island in the middle of the world's biggest ocean.

I make it to dinner at The Homestead restaurant, where the chef cooks over a traditional Argentinian perilla grill. He lifts my Flametail Snapper onto a plate and spoons a coconut-turmeric broth over it. Exquisite.

Leaving the restaurant, the verge is still nose-to-kerb with happy cows dining on Norfolk's freshest greens. I'm glad I ordered the fish. **AWW**

More info at norfolkisland.com.au

Travel NOTES

How to get there
Qantas flies from Sydney and Brisbane.

Where to stay
Tintoela Homestead is perfect for small groups; Governor's Lodge Resort Hotel for location and restaurant on-site, and Watermill Beach House Estate to be near the water.

When to go
Being sub-tropical, the weather is temperate all year – so any time is good!



