











PHOTOGRAPHY: NORFOLK ISLAND TOURISM

HANGING OUT IN A PACIFIC PARADISE

A tiny Australian territory in the South Pacific, Norfolk Island is a treasure chest of thrilling experiences including snorkelling a coral reef, meeting sea birds nesting cliffside, and a terrifying visit to one of the country's most haunted houses.

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Our catamaran dangles from a crane over Cascade Pier. Like a fat fish on a hook. The sea breeze catches an edge, swivels us to port, swings starboard then our gasped breath, like a collective pillow of air, cushions our descent into the sloshy shoreline surge of the South Pacific Ocean.

My heart thumps, trembling between thrilled and terrified. This is not in any brochure for Norfolk Island. And it is surely, the strangest start to a cruise.

A 1,600km hop from the East coast of Australia, Norfolk Island is one of Australia's seven external territories – inhabited first by Polynesians, then two penal colonies, followed by Pitcairn Islanders, the descendants of mutineers from Captain William Bligh's ship, the *HMS Bounty*. From Sydney or Brisbane, it's an international flight (Australians don't need passports) and even before landing you'll sense this tiny rock is a treasure island of unique adventure experiences.

Coming into land all I can see is a living green screen of Norfolk Pines, lush pastures, plantations of Kentia Palms and hectares of market gardens. Framing the greens are towering basalt cliffs and Instagram-perfect beaches with the entire scene ringed by coral reef. It looks unreal.

Back to Cascade Pier. With no port or marina, a crane lift is the only way boats can get their hulls into the ocean. Sharks circle, snapping up fishermen's scraps and above, a wreck of sea birds hovers, the bravest plunging to snatch their share. We motor west, racing the sun to the horizon for sundowners.

Skipper Luke Fitzpatrick slips the catamaran through 'The Arch', and past formations named Elephant Rock and Cathedral Rock. They are enormous, but dwarfed by monstrous cliffs, the island's only defence from an ocean working relentlessly to wear it away. Luke's cruise is 2.5 hours long, I have an extra glass of bubbles, knowing we have another crane lift to get back to shore.

Clockwise, from far left top: Kingston Pier where cargo ships unload; Lantern-lit ghost tours tell tales of Norfolk's convict past; Snorkelling in Emily Bay; Masked booby nest on the cliffs; Exploring the shoreline of Norfolk Island; Climbing to the top of Phillip Island.

The next morning I'm dangling from a crane again. This time on Kingston Pier for a trip to Phillip

> "SHARKS CIRCLE, AND ABOVE, A WRECK OF SEA BIRDS HOVERS."

Island, Norfolk's baby neighbour six kilometres to the south. Known as 'Uluru of the Pacific' it's a giant red rock that you are allowed to climb, but only if the ocean is calm enough for the boat to approach.

"Quick! Get your shoes off! Jump in your socks!" Skipper Dave Bigg hollers the last-minute advice as he surfs the swell around a rock platform – Phillip Island's only landing spot. The advice immediately makes sense – socks grip better than shoes on slippery rocks.

The ascent is a thrilling sequence of rope climbs, timber-ladder paths and steep inclines through a landscape more Mars than Earth. Purple, white, red, yellow and ochre-coloured soils decorate wind-chiselled valleys – their strange beauty the result of a century of erosion and degradation.

Regeneration is bringing the plants back and thousands of breeding seabirds are testament to the island's recovering health. Masked booby, black-winged petrel, sooty tern, black noddy and the magnificent providence petrel come here to breed. We walk amongst thousands of them, nesting in burrows and tucked in nooks on the cliff edge. Gazing across the South Pacific I know it's a unique experience that few have had.

The ocean is in a bad mood. Crystal Pool is being smashed by frightening waves – the island's most beautiful swimming hole is also its most treacherous. Even on low tide this jewel of a pool cops random waves that will express post you to the wrong side of the rocks. On this isolated part of the coast it's not a good place to be sent.

The track down to the pool is muddy and slippery, even dry it's tricky. Ropes are there to help but at several points I'm dangling. Again.

Crystal Pool is glorious with its own mini coral reef teeming with whatever the high tide has washed in. One day it's a school of fish, the next a baby Galapagos shark, then a lone kingfish separated from its school. All are reunited with their kin on the next high tide.

The reefs at Emily Bay and Slaughter Bay are safer and more accessible: nowhere else in the world can you swim, dive or snorkel a coral reef surrounded by marine park, bordered by a world heritage-listed convict settlement. What's not widely known is Norfolk's appeal as a surf destination – Bumboras, Ball Bay and Anson Bay are three of the world's most remote and unspoiled surfing beaches. And yes, they go off.

Late night adventures will test your nerves. At Kingston amidst the ruins of the old penal settlement, ghost tours will have you second-guessing every shadow. Brave hearts can visit one of Australia's most-haunted houses – No 9 Quality Row. I'm a sceptic, but in one corridor of the home my skin goes cold and clammy and hairs prickle on the back of my neck – something I'd always thought was made-up content for horror novels and Stephen King movies. I follow through with a lantern-lit tour of the ruins then dare myself to go it alone through Norfolk's 200-year old cemetery and last about 30 seconds.

I'll take dangling from a crane any day. MF

DID YOU KNOW?

1. Norfolk Island has its own language (Norfuk) – a blend of 18th-century English and Tahitian.
2. Cows have right of way over cars.
3. Artisan food producers are making Norfolk honey, goats cheese, and local sea salt.
4. There are more than 40 plant species that are unique to the island.
5. Bounty Day is celebrated annually to mark the arrival of the Pitcairn Islanders on Norfolk Island.

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