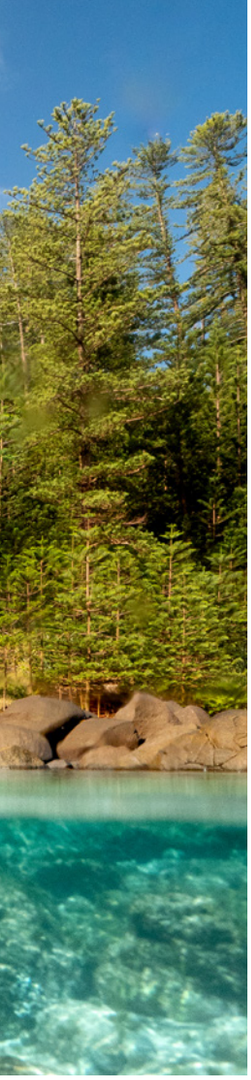






01 Expect plentiful birdilfe at Norfolk and its neighbour, Phillip Island 02 The crystal clear waters of Bumboras 03 The view of Phillip Island from Norfolk ©Tourism Australia



24 ABOVE *and* BEYOND

From endangered flora and fauna to a rare language, Norfolk Island's hidden details make it truly extraordinary, writes Susan Elliott.

Travel file

Getting There
qantas.com

Accommodation
forrestercourt.com

Information
norfolkisland.com.au



I'm standing – socks only – on a mossy green platform awash with waves in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I'm just obeying orders: "Socks grip better than shoes," captain Dave Bigg tells me before I unlace my sneakers and leap from his charter boat onto the slippery rocks.

I'm here to trek Phillip Island, the petite neighbour to Norfolk Island, one of Australia's seven external territories, some 1,600 kilometres off the mainland's east coast. Once the most dreaded penal settlement in the Southern Hemisphere, Norfolk is today home to 2,100 law-abiding folk. Many are descendants of mutineers from William Bligh's ship, the HMS Bounty, who came to shore here in the mid-1800s.

Island idyll

On Norfolk, 'extraordinary' embraces you from the moment you begin planning your trip. Flights to the island depart from international terminals in Sydney and Brisbane, but because you're travelling to an Australian territory, you don't need to pack your passport. And yes, you can stock up on duty free. Coming in to land, our plane flies over hulking granite cliffs where tens of thousands of Norfolk pines sway like the arms of fans at a rock concert. Taxiing to the terminal, keen eyes will spot the 'score card' in the window of the tarmac fire station – our landing rates 9/10. It's a quirky touch and raises a smile among passengers. You'll be smiling, too, upon hearing the excited chatter of locals. Many islanders speak Norf'k. It's a charming, lilting mix of 18th-century English and Tahitian, with every conversation sounding like the best story ever told. All you need to know for a quick stay is: watawieh (pronounced wot-a-way), which means "how are you?" and the reply, kushu (koo-shoo), which means "great".

Winged wonderland

With the seawater squeezed from our socks, shoes are back on to summit Phillip Island. There's a rope to help climb the first steep section, then timber-ladder paths criss-cross the rocky surface, a crevassed Mars-scape. Dramatic eroded valleys of red, purple and yellow earth are garnished with green, the plant life grasping its way back after years being ravaged by feral rabbits, goats and pigs.

While Phillip Island is devoid of human residents, it is an avian riot, attracting all manner of sea birds to breed and nest – masked boobies, sooty terns, red-tailed tropicbirds, Australasian gannets, wedge-tailed shearwaters and the magnificent providence petrel. The birds have no fear of humans, but it's not us they need to worry about. When night falls, the Phillip Island centipede comes out to hunt. Growing up to 30 centimetres in length, they slither into birds' burrows to feast on chicks. Scientists estimate the centipedes kill up to 3,700 winged wonders each year.

Back from the brink

Back on Norfolk proper, the inventory of rare creatures is equally impressive. The Norfolk Island morepork was once the world's most threatened owl; the green parrot has been saved from extinction; and there are five fish species found nowhere else on the planet. Not rare, but obscure, is the dreamfish, known for causing auditory and visual hallucinations – including terrifying nightmares – among those who eat it.

I choose a 'real' dream – a snorkelling expedition at Bumboras Beach. I brave the rocky entry to be rewarded with the company of two green turtles.

The only way to top the experience is with 'High Tea by the Sea', served on the neatly clipped clifftop lawns of Forrester Court, arguably the island's most luxe accommodation.

I walk to the cliff's edge, curious to see the drop. It's not slippery, but Dave Bigg's advice is still fresh in my mind: "Socks grip better than shoes". For the second time today, I unlace my sneakers and feel the cool comfort of the Earth beneath my feet. ◆