#NORFOLKISLAND #ISLANDLIFE

New bounty on old Norfolk

Norfolk Island was once the most dreaded penal settlement in the Southern Hemisphere. Today, the only punishment here is exhaustion from the pleasure of leisure. ***By Susan Elliott***

NORFOLK ISLAND TAKES YOUR breath away, even before you've landed. It's tiny. A green speck, sitting proud of the South Pacific Ocean, just five kilometres by eight, smothered in Norfolk pines (of course) and barricaded from the sea by formidable cliffs, interrupted – sparingly – by stunning bays.

A two-and-a-half flight from Brisbane or Sydney, about 1,600 kilometres offshore, this is one of Australia's seven external territories – the international departure making it extra special at the moment as you're on an overseas holiday, without officially leaving the country.

Taxiing into Norfolk's petite terminal I have to laugh; the airport fire crew has 'scored' our landing, the result displayed in the station window on the edge of the tarmac. It's 7/10, which, given hefty cross winds, seems unfairly low. But it's funny, quirky, and sets the tone for my week on this drop of basalt, a place that, in history, has not always had much to laugh about.

CONVICTS AND MUTINEERS

Once known as 'Hell in Paradise', Norfolk's capital, Kingston, was the brutal destination for the worst of Australia's convicts between 1788 and 1814, and again between 1824 and 1856.

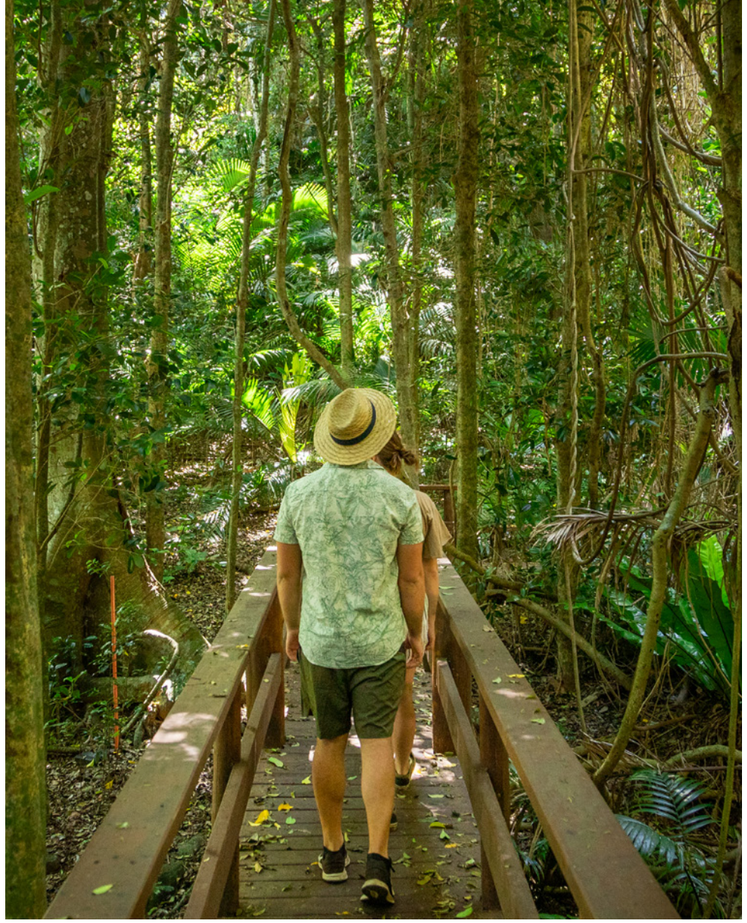
Next came Pitcairn Islanders, descendants of mutineers from HMS *Bounty* who, on orders to collect breadfruit trees in Tahiti, reckoned a future with beautiful Tahitian women was infinitely more appealing than months more at sea under the ferocious command of Captain William Bligh. Bligh was set adrift on the ship's launch, and the mutineers settled with their new brides on Pitcairn Island before re-locating to Norfolk Island in 1856.

The mutiny on the *Bounty* is a big part of Norfolk's culture, with 70 per cent of today's population descendants of the mutineers

While Norfolk's history is fascinating, the island is far from stuck in yesteryear. Within an hour of landing on Norfolk, I'm off it – seated in a catamaran that's dangling from a crane, being lowered into the ocean at Cascade Pier for a champagne sunset cruise. With no port or marina on the island, this is the only way to launch a boat; it's a thrilling, if slightly nerve-wracking, experience.

As the sun speeds towards the western horizon, skipper Luke Fitzpatrick negotiates a sloppy shoreline surge to slip through a narrow tunnel and around formations called Elephant and Cathedral rock – their





names suggesting not only their shape, but also their size. Enormous columns of basalt loom above and, arriving at Anson Bay, there is bottomless champagne to farewell the day. Cheers to tomorrow.

Resembling a movie set plonked in the middle of a cow farm, The Sunset Bar at Puppy's Point is Norfolk's newest place to watch the sun go down. This is the home of Pip and Les Quintal – a bounty descendant who loves tourists so much he decided to invite them over for drinks on his terrace.

"Guests love it because they are coming onto a rural property. We have 30 head of Braford, which we breed for the local meat industry, but also for our bar food," Les says with a smile.

The meat platter tempts me, as do mussels in a tomato-garlic sauce. But, with Sunset's vibrant green signature cocktail, Mermaid Mimosa, in hand, I opt for the serving of king prawns because I know the melon of the Midori and the sweetness of the seafood will not only be good taste buddies, but also make an awesome Instagram couple. They do.

LODGE AT GOVERNOR'S

The hibiscus are frightening. Terrifying in size. Alarmingly bright in colour. The flowers smother my cabin, bravely fending off macho staghorns, flirty frangipani and blossoming banana trees under a canopy of chaperones: kentia palms and king ferns, the latter of which don't need to boast – they are the tallest tree fern in the world, endemic to Norfolk.

I've checked in to Governor's Lodge Resort, and am not the only one being plant-wooed: 55 cabins are scattered along the retreat's tropical garden lanes, and if you eavesdrop (who doesn't?), you'll hear nothing but talk about the beauty of the grounds. The property is green in other ways, too: harvesting rainwater and generating solar energy, with excess shared to the main grid.

Governor's new owner, Mat Christian-Bailey – a seventh-generation descendent of Fletcher Christian, who led the mutiny aboard the *Bounty* – guides me away from the manicured gardens to bush-bash an overgrown road cut out by New Zealand soldiers during WWII to access spring water at the bottom of the hill. When cleared, this will be yet another new path in Norfolk's diverse history.

"I grew up running around here," says Mat. "I rode bikes, horses, all over this place. And I always wanted to own it, even as a kid. I'm just so happy it's now back in my family."

The centrepiece is Bailey's Restaurant, the original homestead with pit-sawn ceilings and a verandah of limestone from the old jail in Kingston. The pumpkin soup is a deliciously creamy starter, which I follow with steak and potatoes dauphinoise. I pause to think of the starving convicts who preceded me on this bountiful island. Millisecond over.

Homestead Restaurant is another Norfolk beauty that has been given fresh life. The 1930s estate has been in the Menghetti family for 40 years, and it's Kurt Menghetti's turn in the kitchen – cooking over a traditional Argentinian *perilla* grill handmade by his dad. I'm impressed even before he reveals he also makes his own charcoal from olive tree wood on the property. Awkwardly, I choose to go raw, as Norfolk's freshly-caught kingfish is unsurpassable; Kurt cures it in beetroot juice and serves with his own wood-fired sourdough bread.

DIVE INTO NORFOLK

I'm dangling from the Cascade Pier crane – again. In a dive boat this time, feeling marginally happier in a wetsuit should things go awry. After 10 years without a commercial dive operation, local lad Mitch Graham has brought scuba diving back to Norfolk. And I'm excited for it.

"Nowhere else in the world can you dive a pristine coral reef, surrounded by a marine park, bordered by a World Heritage-listed convict settlement," says Mitch. The towering basalt formations seen on my sunset cruise appear dramatically different underwater, but at the same time strangely familiar as I watch sea life circling the formations as excitedly as the sea birds do above.

Diving is thirsty work. It's the saltwater, I convince myself, walking (slightly too quickly?) into the brewhouse at Castaway Resort. After years of being asked by visitors if there was a local beer, Tony Watts decided to brew one – Norfolk Island Brewing now has seven beers on tap, made with Australian and New Zealand barley. Tour the brewery, enjoy a tasting on the sunny deck, and make sure to order Tony's bread baked using the spent grain from his brewing process.

Settling into my seat for the flight home, I catch sight of the airport fire station and see the mornings' incoming flight got 10/10. Perfect. It sums up my week on Norfolk Island, a place that, in just 200 years, has gone from 'Hell in Paradise' to a 'Helluva Paradise'.



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OPENING IMAGE: The colours of Emily Bay © Norfolk Island Tourism. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Liquid gold at Norfolk Island Brewing © Susan Elliott; a floral paradise © Norfolk Island Tourism; villas at Governor's Lodge; Norfolk's capital of Kingston © Ian Wilkinson

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Regular flights from mainland Australia to Norfolk Island operate from Brisbane and Sydney with connecting services to all other major capital cities and from Auckland, New Zealand.

STAYING THERE

Governor's Lodge Resort Hotel
governorslodge.com

DINING THERE

Baileys Restaurant
governorslodge.com
The Homestead Restaurant
thehomesteadrestaurant.com.au

EXPERIENCES

Norfolk Island Sunset Cruise
advancefishing.nf
Norfolk Diving
norfolkisland.com.au
Norfolk Island Brewing
castawaynorfolkisland.com

INFORMATION

norfolkisland.com.au

