Pacific playground

#ISLANDTIME #NORFOLK

From its underwater treasures to dazzling celestial visions, Norfolk Island is one of the most spectacular playgrounds in the South Pacific. ***By Susan Elliott***

LUGGAGE HAS EXPLODED ACROSS the floor of our rented Norfolk Island cottage. Cameras, drones, tripods, masks, snorkels, hiking boots, wetsuits and towels are scattered everywhere, tripping us as we scramble to get sorted. Emily Bay, one of Australia's most beautiful lagoons, is minutes away yet there is that childish, panicky belief that it will disappear if we don't get there in the next five minutes.

Three hours ago we were in Sydney. That's how quickly you can get to this tiny Australian territory, 1,600 kilometres off the east coast. It's an international flight – but no passport is required. At the airport, there's still the thrill of over-spending on duty free goodies. We're starved of overseas holidays, so this trip warrants five kilograms of cut-price Toblerone and one of those *ridiculously* big bottles of spirits. Each.

BAY BLISS

Emily Bay has waited for us. I kind of suspected she would. And so our play week in paradise begins.

We plunge off a pontoon into the lagoon. We snorkel over coral bommies and fend off aatuti – Norfolk's cheeky, territorial fish that believe they can kiss you to death with their teeny weeny mouths.

The world's largest ocean, the Pacific, envelops Norfolk – a plateau of basalt formed three million years ago when lava spewed from a submarine volcano. Polynesian seafarers were the first settlers between 1150 and 1450; Captain Cook the first European in 1774; and 14 years later the first British convicts started a 67-year-long penal colony.

Then came the descendants of the infamous *Mutiny on the Bounty* seamen who had been living with their Tahitian wives on Pitcairn Island for 66 years. Today, around a third of Norfolk's 1,750-strong population are proud *Bounty* descendants.

Back to play days… and we're dangling, in a 5.4-metre aluminium catamaran, from a giant crane at Cascade Pier. It's a bizarre way to start a dive trip, but with no port or marina on the island, it's the only way to launch a boat.

Swinging out over the sea, I get an inkling of how Lieutenant William Bligh might have felt as the *Bounty* mutineers set him adrift in a tiny boat and stole his ship. There's no comparison, of course – I'm top-to-toe in neoprene, front-to-back in scuba gear and there's Toblerone chilling in my esky.

Underwater, the reef crackles and pops like breakfast cereal. Coral-crusted chimneys, chasms, caves and tunnels swarm with schools of drummer, kingfish, trumpeter and snapper. Stingrays soar on currents like submarine albatrosses, green turtles make dashing cameo appearances and sharks cruise past with 'border patrol' authority.

ULURU OF THE PACIFIC

Emily Bay, however, is not a deep dive, 20 metres at most. More immersive experiences to 40 metres are available in the waters surrounding neighbouring Nepean and Phillip islands.

So once again we're dangling from a crane – this time at Kingston Pier on the southern side of Norfolk, ready for the six-kilometre boat trip to Phillip Island. Once there, we take off our shoes to leap to a slippery rock platform in our socks – a gripping tip from skipper David Bigg, who dances his boat in the swirling shore surge so we can jump ship safely.

Why is Phillip Island called the 'Uluru of the South Pacific'? Sure, it's a big rock, but the nickname seems meaningless at sea level. Puffing at the top of a rope climb and several timber-ladder paths, I begin to understand why – it's a landscape like nothing else on Earth. Red, purple, ochre, white and yellow soils have been wind-chiselled into dramatic valleys, wild-looking sand dunes and strange rocky outcrops. Earth colours made unworldly, like Mars and the Red Centre on the same playing field.

Feathered squadrons perform a constant fly-past – petrels, gannets, sooty terns, shearwaters, noddies and the elegant red-tailed tropicbird – here to breed, nest and leave. What you won't see is one of the world's most fascinating insects, the giant Phillip Island centipede which preys at night on seabird chicks snuggled in burrows. A bird-eating centipede… I'm glad to be here in the daylight.

THE GRASS IS GREENER

Back on Norfolk we go our separate ways – the massage people and the golf people. My 'hole in one' dream comes true at Bedrock Body Mind Spirit – my face in the hole of a massage bed while hot stones soothe back muscles, the rugged, rocky coastline a treat for my eyes every time I glance up.

At Norfolk Island Golf Club, the views could put you off your game. Help yourself to that excuse. The South Pacific is a nasty water trap on one side, while the historic convict buildings of Kingston guard the other. In between, hundreds of Norfolk Island pines with fronds like baseball mitts catch every sliced ball. Maybe take a private lesson with Andrew Umlauft, the club professional, to learn how to avoid them.

But Norfolk saves her most spectacular vistas for after sunset. The island is classified a Gold Level Dark Sky Town and the stargazing is out of this world. We lie on top of Mt Pitt, scoffing the last of our holiday chocolate, and cheer as shooting stars stage a private fireworks show.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies to Norfolk Island from Sydney and Brisbane. All passengers must apply for a Norfolk Island Entry Pass.

qantas.com

EXPERIENCES

facebook.com/norfolkislanddiving

norfolkislandgolf.com

bedrockbodymindspirit.com.au

fishnorfolkisland.com.au

INFORMATION

norfolkisland.com.au

OPENING SPREAD: Snorkelling Emily Bay © Scott Portelli THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: Marine life abounds © John Turnbull; immense wilderness areas await; the island's golf course; exploring Phillip Island. All images © Norfolk Island Tourism







