

BETWEEN the pretty seaside towns of the Eyre Peninsula are untamed regions ripe for adventure.

Peering over the edge of a giant cliff of sheer sand, it occurs to me that four-wheel driving through 80m high dunes is not for the novice driver - or the faint hearted. Luckily, I'm with an expert so I'm perfectly relaxed about plummeting nose-first down the other side. Well, almost. It's a bit like riding a rollercoaster; you know you're safe but when you reach that point of no return it's difficult to tell the difference between thrilling and terrifying. Either way, it's a lot of fun.

"Now this is real four-wheel driving," says my guide, Phil Porter, as he races his Nissan Patrol up another impossible incline. Extreme four-wheel driving, more like it. It takes four attempts but we eventually make it to the top before flying down the other side.

Others aren't always so lucky. Phil, who with wife Amanda runs the 4WD tour business Wilderness Wanders out of Port Lincoln, is regularly called upon to pull other vehicles, driven by amateurs and seasoned drivers alike, out of the soft sand. As we pass a heavily-laden ute struggling up another dune, it looks for a moment like Phil might be pressed into service again. But the ute's driver is lucky, and so are we. It's a gorgeous spring day, with hardly a breath of wind and the turquoise waters of Sleaford Bay are, I'm told, unusually calm.

"I brought a couple to be married here on the beach a few weeks back," says Phil as we stop to enjoy a spectacular view over the pristine sandy shore. On the way back we pass the guys from the ute, now on foot, loaded up with rods and eskies. It might be a perfect spot for romantic nuptials but apparently the fishing's not bad either.

The Wanna Dunes drive, which follows the southwest coast at the tip of Eyre Peninsula, is the last feature on our tour today, which we've done in reverse due to the late arrival in Port Lincoln of my 40-minute flight from Adelaide. Unfazed, Phil had been waiting outside the airport, along with Wander, the nine-month old orphaned joey, who accompanies the tours, happily ensconced in a woollen pouch slung over the back of Phil's seat. Wander was rescued after her mother was killed by a car near Ceduna. "She wasn't expected to live but look at her now," says Phil proudly as Wander hops around in her disposable nappy (a third hole cut for her tail). Extreme four-wheel driving doesn't worry her a bit: "It's just like being in her mother's pouch."

Phil operates several tours, including overnight full-catered walks, but I've opted for the Special Memories Drive, a full-day tour which takes us along the rugged

western coast of Lincoln National Park through the Memory Cove Wilderness Protection Area, an area so fragile that visitor numbers are restricted.

The local place names here are a reminder of the fierce competition between the early French and English explorers. Louis Freycinet, part of Nicholas Baudin's French expedition, named Jussieu Peninsula and Cape Tournefort, but the majority of names that have survived were charted by English navigator Matthew Flinders - who, perhaps in a fit of homesickness or melancholy, named a lot of local landmarks after his home in Lincolnshire.

Many, including Phil, believe this part of the South Australian coastline was a turning point in Flinders' 1802 expedition. Desperately short of water and supplies, Flinders lost eight of his crew, including John Thistle, the master of his boat, when their cutter sank while they were out searching for fresh water near what Flinders later named Cape Catastrophe and Memory Cove. By any measure, it was a terrible maritime tragedy. A devastated Flinders also named the eight islands off the southern tip of the peninsula after each of the men, whose bodies were never recovered. A few days later, the expedition was saved when fresh water was found close to where Port Lincoln stands today. Had Flinders not been able to restock his provisions, some speculate he may have been forced to head straight for Sydney, leaving the South Australian coast to the French. There's no sign of treacherous waters when we reach Memory Cove, although little else has changed since Flinders' day. A family, who've travelled by boat from nearby Port Lincoln, are picnicking on the sandy beach while a group of children chase fish in the clear, tranquil waters.

After a fine spread of our own, which includes Coffin Bay oysters, smoked tuna and Amanda's amazing quandong tarts, Phil, with Wander hopping behind, takes me further up the beach to show me another puzzle in the cove's history. Just above the waterline, he points out a rock upon which has been carved "4ft" with an arrow pointing upwards. The four is reversed, dating it to a period when sealers would have been active in the area. One theory is that it may have been part of an old postal service with sealers leaving letters in a designated area to be picked up by the next passing vessel. No one knows for sure.

Later that evening I go for a walk through the town dubbed "the seafood capital of Australia". Had it not been for an apparent lack of fresh water and Colonel Light's veto, Port Lincoln might also have been the capital of South Australia. Today it has a healthy population of about 14,000, and is the centre of the tuna fishing industry. It's also a great base for a family holiday with plenty of adventure to be had, including diving with sharks, swimming with sea lions and, of course, fishing

charters.

With more time you can also explore the Far West Coast coastal towns of Elliston and Streaky Bay, named, again by Flinders, for the bands of colour in the water, caused, not by a river as he thought, but by oils given off by seaweed. Today it's another great place to sample the local seafood, including oysters.

On the other side of the peninsula sits Tumby Bay, a pretty holiday and fishing town an easy 40-minute drive from Port Lincoln, where you can fish, visit museums and galleries or just enjoy the views.

Unfortunately, there's no time on this trip to do everything so in the end I hire a car and drive 30 minutes west to Coffin Bay, famous for its oysters and its beaches. It's quiet when I arrive and there are plenty of vacancy signs but it's a different story in summer when the regular population swells from 500 to about 3000. I follow the coast out of town to the entrance to the Coffin Bay National Park where I discover I'm limited to a small slice of the southern end of the park. Only serious 4WD types are allowed to explore the challenging tracks of the northern end of the peninsula. But there's still plenty of spectacular scenery for 2WD vehicles, ranging from sheltered swimming bays and sand dunes to rugged cliffs and surf beaches. At the end of the sealed road lies Golden Island, named after the way the sun hits its limestone cliffs.

It's soon obvious, however, that I need to keep my eyes on the road. Maybe it's the approaching storm but my red hire car seems to be a wildlife magnet. Bushes on the side of the road suddenly gain legs and dart across in front of me with alarming regularity. It's not just the emus that have a death wish this particular morning; half a dozen kangaroos also wait for my approach before deciding to bound across to the other side. By the time I reach the aptly named Point Avoid, it's started to rain and the wind is buffeting the car. I haven't hit anything but I'm a wreck. A cheerful sign at the end of the look-out warns of crumbling cliffs, dangerous winds and freak waves so I stay inside while I gather my wits. The trip back is painfully slow but, eerily, unremarkable. I don't encounter a bird, beast or moving bush.

There are sand dunes and beaches to drive on here too, but be warned, most of the "tracks" are strictly extreme 4WD with the added danger of fluctuating tides. To avoid the embarrassment of being rescued and to fully appreciate what this area has to offer, including the wildlife parade, you might find, like me, that it pays to leave the driving to the experts.

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