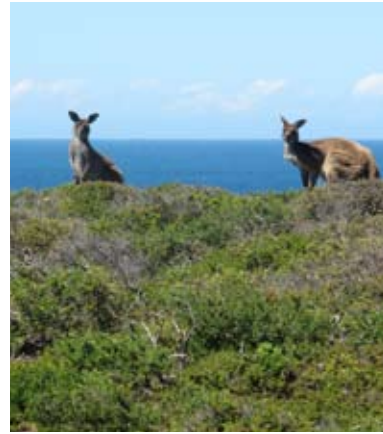


TOP of the eco-chain

XXVI



The road less travelled is very appealing and Port Lincoln fits the bill. **Becky Wilson** explores the area with ecotourism in mind.

Most people love the words ‘off the beaten path’. They conjure images of remote sandy beaches, thrilling landscapes, encounters with amazing wildlife and the feeling of being an adventurer; and of stepping on unspoiled land.

While high volumes of tourist activity can easily spoil once-remote areas, ecotourism provides a great way to leave Australia’s natural beauty intact for future generations. According to Ecotourism Australia, “Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that foster environmental understanding.”

Port Lincoln is known for embracing this ethos, so I decide to head to the port city that sits on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula, surrounded by some 2,000 kilometres of coastline. Made up of numerous bays, coves and famously untouched beaches, the region is renowned for its excellent seafood and a plethora of iconic Australian wildlife such as southern right whales, dolphins, great white sharks, and thousands of kangaroos and emus. It also has a number of eco- and adventure-experiences that will show me the area in its best light.

As I fly in, what amazes me is the pristine Southern Ocean. Having become accustomed to murkier waters, I am stunned by the mesmerising colour of the aqua blue expanse below me. The coastline is rugged, and the flora, dominated by mallee woodland and limestone cliffs, is so naturally beautiful and untouched that I’m convinced it must have looked exactly the same when Matthew Flinders discovered it in 1802.

Port Lincoln is renowned for its excellent seafood and a plethora of iconic Australian wildlife. It also has a number of eco- and adventure-experiences.

Wandering in the wilderness

For central accommodation, the Port Lincoln Hotel, situated right next to Boston Bay, is a great place to make your base while exploring the town. The hotel is the hub of much socialising, with live music, the popular Sarin’s restaurant and several bars – one with an open fire (think a glass of local wine and a good book). The friendly staff also have excellent knowledge of the area.

For a 4WD tour of Lincoln National Park, I meet Phil and Amanda Porter, owners of Wilderness Wanderers, who are one of few businesses to receive eco-accreditation before trading. Joining us for the day is Wanda, an adorable eight-month old joey, one of five orphaned kangaroos being hand-reared on the Porters’ land. Much to my delight, local celebrity Wanda sits comfortably in a pillowcase in the back of the car, and merely gets out to stretch her legs with us when we stop – although she never strays far from Phil, who cares for her like a newborn baby.

Phil tells me he is about as local as you can get – being a fifth-generation Australian. His forefathers arrived in Port Lincoln on Matthew Flinders’ boat and his family has lived in the area ever since. He has enough information about the native wildlife to keep me enthralled all day, reeling off facts almost faster than I can take them in. He tells me “a female kangaroo can delay a pregnancy in progress for up to nine months if she senses that there is possible danger to the joey, such as drought or a bushfire. “And when a female emu has laid her eggs,” he goes on, “it is the father that sits on them until they hatch, and then watches the baby emus until they can fend for themselves.”

Phil’s intimate knowledge of the land certainly came



in handy when navigating the gigantic sand dunes, which if attempted alone, would have certainly left me in an upturned vehicle or bogged in tons of sand. The good thing about these tours is that you get to see landscapes that simply wouldn't be possible without a guide. We snake up the coastline, past countless coves, bays and beaches with beautiful, bright blue water, sandy shores and limestone headlands. We stop for lunch at Memory Cove, which is a perfect beach with sparkling white sand and camping space, although access is limited to 15 vehicles a day in order to keep it unspoiled.

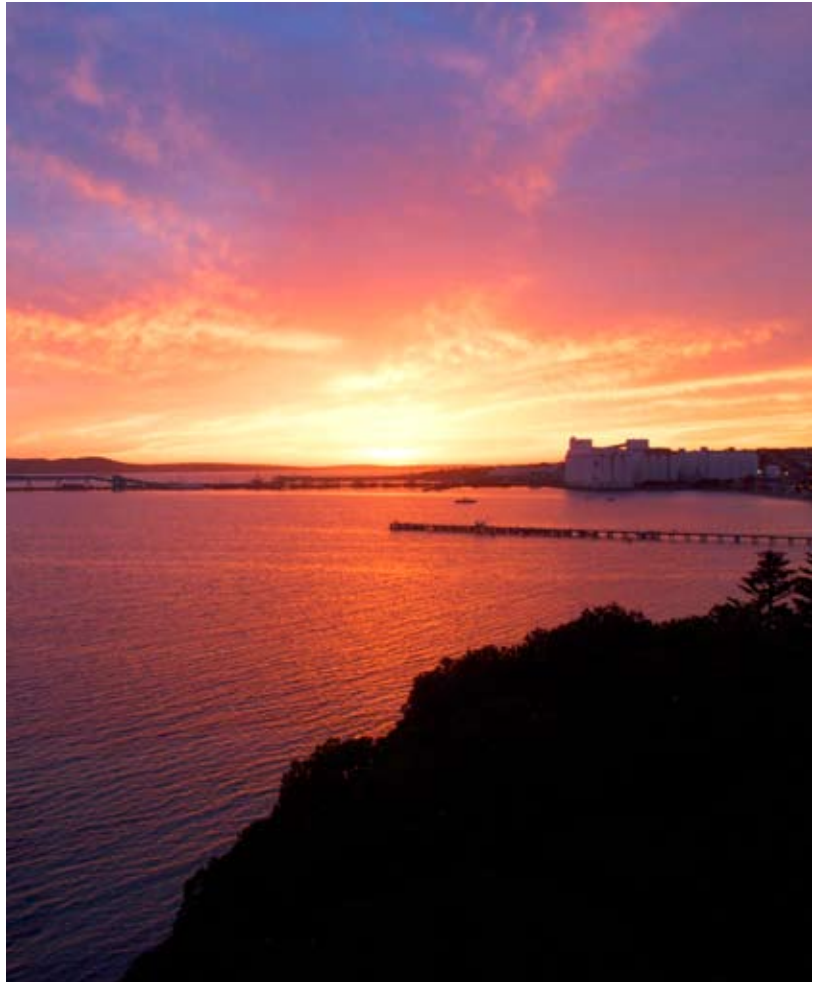
I am privileged that Phil and Amanda show me the nesting area of a native pygmy possum. It seems that these tiny animals are not recognised for the sweet creatures that they are, and often get killed by locals when they are mistaken for mice. I am smitten and, want to take one home along with Wanda.

The Porters are passionate about conservation and anyone visiting the area can see why. With more than 33,000 hectares of land protected by National Park, there is a big portion of Port Lincoln that has been left mainly untouched by human development, and this protection means that it is likely to remain in this condition long into the future.

A luxury eco-escape

Port Lincoln has faced some difficult challenges over the years. It was ravaged by fire several times during the last 10 years, but sometimes devastation can draw a community together. That is evident here, as everyone I meet has been affected by fire in some way, from losing their house, to losing friends or their business. But, most people are quick to look on the bright side. Owners of Tanonga Luxury Eco Lodges, Jill and Michael Coates, point out that their project would not have been possible without fire, because it cleared huge amounts of dense bushland on their land that was virtually impenetrable. And fire can also bring diversity and regrowth to the land.

The luxury eco lodge is everything that you could hope for in a special retreat. It is an experience that takes you right into the heart of bushland, with



extraordinary views of rolling countryside, and Jill and Michael have thoughtfully considered every convenience. The kitchen is stocked with local treats such as regional wine, jam made from quandong berries that grow wild in Lincoln National Park, and exquisite organic dried fruits and nuts. Local organic bathroom goodies are also provided for your indulgence.

It takes a great deal of passion and integrity to complete a project such as these eco-lodges. The Tanonga property is proof that quality does not need to be compromised for the sake of the environment. The elegant, architecturally designed lodges are created from sustainable materials, powered by solar panels, equipped with energy-efficient appliances and designed to allow natural warming and cooling in winter and summer.

There are several bushwalks leading from the lodges, so I take one to admire the view from the top of the hill where one of the lodges is situated. Shards of a golden sunset drape across the green, yellow and brown hills, and at night, away from the city lights, the blackened sky reveals thousands of glittering stars. Standing below them, I promise myself that I will be back.

Above Left: The famous Coffin Bay oysters.

Above Right: A colourful Port Lincoln sunrise.

Feeling fishy?

Port Lincoln is best known for its quality seafood and the community is heavily reliant on the fishing industry, particularly the Southern Blue Fin (SBF) tuna industry. Dominated by Croatian fisherman that emigrated to Australia, the industry has afforded Port Lincoln the claim of more millionaires (Tony Santic, owner of triple Melbourne Cup winner Makybe Diva among them) per capita than anywhere else in Australia.

At the peak of the industry in 1982, Australia was netting 21,500 tonnes of SBF per year, but as it became obvious that tuna was being over-fished, the government introduced a quota, which is currently set at just over 5,000 tonnes per year. Now aware of the damage that over-fishing can cause, there has been a compulsory shift from tuna fishing, to tuna farming. These days, tuna weighing more than 13kg are caught and are transported to designated pontoons where they are fed daily in order to fatten them to between 20-30kgs each. Port Lincoln SBF accounts for 95 per cent of Australia's quota (around 5,000 tonnes per annum), although 80 to 95 per cent of tuna farmed goes straight to Japan.

My trip to swim with a school of tuna with Adventure Bay Charters was one that I admit to feeling hesitant about. How I could possibly get into the water with such huge fish capable of swimming up to 70km/h, without getting hurt? But I am surprised by the tunas graceful movements: they swim at such high speed, with incredible accuracy, seeming to sense which way you are going to move next and adjusting their route accordingly. I come away unharmed and completely stimulated by the experience.

"Port Lincoln does have amazing wildlife, but it also has the best seafood in the world," says owner of Adventure Bay Charters, Matt Waller. This is a claim I hear a lot during my stay, but you need to know where to look to find the best spots. The Eyre Peninsula provides more than 60 per cent of Australia's seafood, so much of the precious premium seafood is packaged up and sent across the country, or overseas to feed the insatiable Asian appetite for seafood. But there are several wholesale shops where you can buy fresh seafood, including some of the best and freshest prawns, abalone, crayfish and snapper you will ever taste.

As an eco-accredited operator, Adventure Bay Charters plants trees to offset the fuel it uses during the trips, and it is also passionate about educating the public about a very rare breed of Australian sea lions. We take a boat out of Port Lincoln; cruise south past the Lincoln National Park and head towards Hopkins Island, where a colony lives all year round.

With a worldwide population of only 12,000, these sea lions are only found on the southern and west coast of Australia, so the chance to interact with these delightful and playful characters in the wild is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We are told not to touch or approach the sea lions, but minutes after we have



Above: Swimming with Tuna.

Below: The view from Tanonga Eco-Lodge.

Bottom: Tanonga is the ultimate luxury retreat.

squeezed into wetsuits and jumped into the water, the dog-like creatures glide through the water towards us. Game for a bit of fun, they love to mimic you, so we all do somersaults and blow bubbles towards them to entice them to play.

Coffin Bay

An easy 45-kilometre drive from Port Lincoln sits Coffin Bay, which is probably known best for its oysters that are consistently some of the best in the country. I can vouch for that claim after devouring several freshly shucked oysters that had been dragged out of the water only minutes before.

Coffin Bay's waters are believed to be magical because of they are so clean and rich in nutrients. It is a valuable expanse of water that sustains the economic prosperity of the community, with fishing as the major industry, employing 100 of the 600-strong population.

The Coffin Bay Explorer is the bay's only fully accredited Marine Tour operator and offers a lovely and informative day out that will give you a valuable insight into the area. Owner Darian Gale can recount the history of every boat in the marina, has endless knowledge of the fishing industry and runs excellent tours and packages around the bay.

Although I didn't experience it myself, it is common to see pods of dolphins in Coffin Bay, where they swim daily. But it's interesting to note another life form that I didn't see much of while exploring the many coves and beaches in Port Lincoln and Coffin Bay: humans. The only footprints on the beaches were my own. ■



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www.wildernesswanders.com.au
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Coffin Bay Explorer

www.coffinbayexplorer.com
0428 880 621

Adventure Bay Cruises

www.adventurebaycharters.com.au
04 8842 8862

TO STAY

Port Lincoln Hotel

1 Lincoln Highway, Port Lincoln
www.portlincolnhotel.com.au
1300 766 100

Tanonga Luxury Eco Lodges

Pope Drive, near Port Lincoln
www.tanonga.com.au
08 8684 5066

TO EAT

Sarins (located inside the Port Lincoln Hotel)

1 Lincoln Highway, Port Lincoln
www.portlincolnhotel.com.au
1300 766 100

Del Giorno's

80 Tasman Terrace, Port Lincoln
www.delgiornos.com.au
08 8683 0577

The Pier Hotel

33 Tasman Terrace, Port Lincoln
1300 788 378

Oystebeds Restaurant and Pizza Shop

61 The Esplanade, Coffin Bay
08 8685 4000

Moorings Restaurant

94 Tasman Terrace, Port Lincoln
08 8682 2133

FOR MORE INFORMATION

South Australian Tourism Commission

www.southaustralia.com