

RETREAT



Gone with the wind

Local knowledge unfurls on a Flinders Island getaway

LINDY ALEXANDER

The wind is notorious on Flinders Island, a rugged landmass rising from the turbulent waters of Bass Strait and prone to busters that can last for days. Sometimes, though, the Roaring Forties can vanish for days and there's no more than a gentle breeze to tousle the waves.

The calm weather creates ideal conditions for flying, something I'm grateful for as we climb aboard our private nine-seater Piper Chieftain from Melbourne's Moorabbin airport. We soar above a blanket of white for most of the journey, which takes a little over an hour. As we dip below the clouds to land, I catch glimpses of granite headlands, turquoise waters and fields speckled with grazing cattle.

"Welcome to Flinders Island international airport," jokes our pilot Robert Thomas as he points to the solitary building beside the airstrip. "Your luggage will be available at carousel number one, which is also known as the front of the plane." From here, Rob sidesteps into the role of wingman for Heidi Marshall from Flinders Island Adventures, who will guide our three-day Australian Air Safaris adventure.

As part of the land bridge that once joined Tasmania to mainland Australia, Flinders is the largest of 52 islands known as the Furneaux Group, a scatter of giant stepping stones reaching from the northeast tip of the Apple Isle. With a total land area of 1333sq km, it's bigger than Hong Kong or Singapore, but the population of Flinders and neighbouring Cape Barron Island sits at about 900.

As Heidi expertly manoeuvres our white mini-van up a steep gravel road to Walkers Lookout, she outlines some of the island's history. "Indigenous Tasmanians lived here 35,000 years ago but for reasons we don't know, they left the island some time between 9000 and

4000 years ago. Then in the late 1700s sealers arrived and it slowly expanded from there."

From our viewpoint there's not much evidence of human habitation at all. Meringue-like clouds brush the granite mountain tops, their rounded peaks bowing towards the forested valleys. Pacific gulls hover overhead and circle the pastoral land that skirts the mountains and peters out to the ocean. I can't see any roads, houses or people apart from those in our small group. That's the beauty and rugged luxury of Flinders Island; the human touch is light here.

Even the main town of Whitemark is stripped to the bare essentials, with a two-storey hotel, general store, supermarket, petrol station, butcher, bakery, cafe and tiny gallery. Unlike many other coastal towns that embrace expansive sea views, Whitemark turns its back on the water as if protecting itself from the fierce, biting winds that can sweep through. One notable exception is The Flinders Wharf, a bar, restaurant and distillery that meets the ocean eye-to-eye.

For a venue so close to the water, you'd expect top notes of brine or salt wafting around, but instead it's the heady scent of yeast that envelops me as I walk towards the strikingly modern timber and metal building. Inside it's an expansive and welcoming space, its industrial chic decor complemented by the glimmering ocean beyond. And the aroma? It's from Furneaux Distillery, where honey-coloured, small-batch, peated single malt whisky is made.

The menu at the restaurant is a roll call of the island's producers, from garlic, honey and eggs to scallops, wallaby and beef. It's disappointing we don't have a chance to dine here, but Heidi explains that variations in seasonal openings make it difficult for groups like ours to book far in advance. Instead, we head to the nearby Interstate Hotel for lunch. It's a welcoming pub, established in 1911, with leadlight windows and a heritage col-



IN THE KNOW

Fantastic Flinders Island is a three-day trip departing from Melbourne's Moorabbin airport with Australian Air Safaris. From \$2495 a person, twin-share, including flights to the island in a private aircraft, accommodation, meals, beverages, daily activities and guided tours.

australianairsafaris.com.au



our palette of deep green and maroon. According to some residents, the four seasons on Flinders Island are wild duck, mutton bird, brown quail and rock lobster (crayfish). I've arrived at the start of crayfish season, but there's no lobster on the menu and nor is there likely to be. "An individual rock lobster licence lets you have one pot or trap, but that's for personal consumption," Heidi tells us. "Commercial cray pot licences cost over \$65,000 each. So, if you want to eat rock lobster, you'll have to cosy up to a local."

We don't meet any locals willing to forgo their precious catch as Zimbabwean-born Heidi takes us around the island she's called home for the past six years. She points out landmarks and houses as though deciphering a family tree. As we pass a tiny, rustic timber cottage, we learn about the hardy Eden sisters who lived here until they were in their 80s, shearing sheep and living a near self-sufficient lifestyle. These and other early families, such as the Bowmans, Blundstones, Wheatleys, Blyths and Treloars, were settlers, farmers, fishermen and merchants, all making the most of what the land and sea provided.

We spend the next few days threading our way through the interior of the island, passing cartwheeling wind turbines before emerging at secluded coves and bays where smooth boulders poke from the water like the curved backs of whales. At Marshall Bay, we walk along the shoreline to Castle Rock, a monolith that looks like a giant lump of clay sliced through the middle with taut fishing line. The water is Caribbean-blue, reminiscent of the peacocks we passed in a field earlier, the metallic blue-green of their fanned-out feathers glimmering in the sun.

Among the dense bushland of Mt Strzelecki, we search for delicate orchids clinging to granite rock faces, and at Petrification Bay we listen carefully to hear the tiny pops of clams in the black shallow rock pools. We scour windswept beaches for Killiecrankie "diamonds"; glittering pieces of topaz that were once collected and sent to London to be displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibi-

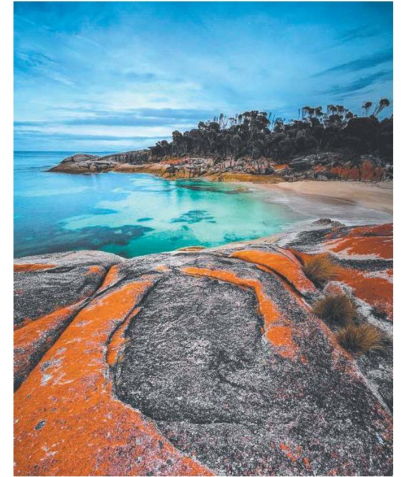
'If you want to eat rock lobster, you'll have to cosy up to a local'



Bay and farmland views on Flinders Island, left and right; Trousers Point, far right; Furneau Distillery, below left; The Flinders Wharf, bottom left.

tion in The Crystal Palace. We don't find any gems, but on the west coast of the island, we visit a small red brick chapel bathed in sunlight. It's the only remnant of the disastrous Wybalenna settlement, where more than 130 Indigenous Tasmanians were exiled in order to be "protected" from white settlers on mainland Tasmania in 1833. Disease, inadequate shelter and poor access to food meant many died at the site, and in 1947 it was closed. Looking out to the windswept landscape and the small cemetery with unmarked graves, I can only imagine the hardship of being abruptly transplanted here and living in such unfamiliar country.

In the evenings we retire to Mountain Seas Lodge, a homely property tucked into the foothills of Mt Strzelecki. The meals are tasty, hearty affairs that come with a side of wildlife spotting. When our group of mainlanders excitedly alert the neighbouring table to the wom-



bats snuffling around outside the restaurant's window, they just chuckle and go back to eating their dinner. "We get a lot of wombats around here, love," one of the men replies kindly.

Our final lunch is at Unavale Vineyard, the only winery on the island. We sit at a long timber table surrounded by lush green vines and share a grazing platter of Tassie cheeses, homemade condiments and small-batch charcuterie, along with a bottle of the winery's juicy rosé. As a gentle breeze ripples through the vines, we board the minivan for one last time. And as we make our way back to the tiny airport, flanked by deserted beaches and mountain peaks, I can't help but think that the Killiecrankie diamonds aren't the only gems to be found on Flinders Island.

Lindy Alexander was a guest of Australian Air Safaris.

BONUS HIGH TEA!

BAILEY'S RESTAURANT

Whether you're a history buff, or enjoy learning about a place's past and people, Norfolk Island is the destination for your next escape. Alongside the stunning natural beauty, free roaming cows and practically private beaches there's a rich history dating back to the convict era. It's an easy two hour flight from Brisbane or Sydney, so why not discover Norfolk Island for yourself.

On Norfolk Island most roads lead back to the Bounty, and the history of Bailey's restaurant is no different. This beautiful, old island home once belonged to Herbert and Clara 'Settie' Bailey, children of Bounty descendants from Pitcairn Island in 1856.



Herbert built this house for himself and Clara around 1901 from local and imported timbers. It was a typical layout for the time with two rooms, a kitchen at the back, and a wide verandah all around. The Baileys had five children, and in time they added three extra bedrooms and enclosed a section on the western side for Clara's sewing room - which now serves as the bar area.

Today, the house remains in the family, with Governor's Lodge now owned by a direct descendent of Fletcher Christian and the great nephew of Herbert and Clara Bailey's son, Dave Bailey.

Bailey's restaurant is open for dinner and happy hour daily, serving stunning modern Australian cuisine, and a high tea experience once a week called Bailey's Tea Party. Bailey's restaurant is a must-do dining destination.

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