

# Southern *beauty*

*Rugged, barely touched and teeming with friendly sea creatures ... few places offer oceanic splendour quite like southern Australia. **Susan Skelly** romances the remote aboard True North.*



**T**he southern bluefin tuna is said to be the fourth fastest fish on the planet. Some call it the Ferrari of the ocean. Right now, a gang of them swims just a foot from my face.

In profile, they are magnificent – each a 40-odd kilogram torpedo in slick blue-bronze and pewter, all bulging muscle with a confidence that comes from being a species that delivers the most in-demand premium-grade sashimi in the world. From above, yellow finlets give them dot-painting cachet.

The tuna swish through a mob of trevally glittering in the morning sun in an undersea pen built by Yasmin and Mick Dyer of Oceanic Victor, anchored in Victor Harbor on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula.

The 50-metre adventure cruiser, True North, has anchored just off Granite Island in Victor Harbor with the tuna's next audience. They are ready to swim with, and hand-feed, some 80 southern bluefins, or just gaze upon them from an underwater portal.

Guests have spent the previous day in the Barossa Valley checking out the wine world's similarly prized exports. It is the start of True North's annual eight-night 'Southern Safari', which dips in and out of the north, west and east coasts of Kangaroo Island, the lower Eyre Peninsula, the oyster capitals of Coffin Bay and Streaky Bay and, along the way to Ceduna, remote islands in the Great Australian Bight.

Swimming with our underwater companions is top of the agenda – with New Zealand fur seals, Australian sea lions, dolphins and, separated by a sturdy viewing cage and thick wetsuits, great white sharks. Dolphins are surely the ocean's happiness pills; seals turn out to be hilarious in the way they mimic – you roll, they roll; white pointer sharks are surprisingly quiet and graceful – and utterly chilling.

We see an abundance of pelicans, cormorants, terns, raptors, and the odd little penguin, also known as fairy penguins. We will bounce across bays in our tender boat and wade into the blue, blue waters of dreamy, barely populated beaches.

## A true adventure

Australia's rugged, idiosyncratic southern coastline offers several perspectives. But whether it's seen from underwater, from the shoreline, from atop a mountain, or from a helicopter cruising at about 300 metres, you hit the jackpot.

This isn't the kind of travel that deposits you at the epicentre of your comfort zone. The philosophy here is to place you on the outer rim of comfort; to push boundaries, and feel proud you did. Espresso-drinking urbanites find themselves fishing, mud crabbing, rock climbing, hiking, learning to paddleboard. There's an itinerary but, as cap-





tain Gavin Graham explains from the hi-tech bridge, it's subject to change as winds, tides and unexpected opportunities dictate.

True North Adventure Cruises started life as North Star Cruises Australia, the brainchild of Broome-based director Craig Howson. His enterprise recently celebrated its 30th anniversary while the luxury explorer is now in its fourth incarnation. In 2016, Howson received the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to tourism in Western Australia.

"We are very different from a big-ship holiday," Howson explains. "Our itineraries are always activity-based and much more suited to travellers looking for a holiday that is also a rewarding experience. We can go where other cruise ships can't."

The ship has 18 cabins over three decks (top deck, top price), a spacious lounge, dining room, deck areas to find solitude on, six workhorse tenders, and usually a chopper on the roof.

Cabins are elegant minimalism with plenty of storage. Housekeeping fairies keep it ship-shape and supplied toiletries are L'Occitane. The crew of 20 is skilled, respectful, reactive and informed. On-board naturalist Natalie Hill, who can tell a fur seal from a sea lion, is a person you want on your trivia night team.

The food on board is surprising, creative and flexible, much of it sourced from the larder that surrounds the boat – King George whiting, flathead, squid, abalone, oysters, and blue swimmer crabs among the fresh flavours. Bar snacks might include pickled octopus, caught by the anglers. Toast the day's efforts with a mango daiquiri, espresso martini or the bottle of Central Otago pinot noir.

After just three days, being on True North starts to feel like a school reunion. Which it often is; she has a recidivist

clientele. One couple recently booked their 30th trip, and more than 100 people have embarked 10 times. The demographic is one that's well travelled, well heeled, and keen on once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

And there is an abundance of those. After exploring Australia's southern coastline in January, True North takes a break for a refit before cruising WA's south-west coast in March. It's in its Kimberley element from March to September, before heading to Broome and the coral atolls of Rowley Shoals, then onto Indonesia for Komodo dragons, volcanic history, snorkelling and whale sharks until November. The culturally fascinating Papua New Guinea and Melanesia take up December and, if you want fireworks, there's a Sydney New Year's Eve package.





A coastline for explorers

Matthew Flinders is the poster boy of the Eyre, Yorke and Fleurieu peninsulas, and the gulfs they sit in. The mapping the English explorer did of a then-unknown coastline while captaining the Investigator in 1801 and ‘02 has stood the test of time and technology. Landmarks Catastrophe Bay, Point Avoid, and Memory Cove (a tribute to drowned sailors) are a reminder of the degree of difficulty.

We survey a few remote islands ourselves, relishing their sealife, wildlife and birdlife.

Kangaroo Island is home to a subspecies of the western grey kangaroo, except they’re a very dark brown. Sleepy koalas in the Hanson Park Wildlife Sanctuary are postcard cute. Square backsides! Who knew? The island, Australia’s third largest behind Tasmania and Melville Island, is also home to the platypus, tammar wallaby, black swan, and the truly wondrous echidna, which wakes up to bad hair every day of its life.

Artisan producers on Kangaroo Island collect Ligurian honey and lavender, make cheese and yoghurt, distil spirits and eucalyptus oil, brew beer, grow grapes for wine, and shuck oysters. In the south-west of the island, the 500-million-year-old Remarkable Rocks and the stalactite ‘mouth’ of Admirals Arch are geology at its most awesome.

The Neptune Islands, 70 kilometres south of Port Lincoln, are home to fur seals, sea lions, rock parrots, ospreys and the odd albatross. There’s nothing but ocean forever, as the True North guests prep for their shark-watch. It’s the one place in Australia where cage diving is permitted. We descend by ladder, weighted and well insulated, to a submerged cage and wait for white pointers to glide by. Underwater scenes for the 1974 blockbuster, Jaws, were filmed here.

Pearson Island, 63 kilometres off Cape Finniss, on the western side of the Eyre Peninsula, might as well be a casting session for Galapagos Down Under. Separated from the mainland for more than 10,500 years, it is a bio-control playground for rock wallabies, sea lions, fur seals, little penguins and lizards. There is also a unique stand of she-oaks.

Some call what follows our disembarkation from the tenders here a comfortable walk over granite rocks, while for others (that’s me) it’s one year’s exercise rolled into three hours. The adventurer who has trekked the Annapurna Circuit and crewed on the Clipper Round The World Yacht Race dubs it ‘a scramble’. Either way, the goal is Hill 781 (named for its height in feet), 238 metres above sea level. Pearson Island’s highest point has panoramic views to the other three islands in the Pearson Isles group.

From Flinders Island later in the day, Howson, who

is on board along with general manager Chad Avenell and their families, radios the tenders to check on the fish tally. The King George whiting are all but jumping into the boat along with the odd squid. No one is going hungry tonight.

We can’t go ashore on the Franklin Islands. Part of the Nuyts Archipelago Conservation Park, it is the last habitat of the greater stick-nest rat, and until Great Australian Bight park rangers can ascertain how its numbers are faring, it’s a prohibited area. But it’s a seductive place from the sea – all granite boulders, limestone, sand bars and aquamarine waters. Bobbing about in a sensuous afternoon sun, we watch fur seals down fish in one gulp and clap pods of dolphins to the surface for their photo shoot.

During the voyage, several silky beaches are road-tested. On Red House Bay beach, at the eastern end of Kangaroo Island, it’s just True North beachcombers, three sheep, and a party of tuna wranglers on their day off, plus delicate chattering wrens with electric-blue heads. On the beach at Memory Cove, the deck chairs are lined up, cricket is in play, the paddleboards are out and pelicans are posing. Cocktails and tempura prawns are handed around. Now that’s Southern style.

From Farm Beach one afternoon, after a morning spent learning about the trials and triumphs of the oyster industry and sampling Coffin Bay’s bounty, it’s time for the bird’s-eye view.

Henry Riggs pilots his Helivista helicopter southwest from Farm Beach over a lime green sea hosting schools of salmon, a grid of oyster leases, the odd stingray, and a lone abalone runabout.

A half hour reconnaissance takes in Point Sir Isaac to the north, Point Whidbey to the south, and a frothy line of speedboat wake down the middle. Below is Coffin Bay town and old rock fences that indicate yesterday’s farming.

Two bays around from our landing spot is the beach where the 1981 film, Gallipoli, was shot.

And that’s the thing about this part of the world. It’s endlessly photogenic, practised in nuance, and with a cast of thousands forever ready for their close-up.



Enquire more about this story at [luxurytravelmedia.com.au](http://luxurytravelmedia.com.au)

Stay

Prices for True North’s eight-night Southern Safari in 2019 start from A\$9495 per person, including the return flight from Ceduna to Adelaide. For information on other itineraries, visit [truenorth.com.au](http://truenorth.com.au)



© REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA WHYALLA AND EYRE PENINSULA (RDAWEP)

Bite-sized Barossa

Top or tail your voyage with an indulgent couple of days in the Barossa Valley

Where to stay

The Louise

Banks of agapanthus are the summer welcome at this five-star property. A founding member of the Luxury Lodges of Australia portfolio, The Louise has just 15 suites as well as a pool, sun beds, sauna, cool boutique and an art collection curated by co-owner Helen Carreker. With a charcoal, dove grey and crisp white palette, the luxurious rooms have views to the vineyards, a courtyard or two, Bose music system, a beckoning bathroom, plus good reading, eating and drinking. The in-suite breakfast of fresh juice and egg and smoky bacon tart with a dinky side casserole of baked beans is delicious. Rooms start at A\$585 per night.[thelouise.com.au](http://thelouise.com.au)

Where to eat

Appellation

This is The Louise’s hatted fine diner. A four-course degustation for \$135 might include cured kangaroo with native currants, a very pretty greenlip abalone on sweet pea puree, the region’s famous King George whiting, and a sorbet sensation combining wild fennel, apple and ginger. Matching wine is \$60 and optional. Ryan Edwards is executive chef while sommelier James Boden has overseen the extensive wine list since January. [thelouise.com.au](http://thelouise.com.au)

Local foodies concur that joining Appellation on Barossa’s best list is FermentAsian (Tanunda), 1918 (Tanunda), St Hugo Restaurant (Rowland Flat), Vintners Bar & Grill (Angaston), Hentley Farm Restaurant (Seppeltsfield), El Estanco (Greenock), and 40s Café (Angaston, for pizza).

What to do

Life is a Cabernet

Ralf Hadzic knows the Barossa’s secrets and he’s willing to share them. Life is a Cabernet can take charge of your pick-ups, itineraries and wine tours, organise freight and even conjure up a celebrant to marry you! [lifeisacabernet.com.au](http://lifeisacabernet.com.au)

Enjoy a local drop

At last count there were 46 cellar doors in the Barossa. Really, you can’t go wrong. But, just down the road from The Louise, in Marananaga, Two Hands Wines makes sense. They’ll pick you up for a short, medium or long day tour that takes in vineyards, views, barrel tastings and a cellar door recce. Souvenir? Two Hands’ Holy Grail Shiraz, \$100. [twohandswines.com](http://twohandswines.com)

Cooking class

Opened at Nuriootpa late last year, The Eatery is a casual version of Maggie Beer’s famous Pheasant Farm. Run by Beer’s daughter, Elli Beer, the casual lunch spot doubles as a cooking school headed by chef Tim Bourke (formerly Kangaroo Island’s Southern Ocean Lodge). Learn clever dinner party tricks such as a hand-rolled pasta with kale pesto and fresh ricotta. [thefarmeatery.com](http://thefarmeatery.com)