

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Where to holiday once state borders open



Luxury hoteliers James and Hayley Baillie rented a beach property to live in during lockdown. **Peter Braig**

***Fiona Carruthers** Travel Editor*

May 23, 2020 – 12.00am

On the back of news over the past few days that the nation's most populous state, NSW, will be open for tourism from June 1, the \$45 billion Australian tourism industry got a taste of what it can expect when borders open nationwide as phones began ringing again and bookings finally kick in.

"We are gearing up for an incredible local tourism boom," says Tourism Australia boss Philippa Harrison. "And it's so important that this happens sooner rather than later, given the industry is made up of thousands of small operators, is a huge employer, and makes a significant contribution to the nation's GDP."

Don't get too excited just yet. Only the borders between NSW, ACT and Victoria are open at present. And even intrastate holidays have only been given the green light within South Australia, and NSW as of June 1. From June 12, you can holiday up to 250km from your home in Queensland, and

from June 15, Tasmania will join the Northern Territory in relaxing its rules around camping for its residents.

But as the nation prepares to get out and about in line with strict government regulations around preventing the spread of COVID-19, we're already looking at our vast sunburnt backyard with fresh eyes.

For husband and wife luxury hoteliers, James and Hayley Baillie, the restrictions mean they can't simply decamp to one of their own lodges (with their four boistrous teenage boys in tow), although that might change by the time school holidays roll around come spring.

The Baillies are busy readying their portfolio, which includes Capella on Lord Howe Island (reopening August 29), and Longitude 131, which fronts Uluru in the Northern Territory. "You want to be ready to accept guests as soon as restrictions are eased," says James. "The whole of Australia will be holidaying at home over the next year; things are going to eventually get busy."

The Baillies are also in rebuild mode after their flagship Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island burned down in the January bushfires and they're working on new ideas for New Zealand's blue ribbon Huka Lodge, which they're in the process of acquiring.

In the meantime, they're already enjoyed a temporary minibreak "refresh" of sorts. For lockdown, they moved from their family home overlooking Pittwater to rent a house on the other side of the peninsula by Avalon beach on Sydney's northern beaches, where their boys surf. "A change is as good as a holiday," Hayley points out.

When the nation does open up, at least one thing Australia doesn't lack is diverse holiday options. And in the era of coronavirus, the size of the country versus the population base must comprise one of the world's best ratios for effective social distancing while on annual leave.

Tourism minister Simon Birmingham has done his bit for Australia's economy by urging state and territory governments to open their borders for the winter school holidays.

As soon as he can get some time off, he says he's looking to take his family camping on Kangaroo Island and hopefully to try some oysters at Coffin

Bay. He's been pushing unsuccessfully for the Queensland border to reopen well before September 1, but it hasn't put him off the sunshine state. Some surf and sand in sunny Queensland is also high on his bucket list.

When it comes to local tourists being let loose, a main concern remains to protect vulnerable Indigenous populations in remote areas such as the Kimberley in WA and parts of the NT and far north Queensland, where the federal government has firm biosecurity restrictions in place.

But safe, monitored tourism is a strong kickstart for the economy given Australians took nearly 10 million overseas trips last year, spending \$65 billion, where 5.6 million trips, or \$43.2 billion, were for holidays only.

"Australians need to get travelling in their own country," says Harrison. "Whether it's a road trip in your own state or a bucket-list option you've always wanted to do – mine is Larapinta Trail in the Northern Territory – book it."

More than 95 per cent of Australia's 302,500 tourism-related businesses are micro or small ventures employing less than 20 people.

Due to widespread confusion as to what people can do – and changing information on when borders might reopen – [Tourism Australia is at work on creating an interactive map](#) version of the "one stop shop" COVID-19 travel alerts tab on their website.

It's hoped this will be available in the coming weeks.

"We did this during the bushfires and it was hugely well received," Harrison says.

Another industry leader, Sydney-based mega hotelier Dr Jerry Schwartz Schwartz Family Co, already has his eye on various local destinations.

"A hidden gem is glamping with the animals at Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney and they've now built an eco hotel at the zoo," Schwartz says. "Similarly, I'd love to go to another hotel in Canberra's Jamala Wildlife Lodge, where you can also sleep with the animals."

Melbourne-based CEO of Luxury Escapes, Cameron Holland, wants to take his family to Far North Queensland for a stay in Port Douglas, Palm Cove or Cairns, however, they will settle for a drive to King Valley in North-East Victoria for the time being.

Bas Bosschieter, the Melbourne-based CEO of Australian company Captain's Choice, agrees that it's a case of close to home is best for the rest of 2020. "The domestic bookings are outweighing international at this stage, and this will be our focus for the next few months.

"Those that are booking international are booking mid to late 2021. For our Australia and New Zealand journeys, we'll be launching more than 10 new journeys over the next month, all travelling by private plane or jet, departing from September 2020 to May 2021.

In Adelaide, luxury travel agency The Tailor, started by Drew Kluska in 1998, is preparing for private jet, helicopter and yacht charters to boom.

"We're not doing well with international queries into Australia but domestic inquiries are going bananas," Kluska says. "People want remote trips that involve getting back to nature. They're not looking to go to Sydney or Melbourne and stay in a hotel, no matter how nice."

Advertisement

To play it safe and avoid the hassle of cancellations, most of their clients are looking to book after September-October, Kluska says.

"At the top end of the market, our clients have mostly written off the next few months.

"They're looking to spend their money at home for the right itinerary, like a private yacht trip out of Port Douglas with all the toys: jet skis, diving equipment, paddle boards and the rest."

Prices for these types of trips start at around \$750 to \$1300 a day per person and climb north from there. "People want to feel inspired but they also want to feel safe as they start to get out and about again," he says.

Plan your escape

CAPTAIN'S CHOICE The popular high-end Australian travel company, started by Phil Asker in the 1990s, is compiling new Australian journeys.

Three new private plane journeys include: a three-night "Southern Islands" sojourn flying Melbourne/Flinders Island/Strahran/King Island/Melbourne.

A "Weekend in the Outback" out of Brisbane or Sydney flying to Broken Hill/Coober Pedy/Lake Eyre/Birdsville/Brisbane or Sydney.

A six-night "Whale Sharks and Wines of the West" trip, comprising: Sydney/Uluru/Ningaloo Reef/Margaret River/Port Lincoln/Sydney.

THE TAILOR: LUXURY TRAVEL AUSTRALIA is offering a six-night private jet safari within South Australia that takes in the Flinders Ranges, Barossa Valley and Coffin Bay.

LUXURY ESCAPES are promoting "tranquillity and romance" with a two-night minibreak at Pethers Rainforest Retreat (for adults only) in the lush treetops of the Tambourine Mountain rainforest in the Gold Coast Hinterland. They also suggest a four-night rail journey from Adelaide to Brisbane aboard The Great Southern.



Fiona Carruthers *Travel Editor* Fiona Carruthers has been Travel editor since 2018 and editor of *Sophisticated Traveller* since 2012. Prior to joining the Financial Review, she was Traveller deputy travel editor and has written travel for The Sunday Times, The Financial Times, The Australian, Time Magazine, and The Sunday Telegraph. Fiona has produced travel features for ABC Radio National and Deutsche Welle. *Connect with Fiona on [Twitter](#). Email Fiona at fcarruthers@afrc.com*