

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 6 | OCTOBER 21, 2012

# travel

Home &  
Driving  
INSIDE

## HOLD ON TO YOUR HAT, SHEILA

Beaches, homesteads,  
deserts, jungles, reefs  
and an epic train journey  
— 20 essential Australian  
experiences P14

PLUS Northern lights ★ Sunday hotel deals ★ Seaside chic in Uruguay



Sailing in the Whitsundays: so many Islands, so little time.



## Big country, big adventures: maximise your time down under with Max Anderson's guide to the essential Oz experiences

**D**ream trips are made of this: from the perfect isles of the Whitsundays to the wines of Margaret River, from the drinking dens of Melbourne to the reef at Ningaloo. Prices may have risen (see overleaf for our insider tips for doing Oz on the cheap, plus a complete travel guide), but dreams are worth saving for. If you haven't been, you should go — and, if you have, here are 20 reasons to return.

### SETTING SAIL Whitsunday Islands, Queensland

Sailing in the Whitsundays offers outstanding value — from just £38pp a day for a group of you. There are 74 islands to discover, as well as reefs, beaches, giant manta rays, dolphins, mountains, caves and six resort islands with bars and restaurants. If you have no sailing experience, it's best to get a morning's instruction from an experienced skipper (£125).

**Details:** Cumberland Charter Yachts ([ccy.com.au](http://ccy.com.au)) has six-berth boats from £1,610 for a week's charter; a 10-berth catamaran starts at £895 a night. Food is not included: buy provisions yourself or get the company to take an online order. Menus start at £20pp. Return flights from Brisbane to Proserpine cost about £145 (see overleaf for details of airlines offering internal flights). For more information, visit [tourismwhitsundays.com.au](http://tourismwhitsundays.com.au).

### A WONDER WALK Maria Island, Tasmania

Australia does whopper walking trails, but the heat and sore feet can prove testing. The Tasmanian operator behind the Maria Island Walk offers a four-day trip that's more experience than foot-slog. Starting and ending in Hobart, you'll do no more than 11 miles in any one day, but will be spoilt for wildlife, landscape and history, with dolphin-spotting and hikes through the cloud forest. Three nights are

spent in diverse but brilliantly chosen accommodation, with fine food and wines served by candlelight.

**Details:** the Maria Island Walk ([mariaislandwalk.com.au](http://mariaislandwalk.com.au)) starts at £1,372pp, all-inclusive.

### WILDLIFE CENTRAL Kangaroo Island, South Australia

KI, southwest of Adelaide, is Aussie wildlife-plus-plus, with huge numbers of kangaroos, koalas, echidnas, platypuses, penguins and sea lions, and it's not hard to get among them. The other big surprise is the diversity of the landscape — wetlands, winelands, sea cliffs, desert-style dunes, dense eucalyptus forest and rolling vales of "grass trees". The beaches are wonderful, and the population of 5,000 means none is especially busy. Do yourself a favour and spend at least three nights here.

**Details:** accommodation ranges from £69 for a night, room-only, at the

Kangaroo Island Lodge ([kilodge.com.au](http://kilodge.com.au)) to £2,540 for two all-inclusive nights at the Southern Ocean Lodge ([southernoceanlodge.com.au](http://southernoceanlodge.com.au)), including transfers and selected island experiences. If you're driving, take the ferry from Cape Jervis (about £150, one-way, for a car and four passengers; [sealink.com.au](http://sealink.com.au)). Return flights from Adelaide cost about £190 return.

### CANOPY LUXURY Mossman Gorge, Queensland

Snug in your boutique treehouse, you'll fall asleep to the sound of the Mossman River gurgling far below, but 330 species of tropical birds will let you know when it's time to get up. You'll have a timber balcony, a luxury spa bath and a Bose music system, but in the canopy of ancient rainforest, it's clear who rules the roost. When you're on the ground, spend your days canoeing, doing yoga on the banks, spear-fishing in the mangroves with an Aboriginal guide or taking a boat to the Great Barrier Reef.

**Details:** treehouses at Silky Oaks Lodge ([silkyoakslodge.com.au](http://silkyoakslodge.com.au)) start at £316, including breakfast and in-resort activities. The mangrove walk starts at £41pp, a reef trip at £114pp. Return flights to Cairns from Brisbane start at £395; the transfer to Silky Oaks starts at £30pp.

### VINEYARDS AND VISTAS Margaret River, Western Australia

Hire a car in Perth and head out on a 600-mile journey that combines winelands, woodlands and wild beaches. Essential stops include the Margaret River wineries, the Valley of the Giants treetop walk in Walpole (130ft up among the canopy of karri and tingle trees), the aromatic truffière of the Wine and Truffle company in Manjimup, Albany (a waterside town with excellent fishing), and maybe a couple of the white beaches along the 600-mile Bibbulmun Track. Two historic trips are well worth doing:



# AUSTRALIA'S TOP 20



the jail tour of Fremantle, a boho port city, and the old whaling station in Albany (hard to believe the Aussies killed their last whale in 1978).

**Details:** doubles en route range from £85, room-only, at the Margaret River Hotel ([margaretriverhotel.com.au](http://margaretriverhotel.com.au)) to £190, B&B, at Cape Lodge ([capelodge.com.au](http://capelodge.com.au)) has 10 days' car hire from Perth for about £250.

#### GOING BUSH Eyre Peninsula, South Australia

The Eyre peninsula is a huge triangle of wild country and brutal seas. Start in Port Lincoln, tuna-fishing capital of the world, from where your guided bush adventure will take you 130 miles north to the four-star wilderness camp at Kangalana. There you'll find scenery that's 1½ billion years old, salt lakes, settler homestead ruins, rare southern hairy-nosed wombats and awesome star-scapes. For at least one night, be sure to swap your luxury tent for the rather romantic Swagon — the Aussie equivalent of a gypsy wagon.

**Details:** Gawler Ranges Wilderness Safaris ([gawleranges.com](http://gawleranges.com)) has four-day trips from £1,290pp, all-inclusive. If you want to go it alone, pick up a hire car in Adelaide for about £16 a day ([budget.com.au](http://budget.com.au)) and make for far-flung spots such as the Coodlie Park Farm Retreat ([coodliepark.com.au](http://coodliepark.com.au)), which can put you up in cabins from £57. Return flights from Adelaide to Port Lincoln start at £128 return. For more information, try [visitsouthaustralia.com](http://visitsouthaustralia.com).

#### GROUND-BREAKING ART Hobart, Tasmania

The most exciting thing to open in Australia since the Opera House, Mona (£13; [mona.net.au](http://mona.net.au)) rewrites the rules of how people experience art. It houses a £130m collection of the antique, the avant-garde and the downright confrontational, combining the art with a brewery, a winery and a top-notch restaurant.

**Details:** the Grand Mercure Hadleys Hotel ([mercure.com](http://mercure.com)), built in 1834, has doubles from £62, room-only. If you're feeling flush, stay in one of the brilliant Mona Pavilions; from £228, B&B.

#### BEACH BOHO Byron Bay, New South Wales

The east coast is strung with lovely beaches, but Byron, on the New South Wales/Queensland border, sums up the classic hippie surf vibe. Restaurants, bars and alternative shops line the streets, and the lighthouse twinkles at night. This is the place to learn to surf: the beach break is forgiving to novices, of whom there are plenty. Silver surfer Rusty Miller, a former champion, offers one-on-one tuition from £85 for two hours ([rustymillersurf.com](http://rustymillersurf.com)).

**Details:** accommodation ranges from £76, room-only, at the Byron Motor Lodge ([byronmotorlodge.com](http://byronmotorlodge.com)) to £250, room-only, at the Byron at Byron ([thebyronatbyron.com.au](http://thebyronatbyron.com.au)). The closest airport is Ballina — flights from Sydney cost about £350 return. If you're in Brisbane, it's an easy two-hour drive south. For more information, look at [visitbyronbay.com](http://visitbyronbay.com).

#### FORGOTTEN BACK Karijini, Western Australia

Karijini National Park is one of the most dramatic destinations in Oz,

lying deep in Western Australia's iron-ore country, near hard-as-nails mining towns such as Tom Price and Newman. The plum-red ranges covered in lime-green spinifex suddenly fissure into plunging chasms and gorges — and here's where the adventure begins. Follow a guide deep into the labyrinth of twisting, kinking corridors, sculpted by wind and water to expose geologies of amazing colour. Expect lots of clambering, scaling and, best of all, swimming in the beautiful, slightly eerie black waterholes. Wait until April to avoid the heat.

**Details:** a 10-day trip to Karijini from Perth starts at £1,050pp, all-inclusive, with Kimberley Wild Expeditions ([kimberleywild.com.au](http://kimberleywild.com.au)). Or fly to Tom Price airport and tour Karijini with Lestok ([lestoktours.com.au](http://lestoktours.com.au)) or West Oz Active ([westozactive.com.au](http://westozactive.com.au)). Day trips start at £95.

#### A WET SEASON WONDER Kakadu, Northern Territory

It's one of Australia's top attractions, but most people see it in the dry season. In the wet season (December to March),

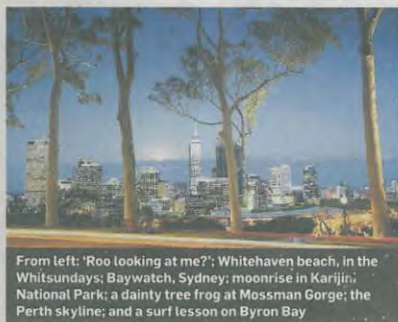
Kakadu National Park is savage and beautiful, with gushing waterfalls, flooded plains, hyperactive wildlife and torpid air, buzzing with insects and birds. You'll need some resolve — it's a sweaty time of year — but standing atop the rock outcrops of Ubirr makes it all worthwhile. You'll have the astounding Aboriginal rock art to yourself, and you can witness horizons filled with hunched clouds dragging great chains of rain across the wetlands and firing lightning bolts into the earth. Magical.

**Details:** four days' car hire from Darwin starts at about £90 ([budget.com.au](http://budget.com.au)); studio cabins at Kakadu Lodge start at £82, room-only ([auroraresorts.com.au](http://auroraresorts.com.au)). If you want it all done for you, a two-day wet-season tour with Venture North ([venturenorth.com.au](http://venturenorth.com.au)) costs £638pp, including two scenic flights, accommodation and meals.

#### NATURAL STYLE Freycinet Peninsula, Tasmania

Saffire combines radical design and a perfect location. The 20-suite retreat

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From left: 'Roo looking at me?'; Whitehaven beach, in the Whitsundays; Baywatch, Sydney; moonrise in Karijini National Park; a dainty tree frog at Mossman Gorge; the Perth skyline; and a surf lesson on Byron Bay

Guido Cozzi/Corners Images

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evokes sea creatures or waves, depending on how you look at it, although there's no doubting the splendour of Freycinet's surroundings: pink-granite mountains, white sand beaches and turquoise seas. Attractions include a winery, an oyster farm and pelican colonies — you can also explore the isles aboard the Saffire's cruise boat. The service, the suites and the seafood have all won plaudits, but one of the nicest touches is also the simplest — complimentary kites.

**Details:** Saffire (saffire-freycinet.com.au) has doubles from £1,355 a night, all-inclusive. You can drive down from Hobart or take the hotel's seaplane (£850 for four people).

**THE GREATER REEF**  
Ningaloo, Western Australia

The Great Barrier Reef gets all the publicity, but the Ningaloo Reef is better. Unlike the GBR, which requires a long boat trip to reach, Ningaloo, just off Australia's remote northwestern corner, is within wading distance of the beach in many places. You'll get all the good stuff — coloured coral, cute Nemo fish and apex predators — as well as humpback whales (from May to December) and whale sharks, which you can swim with (from March to July). Stay in the pleasant town of Exmouth or, if you're the budget, hole up at the brilliant Sal Salis eco-retreat, a posh Crusoe camp with a lovely bit of reef right outside your tent.

**Details:** accommodation ranges from £105, room-only, at the Sea Breeze Resort (seabreezeresort.com.au), the nearest option to the marine park, to £437pp, all-inclusive, at Sal Salis (salsalis.com.au). Return flights from Perth to Exmouth cost about £350. Swimming with whale sharks costs £250pp with 3 Islands Whale Shark Dive (whalesharkdive.com).

**COOL DRINKING**  
Melbourne, Victoria

AlleyLife (alleylife.com.au) gives you a clue to Melbourne's laneway scene: every bar is rated for "difficulty

finding". Among the skein of urban rat-runs, the joy lies in getting lost, turning corners, tapping on discreet doors. There are about 50 bars here, hidden in basements, on rooftops and behind speakeasy-style peepholes — some intimate, others sprawling over several floors of a warehouse. The bars are complemented by hip new restaurants, rusted-on cafes and street-art hang-outs. It's cool and savvy, but also relaxed and inclusive.

**Details:** save cash for your bar crawl by staying at the Hotel Pensione (shotels.com); doubles from £63, room-only). The five-star option is the Langham



Alto Pawan/4Corners Images

(melbourne.langhamhotels.com.au), which has posh doubles from £185, room-only. For more information, go to visitmelbourne.com.

**ACTION ISLAND**  
Lord Howe Island, New South Wales

One of the most dramatic and enchanting destinations in Australia, Lord Howe Island is also ridiculously little-known. An eight-mile-long strip of beach, mountains and pine trees in the Pacific, it hosts only 400 visitors at any one time and is a first-class adventure destination, blessed

with awesome wind and waves for kitesurfing, windsurfing, sailing and surfing. It also has one of the world's most sublime golf courses (lordhowegolf.com.au; £25 a round, including club hire). The deep-sea fishing grounds are packed with all sorts of monsters and the bird life is astonishing, from the nightly return of tens of thousands of shearwaters to the spectacular mating rituals of the red-tailed tropic birds. The *five day resistance* is a challenging day climb up 3,000ft Mount Gower.

**Details:** accommodation ranges from £100pp, self-catering, at the Somerset

**OZ WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK**  
Dream trip tips for going down under without going under

The Australian economy is in rude health, and the dollar has gone through the roof: three years ago, you might have got \$2.50 for your pound; now you'll get closer to \$1.50. Flight costs are high, too, but while there's no way to make it a cheap trip, there are some economies to be made. Here's our guide on how to get there, how to get around and how to experience the best of the country without coming home to an airtight bank manager.

**GETTING THERE**

Airlines flying to Australia from Heathrow or Manchester include Qantas (020 8600 4300, qantas.com.au), British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), Emirates (0844 800 2777, emirates.com), Singapore Airlines (020 8961 6993, singaporeair.com), Cathay Pacific (020 8834 8888, cathaypacific.com), Malaysia Airlines (0871 423 9090, malaysiaairlines.com), Thai Airways (020 7491 7953, www.thairways.com), and Etihad (0845 608 1225, etihadairways.com). There's always a stop on the way; that usually means changing planes, although Qantas and BA offer a direct service.

The shortest flight, to Perth, takes 19 hours; Sydney takes 23. The "gateway" cities are Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Cairns and Darwin. New flight options are opening up all the time: on November 1, for example, Emirates launches flights to Adelaide via Dubai, with an introductory offer of £915 return for bookings made by October 31.

**How to save:** an open-jaw ticket allows you to fly into one city and home from another, saving on internal flights: London to Adelaide and back from Melbourne with Qantas is £953 between January 28 and March 15. Prices are highest around our school summer holidays and Christmas. If you can't face the long haul in economy, you could upgrade to business class, but it will cost you:



Andy Rouse

A whale shark off Ningaloo Reef

flying business with Qantas in March would add £2,600 to your regular fare. Much more affordable is premium economy — typically £700 extra.

**GETTING AROUND**

**By plane:** because it's such a big country, most visitors will need to buy at least one, and often two or three, domestic flights. There are four main domestic carriers: Virgin Australia (virginblue.com.au), Qantas (qantas.com.au), Jetstar (jetstar.com.au) and Tiger Airways (tigerairways.com). Smaller regional airlines, which can be useful for accessing out-of-the-way destinations, include Regional Express (rex.com.au), handy if you're visiting country towns in southeast Australia, and Skywest (skywest.com.au), for Western Australia.

**How to save:** it's often cheapest to book internal transfers when buying your flights from this country, as there are good deals when domestic sectors are incorporated into the international ticket. Fares are increasingly competitive, especially between state capitals — at the time of going to press, a Melbourne-Hobart flight, booked direct with Jetstar for travel in January, could be bagged

for as little as £25. Shop around and book early, avoiding the Australian school holidays, especially Christmas and the first two weeks of January.

**By car:** several big chains have branches across the country, including Hertz (0870 844 8844, hertz.co.uk) and Avis (0844 581 0147, avis.co.uk).

**How to save:** driving delivers a lot of Oz for your money. Hire prices are reasonable — generally £16-£25 a day — and petrol is a third cheaper than in Britain. As a rule, there are no one-way drop-off charges if you rent a car for three or more days. There are plenty of decent B&Bs, pubs and motels, with typical prices of £40-£65 a night. Don't forget camper vans, either. They cost more up front (from £65-£130 a day, depending on the length of hire), but you'll save on hotels and have more freedom. Good companies to try include Kea (arentals.keacampers.com) and Apollo (apollocarrentals.com.au).

Each state has its own rules on roadside camping — in some, you'll have to stay on an official camp site. Check out the state websites for rules and itineraries (see below)

**TOUR OPERATORS**

Buying a package often works out cheaper — and safer — than doing it yourself. All package prices are per person, including flights and car hire.

**Bridge & Wickers** (020 3642 9204, bridgeandwickers.co.uk) has a Tasmania tour for £3,305, with three nights each at the Islington, in Hobart, and the Saffire, in Freycinet, and a four-day guided walking trip on Maria Island.

**Wexas Travel** (020 7590 0610; wexas.com) has a nine-night Western Australia trip — two nights each at the Richardson, in Perth, Cape Lodge, in Margaret River, and the Karma Chalets, in Denmark, and three nights at Sal Salis, next to Ningaloo Reef — from £2,324pp.

**Traillfinders** (020 7368 1200, traillfinders.com) has five nights each at the Cambridge, in Sydney, and the Reef View Hamilton Island, followed by four nights at the Apartments Inn Byron Bay, from £1,299pp.

Other operators include Austravel (0808 159 6645, austravel.com), Freedom Australia (0844 567 8050, freedomaustralia.co.uk) and Travelbag (0871 703 4698, travelbag.co.uk).

**WHEN TO GO**

The southern half of Australia is warmest and driest during our winter; the north enjoys its best weather in our summer. If a storm or two won't put you off, head for Kakadu in the wet season (see A Wet Season Wonder, page 15). If you're seeking sunshine, then the magnificent landscapes there, and in Kimberley, Queensland and the islands of the Great Barrier Reef, are best enjoyed from April onwards.

**AND FINALLY**

All British passport-holders need to acquire an ETA (Electronic Travel Authority) prior to arrival; this can be arranged online at [immi.gov.au](http://immi.gov.au) or through a tour operator.

The websites of the state tourist boards are well worth visiting when planning your trip. Visit [visitvictoria.com](http://visitvictoria.com); [southaustralia.com](http://southaustralia.com); [discovertasmania.com](http://discovertasmania.com); [tourismnt.com](http://tourismnt.com); [westernaustralia.com.au](http://westernaustralia.com.au); and [queenslandholidays.com.au](http://queenslandholidays.com.au).



Kakadu National Park in the wet season



Apartments (somersefordhowe.com.au) to £420pp, B&B, at Capella Lodge (capellalodge.com.au). Return flights from Sydney start at £650. For more information, visit [lordhoweisland.info](http://lordhoweisland.info).

**STATION LIFE**  
Flinders Ranges, South Australia

Ian Fargher runs a 160,000-acre sheep station in a stark red landscape of

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