

THE LIFE AQUATIC

A sea-themed safari in an RV around the Eyre Peninsula serves up surprises above and below the water

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN



Baird Bay provides encounters with cute Australian sea lions.

The Iveco motorhome makes for easy driving on all but one particularly bumpy road.



WE'RE OFF TO an underwater orgy of epic proportions. At Stony Point, near Whyalla on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, tens of thousands of giant Australian cuttlefish congregate to copulate. It's billed as one of the most spectacular marine events in the country and we're going to snorkel above them as goggled voyeurs. I'm a little concerned about the frigid southern waters, but it turns out I'll have worse to worry about on the day...

The Eyre Peninsula is known as the Seafood Frontier, so hubby and I book a motorhome for a road trip from Adelaide. We fly in the night before and dive into the seafood theme at Vibe Hotel's inhouse restaurant, Storehouse, with barramundi and Vietnamese salad.

At Star RV, our Iveco Polaris 6 motorhome looks enormous, but proves easy to drive if we can just avoid low-hanging branches. It's a true home on wheels, with a kitchen, toilet, shower, and even outdoor furniture in the boot. After provisioning, we drive to Wallaroo Beachfront Tourist Park on the Yorke Peninsula. It's next door to the ferry that will transport us across the Spencer Gulf to the Eyre Peninsula in the morning.

After copper was discovered in 1859, Wallaroo became SA's second busiest port and the Heritage and Nautical Museum tells its story. Nowadays, the Bond Store is a swanky micro-brewery and distillery owned by Italian couple Andrea and Elisa, where we try a gin flight and beer paddle. During dinner at the Weeroona Hotel, proprietor Lee-Anne asks, "Are you the lady that drove the big RV into town?" It seems the motorhome's eye-catching coastal livery attracts attention.

The ferry to Lucky Bay takes 2.5 hours and from here we drive west through Kimba. The town is halfway across Australia as the crow flies, though it's a giant pink galah that greets travellers to Kimba, along with a beguiling image of a young girl in a wheat field painted on silos.

Viterra silos signify each settlement along the Eyre Highway as it carves through grain country that produces around 45 per cent of SA's wheat. Vast fields make Jeremy Clarkson's 'Diddly Squat' paddocks look piddly squat. A patchwork of wheat stubble, tilled soil and dry dirt renders the landscape 50 shades of fallow brown, aggravated by drought. At Wudinna (pronounced Wood-na), the challenges of rural living are portrayed in the eight-metre-high Australian Farmer sculpture, an elegant granite monolith by Marijan Bekic that took two years to carve.

The rutted gravel road to the campsite in Gawler Ranges National Park is brutal in the RV and we're forced to shout over the cacophony of clanging cutlery. When milk spills in the fridge and cascades out along the floor, we've had enough and decide to backtrack to Wudinna RV Park at the showgrounds.

We continue west in the morning to Pildappa Rock, an enormous inselberg with a wave-like base and a moonscape of craters on



top. Dry now, they were natural water reservoirs for the local Indigenous people and early settlers, who channelled the runoff.

After parched paddocks, Streaky Bay's ocean blues are a balm to our spirits, and we score a beachfront site at Discovery Parks Streaky Bay. Cormorants, pelicans and dolphins glide across Doctors Beach as a fisherman reels in a fiddler ray. A foreshore path leads into the town's 340-metre-long jetty, built in 1914, overlooked by the pub and waterfront restaurant, Drift.

Like a hermit crab, our home comes with us on a daytrip to Baird Bay, about 50km south. At Baird Bay Experience, Kat and Brendan kit out guests with wetsuits and snorkels before skimming us across the glassy, shallow bay in a runabout. When dolphins arrive, we slip into the frigid water where they zip and spin to eyeball us, before deciding we're dull and zooming away.

Brendan anchors off Jones Island, home to hundreds of seabirds and a colony of Australian sea lions. Three females gambol over to swim with us, peering into our faces with inquisitive eyes. Their adorable puppy-dog whiskers warm my heart, if not my extremities. Kat says they're pregnant and they nuzzle each other while resting on the sandy bottom.

Back at Streaky Bay we buy oysters and local King George whiting from Streaky Bay Marine Products to cook for dinner. I wake to windy weather and a stuffy head cold.

Heading southeast along the Flinders Highway, we detour to Murphy's Haystacks, named after a visiting Scottish agricultural 'expert' mistook the 1.5 billion-year-old rocks for stacks of hay produced by the surrounding property's owner, Denis Murphy.

The weathered granite outcrops are reminiscent of Stonehenge, albeit more spread out, with shapelier silhouettes. I buy a jar of mallee honey by the gate and, further along the highway, wood-fired fruit buns at the Colton Bakehouse honesty stall.



Cormorants, pelicans and dolphins glide across Doctors Beach as a fisherman reels in a fiddler ray

At Walkers Rock campsite, dunes block the onshore winds, and we have a lazy afternoon. Following dinner around the fire, we rug up to lie on the beach and gaze at the infinity of stars undiminished by light pollution. From here it's on to Coffin Bay, named by Mathew Flinders in honour of Sir Issac Coffin. This hamlet of 650 people sits on the edge of a sheltered waterway that's every shade of aquamarine. It's been renowned for Pacific oysters after they were introduced in 1969, but it was originally native angasi until they were fished out.

We have two nights at Discovery Parks Coffin Bay, across the road from Oyster HQ. This waterfront bar and restaurant has an oyster vending machine for those in a hurry. Hubby is in heaven, with beer and oysters for afternoon tea, and seafood platters for dinner, washed down with a Peter Teakle riesling.

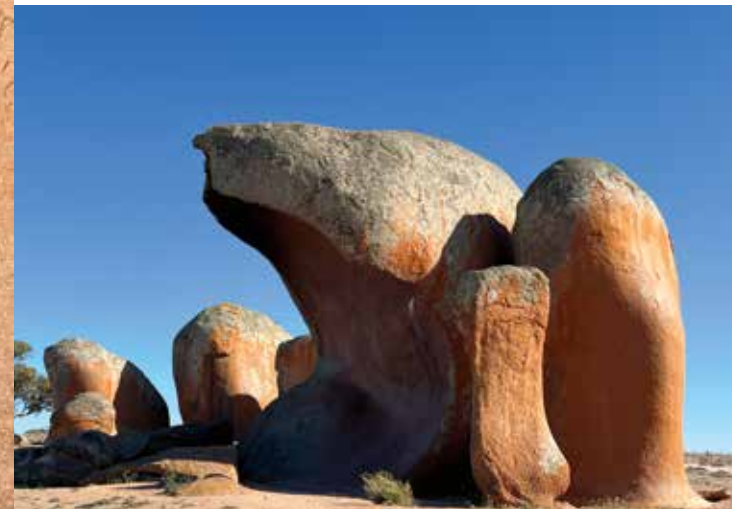
"Coffin Bay oysters grow faster and taste better," says ex-fisherman Scotty on a boat tour with Experience Coffin Bay. "It's due to the clear, nutrient-rich water that's free of contaminants from industry, big shipping and farming, as no major rivers run into the bay."

With puffer jackets zipped we take the Oyster Walk along Kellidie Bay. Kangaroos graze on park lawns and emus hang out at the yacht club. Clouds colour the bay turbid teal, but the water beneath the boardwalk is magnifying-glass clear.

Warm and cosy 1802 Oyster Bar recently won an Australian Good Food Guide Readers' Choice Award, a fantastic

Main Image: David Edgar

From far left to right: one of Jones Island's resident sea lions soaks up the sun amongst many seabirds; ocean delights from Oyster HQ; erosion over eons has carved Pildappa Rock into a wave; Murphy's Haystacks are thought to be 1.5 billion years old; Scotty from Experience Coffin Bay knows a thing or two about oysters.



achievement for Clare and Andy who bought the place just before COVID. Our 'seafood experience' dinner brings plate after plate of innovatively prepared and presented dishes, including kingfish crudo and barbecued Spencer Gulf prawns.

The next day we join Kane on an informative Wild Yarnbala Tour. "This she-oak woodland was slated for residential development," he says, as we walk through the endangered ecosystem that he and his family have turned into a nature reserve. He hands out wattle seeds and quandong skin for us to taste and tells us about the vulnerable western pygmy possum, later getting us to try water divining. Sceptical, we smile incredulously when the divining rods swivel wilfully in our hands. We finish with a Coffin Bay gin around the firepit, as Kane plays the didgeridoo and lap steel guitar, sounds that seem borne from the bush.

Coastal scrub gives way to Southern Ocean views on the drive into Coffin Bay National Park. Rolling surf scours limestone cliffs and Point Avoid overlooks a frenzy of white water to Golden Island. Our Yangie Bay campsite is on the sheltered side of this hammerhead peninsula, surrounded by flowering coastal velvet bush and cockies tongue. We walk up Yangie Hill for panoramic views over the saltmarsh sanctuary, have sunset drinks around the firepit, wake to mist over the water, and eat breakfast with willie wagtails and wattlebirds.

Across the Eyre's tip at Surfleet Cove in Lincoln National Park, we have the beach to ourselves, but it's windy and fires are prohibited. Next is a brief stop at Port Lincoln Tourist Park, where we catch a taxi to Peter Teakle winery. The tasting room resembles a giant wine barrel, but we head to its Line & Label Restaurant for a long lunch, which regrettably doesn't leave time to visit West Coast Distilling Co.'s gin bar in town.

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INVIVA

From left to right: the Whyalla Maritime Museum is home to HMAS *Whyalla*; cuttlefish come to Stony Point to mate; a huge galah greets visitors to the town of Kimba; the beachfront campground at Point Gibbon.



MORE INFORMATION

Star RV | starrv.com/au

Baird Bay Experience | bairdbay.com

Whyalla Diving Services | whyalladivingservices.com.au

Cuttys Glass Bottom Boat Tours | cuttys.au

Discovery Holiday Parks | discoveryholidayparks.com.au

Experience Coffin Bay | experiencecoffinbay.com.au

Wild Yarnbala Tour | yarnbala.com/wild-yarnbala

Vibe Hotel Adelaide | vibehotels.com

Travelling north along the Spencer Gulf coast, we view the silo art at Tumby Bay and stretch our legs on the Arno Bay Boardwalk, where swathes of samphire plants in shades of pink, pearl and pinot cover the ground like a Persian carpet. These small towns deserve more time than we have.

Arriving at Point Gibbon beachfront campsite, we wish we'd booked two nights. On the point of a sweeping beach, sand dunes slope down to garnet-coloured rocks where sea lions are said to frequent. Beach walks offer up a collage of coloured seaweed, myriad cuttlefish bones, and desiccated puffer fish.

The next day we head through Cowell to the steel port of Whyalla, which feels like the big smoke. A drive up Hummock Hill gives 360-degree views over the township, steel works, harbour, and circular jetty. The Maritime Museum, home to HMAS *Whyalla*, the first Bathurst-class minesweeper built by BHP, includes a natural history gallery on the region's marine environment.

We come and go from Discovery Parks Whyalla Foreshore to the cuttlefish breeding site at Stony Point. The morning of our snorkel, I wake early with a horribly upset stomach. I panic, contemplate cancelling and take Imodium.

Soldiering on at Whyalla Diving Services in town, we're dressed in two layers of wetsuits and booties. There's no getting out of these by myself, let alone in a hurry - more panic, more Imodium. Like seals out of water, we waddle ungainly up the street to our motorhome. It'd be funny if I wasn't frantic. At least our van has a toilet, and shower, should the worst happen.

Stony Point is aptly named. Precariously balanced pancake-flat rocks lead into a shallow bay beside the Santos gas fractionation plant. Donning gloves, hooded vests and snorkels, we follow guide Romy into the 14°C water.

I spot dozens of cuttlefish immediately in only a metre or two of water. Their mantles, outlined in neon turquoise, undulate


I realise all those cuttlebones on the beach were the aftermath of an amorous gathering

like flouncy frills as they hover over the sea grass. With a chameleon-like ability to change colour and texture, they camouflage themselves and communicate.

Males vastly outnumber females and inflate their bodies and elongate their eight arms to intimidate competitors. Smaller males resort to cross-dressing skulduggery, imitating females to sneak in under bigger rivals to do the deed. I spot one couple head-to-head, tentacles locked in a mating embrace - it's like watching the Discovery Channel. I don't witness the pulsating psychedelic colours I've seen online, perhaps that comes later in the season when the competition is fiercer (and the water is five degrees colder), but I do spot southern eagle rays.

After 45 minutes we're freezing. While the rest of our group heads to the changerooms, we shuffle to our motorhome, peel each other of neoprene, and thaw out under a blissfully hot shower. Thanks to modern medicine, I return an unsoiled wetsuit.

The following day we're on a glass bottom boat tour with Cuttys. Owner Matt, an ex-fisherman who never lets the truth get in the way of a good story, says no one knows where the cuttlefish come from, just that the flat rocks offer excellent protection for their eggs. He explains they have three hearts and blue blood, but only live for one to two years, and die after mating.

As we head back to Adelaide via Port Augusta, I realise all those cuttlebones on the beach at Point Gibbon were the aftermath of an amorous gathering, much like the one to which we've been privy. 

Credit: Carl Charter (cuttlefish photo)