# Travel Today

SPRING 2026

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# All set for the summer

Earlier in the year it looked like unrest in the Middle East may put pay to Northern Hemisphere Summer trips but as I flick through my Instagram feed, it seems Australian's still found a way.

If Chris Nolan's Odyssey didn't spark interest in the Mediterranean history and the beauty of the region then a barrage of friend's pictures from throughout the summer certainly would. My favourite was from Vanessa Tokatly as she sat watching the Odyssey outdoors in Greece – that was next level.

Vanessa is an experienced travel consultant, and over the past three months has been enjoying summer in Europe – it's a working holiday – she's been busy taking in the sights and enjoying what the region has to offer all in the name of making things easier for her clients. She kindly took time out from the beaches of Cyprus this week to explain how to visit Europe in high summer and avoid the inevitable crowds (Page 13 of this issue).

Travel-writer Kylie Mitchell Smith has also been enjoying Greece as well (watch out for her thoughts in the summer issue) and the two caught up so for a couple of days there were joint posts. While one of my husband's best friends has spent the summer enjoying the festivals and family of Malta (Page 12-13). And me – well - I've been living vicariously – currently the closest I've come to a holiday in the Med is renovating my bathroom in Tuscan flavour. But has been lovely to wake up each day to a new adventure from Kylie and Vanessa. And I know that when I finally go, there will be plenty of expert knowledge coming my way.

It has kind of reminded me of my childhood when my Aunt and Uncle would travel to somewhere exotic in the world and then a few months later would make their way out to Western NSW on a tour of the family for slide night. My dad was one of eleven – so they were like touring rockstars on a six-week tour or regional NSW.

For us it meant a darkened loungeroom, an old sheet strung up on the chimney breast, my mum's homemade cakes and biscuits and a gaggle of neigbour's on every available chair and floor space as we all tracked vicariously through Africa or the UK with the help of the slide projector, Uncle Frank's witty commentary and Aunty Marge popping up to correct him.

These days people can show you their holiday snaps as they are happening, often with a backing track and voice over (and give you the ability to skip through quickly with out being told "down in front!!").

**Tania Phillips**

**Editorial Coordinator**

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**DEADLINES 2026**

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# Starry Starry nights

From meteor showers to the Milky Way, more travellers are venturing into regional Queensland in search of unforgettable night sky experiences with a 100 per cent increase for the word 'astrotourism'.

New research by LifeFlight Lotteries has ranked the state's best stargazing destinations, highlighting where visitors can enjoy spectacular views while reminding adventurers to prepare before heading off the beaten track.

The ranking assessed Queensland's leading stargazing locations using publicly available data, including light pollution, average spring rainfall, accessibility, mobile coverage and nearby camping opportunities.

Whether you're an experienced astronomer, a keen camper, or simply looking for your next weekend escape, these destinations combine breathtaking night skies with memorable outdoor experiences. Below is a closer look at Queensland's highest-ranked stargazing locations.

## The Top Seven Places to Go Stargazing in Queensland

1. Undara Volcanic National Park, Gulf Savannah (Overall Score: 87.63 / 100)

Claiming the top spot is Undara Volcanic National Park, which combines some of Queensland's darkest skies with one of the world's longest lava tube systems. Formed almost 190,000 years ago, the park offers a unique backdrop for stargazing, while thousands of microbats emerge from the caves at dusk before the stars take centre stage.

With a Bortle Scale rating of One—the darkest classification possible—just 1.33 average rainy days during spring and a location 30 kilometres from the nearest town, Undara achieved the highest overall score in the rankings.

2. Byfield National Park, Capricorn Coast (Overall Score: 76.97 / 100)

Second place went to Byfield National Park, where rainforest, towering sand dunes and secluded beaches create a spectacular setting for an overnight camping trip. The park received a Bortle Scale rating of two and sits just 17.5 kilometres from the nearest town, making it one of Queensland's most accessible dark-sky destinations.

3. Lake Broadwater, Western Downs (Overall Score: 74.56 / 100)

Taking third place is Lake Broadwater, the Western Downs' only naturally occurring freshwater lake. Popular with campers and birdwatchers, the destination combines a Bortle Scale rating of two, strong mobile coverage and easy access from nearby Dalby, making it an ideal weekend stargazing escape.

4. Winton Dark Sky Sanctuary, Outback Queensland (Overall Score: 63.91 / 100)

Australia's first internationally recognised Dark Sky Sanctuary, Winton secured fourth place in the rankings. Famous for both its dinosaur heritage and spectacular night skies, the sanctuary earned a Bortle Scale rating of 3 and experiences an average of just two rainy days during spring.

5. Cosmos Centre, Charleville (Overall Score: 56.14 / 100)

Fifth place went to Charleville's Cosmos Centre, one of Australia's best-known astronomy destinations. Located just 500 metres from town, the centre offers guided stargazing experiences beneath the Outback's expansive night skies, supported by relatively dry spring conditions and a Bortle Scale rating of 4.

Dark Sky stars on the Sunshine Coast. (Dr Ken Wishaw)

6. Pioneer Park, Gheerulla (Overall Score: 54.97 / 100)

Nestled in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, Pioneer Park claimed sixth place thanks to its combination of accessible camping, nearby walking trails and darker skies. With a Bortle Scale rating of 3, it's a popular option for South East Queenslanders looking for a nature escape close to home.

7. Glass House Mountains, Sunshine Coast Region (Overall Score: 50.50 / 100)

Rounding out the rankings are the iconic Glass House Mountains, where dramatic volcanic peaks provide a striking foreground for astrophotography and night sky viewing. While closer to populated areas than many other destinations, the region's excellent accessibility, strong mobile coverage and abundance of camping options make it an ideal introduction to astro-tourism.

## LifeFlight's Top Tips for Safe Stargazing

Many of Queensland's best stargazing destinations are in regional and remote areas, where a little preparation can make all the difference. Before heading off in search of dark skies, LifeFlight Australia is encouraging travellers to take a few simple steps to help ensure a safe and enjoyable adventure.

- **Plan ahead:** Research the destination, check road conditions and let a family member or friend know travel plans and expected return time.
- **Keep an eye on the weather:** Clear skies make for the best stargazing, but conditions can change quickly. Check the forecast before leaving and be prepared to adjust plans if needed.
- **Pack for the conditions:** Carry plenty of drinking water, food, warm clothing, a first aid kit and a reliable torch or headlamp, as temperatures can drop significantly after sunset.
- **Prepare for limited reception:** Mobile coverage can be unreliable in remote areas, so download offline maps before you leave and consider carrying a personal locator beacon (PLB) or satellite communication device if travelling beyond coverage.
- **Drive with extra caution after dark:** Wildlife is often more active on regional roads at night. Reduce your speed, stay alert and, where possible, arrive at the destination before sunset to set up camp safely.
- **Camp responsibly:** Choose designated camping areas where available, familiarise with surroundings before nightfall and help preserve Queensland's dark

Sheep graze at Andenes, Lofoten islands. (Nordic Visitor)

The stunning Northern Lights, Lofoten, Norway.

Lofoten-Islands.

**Norway has been news a lot recently thanks to their performance in the recent Football World Cup and the death of their monarch. It's a nation we've heard about but what's it really like to visit? Travel Today asked Nordic Visitor – a travel company with people on the ground in the region – for some inside knowledge.**

# Norway's wonders

**By Willow Woods of Nordic Visitor and Tania Phillips**

Norway sits partly inside the Arctic Circle, which produces two extremes most Australians never experience firsthand: in Tromsø and the Lofoten Islands, the sun doesn't set at all from mid-May to late July, and by November it disappears again until January, when the polar night takes over.

Football and a change on the throne have put Norway in Australian headlines this year, but neither says much about what the country is actually like to visit.

Norway has one of the lowest population densities in Europe, so the wilderness starts just outside almost every town.

Two of the country's best-known fjords, Geirangerfjord and Nærøyfjord, wind between mountains that glaciers carved out over thousands of years.

The Lofoten archipelago, further north, stretches just 110 kilometres from end to end, yet still fits in fishing villages and eagle safaris within a few days' drive.

Reaching it from Oslo means flying roughly 1,300 kilometres further north, well past the Arctic Circle.

Elin Lilja Öqvist, a Nordic Visitor Travel Consultant who has lived in both Oslo and Northern Norway, says that scale is what strikes most first-time visitors.

"The first time I visited Norway I was completely awestruck," she said.

"So much of it feels like walking into a painting.

"Nature is more present here than anywhere I've been." Norwegians have a word for that feeling, friluftsliv, which translates loosely to "open-air living" and describes the sense of wellbeing that comes from simply being outdoors.

Bergen, Norway's second-largest city and the departure point for many European and international cruises, shows how compact Norwegian cities can feel.

Ringed by seven mountains, Bergen keeps the pace of a small town, and the Fløibanen funicular carries visitors up Mount Fløyen for a view over the whole harbour within minutes.

The old wharf district, Bryggen, is UNESCO World Heritage-listed, with wooden buildings dating back 900 years.

"While Bergen is Norway's second-largest city, it still feels like a small town," Öqvist says, "it's all wooden houses, sea air and cinnamon buns."

The city's reputation for rain is well earned as Bergen is often ranked among the wettest cities in Europe.

This is a fact locals treat as a running joke.

As Öqvist puts it, quoting a well-known Norwegian saying: "det finnes ikke dårlig vær, bare dårlig klær", translated, "there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing."

Nordic Visitor is one of Europe's leading specialist travel agencies, planning and operating tailor-made self-drive and guided tours across more than 20 destinations. Founded in Reykjavík in 2002, they have grown from a small downtown booking office into a team hundreds strong, with local experts and offices across the continent.

They aim to help people confidently connect with new places and cultures all over Europe and are part of Travel Connect - a group of seven specialist travel brands operating across Northern Europe.

Find out more at nordicvisitor.com/norway.

# Things to know before you go

Norway is a destination full of charm with dazzling blue fjords, fascinating Viking legends, a thriving cultural heritage, bustling cities and quaint fishing villages.

The summer months are perfect for coastal cruises and road trips. The natural landscape blooms green and extended daylight hours allow you to explore sight after sight.

Visit in winter for an unforgettable adventure packed with magical sights. Think chasing the northern lights and dog-sledding through the snowy plains.

### How to get to Norway:

There are almost a hundred airports in Norway. The five main international airports are: Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger, Tromsø, Trondheim and Ålesund.

By ship and train, Norway reveals itself one view at a time. Sail through its fjords, then board the Bergen Railway to see the landscape open up from above.

Norway is the home country of Viking Cruise Lines and Bergin is their home port.

### Getting around

Journey through Norway's jaw-dropping mountain scenery and set sail along its frigid fjords with an independent train and cruise tour or hire a car.

The capital city, Oslo, has a well-connected public transport system consisting of buses, trams, trains, the metro (the T-bane) and even boats. Tickets and passes can be purchased at stations, but there is also an Oslo Pass. This includes unlimited free travel on public transport as well as discounted entrance to several museums and attractions.

Don't worry about the language barrier – English is widely spoken in Norway.

### When to visit

The best time to visit Norway will depends on what a visitor wants to do and see.

For hiking and kayaking, driving and sightseeing the best idea is to plan a trip between May and September when the weather is warwmest, days are logest and the driving conditions are best.

For snow and the elusive northern lights try between November and March. These months have fewer daylight hours, and the temperature can really drop. These colder conditions result in a magical winter wonderland, perfect for dog-sledding, snowmobiling and skiing.

### The must-see sights

There are countless incredible sights all over the country. From jaw-dropping natural landscapes to fascinating historical attractions. These include:

- Oslo, the grand capital city with museums and royal residences
- Fjords like Sognefjord, Geirangerfjord and Lysefjord
- The "Paris of the North", Tromsø, with its Arctic Cathedral
- Bergen, the western city nicknamed the "Gateway to the fjords"
- Coastal cities of Ålesund and Trondheim
- Roaring mountainside waterfalls, including Seven Sisters and Bridal Veil
- The scenic Lofoten islands and their charming fishing villages
- Rugged Arctic coastline and the North Cape
- Pulpit Rock and Trolltunga rock formations
- Svalbard's frozen landscape and polar bears

Yarra Valley Dairy. (Visit Victoria)

Wine tasting at Coombe Yarra Valley.

# Beauty awaits

**By Visit Victoria and Tania Phillips**

Travelling out from Melbourne (with a large group of gnomes no less) on the train and then catching a bus with all sorts of characters it's hard not to see that while it is not that far from the City – the Yarra Valley is a world away.

"I'm staying out here next time," my daughter declares as we head out towards the Yarra Valley Racecourse. A mix up with parking at the venue had led to a little gridlock (soon solved with the opening of another carpark) but it meant taking the scenic route – not that we were complaining because it was just that – very scenic. And as she stared out the window and took in the sights - I figured that my chances of staying in Melbourne for next year's Ren Faire were diminishing quickly.

It's been a decade or two since we travelled out this way and took in the sights. She was young then, barely a toddler and steam trains, animal sanctuaries and playgrounds were the favourites for both her and her older sister.

Now with a busy job and life - the idea of just getting away and escaping is the big attraction.

And it feels like you really could hide away from the world in this picturesque part of Victoria – the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges - discovering the region's natural surrounds and spoiling yourself, enjoying the region's food and wine, staying at secluded boutique accommodation and wandering studios and galleries, and magical gardens.

As Visit Victoria extoll -this is a region where you can indulge in sophisticated food and wine experiences amid the Yarra Valley's vine-strung hills and rolling farmland. It's a chance to wander into a world of whimsy in the Dandenong Ranges' shops, ancient forests, abundant wildlife, and hidden retreats.

And you don't have to just see it all from ground level - you can gently drift over the Yarra Valley in a hot air balloon at dawn and take in Healesville to the valleys and rivers of Warburton from the air before returning to the ground for a breakfast of local produce and seasonal fruit. And then maybe it's off to spend the day visiting the cellar doors or pick up gourmet treats at farmers' markets, survey the work of Australian artists at TarraWarra Museum of Art in Yarra Glen, and finish with a dinner to remember overlooking a vineyard.

The next day you could get close to native Australian wildlife at the ever-popular Healesville Sanctuary, home to dingoes, kangaroos, wombats and the elusive platypus.

And then enjoy the Dandenong Ranges, with it's fern glades, towering trees and creative communities. Climb aboard Puffing Billy, the historic steam train, for a trip down memory lane or a different view of the region taking in secluded cottages, sun-kissed gardens and stunning national parks from out the train window.

And if that's not your style (or you have a few days to wander) explore Belgrave, Sassafras and Ollinda where you can shop in the eclectic boutiques, enjoy some of the best Devonshire teas I've ever had and wander the Alfred Nicholas Gardens (a must for the gardener).

Yeah maybe my daughter is right maybe we should stay out there next time.

To find out more head to /www.visitvictoria.com.

# Top towns worth a visit

Looking for somewhere outside Melbourne and surrounds to visit in Victoria - the Victorian Tourism Industry Council has just named the top tourism towns for 2026 and they are all pretty as a picture.

The Top Tourism Town (population over 5,000) it is Echuca Moama that has taken the gong.

A leisurely 2.5-hour drive from Melbourne, discover the historic river town of Echuca Moama.

Once Australia's largest inland port, it is now home to a charming collection of historic paddlesteamers, gently chugging along the river sharing stories of times gone by while passengers breathe in the tranquillity of river life.

But it is not all about history, not even close. An abundance of outdoor activities to enjoy within the natural beauty, a thriving contemporary culture of food and drink, music and art supported by an exciting calendar of events come together to bring the town to life all year 'round.

The Top Small Tourism Town (population between 1,500 and 5,000) is Portarlington.

Portsea is one of the top tourist towns in Victoria this year and is worth a visit. (Mornington Peninsula Shire).

Known as Australia's mussel capital, Portarlington is a charming seaside town that sits on the tip of the Bellarine Peninsula in Victoria.

A hatted chef has elevated the food scene opening two restaurants by the water; a grand hotel is gleaming after a multi-million-dollar restoration; award-winning wineries are a stone's throw away and Australia's only boutique mussel tour cruises from Portarlington pier. It's a peaceful place to visit and enjoy boating, fishing, swimming and golf.

Add in major events, high street shopping and luxury accommodation, this beautiful part of the world is well worth visiting.

Top Tiny Tourism Town (population under 1,500) winner is beautiful Portsea.

Portsea sits at the southern tip of the Mornington Peninsula, offering a unique coastal escape that's anything but expected.

It's a place shaped by movement, from swimming and snorkelling in calm bay waters to exploring rugged coastlines and the rich history of Point Nepean National Park. In the village, cafes, boutique shops and the local bar and pub create a lively, social atmosphere that carries into the evening. Just over an hour from Melbourne, it's an easy escape that feels distinctly new and different, best experienced with your loved ones who want to make the most of it.

The crowds and fun of the Abbey Medieval Festival. (Supplied)

Roasting meats and meeting people at the Melbourne Renfair. (Steven Phillips: 577955)

There be dragons at Yarra Valley. (Steven Phillips: 577955)

# Escaping to another realm

**By Tania Phillips**

Imagine being able travel to any time in history or to a fantasy realm for this year's holidays – thanks to the rise of Medieval, historical, cultural and fantasy festivals it almost not beyond the realm of possibility.

The award-winning Abbey Medieval Festival in Moreton Bay sells out within minutes of release each year. Now in it's 35th year, the Festival has become one of the country's most sought-after experience for medieval enthusiasts, families and curious travellers who descend on the grounds of Abbeystowe near Redlands.

Crowned the nation's Best Festival and Event at the 2025 Australian Tourism Awards, for one weekend each year, the Abbey Museum grounds are transformed into a living medieval world, where knights battle on horseback, artisans demonstrate centuries-old crafts, merchants trade their wares and hundreds of passionate re-enactors bring more than 1,000 years of history to life.

Hundreds of re-enactors from around Australia have travelled to Moreton Bay to take part, spending months researching and recreating authentic clothing, armour, crafts and traditions from the Middle Ages.

"For one weekend, visitors can leave the modern world behind and find themselves in a bustling medieval village complete with knights, merchants, musicians and artisans," said Abbey Museum Chair and Festival founder Edith Cuffe (otherwise known as Lady Edith of Abbeystowe).

"Whether you're watching world-class jousting, exploring the encampments or learning a centuries-old craft, there's something magical about being able to step into another time and experience history coming to life around you," said Cuffe.

But while Abbey is established as a fabulous celebration of the past there was a new kid on the block this year– with the first Melbourne Renfair officially being held in the Yarra Valley in May.

The Renaissance Faire's of the Northern Hemisphere, have long been a staple of summer and have started to draw interest here in Australia – so much so that the Melbourne event, held May 16 and 17 this year sold out very quickly and will be expanded to three days for next year. Organisers are looking at venues in other states including Queensland. While other independent events have also already popped up here.

While events like Abbey are more about fact, the Renfair treads the territory between fact and fantasy kind of like a medieval Comicon Popculture Festival where every one dresses up and a medieval serf can rub shoulders with a dragon, the Witcher or even Jon Snow. The Yarra Valley racecourse saw jousting, swordfight lessons and plenty of artisans from all over Australia (including several favourites from Queensland) selling their wares.

Organiser Konga said the event "went off pretty much exactly as I imagined".

"And that's a pretty good start," he laughed.

"I've been into Medieval Enactment and Live Action Role Play (LARP or Larping) since I was just out of high school. I've got a business where I do leather work and I sell armour and weapons for Life Action Role Play and Medieval Reinactment events."

He said his business and love of Larping often takes him away from his family.

"I was away at an event camping for a week and when I got back my partner said I missed you and I don't like it when you go away," he explained.

"While she's not really interested in Larping she said would definitely go to a Renfair. I said ok – that's pretty much down the same path as what Larping is – ok I'll run a Renfair. So that's kind of what inspired me to get the ball rolling.

"And as I spoke to people, they seemed really keen on it and I thought ok this could be a thing.

"I've been in the scene since 1999, I've been to a lot of Medieval events, and I always found that they could be a bit dry for the participants. People come and they see people doing things, its more of a spectator event and with my Larp background I really wanted to create something where you stepped into this other world and you are just as much a part of it as the people who have the shops, the people who are doing the performances.

"The people who are there to attend the event are just as much a part of it and I really think people took that onboard, they brought their own instruments and jumped in with the performers, they started little dancing groups just in the crowd and it was just so much joy. "People were just having a carefree time and that's a hundred per cent – as the Renfair idea developed – that's the one thing I wanted to emphasise.

"The world's not a great place at the moment, there's a lot going on and for a lot of people, especially post Covid, it's been kind of oppressive because you hear it all, you see it all but there's not much you can do to fix it. I kind of wanted to create a space where people could escape the real world for a day or a weekend if you went both days and just have fun and be carefree and be whimsical and all pressures of daily life just ease of you and you can just enjoy yourself before you go back to the real world."

People came from everywhere including a vendor from New Zealand who came to sell at the Goblin Bizarre along with Vendors from every state of Australia.

"Then actual attendees were from all around Australia and we had a few international attendees fly in as well," he said.

"It was crazy. I did speak to some of the vendors and asked them – I said you're coming a long way, thank you for coming, but what has attracted you? And they literally said, the whole vibe of the event is different to what we are used to."

The 36th Abbey Medieval Festival is scheduled to take place from 9-11 July, 2027, at the Abbey Museum in Caboolture, Queensland. With tickets going on sale earlier in the year.

While the second Melbourne Renfair is on 15,16, 17 May with tickets expected to go in May. But check the internet for other events from Scottish Festivals at Glen Innes and the bi-annual Celticfest at Warwick, to Dungeon and Dragon events and markets.

# Finding a Sunshine moment

Spring has arrived on the Sunshine Coast, bringing longer days and the perfect excuse to plan your next holiday and find your Sunshine Moment. While you're here, make the most of your stay by discovering some of the fun and adventure waiting across the region. Whether that means an adrenaline rush, family fun, getting back to nature or a leisurely cruise, there's a tour or attraction waiting to be discovered.

From coast to hinterland and everywhere in between, we're taking the scenic route north to uncover some of the Sunshine Coast's tours and attractions worth stopping for along the way.

Among the rolling green hills of the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, Maleny Botanic Gardens and Bird World pairs sweeping Glass House Mountains views with colourful, up-close bird encounters. Down among the peaks, Australia Zoo needs little introduction, home to crocodiles, koalas, elephants, giraffes and more.

As the mountains give way to the coastline, there's plenty to discover around Caloundra. Step inside the Queensland Air Museum or pick up the pace on the water with Caloundra Jet Ski Hire and Safaris.

For families, there's plenty of fun to be had along the way. Chase the thrills at AussieWorld, or wind your way through the mazes, puzzles and challenges at nearby Amaze World.

Closer to the coastline, Mooloolaba offers a different kind of adventure. At The Wharf Mooloolaba, come face-to-face with sharks, seals and marine life from around the world at SEA LIFE Sunshine Coast, or see another side of Mooloolaba aboard Aquaduck, travelling from the beachfront streets to the Mooloolah River.

In Maroochydore, the action heads skyward at Next Level High Ropes Adventure Park, with courses and ziplines suspended above Cornmeal Creek at Sunshine Plaza.

Turning inland, one of the Sunshine Coast's most recognisable icons comes into view. The Big Pineapple in Woombye has been drawing visitors for generations, and today there's even more reason to stop by. Ride the Pineapple Train for a little nostalgia, meet native and exotic animals at Wildlife HQ or test your nerve on TreeTop Challenge's rainforest ziplines and aerial obstacles.

The Ginger Factory in Yandina is an easy family stop with free entry and plenty for little ones, from the Overboard boat ride to the ginger train. Grown-ups can wander the gardens, enjoy ginger tastings and discover how one of the region's best-known ingredients goes from paddock to plate.

Nearby, browse local makers, artists, food and live entertainment at The Original Eumundi Markets every Wednesday and Saturday.

Around Noosa, the pace is yours to choose. Make the most of the longer spring days with a leisurely cruise along the Noosa River aboard Noosa Ferry, or explore on two wheels with an e-bike from ecoTekk.

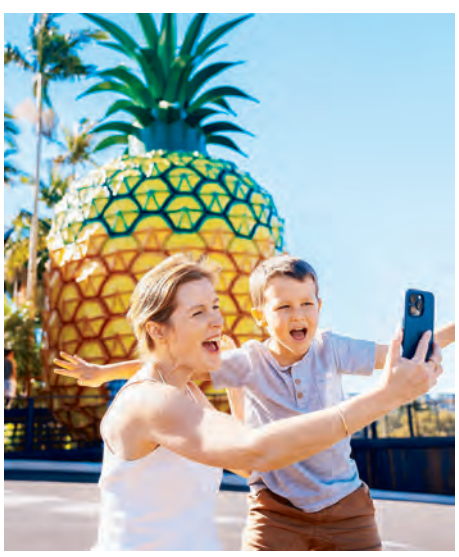
For a taste of Noosa's wilder side, venture into the mirrored waterways of the Noosa Everglades with Everglades Eco Safaris.

Towards Rainbow Beach, the bitumen gives way to sand with Great Beach Drive 4WD Tours. Covering more than 70 kilometres of beach between Noosa and Rainbow Beach, tours combine coastal scenery, wildlife spotting and access to Double Island Point Lighthouse.

At the northern end of the Sunshine Coast, swap coast for countryside at Highland Hideaway Experiences, with hands-on encounters with Highland cows and other farm animals.

Then step back in time aboard the Mary Valley Rattler, winding from historic Gympie Station through the rolling landscapes of the Mary Valley on a beautifully restored heritage train.

Find your Sunshine Moment at visitsunshinecoast.com



# This is the moment Ash conquered the deep end.

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Four-wheel-driving on the Gibb River Road.

Enjoying the Kimberleyland Caravan Park's Kununurra Cabins. (Supplied)

The beauty of Bell Gorge. (Caravan and Camping WA)

# The western routes

**Red dirt, rugged roads and real adventure: Road tripping the Kimberley**

For those whose idea of a holiday involves a 4WD, a little red dirt and somewhere worth stopping for the night, put the Kimberley on the list.

Caravan and Camping WA have put together a route for travellers who love 4WDing and want to explore Western Australia's North West, linking gorge walks and freshwater swimming holes with places to stay along the way.

The journey in Broome and follows the unforgettable Gibb River Road towards Kununurra, leaving time for the side roads and extra adventure.

- The appeal of Australia's incredible North West is in the experience: standing beneath ancient gorge walls, amongst untouched landscapes.

For this road trip, allow around two weeks, plus time to enjoy the coast.

### Broome to Derby

- Distance: Approx. 220 km

Enjoy a couple of nights in Broome before heading east along the Great Northern and Derby highways. The coastline gives way to cattle country and boabs, with Derby your last major supply stop before the Gibb. Call into Derby's Visitor Information Centre to ask about road closures, corrugations and water levels at crossings before heading into remote country.

### Road Trip Highlights

- Cable Beach: Take your 4WD onto the expansive sandy coastline and watch the Indian Ocean sunset.
- Derby Jetty: Watch King Sound's enormous tides transform the shoreline around the iconic jetty.
- Mowanjum Aboriginal Art & Culture Centre: View Wandjina artworks and explore the museum's stories and cultural displays.
- Where to stay: Cable Beach Caravan Park in Broome has shady, powered sites and a large pool. Kimberley Entrance Caravan Park offers a central Derby base for stocking up before the Gibb.
- Road Trip Tip: Fuel stops can be more than 300 km apart; confirm opening hours, fuel types and supplies before leaving Derby. Check Main Roads WA and Park Alerts for access updates. Take a high-clearance 4WD and a camper suited to corrugations. Secure the fridge and its contents, latch cupboards and carry spare tyres, drinking water and recovery gear.

Taking time out at Emma Gorge.

### Derby to Bandilngan (Windjana Gorge)

- Distance: Approx. 157 km; Dimalurru (Tunnel Creek) adds 37 km each way

Turn onto the Gibb, then take the side road into the Napier Range. On Bunuba Country, ancient limestone rises above the plains at Bandilngan. Here, the scale of rock walls gives reason to stop and walk, rather than simply taking a photograph from the road. Explore nearby Dimalurru before retracing your route to the Gibb and continuing east.

### Road Trip Highlights

- Bandilngan: Walk beneath limestone walls and watch freshwater crocodiles from a safe distance; this is no swimming stop!
- Dimalurru: Explore the creek's natural limestone tunnel. Bring a torch, sturdy footwear and expect to wade through water.
- Road Trip Tip: Hot tip: Check Park Alerts before visiting. Keep well back from crocodiles and the water's edge.

### Bandilngan to Dalmanyi (Bell Gorge)

- Distance: Approx. 158 km

Return to the Gibb and continue into the Wunaamin Miliwundi Ranges. Allow time for the rough access road to the gorge's car park, then follow the walking trail towards the falls. After the corrugations, sitting beside the water is a great reason to leave the afternoon unhurried.

### Road Trip Highlights

- Dalmanyi lookout: Follow the trail to views over the waterfall and the rock terraces below.
- Dalmanyi Falls Trail: Tackle the steeper extension to the lower pool for a cooling swim when conditions permit.
- Where to stay: Imintji Campground and Art Centre offers escarpment views and modern amenities, with Bell Gorge within reach for a day's exploring.

### Dalmanyi to Manning Gorge

- Distance: Approx. 126 km

Head back to the Gibb and continue towards Mount Barnett Roadhouse, where you arrange access to Manning Gorge. Ask the roadhouse staff about current trail conditions and crossing the Manning River on foot before setting out. Start early and allow a full morning for the walk over uneven, exposed ground.

### Road Trip Highlights

- Galvans Gorge: Break the drive with a short walk to a rock-framed waterhole.
- Upper Manning Gorge: Walk to the broad pool beneath the falls and cool off before the return hike.
- Road Trip Tip: Start gorge walks early, carry plenty of water and wear grippy shoes. Ask roadhouse staff or park rangers about trail access and designated swimming areas; conditions change after rain. For river crossings, check Main Roads WA and ask Derby or Kununurra visitor centres for updates. Never wade into the Pentecost to check depth as saltwater crocodiles occur here.

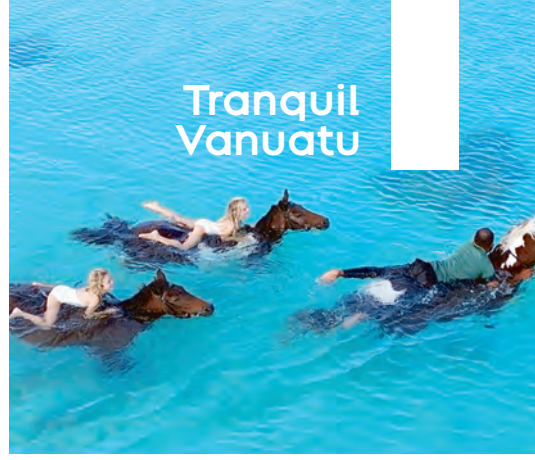
### About Caravan and Camping WA

They are the peak caravan and camping industry body for Western Australia. Incorporated as a not-for-profit Association in 1961, they support, represent, and advocate for their members to enhance performance and promote the industry.

Their membership of over 330 businesses consists of caravan parks, manufacturers, retailers and repairers of recreational vehicles, camping equipment and accessories retailers, residential lifestyle villages, tourism operators and associated services industries.

They are committed to serving their members and ensuring that member businesses have access to quality research, business support, marketing opportunities and the best advice within the sector.

For more information visit caravanwa.com.au.



All photos supplied Greg Smith.

# Santo Island - a South Pacific secret

**By Kylie Mitchell-Smith**
**TRAVEL WRITER/PODCASTER**
**www.travellingsenorita.com**

A dreamy escape threaded with tradition - that is the Island of Espiritu Santo – Santo to the locals.

A hidden gem in the South Pacific, Santo is the largest island in Vanuatu – covering 3,955 square kilometres and featuring the famous Champagne Beach and crystal-clear freshwater blue holes including Matevulo.

It's approximately an hour north of Port Villa (as the dove flies) and just a 2.5-hour flight from Brisbane with Solomon Air and yet it feels like a world away.

Santo is the quiet island in comparison to the bustling nearby capital of Port Villa.

But it's also pit-stop to a cluster of pristine islands – though I suggest staying on the mainland before jumping on a boat to the surrounding atoll.

Arriving there, it's not long before the array of blue holes are calling us for a quick swim or two.

We also take the chance for a deep-sea dive and to indulge in a fresh seafood lunch at nearby resort, Turtle Bay Lodge.

Along the way we meet an array of expats and it becomes apparent that the region is fast becoming the place to relocate from Australia, both for its proximity to Brisbane and laidback nature.

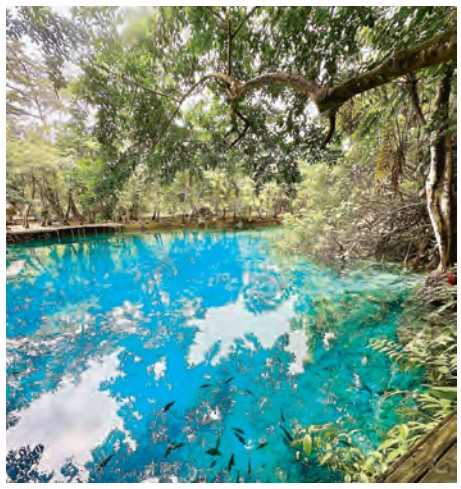
Flying into a modest air hanger, we take the dirt roads to the rustic marina, where a friendly local takes us out to the islands.

We head to Ratua Private Island, a 30-minute boat transfer and arrive to a secluded, dreamy destination.

My husband and I first visited the island with our family some 15 years ago- it's a place we vowed to return.

Unique in design, Ratua is home to a Javanese (Ubud style) 200-year-old-village that was shipped there a couple of decades ago by a French adventurer- no easy feat.

But it's created a little piece of paradise set on 146 acres-with a focus on sustainability, from a working farm and market garden to local craftmanship.



We arrive to a symphony of locals greeting us on the resort pier and swiftly kick off our shoes, heading to the Yacht Club for a fresh coconut water.

The Yacht Club is a communal space, serving up a fresh daily menu, with a charming lounge and games area. Cocktails are mixed at the sunset bar, while traditional dancers perform on the beach-next to the roaring fire pit.

A sense of peace washes over us, as we drop in to island life and unwind from the everyday hustle and bustle.

The resort offers an all-inclusive meal and water sports package from paddle boards, to glass bottom canoes and snorkelling gear.

Ocean horse riding, a sunset cruise and a signature treatment-at the dreamy overwater spa are options that are very well worth take.

A lot has happened on Ratua since our last visit, the original French adventurer has sold to a New Zealand couple, who weathered a global pandemic and harsh cyclone, that nearly destroyed the island and surrounds.

And now they have sold, and the incoming owner is a French technology entrepreneur Jean-Yves Sireau (JY), living in Malaysia, who's determined to bring Ratua back to its former glory- plus a whole lot more.

JY is convinced there's no place like Vanuatu in the world, so much so he bought another island further north, Kwakea- which is all about adventure.

Plans are afoot on Ratua, to build overwater villas and more personalised bures, complete with buggy and chef. There is already a variety of accommodation types to suit, from the romantic beachside villas to rustic glamping tents to 'Fish Village' which is ideal for families.

It takes 30 minutes to walk all of Ratua - stopping off to feed the resort horses and animals along the way. The friendly local's village is centrally located, next to a thriving organic garden and bustling chicken pen.

The resorts menu is all about fresh produce directly from the source, grown or caught within a 50-kilometer radius. Seafood such as yellowfin tuna, reef snapper and slipper lobster, burst with island spices and are paired with an abundance of tropical fruits.

Ratua offers barefoot luxury at its finest, where long sunny days slide into dreamy nights.

During our stay we are reminded daily, that we've been 'ratua'd'-a state of nirvana and peace further emphasized during barefoot walks around this beautiful island and it's hard to pull ourselves away when our time there finally comes to an end.

**EAT**

- Turtle Bay Lodge
- Yacht Club, Ratua

**PLAY**

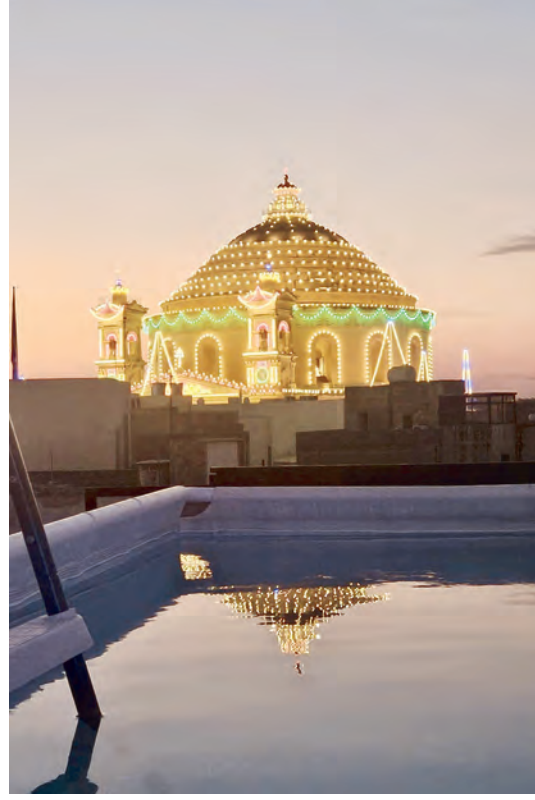
- Blue Holes, Santo
- Ocean Horse Riding, Ratua
- PADI Dive Centre, Turtle Bay Lodge

**STAY**

- Turtle Bay Lodge, Santo
- Ratua Private Island Resort

* Direct flights from Brisbane to Santo with Soloman Air depart on a Tuesday and Saturday- taking under three-hours and starting from $700 return.

The entrance to Valetta.



All lit up.

# A very personal visit to Malta

**According to the 2021 Census more than 234,402 Australian's (according to the 2021 Census) claim Maltese ancestry including Shaun Micallef, Troy Cassar Daley and Adam Hills and yet many of us know little about this beautiful Mediterranean Island and Archipelago which has been at the cross-roads of civilization for millennia. For Maltese-Australian Charlie Muscat an initial trip to meet his grandparents in the late 60s has turned into a love-affair with the country where his parents were born, he has been back many times over the years, but no visit has been more personal or joyous than his most recent.**

**By Tania Phillips**

Malta is a stunning Mediterranean Island set with beautiful beaches, cities and towns which attract large amounts of tourists every year – and why not, it's a place that is well worth a visit.

It's beautiful capital Valletta – a UNESCO World Heritage Site - includes the Upper Barrakka Gardens with sweeping views of the Grand Harbor and the historic "Three Cities," Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa, St John's Co-Cathedral with its spectacular interior featuring Caravaggio's painting The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist and the Hagar Qim, a megalithic, 5,000-year-old stone temple and a UNESCO Site.

But for Maltese- Australian Charlie Muscat this history and beauty also comes with layers of family history and a lifetime of memories from decades of visits. And since the death of his parents in recent years, the Island has come to mean even more, which is why he couldn't resist another more personal visit with his brother over the recent European summer.

"I first went in 1969 and then I went a few weeks ago," he explained. "We lived there for a couple of years in the 70s so I think I've been there about ten times.

"It's funny my parents migrated here in the 50s and they didn't know each other, they met here. They met at the Trocadero dance in the Australia Hotel in Sydney which was big and famous in the 50s. They were each there were there with friends and most of their friends were Maltese too so that's how they met."

The couple were married in 1960 and went on to have three boys, of which Charlie is the oldest. But despite their new life here – Malta was beckoning.

"By the late 60s mum was getting a little bit homesick, so we went in 1969 for our first visit to meet our grandparents and relatives for the first time," he said.

The Mosta Rotunda Church dressed for the coming festivities. (Charlie Muscat)

Three years later the family decided to go back to live for a while, to immerse their young sons in the culture and reconnect with family for a couple of years.

"I think it was 1972 – we went back there to live. This is where the connection started – after that we had a huge connection with the place which we didn't have before," Charlie reminisced.

"We went to school and lived there for about two and a half -three years and then we came back to Australia. But I think that's where the link we had with Malta grew inside us kids.

"We had this urge to continuously go back. We went back in the 70s and then us guys, as we grew up, started planning holidays to Europe and we always stopped in on Malta on the way through or back. So, we went there in the 80s, 90s and then the early 2000s. We had this continued linkage with the place, with our family and relatives and our cousins.

"But mum and dad passed away in the past two or three years and I got talking to my brother about a special visit. Mum and dad were religious and during the summer and each village in Malta has religious festivals for their patron saints. It was a really big deal. There are fireworks, it's a community-based thing, there are bands.

"I said to my brother – wouldn't it be great to go."

It was good time with both their mum's and dad's villages having their festivals in the same week.

"We thought it would be nice to go and think about mum and dad and go to the festivals and really throw ourselves into the celebrations from the lead up to the events, to the festival nights and all the fireworks, foods and relatives.

"Mum was a village called Mosta which is famous for it's huge church - the third biggest unsupported dome church in the world."

The Mosta Dome was built in the 19th century and modelled after the Pantheon in Rome.

"It's also famous because in World War II, while people were praying at a Sunday Mass, they had about 300 people in the church, there was an air raid attack," he said.

Despite their being air-raid shelters nearby (which can still be visited today) the people felt safe in the church and stayed.

"A bomb came through the dome roof into the church full of all these people, bounced down the corridor and didn't go off," Charlie explained.

"In their mind this was a huge miracle and you can still see the bomb replica in the church. It's a big thing. So, there is a lot of stuff that goes with this church and their festival of Santa Maria which is held on 15 August every year.

**Continued page 13**

# Europe without the elbows

**By Vanessa Tokatly**

Europe in high season is busy. Really busy. But after spending this summer travelling through Paris, Rome, Capri and the Amalfi Coast, then on through Tuscany and Sardinia, across to Mallorca and Malta, and finally Athens and the Greek Islands, I'm convinced you don't need to avoid Europe in July and August. You just need to do it better.

First, book the restaurants you really don't want to miss. Ask friends, scour Google and socials, or get recommendations from a trusted travel advisor, and then actually book. The best places aren't necessarily the expensive ones. That tiny family run restaurant with incredible pasta and 500 glowing reviews? Everyone else has found it too. So pre book it!

Not every meal needs to be planned. Some nights you might decide room service in your gown is exactly what you feel like, and that's a perfectly good dinner plan. But it makes such a difference knowing the places you really wanted to experience are already taken care of.

On the other nights, wander. Get a few streets away from the main drag, head down the cobblestone lanes and look for where the locals are eating. Some of the best meals are the ones you weren't looking for.

The same goes for sightseeing. Stop following Instagrammers to find "the best view". Look for the unexpected one. Ask a local. Walk another street. Do a little research. While everyone else was bumping shoulders in Rome, I paid a few euros and found a hidden elevator that whisked me above the crowds to one of the best views in the city. There were six people up there with me. Six!

Where you stay makes an enormous difference too. Sometimes the answer is a fabulous hotel just outside the madness, with complimentary shuttles dropping you into the action and, more importantly, collecting you again. You get to experience

Travel consultant Vanessa Tokatly says visiting Europe in Summer doesn't have to be all about crowds.

the hotspot, then retreat to your pool, a glass of wine and people who know your name.

Even in the heart of Rome or Paris, choose a hotel that feels like an oasis. I've genuinely felt like a princess returning home the moment I've stepped through the doors, leaving the heat, queues and Instagrammers outside.

In places like Sardinia, having a car can be invaluable. We drove to a tiny local beach just two coves away from one lined with what felt like 6,000 umbrellas, and found our own little patch of aqua blue water instead. We also took ourselves off to a beautiful wine resort in the countryside for a night, completely away from the usual tourist trail. Don't get me wrong, I love a fabulous beach club and we visited plenty of them around the Med, but being able to balance those buzzy days with quiet beaches, country roads and those perfect aqua blue moments made the trip so much better.

My other non negotiable? Never spend a precious Mediterranean day on a boat with 50 strangers. Choose a small group, no more than 10, or better still, go private. Great local captains know exactly when the big boats arrive and quietly take you somewhere else. Add freshly made pasta, cold wine and swimming without an audience, and it's money very well spent.

Finally, don't underestimate the value of a great private guide. In the Cinque Terre, my guide had grown up there and knew exactly which station we should get off at and what time we should arrive in each village. We seemed to move through the five villages just as the crowds were moving somewhere else, seeing each one at exactly the right time. You could never recreate that simply standing there with a train ticket in your hand. A private guide can seem like an unnecessary added expense when you're planning a trip, but once you experience the difference that kind of local knowledge makes, you understand exactly what you're paying for.

High season Europe is still completely magical. Don't avoid the places everyone wants to see. Just be smarter about how you see them.

Vanessa Tokatly is a travel advisor and owner of The Runway Traveller.

# Malta's glory

**From page 12**

"Dad's church is in the smaller village of Dingli which is on the Southern Side of the Island. It's a very small village so the festival is a little more lowkey but they still have the fireworks and the bands. The church is all dressed up and they have their special masses.

"It was a great experience because we were able to spend time thinking of mum and dad and spending time with our relatives. It was a very heart-warming, loving trip to Malta this time around."

So, what does it feel like going back where generations and generations of your family lived and died?

"It's really interesting, you can really feel it, you can feel the whole generational thing when you walk past the homes they grew up in," he said.

"I get goosebumps even now thinking about it. The churches where they were christened and baptised, where our grandparents are buried, our great grandparents are buried and our great great grandparents.

"At Dingli on the cliffs there is a plaque dedicated to a man who was killed in 1909 when he fell off the cliff accidentally while he was fishing. That person was my great great grandfather.

"It's different (to go to Malta)– we grew up here without grandparents, our grandparents were over there, they are all gone now obviously. But we would walk past the homesteads and looked at each other and think – we've been here so many times and it still feels magic to think that our parents, grandparents and great grandparents built this and lived there."

"It is a lovely place anyway, it's very mediterranean, the summers are hot, the beaches are very beautiful, the people are very friendly, everyone speaks English which makes it easy," he said.

"Historically it's just a fascinating place. If you google history of Malta and just look at it, you shake your head at the history that goes back 7000 years to prehistoric times.

"I'd love to know more about our ancestors and the history of the place – for example mum's family home, which is in the village of Mosta – it use to be isolated but it's now all built up around it now. The home had two parts to it.

"The front part of the home is 250 years old –all built by the family.

"But the back part of it, which is the kitchen and dining area, was a rectangular shape with a flat roof and the walls were three metres thick.

"It had a little slit window down the back and the front and back door to this room were heavy duty timber walls with huge steel hooks and it was a safe room.

"When the Island was raided by the Turks or by Barbary Pirates looking for slaves, the family would hide in this room, lock the doors and just stay there.

"It was 450 years old -a safe room. It's just amazing – our ancestors built that. They went through that part of history where slavery was all through the Mediterranean where pirates and Empires would come through and take slaves off the Island, it's just amazing that they lived through that.

"But there is so much history - a lot of the ancient temples on Malta are older than the pyramids and Stonehenge – it goes back so far. The history is fascinating but it is amazing to have an emotional connection too."

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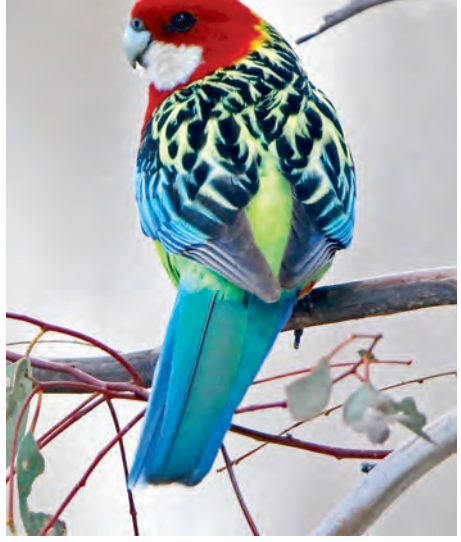
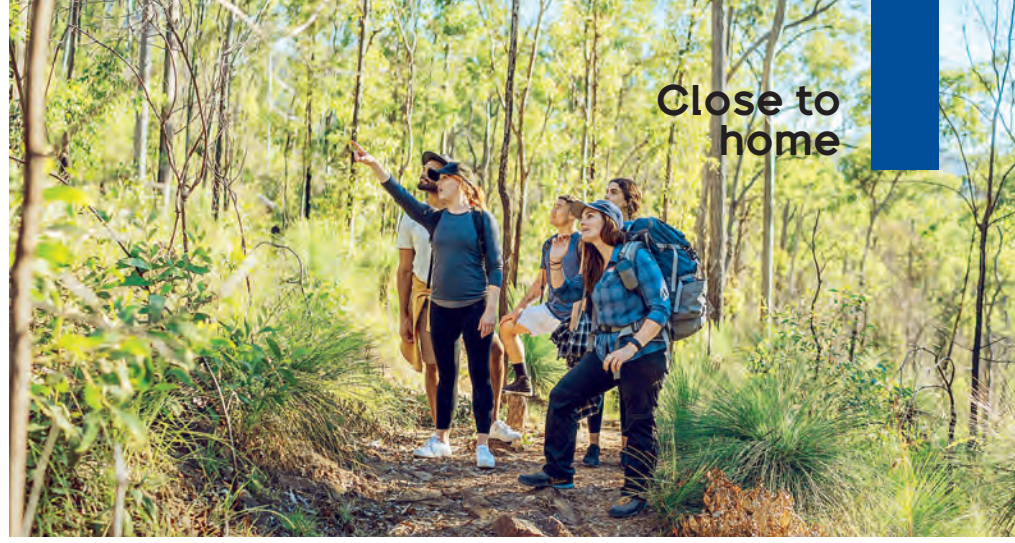
Feeding the wild birds at O'Reilly's. (Drawn with Light)



Eastern Rosella - look at the beautiful colours.



Bird Watching in the Scenic Rim at Mount Barney. (Reuben Nutt)

# Colours and sights

The whole world's been singing about the Eastern Rosella... so where can you take the kids to see them – hint – everywhere but in abundance in the Scenic Rim along with an equally colourful cousin.

One minute it was a seven-year-old boy singing about a bird he spotted on holidays. Next minute it's gone viral around the world.

Seven-year-old Miles Phillips' catchy song Eastern Rosellas has racked up millions of views, been played on radio stations across Australia and covered by some of the country's best-known musicians including Ben Lee and Ball Park Music. He's even become the youngest Australian to make the Aria music charts.

Now, the little parrot with the "beautiful colours" is inspiring a different kind of adventure: bird lovers are heading into nature hoping to spot one for themselves, and one of the best places to do exactly that is in the Scenic Rim.

At Binna Burra Lodge, surrounded by the ancient Gondwana Rainforests of Lamington National Park, the vibrant Eastern Rosella is one of thousands of bird species that delight visitors year-round, with staff reporting an increase in visitors asking specifically about the colourful bird since the song took off.

Travel a little further into Lamington National Park and visitors to O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat are more likely to meet the Eastern Rosella's equally spectacular cousin - the brilliant Crimson Rosella, whose vivid scarlet feathers have become one of the icons of the rainforest.

But the rosellas are only the beginning. The Scenic Rim has quietly become one of Australia's emerging destinations for Twitcher Tourism, with bird lovers travelling from around the country, and increasingly around the world, to experience one of Australia's richest bird habitats. From Albert's Lyrebirds and Regent Bowerbirds to Glossy Black Cockatoos, Australian King-Parrots, Green Catbirds and the elusive Eastern Bristlebird, Lamington National Park offers some of the country's finest birdwatching.

One of Australia's leading wildlife filmmakers with more than 1.2million followers on his Instagram @JeremyFilmsThings, said there was definitely a new wave of birdwatchers, who are showing the world just how fascinating birds can be.

"In July this year, I spent four days exploring Lamington National Park in the Scenic Rim and it had the most incredible bird life I've ever seen. I got to witness a courtship display from an Albert's Lyrebird. He grasped two big vines with his feet and shook them as he mimicked the sound of a Satin Bowerbird. It was an experience that I'll never forget. I also saw a pair of Logrunners collecting twigs and building a nest," he said.

**Pro tips for Twitchers visiting the Scenic Rim:**

- Early morning or late afternoon are prime times for rainforest species.
- Bring binoculars, a camera with a zoom lens, and a sound recorder, the lyrebirds and whipbirds are audio stars.
- Check local birdwatching groups for recent sightings.
- Include a hike to soak up even more of the magic of the region.
- Talk to locals – farmers often know the bird routines and can share spots to check out!
- Stay a few days and nights to wake up and go to sleep with the sounds of birdsong, there's nothing like it! Use this link Scenic Rim | Green Travel Guide for sustainable and eco-friendly spots to stay!
- Consume and travel mindfully - support local producers and eateries, enjoy seasonal farm-to-plate meals, and choose cafes and shops that prioritise eco-friendly practices.
- Bring your own reusable water bottles, bags, and utensils to avoid single-use plastics.
- Recharge your electric vehicle at over a dozen EV charging sites across the region. From Tamborine Mountain to Beaudesert, Mt Barney to Boonah, Plugshare shows where!
- Take the Tamborine Mountain Hop-on-Hop-off tour with Pineapple Tours - to cut your carbon footprint, help ease congestion and save energy and money.

If you're flying into Brisbane or the Gold Coast before heading into the Scenic Rim, offset your flight's carbon emissions by contributing to environmental projects.

For more, visit Sustainable travel within the Scenic Rim

# Beautiful one day busy the next

From GOMA'S major summer exhibition Make, Believe, Magic: The Worlds of the Jim Henson Company to the Rugby League World Cup finals – there is plenty going on around Queensland in Spring.

Step behind the scenes of some of the world's most beloved characters at GOMA's major summer exhibition, Make, Believe, Magic: The Worlds of the Jim Henson Company. From The Muppets and Fraggle Rock to Labyrinth and The Dark Crystal, discover original puppets, costumes, sketches and behind-the-scenes artefacts that showcase the creativity and innovation of Jim Henson's groundbreaking work. Perfect for families, nostalgic adults and pop culture fans alike, it's a must-see addition to a Brisbane spring or summer getaway.

Then there's Bleach - the Gold Coast's signature arts festival - eleven days of live performance, art and big outdoor moments set against the back-drop of the GC.

Up north the Atherton Tablelands throw a paddock party. With big-name country, rock and roots acts, local flavours, and a sky full of stars as Savannah in the Round returns. And if it's music festival's you're after why not head up to enjoy the Airlie Beach Festival of Music -the festival lineup is impressive this year with Xavier Rudd, Mark Seymour, Mental As Anything, Conrad Sewell, The Whitlams, Nathan Cavaleri, The Radiators and more are ready to bring the good times.

Jim Henson on the set of Fraggle Rock 1983–1987 (The Jim Henson Company)

Make Believe Magic: Brisbane, 12 September - 18 April

**Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers: Queensland Country, 18 September - 5 October**

- Queensland Football Series Townsville and Brisbane: 25-29 September
- BLEACH Festival, Gold Coast: 1 - 11 October
- Savannah in the Round: Tropical North, 8 - 11 October
- Groundwater Country Music Festival: Gold Coast 16 -18 October
- Melt Festival: Brisbane , 21 October 7 November
- Boost Mobile Gold Coast 500: Gold Coast,23 - 25 October
- Noosa Triathlon Festival, Sunshine Coast: 28 October - 1 November
- Airlie Beach Festival of Music: The Whitsundays: 6 - 8 November
- Rugby League World Cup Finals: Brisbane,15-Nov

Head to www.queensland.com or their individual websites to find out more.

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