

# AUSTRALIA'S ANSWER TO THE GALÁPAGOS

# NUYTS ARCHIPELAGO



Masillon Island in Nuyts Archipelago

Guide Rod Keogh cooks a meal on St Francis Island (below); a view out to sea (right)



By Alexis Buxton-Collins

A dusky morwong regards me mournfully, its downcast eyes and undeniable pout reminding me of a performer who's just read a scathing opening-night review. "Why so glum?" I want to ask. "Don't you realise you're living in paradise?" I'm not having conversations with a volleyball just yet but after a few days on an uninhabited island I've begun anthropomorphising my fish friends. Fortunately, the neighbours of this underwater Eeyore are a little more cheerful.

With crimson lips and silvery skin decorated with diagonal brown stripes and stylish rosettes, the redlip morwong looks ready to party. Even more flamboyant is the horseshoe leatherjacket whose bright-blue flanks look airbrushed with a vibrant yellow streak and splashes of Hypercolor sent directly from the '90s.

I'm swimming in the shelter of a shallow reef on St Francis Island, a tiny speck off the South Australian coast in the Great Australian Bight. Captivated by

the colourful scene ahead, I get a shock when I turn and find a fleshy-lipped western blue grouper sidling up beside me. At a metre long, this gorgeous cobalt fish is likely to be at least 30 years old but its curiosity is undimmed by age and it follows me closely for several minutes.

Only a single operator has permission to bring tours to this remote island. Gesturing enthusiastically, Rod Keogh, co-owner of EP Cruises ([epcruises.com.au](http://epcruises.com.au)), proudly tells me, "There's nowhere else in the world like it." The avid angler and outdoorsman has run exactly 10 tours to St Francis, which means that fewer than 100 travellers have visited in the past two years. "Before that, the number was zero. It's why the animals are so curious – they haven't learnt to be afraid of humans."

One of about 30 islands in the Nuyts Archipelago – which has been dubbed Australia's answer to the Galápagos – St Francis Island is among the oldest European place names in South Australia thanks to a Dutch voyage that mapped this section of coast in 1627. And yet when I talked to friends about my upcoming trip, even those who've lived in the state their entire lives told me

they've never heard of it. Finding it on a map? No chance.

Unsurprisingly, visiting a place that nobody has heard of requires effort. St Francis lies 27 kilometres from the closest spot on the mainland but our departure point of Streaky Bay is about twice as far. Leaving before dawn from the laid-back fishing town 300 kilometres north of Port Lincoln, we steam west for six hours past oyster leases and low green hills that give way to an endless blue broken only by shearwaters diving into the water and the occasional bottlenose dolphin surfing our wake.

When the islands eventually appear, they look far from inviting. Some are little more than rocks poking above the surface, while the hardscrabble interiors of the larger isles are ringed by unapproachable piles of worn granite boulders. There's not an anchorage in sight until we round a cape and see St Francis' lone beach, a broad strip of sand backed by pale dunes covered in scrub.

"Where's the welcoming party?" asks Keogh in mock exasperation. I assume he's joking until a slick grey fin slices through the water. Soon another appears and

## Stays on the way

Just north of Port Lincoln, the two villas at Tanonga Luxury Eco Lodges (right; [hotel.qantas.com.au/tanonga\\_luxuryecolodges](http://hotel.qantas.com.au/tanonga_luxuryecolodges)) offer distinct but equally appealing visions of the surrounding landscape. The hilltop Ridge villa affords spectacular 360-degree views of rolling slopes that lead down to the glittering ocean while its more private cousin, The Valley, is nestled in a secluded hollow filled with thick native bush that erupts into birdsong each morning and evening. The sensitive, eco-friendly design minimises energy use in both and the solitude means you'll

have just the stars and abundant birdlife for company.

Head north from Streaky Bay and the coast on your left swaps between powerful surf breaks and broad bays lapped by gentle swells. Uncrowded Perlubie Beach falls into the latter category and its waters are ideal for snorkelling, fishing and canoeing. Or you can simply gaze out through the feature window from a deep soaking tub in one of the two quirky but comfortable cabins at Perlubie Sea ([perlubieseas.com.au](http://perlubieseas.com.au)). The property's isolation means it's a long drive to the closest supermarket but the friendly owners can arrange generous hampers filled with local wine and fresh produce, including vegies and herbs picked from the on-site planter boxes.



then another until there are maybe 30 dolphins swimming around us. They fill the air with panting gasps when they surface, arcs of mist from their blowholes creating fleeting rainbows in the afternoon sun. St Francis Island may be uninhabited but it's far from lifeless.

With no infrastructure on the island, Rod and his crew have to make camp every time they land and after lunch we get a quick lesson in how to set up our homes for the next three nights. I place my swag beneath a patch of fragrant coastal daisy bushes overlooking the turquoise shallows and inky meadows of seagrass beyond. With views like this, who needs luxury?

The archipelago's position to the west of the Eyre Peninsula means that the sun rises half an hour later than in Adelaide but the absence of devices lends the days an elastic quality. Each one seems to stretch out endlessly, somehow simultaneously indolent and action-packed.

Walking along the beach, I see groups of large Pacific gulls with cruel hooked beaks and tiny hooded plovers with white breasts and black cowls that skitter comically across the sand in a blur of red

legs. Beyond the dunes, a forbidding interior of saltbush and boxthorn is riddled with burrows dug by the hundreds of thousands of short-tailed shearwaters that share the island with honking Cape Barren geese and shy olive-green rock parrots. A few crumbling ruins are all that remains of the wildly optimistic graziers who once settled here.

Getting around the island by boat is a lot easier so we spend a day motoring past jumbles of granite boulders and curiously rounded slabs that occasionally move to reveal honey-coloured bellies and sleek, dog-like heads. Two of the more energetic sea lions hop into the water and dance around us in a lively underwater game of chase before disappearing when we anchor in a sheltered bay.

"The younger one is about 18 months old so we're the first humans it's ever seen," says Keogh. "There are probably a few big groupers here but I don't know for sure – this is the first time we've ever been to this spot." After lunch I confirm his theory while swimming over waving fronds of seagrass and sandy patches where giant abalone shells shimmer in an iridescent daze.

Between my frequent swims, there's plenty of time to explore the island, lie back with a book and get to know my fellow castaways over a drink from the seemingly bottomless esky. Peter, a diver who's spent five decades surveying South Australian waters, is delighted to be reunited with once common species that he now rarely sees, while a family with three teenage kids debates whether the highlight of the trip is the opportunity to try cliff jumping for the first time or go swimming with dolphins. Both first heard of the island on an expedition with Keogh's winter business, a whale-watching cruise in far-flung Fowler's Bay. And every evening we descend to the beach in a group to enjoy dinners of whiting and abalone, chilli crumbed calamari, prawns and flathead as the sun sets.

By the time I lie back in my swag, the bruised sky is mottled by the dark shadows of returning shearwaters ready to swap shifts with little penguins that emerge from their burrows with a keening wail. As I sleep beneath a blanket of stars, our footprints in the sand are washed away by the tide so that each morning the island is a blank canvas once more. ●