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Cool off with sea lions

On South Australia's remote Eyre Peninsula, Alexis Buxton-Collins tries to keep up with its playful aquatic residents.

SA | Three sets of eyes stare at me expectantly, waiting for my next move. Heart pounding and acutely aware of every breath, I inhale deeply and take the plunge.

I swim past my audience and execute a clumsy barrel roll. Within seconds those eyes are gliding past me on either side, twisting and somersaulting effortlessly as I watch in delight. I gasp through my snorkel when I reach the water's surface and see whiskered faces turn back to me with curiosity, waiting to see what's next.

The eyes belong to sea lions Crazy Girl, Psycho and Shark Bite Girl but they're friendlier than the names suggest. Perhaps that's because they're among the luckiest of their species in the country. The Australian sea lion population has declined significantly over the years, to the point where they're

now considered endangered. But the colony on Jones Island, off the Eyre Peninsula's west coast, is one of the few that is growing.

Alan and Trish Payne have something to do with that. They've been observing this group of mammals since they first arrived in Baird Bay, three hours drive from Port Lincoln, in 1987. The town – not much more than a cluster of holiday houses – is home to just three full-time inhabitants and I don't pass a single car in either direction on the final 30 kilometres of dirt road. Located near the edge of the Great Australian Bight, this is the Australia people dream of when they talk about isolated beaches and untamed oceans. The seclusion is what drew the Paynes here and it's helped to protect Baird Bay's aquatic residents, too.

Since Alan started leading tours of the region with Baird Bay Ocean Eco Experience (bairdbay.com), he's seen the sea lions' numbers increase from about 35 to 140. Now he plays the twin roles of guide and guard, introducing tourists to these friendly creatures while also monitoring members of the public who get too close and rescuing several pups who have lost their mothers.

When I first see Jones Island it hardly looks like a refuge. It's a small, wind-battered lump of rock where nothing grows above knee height. But on a stretch of coast where large Southern Ocean swells crash onto hidden reefs below limestone cliffs, this is a relatively safe haven. Hundreds of seabirds perch on the jumble of boulders surrounding the island but Alan draws my attention to the other side of the boat, where I see a dark mass

gliding beneath the surface before a small whiskered face pops up.

Soon this inquisitive sea lion is joined by another, quickly identified by Alan as an adolescent male named Barry. "When he settles down he's really friendly but he's turned into a boofhead," says Alan ruefully. "He'll just be chasing girls all day." True to form, Barry follows our new friend around until she darts out of sight in an effort to escape him.

Onshore, a mini soap opera plays out as Barry chases some of the other females and accidentally gets too close to one of the older males. The 300-kilogram mass of blubber and scar tissue rears up and puffs out a broad chest the colour of pale honey. Chastened, Barry scampers off as the bull yawns ostentatiously to show off a mouthful of sharp teeth. Alan suggests we give them some space and visit Baird Bay's other denizens.

Piloting the boat towards a beach of golden sand dunes covered in low coastal heath, Alan tells me to keep my eyes open. Soon I spot a jagged fin slicing through the water. "There's Slash," he announces, "and her kid, Firefox, is probably close." Right on cue, a slightly smaller dolphin swims alongside and it's not long before there are 20 dolphins surfing the waves.

As we go to join them, Alan makes it clear that I should never swim towards any animals or follow them. I soon discover there's no need to. All I have to do is keep my eyes open and let them come to me.

Swells kicking up sand from the bottom mean that visibility is down to a few metres and I'm often relying on Alan to let me know where the dolphins are. More than

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once, he tells me to put my snorkel in the water just as several swim directly below me.

As I get used to their movements, I'm able to dive down before they arrive and see them rocketing by. At a certain point, I turn to watch them passing and one notices. He circles several times before wiggling his nose playfully and disappearing with a powerful flick of his tail, as if to tell me it's time to move on.

I now know what to look out for when we arrive back at Jones Island. As if on cue, large rounded lumps between the rocks begin to transform into sea lions as our approach. Alan greets them with a whistle and several of the females rise up, showing off thick coats of silver fur with cream-coloured bellies.

Their movements on land are clumsy but effective. I wince as they flail their flippers around and haul themselves laboriously over jagged rocks but Alan assures me they're protected by a cushion of blubber. That fat layer also keeps them warm when they hit the water and their fluffy coats turn into sleek grey fur.

At the end of winter the water temperature is about 14°C and even in a wetsuit I have to keep moving to stay warm. Perhaps that's why I draw a small crowd of followers. Mindful of Alan's warning, I keep my distance as I watch the sea lions swimming gracefully around me. Wonder turns to delight when they begin to mimic my clumsy movements.

Whether they see me as a playmate or a source of mirth, I'm not sure but I do everything I can to keep them entertained by diving, flipping and corkscrewing in the water. It's like trying to keep up with an Olympic sprinter and soon I'm exhausted.

Sensing the show is over, most of the sea lions go searching for other amusement but Shark Bite Girl seems to have taken a shine to me. Every time I dive down she darts past and when I linger at the bottom she moves her whiskered face close to mine.

I see how she got her name when she displays the large scar on her belly as if asking for a scratch. When I refuse to touch her she hides her face behind a patch of seaweed then rolls around and rubs against the ocean floor. Then she turns her head to look at me and I swear I can see the hint of a smile on her face. She's friendly, curious, enchanting.

When I finally hop out of the water, Alan hands me a cup of hot Milo that I sip in between feverishly reporting on my close encounters. His grin tells me that he's heard it all before.

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Catch a glimpse of a platypus

VIC | The platypus is one of the world's most mysterious and elusive creatures but a wild colony in Victoria's Great Otway National Park is now accepting visitors. On an eco-sensitive canoe adventure, you'll take to the placid waters of Lake Elizabeth at dawn or dusk, when the colony is at its most active. **Otway Eco Tours'** Paddle with the Platypus offering (platypustours.net.au) boasts a 95 per cent success rate and you can be doubly assured the cute little monotreme (a mammal that lays eggs) isn't the sole star of the show: you'll also have the chance to see glow worms and a variety of magnificent birdlife.

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Count sheep beneath the waves at the Great Barrier Reef

QLD | There's a way to immerse yourself in the Great Barrier Reef without getting wet. You'll need your pyjamas, though. **Reefworld** (cruisewhitsundays.com), a three-level pontoon bobbing amid the Whitsunday Islands, 40 nautical miles from Airlie Beach, reopened in late 2019 with a clever addition: Reefsuites, which are private rooms submerged about four metres deep, with king-sized bed, crisp linen and an ensuite. But who cares about those luxuries? It's the floor-to-ceiling windows that really matter, turning your suite into an all-night aquarium so arresting you won't get a wink of sleep. Lie back as sea turtles, giant groupers and hordes of colourful reef fish mosey past before greeting the sunshine as it filters through the sea.

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Share the sea with whale sharks on Ningaloo Reef

WA | There's whale watching and then there's diving into the crystalline waters of Ningaloo Reef and gliding with the mighty whale sharks that migrate along this isolated 260-kilometre stretch of Western Australian coast from late March until late July. Operators such as **Live Ningaloo** (liveningaloo.com.au) use their own spotter plane, allowing you to better time your moment with these charismatic giants.

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Witness the hatchling hustle

QLD + NT + WA | Few things will still you as quickly as watching baby turtles crack open their egg shells before hurtling over the sand on tiny flippers to reach the sea. Luckily, you can catch this show at a host of places around the country.

Mon Repos near Bundaberg in Queensland might have the biggest loggerhead turtle rookery in the Southern Hemisphere but seeing loggerhead and green turtles hatch on the Great Barrier Reef's **Heron Island** is one of life's great experiences. Each summer on this coral cay, the warm sun incubates the eggs, which release their treasures from early January.

Across the continent, on the Northern Territory's **Bare Sand Island**, about 60 kilometres west of Darwin, it's baby flatback and olive ridley turtles that make the perilous sprint to the water. The best time to go is in the dry months mid-year, taking the fast boat at dawn or near sunset to this history-rich island.



Peter Eve

Green, hawksbill, flatback and loggerhead turtles call Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef region home. At the southern end, **Shark Bay** is an important turtle site, with up to 6000 residing here and hatchlings emerging in February and March. Snorkel among them in Ningaloo Marine Park's coral gardens.

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Dive with a pod of wild dolphins

WA | There are an estimated 200 bottlenose dolphins that live happily off the coast of Rockingham, about a 45-minute drive south of Perth. What are the chances

that you'll bump into a pod or two? Very high if you sign up for a trip with **Perth Wildlife Encounters** (dolphins.com.au), which has been hosting swimming with wild dolphins tours for more than 30 years. Touching or feeding these delightful creatures is strictly prohibited. Instead, visitors are encouraged to float on the surface of the sea, using a snorkel to observe the pods darting beneath.

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Make friends with dwarf minke whales

QLD | There's a whole clutch of reasons why swimming with dwarf minke whales ➔

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Watch brolgas dance at a safari lodge

NT | The Mary River floodplain, about 90 kilometres east of Darwin on the edge of Kakadu National Park, has some of the best wildlife spotting in the Top End, from buffalo and saltwater crocodiles to amazing birdlife. Guests at **Bamurruplains** lodge (bamurruplains.com; above) can also join an airboat safari to marvel at the elegant jabiru and the long-legged broлга, known for its graceful mating dance.