

Small Wonder in the Pacific – *The allure of Norfolk Island*

by Sally Blyth

My morning outing leads me past old ruins, golden sands, tranquil turquoise waters, pine trees and an old salt mine ruin. Cattle graze in nearby fields, chooks run amok, and fishing boats unload their bountiful catch. Crumbling buildings with a harsh history beguile and bother me.

In town I find high quality bargains from around the world (Venetian glass, English china, Irish linen, German knives, European shoes, international beauty products, bespoke jewellery, Australian beachwear and much more) alongside local wine, cheese and artefacts. Shopping here is laid-back, stress-free and reasonably-priced. I browse and deliberate, making a few enduring purchases with unhurried pleasure, followed by a delightful café lunch.

Later, an invigorating bushwalk takes me high on a clifftop. Surf surges against the rugged coastline below and the ocean reaches across the horizon to infinity, pierced by giant radiant sunbeams; it's a wildly impressive and pinch-worthy vista. As evening falls, I enjoy a flavoursome dinner of fresh fish, served with relaxed camaraderie and easy banter in breath-taking surroundings. By day's end, warmth envelops me in every way imaginable and sleep comes easy in my unpretentious and hugely comfortable accommodation.



So where in the world am I, to be able to enjoy all this in just one day?

Norfolk Island – where history, nature, culture, curios and hospitality come together on one tiny island in the Pacific Ocean. Isolated, yet so in touch with the world.

I've not been anywhere quite like Norfolk Island; so small in size (34.6km²) yet so immense in magnificence. (As a comparison, Auckland's Waiheke Island is 92km²). There is currently only one flight per week from Auckland, and several from Australia. Since Air NZ stopped flying from

Auckland, Air Chathams thankfully took up the mantle, carrying passengers up and back on a Friday. It's a 2-hour 20-minute flight to this unique under-rated gem in the Pacific that ticks all the boxes; I recommend it highly and without hesitation.

About the Island

Norfolk Island is a three-million-year-old volcanic mass rising from the ocean. Originally settled by Polynesians and discovered by Captain Cook in 1774, it was handed to Australia in 1914 by the UK. Self-governed from 1979 until July 2016, it is again currently subject to Australian Commonwealth legislation – a change introduced to address issues of sustainability, this doesn't make everyone happy. Alas, the good old duty-free days are now part of the island's enduring history.

When the airstrip, constructed to refuel aircraft during World War II, was converted into a commercial airport it brought in the tourists and opened up a whole new realm of employment for the Islanders. Initially gaining a curious reputation for being a rather dull destination for “newly-weds and the nearly dead”, the truth is, Norfolk Island is an untapped treasure trove of wonder for anyone and everyone.

Upon arrival, transition to holiday mode is quick and easy – step off that plane, settle in, relax, anticipate, explore. Within half an hour of touchdown, and with minimal ado, I am firmly on holiday. Even better, I'm surrounded by sea and immersed in seclusion. The island's temperate climate means it's neither too hot nor too cold, although it can get a little humid. Occasionally a misty fog rolls in and hangs around; rather than interfere with enjoyment levels, it adds charm.

Convict Settlement

The evocative historical area of Kingston served as a convict penal settlement twice between 1788 and 1955, with a hiatus when the island lay abandoned for 11 years. The ruins of the penal colony exude more than a hint of eeriness. Apparently ghosts abound and I didn't have to force my imagination too much to envisage what a brutal life it must have been for the convicts who ended up here.

Meandering amongst the ruins, I get a strong and unnerving sense of the gruelling manual labour, unsanitary conditions and poor diet that were all part of their wretched days. Heinous wardens dealt out regular floggings and, even though it was apparently the very worst rogues who got shipped to this fearsome “hell on earth”, the system was so cruel, and punishment so severe, that death would surely have been a somewhat inviting alternative. Hangings were commonplace and some inmates actually sought their own execution, just so they didn't have to endure any more of the misery. Being here, amongst it all, my emotions sway between horror, dismay and empathy.

The Life of the Settlers

The elegant Georgian buildings of Kingston were built by the convicts, nowadays a peaceful World Heritage listed area. Thoroughly pleasant to wander through, it's an evocative showcase of life back in the day, with threads of the past still potent. The Bounty Folk Museum is full of stories and artefacts that take my emotions on a real ride, and the picturesque Cemetery whispers of young lives lost; a truly beautiful setting that I find hard to leave, even though its essence is harrowing.

Most of us are familiar with the infamous story of the Bounty Mutiny of 1789 when Fletcher Christian and his fellow crewmen seized control of Captain Bligh's Royal Navy vessel in the South Pacific. Having set Bligh and his men adrift in an open boat, the mutineers set sail for Tahiti and then Pitcairn Island, where they settled. After a tumultuous time on Pitcairn, where most of the original group died or were murdered, their descendants eventually settled on Norfolk Island in 1856, after it was gifted to them by Queen Victoria. Whaling was their main source of income and the array of old lighter boats abandoned around the place – neglected, weather-beaten and, quite literally, having grown into their surroundings – make for great photo opportunities.

There is no port on the island due to the rugged coastline and lack of sheltered anchorage. Modern-day lighter boats are in action, unloading cargo and tendering passengers from cruise ships that call in occasionally. Fishing boats are launched and retrieved at the Cascade jetty using an ingenious pulley system; it's a complex operation and an interesting one to observe. I spend a long time watching the mesmerising activity; who would have thought?!



The surnames of Christian, Quintal, Adams and Nobbs (and others from the Mutiny days) are commonplace, causing some identification confusion. To overcome this, the phonebook lists people by their nicknames – this is not only a sensible solution, but one guaranteed to put a smile on your face. Beef, Cane Toad, Carrots, Duck, Lettuce Leaf, Moose, Mutty ... it's a read in itself and takes me by surprise. What's not to love about something as enterprising and endearing as this?

The Descendants

My friend Marilyn is a direct descendant of Matthew Quintal, original mutineer. A stocky man and resourceful renegade, he managed to overcome the many hardships that befell him. However, having survived the severity of life on Pitcairn, as well as two keel-haulings (horrifically, most people either drowned or were torn to shreds), he was eventually murdered by two fellow mutineers after a drunken rampage.

What becomes apparent, when talking with Marilyn, is how strongly the resilient spirit runs through her family. Being from such tough English/Tahitian heritage helps engender hardiness and an inner strength of character. As she shares family stories with me, a strong sense of pride in being linked to such a legendary and enduring piece of history is evident – and rightly so.

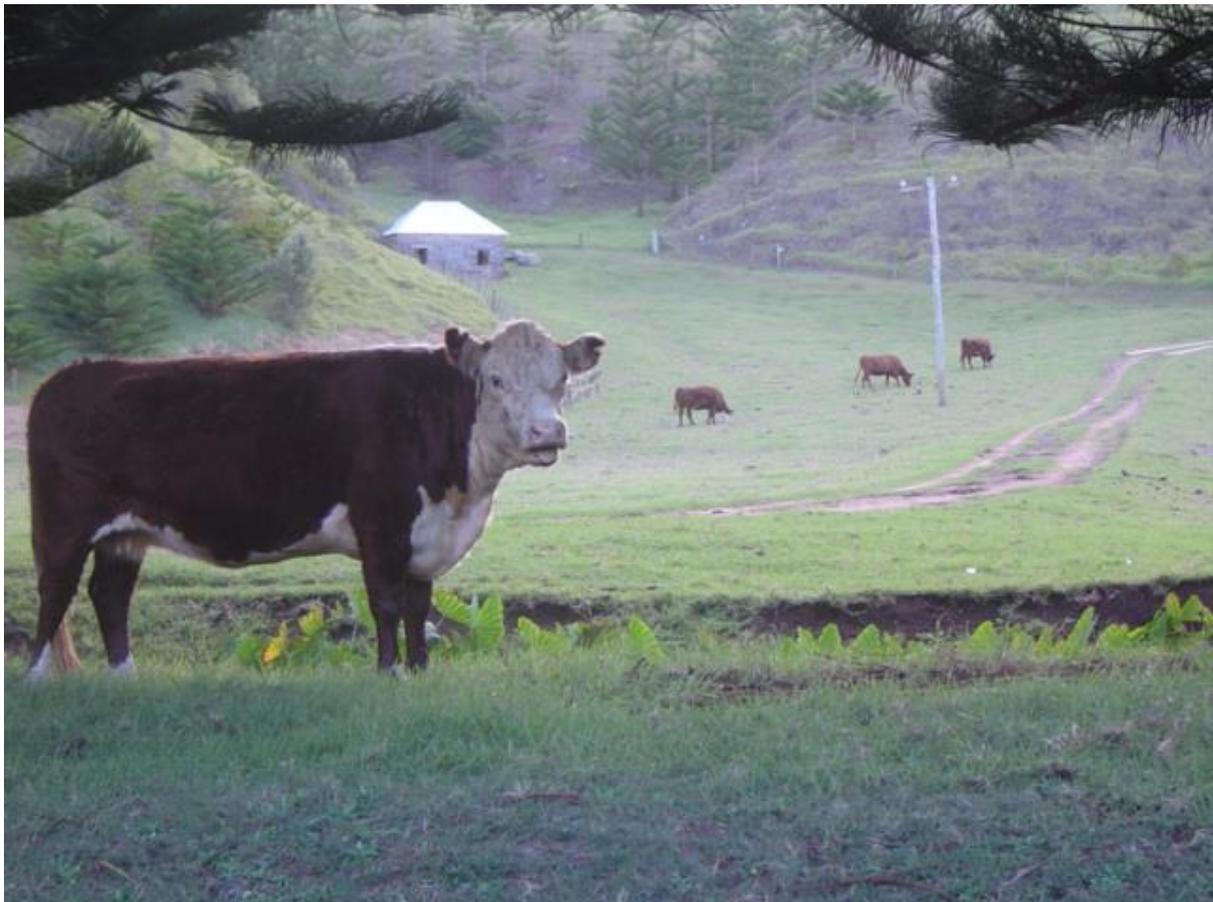
Norfolk Islanders certainly know how to acknowledge their history in a myriad of ways. Bounty Day, celebrated each year on 8th June to honour the arrival of the Pitcairn Islanders, is a big deal. The 360° Cyclorama, an incredibly realistic circular painting that is a must-see for all visitors, also brings the island's history to life. Taking two years to create, it's a large and exceptionally detailed artwork with

amazing 3D perspective. Music and sound effects complete the remarkable illusion and I feel like I am right there on that unique journey through history. It's a spellbinding experience of world-class reputation, a wonderful blend of art and history, 360° of perfection. Don't miss it.

The talented artists who were commissioned to create the Cyclorama have strong connections with the island and have also designed many of the island's stamps, each one a perfect work-of-art in its own right and highly sought after by philatelists around the world. One collection honours the island's spiders. Note of caution, especially for arachnophobes – some spiders are worryingly large, producing huge webs and often sitting disturbingly still and rather too close for comfort. When I see one sitting ominously outside my window, I am immediately alarmed. But, terrifying as they may look, they are harmless.

Cows are everywhere (including on stamps!) and have right of way over cars as they free-roam and munch their way around the island. If you're out and about driving, be prepared for a friendly eyeball with a cow or two; give them patience and a smile and continue happily on your way.

Talking of driving, most accommodation options include car hire and driving here is as simple and pleasurable as you can get – no traffic lights, congestion or road rage to grapple with here. Just the odd stray cow!



Island Dining

With many excellent restaurants and cafés to sample, you're spoilt for choice when deciding where to dine. Norfolk Island is home to top-class chefs who ensure you savour the very best every time you put fork to mouth, and virtually all fruit and vegetable produce is grown on the island, picked fresh and in season. Add fresh seafood and an array of local artisan products to the food basket, as well as the option of casual eateries or fine dining, and it goes without saying that great food is all part of the Norfolk Island experience. The annual Food Festival, held at the end of November, gives visitors an opportunity to try the local fare in a variety of special settings.

The Island Fish Fry is a must-do – eating fresh fish on a clifftop as the sun sets is a glorious way to enjoy a casual convivial dinner with strangers who quickly become friends.

The Norfolk Blue is a local cattle breed that isn't found anywhere else in the world, making it an extra special addition to carnivorous menus.

For something completely different, a Progressive Dinner is a unique island experience, taking you into three different homes, for entrée, main and dessert respectively. Local families take on hosting duties and, because there is no tourist overload here, it never becomes stale. Each host's individual character shines through, with a large dose of repartee and humour – guaranteed great food, loads of laughs and an unforgettable experience. The coconut bread I savour is especially delicious and the recipe given gladly. Each dinner experience is completely different and equally fabulous. Highly recommended.

Island Outings

Most of the island's tours and offerings are both quirky and exclusive, including "Wonderland by Night" – wandering through ten acres of Norfolk pines and bushland in the dark, as poems are recited and all manner of diorama light up like an enchanted forest, is a charming and highly unusual experience. There's a Sound & Light Show, garden tours, food tours, as well as various events that are designed to give you an authentic sense of the life of the convicts.

Scenically, there's an old aqueduct in the middle of nowhere and a superb golf course with unrivalled views. Emily Bay beckons; a perfect swimming lagoon with a pontoon, gold sand, shady pines and a glass-bottom boat expedition, it's never crowded. There's a thriving art scene with artisans at work in various studios around the island. A road runs right alongside the airport runway and if you're lucky, like me, you might time it right and get to race a plane taking off – you'll lose of course, but what a fun, rare, hilarious and memorable thing.



The flamboyant roots of the Moreton Bay Fig trees near Headstone are well worth marvelling over. Frolicking amongst these huge unwieldy giants that have been sculptured so incredibly well by Mother Nature, and framed by greenery, I feel like I've been transported to a fantasy world.

Experience life as a convict, go on a ghost tour through the Kingston ruins, take in the views from the top of Mt Pitt, meander through beautiful gardens. Enjoy fishing (they call it catching), kayaking, golf, snorkelling, archery, palm forests, farmers markets, galleries, colonial architecture, a mission church, 4WD treks, nature reserves, bushwalks galore and even a vineyard. Visit the Captain Cook

Memorial, hang out at a music festival or sporting carnival. Spot locals on bikes with surfboards tucked under their arms, off to secret surf breaks; professional surfers deem this one of the most unspoiled surf destinations in the world.

As mentioned, to get about, a hire car is essential. The roads weave their way around the island, many unsealed. You'll rarely be more than 15 minutes from the township of Burnt Pine – where you might meet a car on the roundabout. But mostly, you'll be largely on your own as you explore. Be sure to do the "Norfolk Wave" – a casual lifting of your right index finger – when you pass an oncoming car. It quickly becomes habit and I even find myself doing it instinctively once I return home. It's a gesture that might generate odd looks elsewhere, but in Norfolk Island it's a charming, grin-inducing, must-do custom that even the cows seem to enjoy.

Charming Norfolk

English is the main language on the island, but Norfolk is the native lingo. *Watawieh* (wutaway) is the local greeting; hello, how are you? It rolls off the tongue quite naturally after a day on the island.

A blend of 18th Century English and Tahitian, Norfolk is oddly described as a creole language and is in some danger of dying out. Thankfully, in an effort to retain it, tourist attractions are being renamed in Norfolk.

I buy a fabulous sign that says *gwen narwi* (gone swimming); it's beautifully carved, resplendently painted in deep turquoise, and is destined to hang with pride at my beach house, always reminding me of a very special place where the swimming is magic.

Norfolk Island, having transitioned itself from paradise to hell-hole and back to paradise again, is a place of sophistication and style with a charming rustic edge. The people are entrepreneurial and immensely hospitable, with many strings to their bows and even more stories to tell. You can experience so much here; distance is not an issue, and everything is manageable, awe-inspiring, thought-provoking. But, as I've intimated, a week is only long enough to scratch the surface. Returning again and again will reveal more of the wonders of this fabulous place that one can never tire of.

The island's promotional tagline is "360° of Wonder" – a message that says it all and an accurate description of a place that you should experience if you can.

It's impossible not to be captivated by the unspoiled beauty and unique history of this exceptional place and, as an Islander would say, when bidding you farewell, *yorlye kum baek sun* (you all come back soon). I'll be back, for sure!



Go there – soon!