

Island Life Down Under

Long stretches of tranquil bay-beaches, rugged ocean surf beaches backed by sheer cliffs, rural hinterland, abundant native wild life, and unaffected sleepy towns put Phillip Island on Australia's map as a popular, still unspoiled vacation destination.

Situated in Western Port Bay, Phillip Island is an easy seventy-five mile drive southeast of the city of Melbourne. At its eastern passageway the island is joined to the mainland by a half-mile bridge. Below, the dangerous currents of the channel are clearly visible as the incoming ocean waters from Bass Strait--the arm of sea between southeastern Australia and Tasmania--meet the meandering waters of the bay in a thick, churning soup.

Forty thousand years ago the island could be reached by a thin land mass. The Bunurong tribe, a nomadic Aboriginal people, came and went with the seasons, as do the short-tailed shearwater, a small bird of the diving petrel family. The shearwater, as the name suggests, skim the surface of the ocean in elegant formation feeding on minute insects barely visible to the naked eye. This spectacle happens at dusk every evening from September to April off Cape Woolamai, the highest point on the Island's southern tip. After breeding season these migratory birds fly thousands of miles to the Bering straight in the Arctic in pursuit of a perpetual cycle of summers.

Cowes is Phillip Island's main town. Boasting about three thousand permanent residents,

it's small-town rural Australia. There is one main street lined with an assortment of shops including bakery, supermarket, fish-n-chip shop, chemist, ice-cream & pizza parlor, a couple of banks and one pub which commands the best view in town overlooking Cowes pier where boat tours depart for aquatic wild life havens such as Seal Rock.

An outcrop at the western most point, Seal Rock is home to Australia's largest colony of southern fur seals. During breeding season, October to December, the rock is overflowing with these aquatic carnivores, which unlike true seals have small external ears. Sharing this end of the island is a penguin reserve. The smallest of the species, fairy penguins are found only on the Southern coastline of Australia.

Like clock work, every night at dusk, hundreds of adult fairy penguins gather on Phillip Island's ocean-side surf beaches after a day's fishing in Bass Strait. Tumbling in on the in-coming surf they group together in the shallows, not daring to walk the beach until it's completely dark. When they do finally venture forth, they waddle with difficulty (penguins swim better than they walk), full bellies dragging in the sand, negotiating exactly the same path taken by generations of penguins before them.

As they make their way to their burrows, which are dotted in the sand dunes around the beach, visitors can follow their path along an elevated walkway and view the parent penguins arriving home to squealing chicks--born in the early summer--eager for a meal of regurgitated squid, anchovy and pilchard. Social creatures, the adult penguins stand at the entrance to their burrows grooming and chatting until sun-up when they head back

out for another day of fishing. Swimming as fast as 25 mph the fairy penguins cover a fifty-mile radius, always returning to the southern shores of Australia at sunset.

Australia's most loved animal, the koala, has a home on Phillip Island. Where once you'd see them clumsily plodding along the ground in back yards and along the side of the road, in search of just the right eucalyptus tree, now they're contained in a koala sanctuary where they're safe from their primary predator, the car. Koalas aren't native to the island- they were introduced in the 1870's. By the 1930's only a thousand remained in the state of Victoria most of which were on Phillip Island. In the 1970's the population was severely depleted by disease and the increase in road traffic. Fortunately, the koala sanctuary has successfully helped restore and maintain one of the island's most precious commodities.

Thickly vegetated on its protected bayside, the north shore plays host to much colorful and aromatic native flora, which in turn attracts abundant native birds. Here also is a wetland area, refuge for thousands of aquatic birds that forage diligently at low tide in the estuary's mud flats for sand worms and tiny delectable crustaceans.

Whether you're interested in wild life watching, invigorating surf or lazy days lying on the beach in the sun, Phillip Island has something for everyone. And keep in mind the best days of summer this far south are December through February.