

# TROPICAL ISLES ON OUR DOORSTEP

## Who needs Queensland when paradise is 2.5 hours from Sydney, asks **Angela Saurine**

**W**hen Lara Bingle emerged from a calm bay on to an idyllic strip of white sand in Tourism Australia's "Where the bloody hell are you?" TV commercials, most people assumed the ad had been filmed in Queensland.

With a lushly vegetated low-lying island in the background and sunny blue skies, it was easy to imagine the bikini-clad model was in the Whitsundays.

In truth, the scene was shot at a little-known island in Port Stephens, just a couple of hours' drive north of Sydney.

The location, Fingal Spit, is just as inviting in real life as it was on screen.

Although it looks idyllic, the sand spit, which connects Fingal Island to the mainland, comes and goes with the tides — and walking across can be risky. The safest way to reach the island is on a tour aboard Imagine Cruises' vessel *Envision*.

It is one of two cruise tours to Port Stephens' islands, both departing from d'Albora Marinas at Nelson Bay.

On the Fingal Island cruise,

guide Jeannie Lawson explains that Fingal Bay was once known as False Bay because people mistook it for the entrance to Port Stephens.

Lawson leads the way up a

small hill and along the track to the Point Stephens Lighthouse on the other side of the island.

Along the way, she stops to point out plants used by indigenous Australians as food and medicine.

They include ferns used to soothe insect bites and paperbark that can be used

as a dressing for wounds, and to wrap food in to cook in the fire.

"If you look around you, this is all they had — there was no

Bunnings down the road, no hospital,"

Lawson says.

The small red leaves of native sarsaparilla are surprisingly sweet.

"That's what Aboriginal kids used as their jelly beans," Lawson says.

### **SHIPWRECKS AND WHALES**

The area was named after Sir Philip Stephens, who was secretary to the admiralty when explorer Captain James

Cook sailed past in 1770 and, perhaps more importantly, was also paymaster. It was another 21 years before the next European visitors arrived, when a former convict ship-turned-whaler, the *Salamander*, came in to shelter from a storm.

The lighthouse was built in

1862, after 24 shipwrecks. Three lighthouse keepers lived on the island with their families for up to three years at a time, before moving to their next post.

At one time 11 children called the island home, along with a school mistress. Lighthouse keepers stayed on the island until 1972, when the light became automated. Sadly, the sandstone cottages where they lived were gutted by fire in 1991, but there is talk of restoring them to make

tourist accommodation. The point is a great spot for whale watching in winter, when humpbacks come close to shore to rub off their barnacles on the reef during the annual migration along Australia's east coast.

### **LAGOON SWIMMING**

Back across the island is a lagoon, where indigenous Australians once placed

rocks to trap fish. There are wild blackberries to try and large elaborate spider webs to limbo under.

"Sorry, sweetie, I'm going to have to move you," says Lawson as she gently takes hold of the side of one web and puts it on another branch so we can pass.

The lagoon beach is covered in shell grit, which was an important commodity during the Great Depression. Many people took up mining it and selling it to poultry farmers as it was a good source of calcium.

One eccentric character, Arthur Murdoch, spent 10 years on the island — often naked. His book, *Sheer Grit*, tells the story of his experiences in the region.

It's a perfect spot for a dip, as is Fingal Spit, where the Envision awaits for the return trip to Nelson Bay.

Lucky passengers may spot a pod of bottlenose dolphins en route. Between 90 and 120 dolphins call the bay home. Each one can be identified by the shape of its dorsal fin and scars, and they have been given nicknames such as Kenobi, Skywalker, Yoda, Paul and Ringo. The skipper plays Bob Marley songs to entice them closer, saying they are drawn to the sounds of reggae.

## PROVIDENCE BEACH

The other Port Stephens island cruise is Moonshadow Cruises' Broughton Island experience.

From d'Albora Marinas, it takes about 90 minutes on the 20m timber vessel Moonshadow III to reach Broughton Island, which lies in Myall Lakes National Park.

The boat moors in Esmeralda Cove, where a handful of fishing huts line the beach. From there, it's a 10-minute walk to the ruggedly

beautiful Providence Beach on the northern side of the island, passing the burrowed nests of short-tailed shearwaters, also known as mutton birds.

Back at Nelson Bay, children frolic in the shallow waters as their parents watch from nearby picnic tables.

It's a tropical island paradise — a couple of hours from Sydney.

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The writer was a guest of Port Stephens Tourism

the old Little Beach Marina in Nelson Bay serves food with a focus on local produce, Hunter Valley wines and Murray's Craft Brewing Co beer. [littlebeachboathouse.com.au](http://littlebeachboathouse.com.au)

## MORE INFO

• [portstephens.org.au](http://portstephens.org.au)

short break

PORT STEPHENS  
CRUISES

# essentials

## GETTING THERE

• Port Stephens is about 2.5 hours' drive north of Sydney via the M1 motorway. Follow the signs to Nelson Bay.

## STAYING THERE

• The **Nelson Resort** is a short walk from the main street and Nelson Bay Marina. Rooms from \$140 midweek and \$190 on

weekends. **4916 4600**, [nelsonresort.com.au](http://nelsonresort.com.au)

## DOING THERE

• **Imagine Cruises'** 3.5 hour Fingal Island And Lighthouse Tour departs from d'Albora Marinas, Nelson Bay, 10am Wednesdays and Sundays, adult \$79, conc \$69, child \$59, family \$217.

[imaginecruises.com.au](http://imaginecruises.com.au)

• **Moonshadow Cruises'** full-day Broughton Island National Park Cruise leaves 10am Sundays from September school holidays until the end of the Easter school holidays. Extra cruises on Tuesdays and Thursdays in school holidays, adult \$89, conc \$58-\$79, child 4-14 \$48, family \$231. [moonshadow.com.au](http://moonshadow.com.au)

## EATING THERE

• **Little Beach Boathouse** at





Fingal Island at Port Stephens, and (top) the Lara Bingle ad.