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Eyre Peninsula, SA: one for your bucket list

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Setting out on foot from our tiny off-grid cabin, perched in splendid isolation above the vast Southern Ocean, we're on the hunt for an easy path to Sandy Point Beach. Like most beaches on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, it's stunningly beautiful and a little bit wild. And it's entirely at the disposal of guests of the newly opened Yambara, a Scandi-chic "tiny abode" standing alone on private farmland far, far from the madding crowd.

Getting onto the sand requires a bit of a scramble but we quickly discover an easier path in a bushy gully. A pair of white-bellied sea eagles cruise above the shoreline, pounding surf breaks onto butter-gold sands and there's not a soul to be seen. Just a few skittish 'roos and a flock of adventurous sheep fond of walking the cliffs and gazing out to sea like marooned sailors.

Everything about the Eyre Peninsula is big: big tuna, big surf, big skies and, yes, big sharks. The beaches are epic in scale, too, strung like a jewelled necklace all the way to Head of Bight in the west.

Yambara has a dress circle possie nestled between Sleaford Bay and the dramatic Whalers Way, with its blowholes and high sea cliffs. Through wraparound windows, we have panoramic views past Lincoln National Park to Cape Catastrophe. Every morning the sea eagles perform a fly-by while little birds scud above a heath so neatly wind-pruned it might be the work of gardeners with secateurs. At the far end of the beach there's a climb up onto a wild headland where in the 19th century a whaler was posted to spot for Southern Rights as they headed into Sleaford Bay, an established whale nursery.

Yambara's situation makes it the perfect land-based whale watching outpost come winter. And,

like all the best Peninsula digs, the little house is well off the beaten track. We would never find it with Google Maps (and the phone signal keeps dropping out, anyway) so we meet with the house's owner, Tim, at the Boston Bean Coffee Co in Port Lincoln, a place so cool it might have been flown in from Fitzroy. Tim asks us to select a coffee blend (ground to order) for brekky and then hands us a walkie-talkie and says, "Follow me." We give chase, out of town, onto gravel, then onto dirt, through four stock gates scattering sheep and 'roos in our wake. Tim points out the best walks, mentions the "big browns" then hands us the key and heads home in a cloud of dust.

We are now alone with the sea and our eagles and a whistling wind blowing up from Antarctica. The nights are blissfully silent, the sky filled with stars; out to sea the lights of fishing boats wink and twinkle. Port Lincoln is home to the country's largest commercial fishing fleet, and everyone here seems to be packing a rod or towing a boat.

When flying in over Boston Bay, one of the world's largest natural harbours (three and half times the size of Sydney's), we'd caught a glimpse of the tuna fattening pens and mussel leases. Down at the Port Lincoln marina, battle-hardened fishing boats are moored cheek by jowl; the canals are lined with the homes of wealthy tuna "ranchers", their multi-million dollar pleasure cruisers docked out front.

Most Australians know precious little about Port Lincoln. (Some may remember Dean Lukin, Olympic Gold weightlifter; everyone knows Makybe Diva, owned by tuna rancher Tony Santic – a statue of the three-times Melbourne Cup winner stands on the town's foreshore.) But visitors are often surprised by this rich regional city. French chef Marvin Lattrez speaks wistfully of his first fishing trip in the pristine waters (imagine his arms spread wide as he describes his catch). Raised in Bordeaux, Marvin and his wife Grace arrived on the Eyre in 2018 via the Congo, then Melbourne. He'd spotted an ad on Gumtree for an empty cafe in sleepy Tumby Bay (40 minutes from Port Lincoln) and decided to take the plunge on a very remote seachange. The cafe was an instant hit, and three months ago they moved their hugely popular L'Anse French Café & Croissanterie into smart new premises in Port Lincoln. The pastries are exceptional and so are his cooked breakfasts (try the delicious miso scrambled eggs).

Thrilled to discover a stash of Marvin's croissants in the breakfast box at Yambara, we decide to stay put – aside from one trek into town for dinner at the handsome Line & Label, overlooking the vines at Peter Teakle Wines. Bluefin tuna tartare and Spencer Gulf prawns are followed by a deep-fried nannygai, a rather terrifying looking but delicious fish. (The variety of fish on menus here is an eye opener; The Fresh Fish Place on Proper Bay Road is a great one-stop shop for all manner of fresh, pickled and smoked seafood, as well as excellent take-out fish and chips.)

Heading west on the seafood trail, first stop is Coffin Bay (30 minutes from Port Lincoln), a beautiful little settlement with white sand beaches. We check in at the boat ramp with Experience Coffin Bay; skipper Scott welcomes us aboard his vessel, conveniently furnished with a bar stocked with local wine and gins infused with coastal botanicals, for a 30-minute cruise out to the nearby oyster leases. This is the sweet spot: a sheltered bay lapped by national park, with no industry, no run-off, no ship's bilge. Instead, a nutrient-rich upswell from the Antarctic current that's sucked into the bay, making these oysters so sweet tasting and clean. The best Pacific oysters in the world, says Scott.

We don waders and plough through the crystal-clear waters while Scott explains the farming process. Back on board, his offsider Daisy is shucking dozens of oysters for a feast. Then there's a slow cruise of the national park shoreline, past sugar-white sand dunes and a rookery shrieking with a thousand cormorants to a little island where a small colony of sealions has hauled ashore. We spend 10 minutes admiring these gorgeous creatures before heading in. Coffin Bay claims a small pub (today 16 emus loiter out front) and a couple of oyster restaurants serving spanking fresh molluscs every which way: hot, cold, fried, spicy. Oyster count for the day: five dozen.

Heading further west, following in the wake of fearless surfers who blazed a trail in the '60s and '70s in search of the perfect wave, you'll discover, as they did, endless empty beaches. Swim in the rock pools at gorgeous Greenly (42km from Coffin Bay), rent a tinnie in Venus Bay, tuck into abalone and chips from the food truck at Streaky Bay or book a stay at the otherworldly Camel Beach House, one of those retreats that feels like a secret known only to the most intrepid travellers.

And if you're feeling brave, operators in Port Lincoln offer the chance to swim with sealions or cage-dive with great white sharks. Underwater sequences for the film *Jaws* were filmed off the Eyre coast, cementing the peninsula's reputation as South Australia's "wild west".

But if like me you're more the "mild west" type, the only danger is eating more oysters than is seemly or getting tangled in your fishing line. Because in these parts, fishing is mandatory.

Where to stay

Camel Beach House

Storm Boy meets *The Shipping News* in this off-the-map, two-bedroom architectural retreat sequestered among dunes above a wild beach. Super cool, seriously comfy Baja-style interiors reflect the owners' global travels. From \$330 per night. camelbeachhouse.com.au

Yambara

Just 80m from Sandy Point Beach with epic ocean views, this chic, one-room off-grid retreat with stylish bathroom resembles a cool caravan for the modern-day gypsy. Local owners Amanda and Tim plan more retreats in the area. From \$450 per night. eyreway.com

Tanonga Luxury Eco Lodges

Twenty minutes' drive from Port Lincoln, these two luxury lodges offer the perfect bush retreat with walking trails through rewilded areas and wetlands and abundant birdlife. The Ridge Lodge has views out to sea. From \$390 per night. tanonga.com.au

Port Lincoln Hotel

Downtown hotel with great views of Boston Bay from many of the 111 rooms and suites, some with large balconies. It has a popular in-house seafood restaurant, too. From \$139 per night. portlincolnhotel.com.au