

What began as a prison colony is today billed Australia's new world city, emerging from the shadow of showy Sydney to take its place as a centre of culture, writes **Isabel Conway**

“Did you see that shark under the wreck?” our leader Renee asks after we break the pristine azure sea's surface. “He's harmless, nothing to worry about.” Shark – any variety – is a word I had hoped never to hear whilst threading the water off the coast of Queensland, renowned for its dangerous sea creatures.

With a splutter I blow water out of my snorkel, enviously eying those distant humans on Tangalooma's so enticing palm fringed white sandy beach on Morton Island. There's a loud plonk alongside and a beery looking fellow, clutching a bottle of prosecco with one hand, and a snorkel and mask with the other, belly flops from a nearby canoe. Word has spread that a shark is snoozing away at the bottom of one of the barnacle encrusted wrecks and he wants a look.

Oz nonchalance in the face of potential animal related hazards is comforting so we relax and some of us bravely retrace our snorkelling path for another furtive gaze down into the depths. The motionless (thankfully) large dark form hugs the rusted bottom of a sunk cargo vessel. He is identified as 'Wobbegong' carpet shark. Far from being asleep, he lies in wait to guzzle whatever food passes by. Above and around him swims a fast moving kaleidoscope of pink and blue, purple and yellow, green, orange and black. These spotted, speckled striped sub-tropical beauties includes dozens of Nemo's relatives.

It may lack the vast expanse and renown of The Great Barrier Reef's coral framed underworld paradise further north in Queensland, yet exploring the fifteen purposely sunk wrecks around Moreton Island's marine park produces a stunning Jacques Cousteau panorama.

The shadowy hulking marine graveyard wrecks are full of ghostly nooks and crannies, the perfect home for armies of cascading, gliding, darting and hunting multi coloured inhabitants. Tangalooma (www.tangalooma.com) turns out to be an unpretentious laid back family style resort whose activities include sightseeing aboard glass bottom boats, stand up paddle boarding, kayaking, fishing and snorkel tours of offshore wrecks where two hundred species of fish, stingrays and turtles swim.



The land down under

A further draw is the evening spectacle of wild dolphins who turn up beside the ferry jetty's viewing benches to play and amuse spectators, in return for hand feeding from the public, well aware that there is no such thing as a free dinner; not even for a dolphin.

A couple of times a day catamaran and other pleasure boats disgorge hordes of sightseers as well as short and longer stay visitors, enjoying their bracing hour and a quarter voyage away from Brisbane's big city bustle. There's plenty of space here for everyone on the world's third largest sand island, from long stretches of perfect beach to forested walks and steep high sand blows from where you can join the thrill seekers sliding down ski slope style on a toboggan.

We've our own thrill seeking treat on the outward journey, a ride aboard the Aeropower small helicopter that takes us soaring above Brisbane's outer suburbs and waterside grand villas into the bay, passing remote forested

North Stradbroke Island.

A few days later a bushfire, among over a hundred already burning for more than a week in late November further north where the early summer heatwave is ravaging bone dry forests, breaks out on 'Straddie'. But for now all is calm and the waters below us are crystal clear. Stinger rays, a lone Duogong, a marine giant closely related to the sea cow, and cavorting dolphins far below us are pointed out by our veteran helicopter pilot Bruce.

Unidentifiable black shapes also inhabit ribbons of pale turquoise and deep emerald water but Bruce says it is too late in the season for any whale spotting. Between July and late October, the coast of Queensland is one of the world's best vantage points for watching the monstrous forty-foot long humpback whales, weighing up to 30 tonnes on their annual migration back to Antarctica. Queensland, known as the 'Sunshine' state, is over twenty-two times bigger than Ireland, covering more than 1200 miles and twenty

hours of driving between Cairns in the far flung tropical north, gateway to the Great Barrier Reef and the overdeveloped Miami like Gold Coast at the south. The interior includes unpopulated bush wilderness and sheep and cattle stations so vast it can take more than a day to cross their perimeters.

Inland, from the Sunshine Coast the contrast couldn't be greater – existing rainforest giving way to verdant tamed landscapes and cookie cutter villages of gift shops and tearooms, reminiscent of old England at the foot of the Glasshouse mountains.

Anyone who has visited Oz, a continent larger than Europe, still with uncharted territory knows how dauntingly huge its expanse is and how you'd need to take a couple of months ticking off all that 'must see' bucket list. Those of us who have visited a few times and love Oz's familiarity (they drive on the same side of the road, they introduced us to the 'flat white' and mashed avocado on toast for breakfast and they've replicated the world of Irish place

names) and exoticism (much of Australia's flora and fauna is found nowhere else on earth) prefer to tackle it all in 'Etappes'.

Brisbane is a great start and finish off point to any southern Queensland odyssey. Enjoying pleasant year round weather, though high summer (Dec-Jan) can be challenging heat wise, the city makes the most of its picturesque waterside setting.

What began as a tough prison colony is today billed Australia's 'new world' city, emerging from under the shadow of cosmopolitan Melbourne and showy Sydney to take its place as a centre of culture, great museums, galleries, shopping and world class hotels and restaurants.

The rough and tumble early history of Brisbane and succeeding stages of gentrification unfolds during a ramble around the city with a Brisbane Greeter (www.brisbanegreeters.com.au) - knowledgeable locals who provide a free service showing tourists their favourite places. Later a Walk Brisbane ([30 IRISH EXAMINER Weekend | 4.01.2020](http://www.walkbris-</p>
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Brisbane city skyline – a clean, properous metropolis.

bane.com) guide shows us a wide canvas of public art, often so discreetly placed that it is missed by visitors, plus the artistic endeavours of a mysterious street artist who paints blue figures in the most unexpected spots.

Europeans only first settled the region after Surveyor General John Oxley took credit for finding the Brisbane river in 1823, following a tip off from four ex-convicts who were mixing with the local Aborigines. They included Irish

'felon' John Finnegan who had left Sydney with his companions to sail further north but were blown off course after three weeks at sea. Shipwrecked on Moreton Island they found their way into the mouth of a large river, thanks to

indigenous people's guidance. No doubt they earned plenty of brownie points from John Oxley and his officials because the natural bend in the river was perfect, offering a natural barrier against prisoners escaping from captivity and with excellent logistics for future shipping trade.

Once Brisbane became a free settlement the usual assortment of entrepreneurs and ex-convicts grabbed their opportunities and by the late 1880's the settlement had already grown into a leading centre of commerce for the region, developing its own distinctive architecture and culture. To this day, touring the city you come across wonderful well preserved landmarks from those times, dwarfed, yet architecturally at peace with progress against a spectacular high rise skyline in this clean, prosperous metropolis.

Brisbane is full of outdoorsy activities concentrated on its broad riversides, from biking to kayaking under the famous Story Bridge. Streets beach is Australia's only inner city man-made beach of perfect white sands and according to recent legend has been known to host sharks washed in during the big floods of 2011. For around €3 a regular city ferry service turns into a welcome summer cooling river cruise, followed by our short stroll along a boardwalk to the newly renovated Howard Smith Wharves.

The site was originally built as a relief work project during the 1920's depression. Now it's earmarked to become Brisbane's hottest new dining-wining entertainment riverside venue. We check out the first establishment recently to open within the wharves buzzy Felons Brewery, whose craft beers and cider honour the intrepid first four Europeans to discover the Brisbane river.

The Sunshine coast is home to over 100 km of sandy coastline, peaceful everglades teeming with wildlife including hundreds of species of birds, Cooloola's lush rainforest and attractions like the late Crocodile man Steve Irwin's enduring legacy, Australia Zoo. Mapleton's experiential immersion into Aboriginal life at the fascinating Triballink Activity Centre (www.triballink.com.au) and typical Oz free 'n easy lifestyles of beach paradise Noosa are unmissable.

The Great Beach Drive is an 80 km four-wheel drive tour from Noosa along the golden sands of Great Sandy National Park with

crashing ocean on one side and mountains of sand whose unique shapes and colours were created over millions of years to our left side. Our off road trip ends at Double Island Point headland, named by Captain Cook when he passed it in May 1770 thinking he was viewing two islands instead of the jutting out mainland. Below is Rainbow beach and I take a dip, encouraged by all the swimmers and surfers, though the famed Oz rips scream caution.

One of Australia's truly epic spots Fraser Island off Hervey Bay, a must visit Sunshine coast side-trip is more untamed wilderness easily accessed by regular ferry from the mainland. We've had to cancel plans for paddle board lessons and a cruise on a sailing catamaran due to choppy seas but on the plus side the weather calms down enough to enjoy the Kingfisher Island ferry over to Fraser. Prince Harry and Meghan stayed at Kingfisher Bay Resort (www.kingfisherbay.com) nestled among rainforest enjoying nature based activities a few months earlier.

While Meghan enjoyed spa treatments Prince Harry explored forest trails, steering clear of the reptiles – six of the world's most dangerous snakes live on Fraser. Then he cooled off in mirror clear blue McKenzie lake, reputedly with enough PH in its water to make you look ten years younger. I have to be practically pulled from the lake after our sojourn so great is my enthusiasm for its famed youth enhancing properties, no doubt dropping a decade or so in a day.

Postscript on the 'wobbegong' shark sighting: I casually tell Sarah, born and bred on the Sunshine Coast and a dive master about the 'harmless' creature we've admired and she replies, "good job you didn't step on him, the Wobbegong has the sharp teeth and grip of a bulldog; last fella who stepped on him was taken to hospital with the shark still attached to his foot".

Getting to southern Queensland. Isabel flew economy class on the A380 with Singapore Air fares from €990 (www.singaporeair.com) London Heathrow to Brisbane return. She was the guest of Queensland Tourism (www.queensland.com) See also Visit Brisbane (www.visitbrisbane.com.au) Visit Sunshine Coast (www.visitsunshinecoast.com) and Visit Fraser Coast (www.visitfrasercoast.com)

In Brisbane she stayed at quirky boutique Ovolo Inchcolm hotel and the cosy Johnson hotel.

TRAVEL DIGEST

Barry Coughlan



Cruise from Cobh

Froschctm.ie offers an April 24 cruise departure out of Cobh for 13 nights, visiting Lisbon, Gibraltar, Casablanca and Cadiz on a full board basis priced from €1,269. The price includes a bonus saving of €420 per person and guests get to have afternoon tea and late night snacks, an invite to a captain's cocktail party and big show entertainment. Telephone: 021 497 6293.

Malta dreams

January could be a good time to head for Malta, where temperatures will certainly be higher than at home and several tour operators are offering good deals in tandem with the Maltese Tourist Board. January fares with Ryanair out of Cork and Dublin start at around €200. Concorde Travel, for instance, offers a January 26 package deal from Cork on January 26 to stay in five-star accommodation for €679. www.maltaireland.com.

China connections

China Airlines has reduced fares out of Ireland through working with Aer Lingus, KLM, British Airways and Lufthansa. The Aer Lingus deal allows travellers to fly from Dublin to London Gatwick, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Rome and Vienna before moving on to Taipei and beyond. Telephone 01 663 3931 or chinaairlines.ie@aviareps.com.

Game of Thrones

Winter has come and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has immersed itself in promoting anything to do with the *Game of Thrones* by taking a trail around the Doors of Thrones, located in pubs and hotels in the North. Carved from trees brought down at the moody Dark Hedges in a storm in 2016, the 10 carved doors let visitors relive the breathtaking scope of the hugely successful TV series. For more information visit: discovernorthernireland.com/gameofthrones

Eat, Sleep, Cycle

Cycling enthusiasts get to have a range of options these days, in Ireland and beyond. Eat, Sleep, Cycle is part Irish in that it was founded from this environment even though it's based in Girona. The company offers tours from the Dolomites to the Pyrenees and beyond, and allows customers reserve a place on any of the planned tours in 2020 for a fully refundable €100 deposit. Details of deals from about €2,300 are on: www.eatsleepcycle.com