

TRUE NORTH

IN THE LOBBY OF AN UPMARKET ADELAIDE HOTEL a wonderful journey is about to begin. Thirty-six guests, bags packed and ready, await the arrival of staff from luxury cruise boat *True North*.

By day's end, the guests will be comfortably aboard the 50-metre-long 'floating boutique hotel' – as one returning guest describes it – striking south out of Gulf St Vincent, on the first leg of the Southern Safari cruise.

For nine, adventure-filled days *True North* will take guests as far west as Ceduna on the Eyre Peninsula, stopping at islands, towns, national parks, sanctuaries, beaches, capes and wildlife colonies along the way. But, for now, with the warm Adelaide sun climbing above that charming city's modest skyline, the group board a coach and take the scenic drive through the hills to the acclaimed Seppeltsfield winery in the Barossa Valley, then back to Adelaide to visit Penfolds Magill Estate. "The Southern Safari experience offers the best of South Australia, and wineries are a big part of that," says cruise director Marese Caldwell.

Once on board *True North*, shoes are removed and a level of comfortable informality is immediately achieved. Australian designed, built, owned and operated, *True North* rises 12m above the waterline, yet draws only 2.2m. "For such a big boat to have such a shallow draft is amazing," says ship's master Gav Graham. "She's very manoeuvrable and can go where other boats, even smaller ones, can't."

Padding around the thick carpet with a champagne in hand, guests familiarise themselves with the ship's layout, which includes separate levels for dining and a plush lounge bar. The largest cabins are those on the Explorer deck, which feature a king-sized bed and twin-basin ensuite, and frame the passing scenery with three large windows. "The ship has so many great spaces for guests to find a place to themselves," Gav says. "But mostly, when they return from side-trips, they're happy to sit together

True North at anchor in calm waters off Kangaroo Island.





and chat. There's always a great vibe on board and the interaction with crew is genuine and very natural."

Throughout the ship are paintings and photographs depicting scenes from *True North's* other adventures around Australia. Apart from a break in February, the ship offers a varied program of departures, which include wilderness cruises along the Kimberley coast, and coral atoll cruises to the Abrolhos Islands, Ningaloo Reef and Rowley Shoals in Western Australia, as well as adventure cruises to Papua New Guinea and Christmas/New Year cruises in Sydney Harbour and the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales.

The first two days on the ship are spent on and around Kangaroo Island. Named by Matthew Flinders during his 1802 voyage to survey the new colony's southern coastline, 'KI', as it is affectionately known, was first settled by sealers, escaped convicts and runaway slaves. After breakfast in Snug Bay, on the island's protected north coast, *True North's* six high-powered tenders zoom off in six different directions, taking guests sightseeing, beach swimming and fishing. "Now this is a routine I could get used to," quips one of the guests as she heads off to land some King George whiting.

While there's no shortage of food aboard, chefs Luke Pursell and Alex Pope joke that lunch depends on the success guests enjoy with rod and reel. After they've waved the tenders off, the pair throw in a line themselves. "Someone should rename this the seafood lovers' tour," says Luke as he lifts the lid on an esky alive with silvery bodies of fresh whiting bound for the dining table.

Next day guests tour the island by coach, visiting its many attractions, including a stop at Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in the south-west for morning tea and koala spotting. The island's beauty is



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: True North's comfortable lounge area on the Explorer deck; wading out to board the tenders in Coffin Bay; a spacious, light-filled cabin on the Explorer deck; chef Luke Pursell prepares dinner; freshly caught crumbed King George whiting.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Australian fur seals at play in the shallows at Thistle Island; tuna feeding at a Port Lincoln tuna pen; cruise director Marese Caldwell with guests aboard one of True North's six tenders.

far from restricted to the cute and cuddly and at Remarkable Rocks, in Flinders Chase National Park, guests wander around huge granite boulders, splashed orange with lichen and gouged by nature's irrepressible hand, before admiring a colony of New Zealand fur seals at Admirals Arch.

From Kangaroo Island, it's across the Investigator Strait and Spencer Gulf to spend the next few days between Port Lincoln and the Neptune Islands, on the east coast of the Eyre Peninsula. The hot topic over dinner is who plans to brave the cage and swim with the great white sharks. For those unsure, there's an opportunity to jump in with another top-ranking predator on a visit to a bluefin tuna pen.

Tuna is on the menu, of course, and guests gather in the galley as Luke transforms pale pink belly meat into highly prized otoro and chutoro cuts perfectly suited to *True North's* health-conscious menu. "Our door is always open and guests pop their head in all the time to see what we're up to," Luke says. "It makes for a really happy kitchen."

An overnight passage brings the party to the Neptune Islands, 70 kilometres south of Port Lincoln and a regular stop on many a great white shark's journey around the globe. Gloomy skies and a wind-ruffled sea greet those brave enough to leave the plush comforts of *True North* and transfer via tender to *Calypso Star*, a former crayfishing boat repurposed for cage-diving trips. As guests nervously eye off the aluminium cage hanging from the back, its skipper Andrew Wright ties a huge set of blood-soaked tuna gills to a line and hurls it into the water, then pours a cup full of blood in for good measure.

After hours of baiting and waiting, without success, it appears that time has run out and guests prepare to head back to *True North* for lunch. But, just as they are about to leave, Andrew cries, "shark off the bow, get in the cage!" and there's a scramble for wetsuits and masks and a hurried plunge into the water. "A lot of people come away with a new appreciation of sharks," Andrew says. "They expect violence and viciousness but mostly they see a big beautiful animal in the wild." Dripping wet and grinning, guests are wide-eyed and ecstatic after the encounter.



LOCATION
 True North's Southern Safari is an eight-night cruise from Adelaide to Ceduna on the west coast of the Eyre Peninsula, via Kangaroo Island.

GETTING THERE
 Adelaide is serviced by regular flights from all Australian capitals and some regional centres. Guests are flown back to Adelaide from Ceduna.

WHAT'S INCLUDED
 All meals, soft drinks, guides, activities, wet-weather gear and fishing and snorkelling equipment are provided. Alcohol can be purchased on board. A filmmaker, on board to capture the experience, provides a movie as a memento of the trip.

WHAT TO BRING
 Lightweight walking shoes and layered clothing for activities, plus casual clothes for relaxing on board.

WHEN TO COME
 Southern Safari departs mid-January when temperatures are generally hot and dry.

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For those seeking a less frightening encounter, there's an opportunity to swim with the great white's favourite food, the Australian fur seal. Just 30km north, on Thistle Island, a small colony has made its home on a sheltered beach. Here, guests can don a mask and snorkel and roll, dive, twist and turn with the inquisitive seals.

Rounding the southern tip of the Eyre Peninsula, the journey's remaining days are spent among the islands, parks and towns of the Great Australian Bight, including a morning at Coffin Bay with local oyster farmer Chris Hank from Pure Coffin Bay Oysters. Later Peter Wilkins from South Australia's Department of Environment and Heritage comes aboard to guide *True North* on an expedition to remote Pearson Island.

Part of the Investigator Group, the island – which lies about 60km off Elliston in the Great Australian Bight – is special for being, according to Peter, “about as close to untouched as any place you could find”.

After a tricky landing on a rocky shelf in surging waves, the shore party heads for the island's highest point. There are no tracks or paths on the island, so the group simply makes its way by best reckoning through the saltbush and grasses on the lower slopes, with the peak in their sights. From the summit, the island's narrow rocky isthmus and outlying islets stretch away to the north. The final stages of the journey proceed through the Bight to Flinders Island, Streaky Bay, and finally, Ceduna, where a chartered plane completes the loop back to Adelaide.

But, for now, with *True North* appearing like a dinghy amid the immensity of the Southern Ocean, the hike up Pearson perfectly encapsulates the Southern Safari experience: far from crowds and surrounded by pristine nature, with caring staff always happy to lend a hand, you are remote yet comfortable. Away from the hurly-burly, yet with good friends, you are free to wander, but you're never far from the genuine warm-hearted atmosphere of your floating boutique hotel.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: A pelican in the shallows at Farm Beach; stunning views reward hikers on Pearson Island; True North staff assist walkers during the hike to Pearson Island's summit; braving the shark-cage dive on Neptune Island; oyster tasting at Coffin Bay.