

# UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

## Meet the guides from Australian Wildlife Journeys



Learning the Australian way of life – laid-back, wide-smiled and with a strong love of the outdoors – is a big part of travelling Down Under. While the koalas, kangaroos, wombats and emus will captivate you, it's the friendships you'll make with locals that will stay in your heart.

What do you see when you picture Australia? A sweeping, burnt orange landscape leading to endless, people-free sandy beaches, perhaps, or rustling eucalypt bushland dotted with koalas, surrounded by sun-kissed plains of bouncing kangaroos? You're forgetting the people. They're as big a part of Australia as our unspoilt landscapes – and leave as much of a lasting impression.

There's the ocean-loving local who'll prise abalone from the rocks and cook them up minutes later, while telling you about their swimming adventures in the surrounding rock pools. Then there's the outback character who'll show you their Aboriginal kinship scars as they lead you to hidden rock art grottos that have existed for tens of thousands of years. You'll also want to meet the young guides who recall blissfully free childhood biking adventures through World Heritage-listed convict ruins, with no adult in sight.

The genuine friendliness of the Australian people is recognised around the globe, but visitors are still surprised by the warm hellos between strangers, the finger waves over car steering wheels to unknown motorists, and the welcoming invitations for anyone standing nearby to join in. These things are liberally doled out around the country.

Part of it comes down to the joy Australians feel at sharing their backyard. They know how lucky they are, and even though they may be used to seeing emus wander along sand dunes, whales breach on the horizon and echidnas amble through the bush, they still get a kick out of showing guests these natural wonders.

They're just as enthusiastic about protecting and preserving their vast land. Teaching others about the value of the world's oldest rainforest, the vulnerable status of the Tasmanian devil, and the fragility of prehistoric island ferns means visitors will value this



ancient country, too, and want to play a part in its conservation. All the people you're about to meet are deeply invested in maintaining the environment they live, love and work in, entwining that ethos in the experiences they curate.

**“True connections are as much about feeling as they are seeing and doing. That's why you'll want to make these friends when you come to Australia.”**

## CRAIG WICKHAM

### Exceptional Kangaroo Island, South Australia



When Craig Wickham spots a goanna scuttling across the road, he doesn't tell his guests to get out of the way. Instead, he invites them into the bush to see where it has come from. He knows that more often than not, the reptile is slinking away from a termite mound where it has just laid its eggs – a spot that's the ideal temperature to ensure they hatch. Crouching down to show people parts of nature they'd never usually know about, let alone see up close, is what gives Craig his buzz, and that's after 30 years exploring his wildlife-packed island off the southern coast of South Australia.

When Craig bought the business in 1990, he remembers people would write letters wanting to make a booking, and later it was faxes. Photographs were used sparingly, still captured on film. “So much has changed in technology,” he says,

“but the fresh scent of crushed eucalyptus leaves, the perfume of bright red bottlebrush flowers or the birdsong indicating a snake is near remain the same.”

Craig studied wildlife management and loves to bust perceptions of Australian snakes being hostile; instead, he shows his guests how calm and inquisitive they can be, if left alone and motionlessly observed. His version of transformational travel ranges from reframing the way we think about things to pausing to engage all the senses. He tunes people into nature as well as into themselves. That might be stopping the car to gaze at endangered wallabies no one else has seen, or roaming through grapevines while talking to the viticulturalist, or tasting freshly distilled gin where it's made, or visiting a hidden beach known only to local fishermen.

“Kangaroo Island was an amazing place to grow up, and a lot of things I loved as child – the outdoors, untouched nature, ridiculous freedom – are still the same today. We still have that joyful sense of freedom that a lot of places have lost. We're able to maintain that.”

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## JANINE DUFFY

### Echidna Walkabout Nature Tours, Victoria

In all the time Janine Duffy has spent in the wild with Australia's native marsupials – koalas, kangaroos, wombats, echidnas and more – she's noticed something curious: they're comfortable making eye contact with humans and seem to connect. When it happens, Janine says it feels like they're looking into your soul. The guide, conservationist and wildlife researcher describes it as unlike anything she's experienced anywhere else in the world.

Janine runs Echidna Walkabout Nature Tours with her partner, Roger Smith. Their first date was to the You Yangs granite peaks outside Melbourne, where they now oversee a wild koala research project and lead tours through the dry, open woodland where an isolated population of around 127 koalas live. In the river valleys

just downstream, they are planting thousands of trees in partnership with farmers, to ensure those koalas' future.

Every tour they do, be it through the eucalypt forests of East Gippsland, to arid Lake Mungo in the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area, or along the breathtaking Great Ocean Road, is imbued with the philosophy that travellers use the world as their classroom. Guests might learn through pulling out weeds that harm the wildlife, listening to the findings of research projects or sensing empathy while watching creatures in their natural setting. Adult education takes many forms, and Janine's bubbly nature and earnest passion – not to mention her other roles as wildlife foster carer and wildlife artist – makes her guests want to commit to a lifetime of study.



“We're so lucky in the Australian wild, we can walk anywhere we want, alone, at any time of the day and night and that's extremely rare in any wilderness areas in the world. There's total freedom of movement.”

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## SAB LORD

### Lords Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris, Northern Territory



You'd expect a man raised on a Kakadu buffalo and crocodile-hunting station to be a character, and Sab Lord doesn't disappoint. He also knows everything – and everyone – there is to know in the outback, enabling him to unlock places and people that few others have access to.

Sporting a dog-eared Akubra hat, a permanent tan and a mouth that rolls out Aussie expressions, it's easy to see why Sab was the private guide of choice for people like Nicholas Cage, Boris Johnson and, rumour has it, Meryl Streep (he won't confirm or deny) as they explored Australia's Top End.

Sab's safari-style version of Kakadu, Arnhem Land and The Kimberley is rich in Aboriginal culture, woven with private viewings of enormous, 50,000-year-old rock art galleries,

snacks of live green ants plucked from a tree, and bellowing buffalo calls across the Mary River floodplains. Nights are spent around a campfire, eating dinner beneath some of the brightest stars you'll ever see while listening to the bushman's tales.

In 2020, Sab clocks up 28 years of guiding people through frontier country. His lifetime of stories enhances the trips as much as the crocodiles lurking in the rivers and the waterbirds flying overhead. There are plenty – the station Sab grew up on became part of dual UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park. His father employed Aboriginal families who taught Sab their indigenous language and involved him in traditional ceremonies. His understanding of their culture has earned him the rare permission to share culturally significant sites and stories.

“A lot of Australians haven't ever met a full-blood Aboriginal who's still living on their homelands or on outstations, and where English may be their second or third tongue. It's what I've grown up with. We try and give people the opportunity to learn about and understand Aboriginal culture.”

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## DAVID DOUDLE

### Australian Coastal Safaris, South Australia

To spend time with David Doudle is to get a window into the fourth-generation farmer's enchantingly free-range childhood. David grew up on a sheep and grain farm on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, by the cliffy edges of the Great Australian Bight. Spare time was spent exploring rock pools for abalone, going snorkelling and spear fishing, surfing remote breaks, sandboarding and trekking through the bush, constantly in search of adventure. It's essentially what he does now, only with much more comfort attached.

These days, when David takes people to the rock pool where he, and later his kids, all learnt to swim, there's no lugging a full esky, chairs, cricket bats and snorkelling gear 50 metres down,

any more. A cushy 4WD vehicle handles all of that. Similarly, when he brings guests to one of the region's first farming properties – settled in 1842 with the original homestead still intact – there's drinks and a cheese platter accompanying the harmony of 160 native bird species. And while peering over stark cliff edges is exhilarating, it doesn't compare to riding in a helicopter opposite the southern crust of Australia, allowing the eyes to sweep over sheep station country and sand dunes, schools of fish and footprint-free beaches, endless saltwater lakes and farmland. The diversity of the region around Port Lincoln never fails to astound David.

"He loves that you can swim with sealions and dolphins in protected

bays, or venture out to face the magnificent great white shark in an ocean cage dive, and top off the suite of nature interactions with masses of koalas on a private property, along with the spectacle of emus wandering along sand dunes. All this, and barely another soul around.



"People get excited when they see a koala in the wild at 30 feet high. I say, save your film, you'll see 50 of them soon, in the low eucalypts. Usually, the emus will still be out, and the roos come out too. They're the three biggies of Australian fauna."

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## JAMES BOETTCHER

### FNQ Nature Tours, Queensland



"On our new night walk, we turn the torches off and just listen. Usually, animals will stay still and wait until you pass. But after 60 to 90 seconds of being still, you start to hear things didn't know were there: fruit hitting the ground because something knocks it down from the canopy; a creature scurrying through the leaves; and you spot bioluminescent fungi in summer."

When James Boettcher was a kid, he thought everyone swung through the trees, slid down rapids and fashioned fish traps from spiky rainforest vines. Growing up in Cairns, the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest was at his fingertips. After finishing high school, he spotted an advertisement in a newspaper about guiding. To him, it sounded "like getting paid not to work" – it was exactly what he already did for fun. It was only when he started seeing his backyard through the eyes of visitors from around the globe that he understood the privilege of having grown up in such a raw, nature-dominated area.

The Daintree Rainforest is three times older than the Amazon, and James has been leading travellers through its wonders ever since. He started his own

business, FNQ Nature Tours, in 2015 with the belief that tourism plays a major role in the voluntary preservation of this remarkable corner of the planet.

James loves to do things differently. Deftly avoiding the hundreds of thousands of people that explore Cape Tribulation and the Daintree National Park each year, he runs a walk that begins as the light softens in the afternoon. It's at this time that people disappear and the rainforest animals start to get noisy; it's when resident eagles fly over the beach at sunset; it's when a post-dinner spotlight walk reveals Boyd's forest dragons, frogs, bandicoots, lizards, spiders and sometimes a possum or snake. No two nights are the same. He watches as people's faces light up in wonder, and as strangers become family.

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## DEBBIE FERGUSON

### Exmouth Dive & Whalesharks Ningaloo, Western Australia

The first time Debbie Ferguson saw a whaleshark was on her honeymoon. She and husband Mark wanted something to remember their special occasion with, and the enormity of the gentle, spotted giant – a filter-feeder that bears a vacuum-like mouth filled with 300 tiny teeth – definitely fit the bill. That was 2003, when Debbie was still working as a radiographer, spending her days indoors, often not glimpsing the outside world until after knock-off time. Mark, a keen scuba diver and boat skipper, had ignited her interest in aquatic pursuits and soon the pair were dreaming of quitting city life. The World Heritage-listed Ningaloo Coast in Western Australia, where whalesharks consistently travel each March to August, became their answer.

Now, their office is the ocean, while diving, snorkelling and wildlife spotting is their nine-to-five. The pair bought Exmouth's first eco-tourism business in 2012. Ningaloo, the world's most accessible fringing reef, and the abundant activity within it, continues to enthral them. As well as snorkelling alongside long, docile whalesharks, from August onwards the couple host humpback whale swims and encounters, as well as playful interactions with graceful manta rays – the ballet dancers of the sea. Their scuba diving trips to sites that are 15 to 17 metres down reveal so many fish, the reef is all but covered. Swarms of bait fish twist and turn in unison, dodging predatory pelagic species while putting on an extraordinary visual show of nature in the wild. For Debbie, it's all in a day's work.



“With warm seas and clear water, Ningaloo is just like paradise. Other places, you're promised so much and it's not there. Here, you're guaranteed so much every day. On one trip, we might have six turtles, a manta ray and a whaleshark; if we're lucky, a hammerhead shark might come past. It's just epic.”

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## GEORGIA CURRANT

### The Maria Island Walk, Tasmania



There are so many wombats on Maria Island, “they're a tripping hazard”, Georgia Currant jokes. The young guide has spent countless family holidays on the island off the east coast of Tasmania, so she's got firsthand experience. In keeping, she makes a point of introducing people to the particularly docile marsupials around the convict settlement of Darlington, as she leads them on the four-day Maria Island Walk.

As one foot is placed in front of another, she might also recount the ghost stories she'd dramatically tell her friends in the Maria Island penitentiary, making use of tuna cans and an ouija board to try and contact the spirits. Her playful laughter indicates a cheeky personality beneath the knowledge and insights into this special place.

Being outdoors is Georgia's happy place; she'd rather sleep under the

stars on a beach than go bar-hopping, and her awareness of how precious the environment is, is acute. As the hike continues along remote beaches, she'll point out where to walk; a misstep could ruin a shorebird's delicate nest; a discarded apple core could sicken a native mammal unused to the parasites within it.

A walk with Georgia is also a journey to huge granite rock formations covered in orange lichens that once formed a natural land bridge to mainland Australia. Tasmanian Aboriginals walked across it before sea levels rose, resulting in them becoming the most isolated humans on the planet for the longest amount of time. Significant indigenous sites are teamed with interactions with Tasmanian devils – a key, disease-free sanctuary population used to preserve the state's iconic creatures.

“When you're out on Maria Island, what keeps it so engaging and exciting is it's just so different. From beaches to mountains, and every place you walk to unravels another layer of history, flora and fauna. It's this microcosm of Tasmania in one tiny space.”

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## PAUL CROSS

### Naturaliste Charters, Western Australia

Paul Cross has travelled more than 52 countries, but if you ask him to pick the most beautiful place in the world, it's his ocean-lapped backyard every time. Growing up near Bunbury, south of Perth, Paul and his brothers spent every spare minute fishing, surfing and diving along the Western Australian coast. Following his father's advice to get a trade, he became a diesel fitter before working in earth moving and construction. But his passion for the ocean persisted. So when a friend told him a whale-watching business was up for sale, Paul jumped on it – even though he'd never been on whale watching tour, let alone skippered a vessel, or owned his own business.

That was a decade ago, and Paul has no intention of getting off the water.

Now, Paul spends his days marvelling at the largest humpback whale migration in the world – some 45,000 playful cetaceans cruise along the WA coast. Paul's charters witness fin slapping and breaching in the flirting grounds of Augusta, body rolls in the placid waters off Albany, and a bit of each in the calf teaching and resting nurseries of Dunsborough and Busselton. Between January and April, he braves the swell on expeditions to observe killer whales that flock to a curious and remote feeding 'hotspot' in the state's far south, opposite the tiny hamlet of Bremer Bay. Some 275

orcas have been individually identified as regular annual visitors, but it's believed there are far more pandas of the sea, eagerly hunting the abundant sea life below.

Paul's focus is strongly interactive eco-tourism, so a marine biologist comes on every Naturaliste Charters tour, educating visitors about whale migration paths, the astounding numbers, their astonishing behaviours and the diversity of ocean species in Western Australia.



**"At Bremer Canyon, it's 1000 metres down to the sea floor, so every day is as unique as any other. You don't know what you're going to see; it could be killer whales on a hunt, or an enormous blue whale, a giant squid, or a humpback breaching. Seeing a 50-tonne wild animal get fully airborne is pretty amazing. Ninety five per cent of the time, you see an epic amount of activity out there.**

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## KARIN BEAUMONT

### Premier Travel Tasmania, Tasmania



At Karin Beaumont's high school, there was a subject called 'adventure'. Choosing it changed the course of her life.

Until then, Karin's captivation with nature and the outdoors had been an off-duty pastime. But passion lurked. She distinctly remembers, at age seven, hearing about a science competition on the children's TV show, Wonder World. "The prize was a trip to Antarctica". It planted a seed in her mind that germinated in 1995, when she won a scholarship to do her university honours on the icy South Pole. Her land base was Tasmania, the last chunk of land between Antarctica and mainland Australia.

While completing her PhD in zoology, Karin voyaged to Antarctica seven times, but she fell just as much in love with the island state, where she's now spent more than half her life.

A deep connection to the land and the environment sees Karin target places that are less visited. With her childhood sense of wonder still firmly in place, she leads visitors into an incredibly green, almost mystical, Lord of the Rings-feel grotto filled with prehistoric ferns and the tallest flowering heath species in the world. Other times, she'll uncover the isle's ancient geology along the western coast, where the immensity of the formations still makes her feel deeply humble.

Closer to the capital city, Hobart, she'll help travellers search for the rarely seen platypus – a duck billed, egg-laying mammal, something only experienced guides can find – in the rivers of Mt Field National Park. Or, tuning into guest's special interests, she'll tap into her many local contacts to plan a surprise, perhaps to an artist's studio or a little local farm.

**"In Tasmania, there's such a sense of timelessness and history, a feeling that creatures have been there so much longer than we have. There's a ruggedness that's so wild, yet so gentle and fragile."**

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## MORE INFO

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