

Homegrown

# Norfolk Island

Complete with breathtaking scenery, a vibrant culture and fascinating history, Edwina Dick discovers Captain Cook's "Paradise on Earth," where food miles become mere food metres.

Photography  
**Sean Fennessey**



## “You’ll see the island to the right shortly, so prepare yourself for an enchanting view,”

the pilot advises over the audio system as we begin our descent 1600 kilometres north-east of Sydney. “Oh, and folks please drive carefully as this is a place where the cows have right of way, not you.”

Approaching Norfolk Island by air, it’s the shades of green that are startling; the emerald grass and rainforest, the bottle green pines and sage kentia palms. Then there’s the surrounding teal bays that seep into turquoise, and then into the deep blue of the South Pacific Ocean. This is a place that is immediately dramatic, pristine and, as the cow comment suggests, wonderfully quirky.


An external territory of Australia since 1914, with a population of approximately 2000, this is one of the only places in the world to have a 50-kilometre speed limit. It’s also the only place in the country to have five-digit phone numbers and a phone book searchable by nicknames. Cane Toad, Diddles and the rest are joined by Spud, the general manager at Norfolk Island Tourism, otherwise known as Glen Buffett.

“Have you got the hang of the Norfolk wave yet?” asks Spud, referring to the friendly gesture made by every passing driver. Spud recently returned home to Norfolk Island with his young family after spending nearly 15 years living in Brisbane. “We wanted our boys to experience the childhood I had, with that same sense of freedom and safety,” explains Spud. “It’s also the sense of community that drew us back here – it’s like nowhere else.”

This gentle pace and familial spirit has long been recognised by residents and visitors alike, along with the island’s extraordinary penal history. Gaining increasing attention, however, is the Polynesian island culture and burgeoning food scene, with a beguiling fusion of Tahitian and British traditions. “A lot of visitors are surprised at the level of Polynesian influence here, as they’re expecting it to be more Australian than it really is,” says Spud. “Modern life on Norfolk owes a lot to our heritage, and the way we live, speak and eat is increasingly being appreciated as unique.”

*Watawieh yorli* means “Hello, how are you all?” and is the island greeting that’s delivered sincerely and often. There’s also frequent chat about *wetls* (food). Both of these terms are expressed in Norfolk (also known as Norfuk), the local dialect that is a fusion of 18th-century English and Tahitian, and the legacy of two groups of people merging to become descendants of Norfolk Islanders.

Before they arrived, though, the island was a temporary home – and sometimes a final resting place – to many other nationalities. “Norfolk Island was actually inhabited by Polynesians, who abandoned it at some stage in the centuries before it was discovered by Cook,”



Towering pines dot the rugged coastline. Opposite from left: *mudda* (green banana dumplings); Darren Bates is a sixth-generation descendant of *HMS Bounty* mutineer Fletcher Christian.



explains Jeanine Snell, a guide at the Norfolk Island museum in Kingston. Described by Captain James Cook as 'paradise' upon his arrival in 1774, this new territory for the Empire was finally colonised in 1788 by a small group of First Fleeters, which included 15 convicts. Prison quarters were soon erected, crops instigated and, for a time, Norfolk Island became a lifeline for famished Sydney Town.

The island gradually transformed from a remote, unpopulated utopia to an agricultural jewel and unforgiving penal colony (known as the 'Hell of the Pacific') over two settlements. It was the final, so-called third settlement that was to determine Norfolk's future. On June 8, 1856, after a brutal five-week journey crossing 6080 kilometres by sea, the entire population of Pitcairn Island landed, having been gifted Norfolk Island by the reigning Queen Victoria.

These 194 men, women and children were the direct descendants of legendary British seaman Fletcher Christian (who led the infamous mutiny on the British Royal Navy ship, *HMS Bounty*), his fellow mutineers and their Tahitian wives. They had lived in almost complete isolation from the world for 66 years, and were rapidly outgrowing rocky Pitcairn Island. The group resettled on the 35-square kilometre Norfolk Island, where each family was given land.

"You just need to take a look at the 2013 phone book – it's still like the rollcall of the *Bounty*," says Spud. The surnames Christian, Adams, McCoy, Quintal and Young, plus those of the three other outsiders to have settled on Pitcairn Island before the move – Buffett, Evans and Nobbs – all still dominate. "The nicknames were another way to differentiate who was who," Spud laughs. They are joined, in print and in person, by the many newcomers who arrived and stayed, choosing a life of symbiosis with the land and fellow islanders.

One of these 'newcomers' is 26-year-old PJ Wilson, who moved to Norfolk with his mother when he was just 10 months old. Despite stints on the mainland for study and work, as well as frequent overseas holidays, he just can't imagine wanting to live anywhere else. A landscaper and gardener, PJ is also the passionate co-host of the 'culinary journey' evenings held regularly at the Bounty Lodge in Burnt Pine, Norfolk's commercial precinct. Like PJ, most islanders work in some capacity for the tourism industry – the lifeblood of Norfolk Island. "There's a really strong connection between the history of the island and its cuisine, and sharing food is such an engaging way to share our story," says PJ.

The culinary journey begins at the *dot awen* (an underground dirt oven), where pork, chicken, carrots and yam have been cooking over coals for four hours. "This is the food and cooking method of our Tahitian foremothers and it's still used for special occasions," PJ announces, pulling back the smoking *ti* leaves covering the mound.

PJ and his co-host, local writer Natalie Grube, then prepare the island's favourite traditional dish – Tahitian fish salad. This is made by dicing raw fish marinated in lemon juice and coconut milk, then combining it with finely chopped fresh herbs and local vegetables. "This dish came over with the Pitcairners, who made sure nothing was





Locals celebrating Thanksgiving. Left from top: the dot awen, a traditional dirt oven that's part of the Bounty Lodge culinary journey; Emily Bay is often referred to by the locals as their 'swimming pool'.



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ever wasted – the lemon ensured a longer life without refrigeration for the fish. Now every family makes their own version of it,” says Natalie.

Other Pitcairn recipes that are still staples 150 years on include *mudda* (green banana dumplings), a dish created out of necessity to make use of the unripened fruit, and *kumara pilhi*, “a savoury, sweet vegetable slice that extended the quantity of the vegetable,” explains PJ. These join a spread of other typically Norfolk dishes, including American-style chopped salads and sumptuous fruit pies, both of which are legacies of the American whalers who were frequent visitors to Norfolk Island for more than a century.

With some of the world’s strictest quarantine regulations in place to protect the island’s fragile ecosystem, no fresh fruit can be imported onto Norfolk Island at all, so “it’s different pies for different seasons here,” quips Natalie. As for enjoying a range of fresh vegetables, the only ones allowed to be shipped in are standard potatoes (known as ‘Irish tatties’), plus onions, garlic and ginger. “Almost everyone grows their own produce here, even some of the restaurants, and whatever you have in excess, you preserve or share,” says PJ. “Yep, it’s food metres here on Norfolk, not food miles,” confirms Nat, “It’s slow food heaven.”

From the Saturday Farmers’ Market to roadside honesty boxes, a bounty of tropical fruit including Hawaiian passionfruit, pawpaw and pepinos (melons with a flavour resembling a combination of honeydew and cucumber) are on offer at every turn. “Rose apples are my favourite,” says Shari Bates, an internationally experienced chef



A view of the capital Kingston from Queen Elizabeth Lookout. The old Military Barracks (in the foreground) now houses the Legislative Assembly. Above from left: Dino’s at Bumboras chef Dean Bosley and partner Helen Bartholomew; a food platter from Two Chimneys vineyard; Robyn Menghetti with her free-range Norfolk Blue cows.



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who runs the boho-style cafe, Sublime Lounge, alongside a highly regarded private catering business. “They’re endemic on Pitcairn, but rarer here on Norfolk – I’m lucky to have a bush at home,” she adds.

“Over the last decade or so, a fresh energy and passion has begun to emerge around our food here. This not only offers another angle of discovery for visitors to the island, but it has also been embraced by the locals as well,” says Natalie.

Robyn Menghetti of award-winning Norfolk Blue Restaurant Grill & Bar agrees. “It’s so fashionable now to be all about paddock-to-plate and fresh seasonal produce. But that’s just what Norfolk is and always has been.” Robyn arrived from the Gold Coast 13 years ago to take up a contract job. Within weeks, she had met her now-husband Paul and soon the pair began breeding their free-range Norfolk Blue cattle (a unique heritage herd) on-site at 100-Acre Farm. The original homestead is now the restaurant and their distinct Norfolk Blue beef is renowned internationally. Robyn is part of a band of business people who are passionate about the island and its produce, and who continue to shape Norfolk’s growing epicurean credentials.

“We were here for a week’s holiday in 2009 and, within five days, my husband and I had bought a block of land and a business!” exclaims Kim Wilson, who heads up popular Hilli Restaurant and Cafe. With the help of a full-time gardener, the Wilsons have created a vast kitchen garden in the spectacular grounds of their new home, which also accommodates their popular new Mastering Taste cooking school. Kim’s wine list at Hilli (and home) includes local wine label Two Chimneys, which was established by Rod and Noelene McAlpine (nee Buffett) in 2003. Located on original Buffett family land in a picturesque valley at Steeles Point, the Two Chimneys vineyard is now home to five varietals, as well as Noelene’s exquisite lunch platters.

Another widely lauded restaurant, Dino’s at Bumboras (only open in the evenings) is housed in Kiwi chef Dean Bosley and partner Helen Bartholomew’s glorious old pine home. “We moved here for the lifestyle, so decided to only work hours that would allow us to enjoy the things we love most about island life; the beach and our feral garden,” says Helen with a grin.

As Helen reveals, there is much to adore about Norfolk, which naturally presents a transcendent ‘time out’ from the rest of the world. “Every aspect of life here has been shaped by extreme isolation, as well as an extraordinary past, but this has resulted in old-fashioned ways and values not only enduring, but thriving,” adds Spud.

In addition to its magnetic history and majestic beauty, word is spreading of the enticing food scene – one that embraces its roots as well as its naturally defined limitations. Living on Norfolk Island today is the good life realised, strikingly green in every way. »







Emily Christian performs traditional island dancing at Bounty Lodge. From right: Dino's at Bumboras; a Mastering Taste cooking class.



## THE HIT LIST

### VISIT

#### Kingston

Allow several days to spend at the island's World Heritage-listed Kingston area. Visit the various museums and public research centre, as well as the penal ruins. There's also a scenic nine-hole golf course, plus snorkelling opportunities in protected Emily Bay. The ocean-side cemetery makes for an interesting stroll.

#### Farmers' Market

This is held every Saturday morning. Buy fresh fruit and vegetables, preserves and local pork, as well as takeaway coffee from Anson Bay coffee farmer Fred Wong. **Next door to the island's Tourism & Visitor Information Centre at Burnt Pine.**

#### Two Chimneys Vineyard & Winery

Enjoy a wine-tasting session at Norfolk Island's picturesque vineyard with affable owners Rod and Noeline McAlpine. You will need to book ahead if you want to enjoy their delectable brunch, lunch or afternoon tea platters. **Two Chimneys Rd, Steeles Point, +6723 24410, twochimneywines.nlk.nf.**

### Cyclorama

This impressive, circular mural depicts the origins and journey of the original Norfolk Islanders. Afterwards, enjoy a snack or meal at the adjoining Hilli Restaurant & Wine Bar. **Queen Elizabeth Ave, www.norfolkcyclorama.nlk.nf.**

### DO

#### Culinary Journey

Learn about the food history of Norfolk Islanders through a delicious, interactive buffet dinner. **Bounty Lodge, Ferny Lane, +6723 50888.**

#### Progressive Dinner

Take part in a three-course dinner hosted by three local families at their homes. Transport included. **+6723 22232; pinetreetours.com.**

#### Mastering Taste Chef School and Garden Tour

Wander through Hilli's inspiring restaurant garden and learn to cook four classic dishes using hand-picked ingredients. **Prince Phillip Drive, +6723 24270.**

#### Ocean Fishing

Darren Bates is a sixth-generation descendant of Fletcher Christian

and he's never returned from a day at sea without a catch. The waters of Norfolk Island are abundant with fish, and feeding the bronze whaler sharks while cleaning the catch at Cascade Pier is an occasion in itself. **+6723 23363, advancefishingnorfolk.com.**

### EAT

#### Dino's at Bumboras

This restaurant offers exceptional, modern-style local cuisine that's served in an historic island home. **89 Bumbora Rd, +6723 24225.**

#### Norfolk Blue Restaurant Grill & Bar

Specialising in Norfolk Blue beef, this award-winning restaurant clocks up less than a kilometre from paddock to plate. **New Farm Rd, +6723 22068, norfolkblue.com.**

#### Bedrock Tea Gardens

Located at Byron and Heidi Adams's glorious cliff-top property, this is the place to experience a traditional Norfolk fish feast with local beers. You can even book in for a massage. **Bullocks Hut Rd, Duncombe Bay, +6723 56996.**

#### The Golden Orb

A quaint bookshop cafe set in tropical gardens. Try the BLT with local pine-cured bacon. **Taylors Rd, +6723 24295.**

#### The Olive Café

The locals come here to catch up over relaxed brekkies and lunches. **The Village, Burnt Pine, +6723 24406.**

### STAY

#### By The Bay

This three-bedroom luxury cottage is a beautiful timber home perched in seclusion above striking Ball Bay. With an expansive deck, dramatic view and luxurious amenities, it's a magnificent place to unwind or entertain. A hire car is included in the tariff. **Martins Rd, +6723 24410, bythebay.nf.**

#### Ponderosa

Set among 30 acres of lush gardens at Longridge, take your pick from a small group of cottages, apartments and houses. There is also a saltwater pool, day spa and barbecue areas on-site. A hire car is included in the tariff. **+6723 22466, ponderosa-apartments.com. 📍**