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Travel

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Australia

So many unique happenings in the weird and wonderful west

By LYN HANCOCK

PICTURES: Lyn Hancock

Clockwise from top: red earth, blue sea and wildflowers at Monkey Mia; sunbathing with a sea lions; quokka looks for handouts on Rottnest Island; penguin taken from burrow on Penguin Island

Where else but weird and wonderful Western Australia would it be possible for a family with a pet anti-government peeve to secede from the state and set up its own country — its own parliament, elections, post office, regalia, royal orders, diplomats — AND get away with it?

Where else would you find an island close to a capital city where wild sea lions are so tame they mimic you in the water, suntan beside you on land and help build sand castles?

Or neighboring islands where penguins nest in burrows set in blisteringly hot sand? Where unique quokkas (rat-like wallabies) beg for handouts like squirrels? Where wild dolphins beach themselves to take fish from your hand?

The world has heard of Australia's natural wonders like Ayer's Rock and the Great Barrier Reef. But few have yet heard of a rock in Western Australia that is two and a half times the size of the one in the Red Centre and close to a billion years older. Or a coral reef 260 km long with greater accessibility and more species of coral than the famed Great Barrier Reef. Or miles of white beaches made of tiny perfect shells, one of two such beaches in the world. Or one of the world's last remaining strongholds of rare stromatolites (low spongy columns of shells, sand and blue-green algae). Or wildflowers with weird names and faces, blind cave eels and black-flanked wallabies — found nowhere else in the world.

Recently, people flocked to Western Australia after the Royal Perth Yacht Club wrested the America's Cup from the United States, the first yachtsmen to do so in 175 years. The Down Under boys lost the Cup but Western Australia has more permanent reasons to draw visitors back.

Five hundred km north of Perth, the state capital, and 16 km from Northampton is the Hutt River Province Principality, 18,500 acres or 29 square miles of land seceded from the state in 1970 and ruled by His Royal Highness Prince Leonard, formerly known as Leonard Casley, farmer. Princess Shirley, their three daughters and their three sons, Prince Ian, Minister of Postal and Banking Services, Prince Arthur Wayne, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Law, and Prince Richard, Minister of the Treasury, form the rest of the Royal Family.

Some 60,000 people a year visit the Hutt River Pincipality. Its dozen live-in citizens guide curiosity seekers around the low key brick buildings, serve them tea and sell the postage stamps, coins and souvenirs. Visitors are welcome to explore the various dams and lakes with their abundant birdlife or in the spring season of July, August and September, the prolific wildflowers.

Shimmering snowpacks fo white everlastings and fields of mauve mulla make unforgettable massed displays but also distinctive are the dramatic contrasts in color of isolated plants like blue cornflower and lobelia against red sandhills. The ultimate in distinction must be the wreath leschenaultia, a wreath of red and creamy flowers encircling a centre of green leaves, and lying on the orange earth as if dropped in a florist shop. Wreath leschenaultia is found only in one area 40 km or so square near Mullewa, not far from the Hutt River Principality.

Aussies — perhaps due to their convict past — tend to revere their controversial characters. The statute of limitations had long passed before the government took wily Prince Leonard seriously. While his dispute awaits a solution in the courts, the Royal Family is amassing an impressive amount of official recognition, including politicians interested in the Hutt River's tourism potential. Prince Leonard knighted one coach driver.

Also in the northwestern part of the state is Cape Range National Park and Ningaloo Marine Park. Here the desert meets the sea in a dramatic contrast of landscape. Arid spinifex-clothed canyons and ridges plunge into blinding white beaches, multi-shaded blue lagoons, and a turquoise sea. The Great Barrier Reef is eighty or so km offshore but you can swim to Ningaloo. And it has more than 500 species of coral, with more being discovered all the time.

There are no resort hotels — you will have to camp — but your rewards are a lack of crowds, a number of rare but easily-seen black-flanked wallabies and a myriad birds drawn to such lush waterholes as Yardie Creek. It you crave company, drive south to Coral Bay, still largely undiscovered except by locals. You can camp there or stay in the hotel.

In Shark Bay to the south the road from Denham ends at a jetty in Monkey Mia.

There's only one small store, a campground and an information centre, but there are always holidaymakers, drawn by the unique daily appearance of wild bottle-nosed dolphins. You can buy fish to feed the dolphins yourself or you can wait for them to feed you. A sign reads, "If a dolphin brings a fish to you, accept it with gratitude and don't give it back."

Charlie, the first dolphin to befriend people, had been shot by an irate fisherman in the early seventies. Since then, nearly 30 dolphins regularly visit this remote unpolluted beach to feed, although only a dozen or so initiate contact with human hands. The best time to visit is between March and November in a season of lower winds, higher tides and cooler temperatures — when prey fish feed in shallower water — a time when the fishing is great for you too.

Mount Augustus may not loom so dramatically naked from the desert as Ayer's Rock but it has other claims to fame. The Guinness Book of Records describes it as the world's biggest rocky outcrop. Its age has allowed vegetation to grow and wildlife to flourish. Its ever-changing chocolate shades have been used as a backdrop in television advertising to promote Cadbury's chocolate.

You don't have to travel to the fabled Northwest to find weird and wonderful Western Australia. Just offshore from Fremantle, the port city of the capital, is a chain of limestone islands and reefs set in a brilliantly bejewelled shallow sea — Rottnest Island, Garden Island, Penguin Island, Seal Island, Carnac Island, Shag Rock. Access is easy — you can fly or ferry to Rottnest Island, you can swim to Seal Island, you can walk to Penguin Island.

Rottnest Island, "Western Australia crystallized", says Tom Perrigo, the American environmental advisor hired to maintain Rotto's laid-back image. The island attracts a quarter of a million visitors a year but almost every Western Australian insists on a "Hands Off Rottnest" philosophy and will fight to keep it a mecca for the average bloke. You don't drive on this island, you walk and bike and swim, in reef-encircled pools, off surf and white sand beaches, in salt lakes that are seven times saltier than the sea. You dive for shipwrecks or huge rock lobsters, watch mutton birds come in from the sea at night to feed their young, or wander around unique colonial limestone buildings built by convicts. If you're lucky or book well ahead, you can even stay in one. Inside the Prison Gate, the Quad houses a hundred guests in former cells that still don't have running water.

Please see AUSTRALIA on H2

Tourism still booming on Great Barrier Reef

By JOHN HANDLEY
Chicago Tribune

There are only three islands directly on the Great Barrier Reef itself — Heron Island, Green Island and Lady Elliot Island.

Among other well-known resort islands are Dunk, Bedarra, Hayman, Hamilton, Hinchinbrook and Lizard. Capt. James Cook named many of the islands during his exploration of the coast in 1770.

A new attraction — in effect a manmade island — is the 200-room floating hotel permanently moored at a lagoon on John Brewer Reef, 75 km northeast of Townsville, another major gateway to the reef. The $40 million, seven-story Four Seasons Barrier Reef resort hotel offers such amenities as two dive boats, three restaurants, tennis courts, a health club and direct-dial phones to the outside world. It can be reached by helicopter, float plane or high-speed catamaran.

The floating hotel is only the latest new tourist facility along the Great Barrier Reef. Other new developments include the $200 million (Australian) remodelling of the luxury resort on Hayman Island, the 200-room Ramada Reef Resort north of Cairns and a "walk-through" reef aquarium in Townsville.

The boom in tourism is reflected in a 50 percent increase in international visitors to Queensland since 1979.

Besides diving, Great Barrier Reef attractions include sailing (especially in the Whitsunday Islands), bird-watching (especially on Heron Island) and black marlin fishing (especially around Lizard Island).

Year-round the Great Barrier Reef enjoys a tropical climate. Since Australia is south of the equator, the seasons are reversed. The most rain falls during their summer — January, February and March.

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Strange people on strange island

By LYN HANCOCK

There are unique characters to meet on Western Australia's Rottnest Island.

My dad Ted Taylor, who spent his boyhood on Rotto and who now lives on his boat at Geordie Bay, spending his 30 years of retirement doing things like setting his pots daily for lobster (called crayfish Down Under) or trolling for herring with such quaint lures as a special bran and pollard concoction or a simple colored drinking straw.

At the turn of this century when Rottnest was a prison and a boys' reformatory, my grandfather was in charge of the convicts.

Then there's Nella, the tortoiseshell cat on the Karen Sue that swims from boat to boat in the bay and brings in her own fishing line.

But the most unusual characters on Rottnest Island in the worldwide sense are the quokkas, rat-like marsupials that give the island its name. In 1696 Dutch explorer, William de Vlamingh, thought that quokkas, unique to Rottnest, were rats or "rots" in Dutch. Aboriginal prisoners, freed on a Sunday to roam the island, hunted quokkas for food. Western Australian aristocracy had regular quokka shoots when governors were in residence. Now this one mammal on the island is protected and thrives in an A-class recreational reserve — although some people think they're a nuisance and they wish they weren't! They plan to fence the quokkas out of the living areas.

Less known are the 20 or 30 sea lions of Seal Island within swimming distance from Safety Bay. They're big and they can bite, but more often they look up sleepily as you pass, tossing sand or waving an idle flipper to shade their eyes from the hot sun. If play is on their minds, they follow you into the water, splashing, rolling, blowing bubbles, imitating your every move. They are so tame that you can pick up a flipper and determine their sex. But don't! The few people — biologists and boaters — who know Seal Island fear that forcing the seals to play will drive them away as has happened at Dyer's Island off Rotto.

One and a half km south is Penguin Island where little penguins nest twice a year, May to June and August to September. During the day the young huddle in their hot sandy burrows waiting for their parents to come in from the sea to feed them fish. It's incredible to think that a species so allied with cold and ice should nest in sand that blisters your feet.

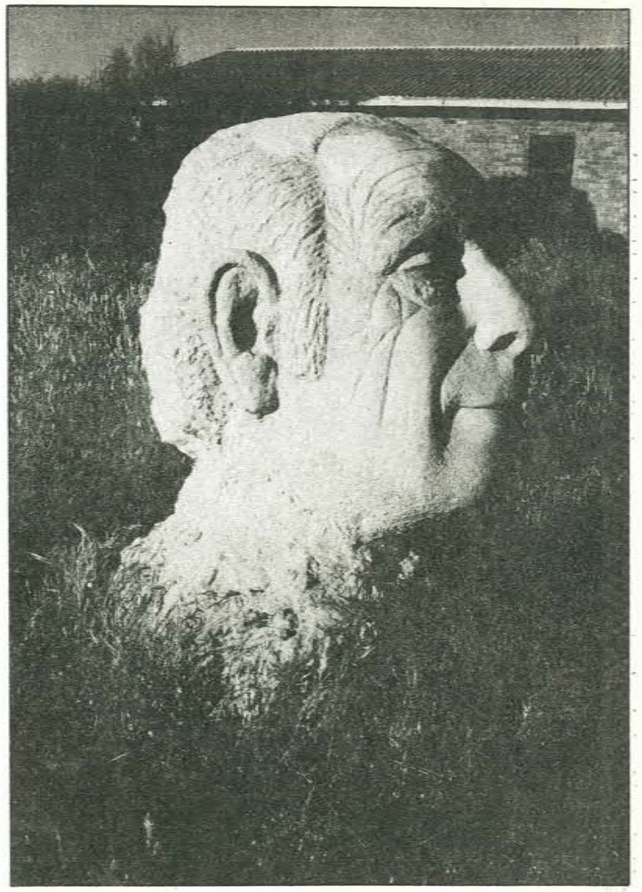
There's much more that's incredible about Western Australia — from a uniquely shaped mountain range in the northern outback called the Bungle Bungles to the uniquely appliqued sweatshirts sold by a street hawker in a southern city.

I left it 25 years ago to see the wonders of the world. Now I'm going back to see what else I missed.

There's a saying Down Under that if you come from Sydney, Aussies will ask you how much money you make, if from Melbourne what school you attended, if from Adelaide what church you go to. But if you come from Perth, they say: "Come in, mate, and have a drink."

Western Australians are like that.

(Lyn Hancock is an Australia-born freelance writer now living in Canada)



Bust of Prince Leonard of Hutt River
. . . where else but in Western Australia?

Nebuchadnezzar's city

Ancient Babylon rising from desert sands