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14 exciting ways to see Australia (and its unexpected highlights)

Our expert has been travelling down under for two decades. He shares his most unforgettable experiences of this epic destination — and the details not to miss



Queensland's Gold Coast is loved for its long surf beaches

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David Whitley

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Australia does all the obvious things well — cruising on Sydney Harbour, snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef and spotting

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kangaroos in the wild are sure to be highlights of any holiday down under. But once you're on your Australian adventure, it's the unexpected bonuses that make the country more than just a highlights

reel.

I've been visiting repeatedly for more than 20 years, and it's the little things that stick with me. The blazing sun bouncing off the tall, silvery trees in Perth's Kings Park. Idly chatting with a winemaker over a glass of shiraz in South Australia's McLaren Vale. A wombat scuttling past my cabin terrace on Victoria's Mornington peninsula.

Australia is famously sunny and easygoing, but what it is spectacularly good at is making memories — and plenty of them. For me, it's studying the ancient rock art in the Northern Territory, which shows how the landscape has changed over time. There's watching my daughters gleefully learn to body-surf off the brilliant white sands of Jervis Bay in New South Wales, or seeing shoals of fish gather around a cleaner wrasse amid the reef coral in Queensland's Whitsundays Islands.

Crucially, [Australia](#) is always changing and offering something new. From hiking its highest mountain to cruising its longest river, these are the best ways to make the most of a visit to the land down under.

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1. Strap on the boots in New South Wales



Try a cliff-top walk in the Blue Mountains

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Multiday walks are booming in Australia, with the two-day 12-mile Grand Cliff Top Walk in the Blue Mountains, a world heritage area just west of Sydney, a gentle intro (bmcc.nsw.gov.au). This links scenic villages, spectacular waterfalls and lookouts over plunging valleys. To go higher, try a five-day self-guided outing along the new Snowies Alpine Walk. The 35-mile route crosses the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales, tackling Mount Kosciuszko — Australia's tallest mountain — on the way.

Details Four nights' room-only from £1,169 (auswalk.com.au). Fly to Sydney

2. Get arty in the Red Centre



Uluru has become an unlikely activity centre

In recent years Uluru, the world's most beloved red sandstone rock, has become an unlikely activity centre. Scenic flights, dune-top dinners, camel rides and didgeridoo workshops are among the options available through the Ayers Rock Resort. But the most exciting new options are dramatic art displays. Wintjiri Wiru, for example, tells the ancestral story of the local Anangu people through a huge light and drone show (£95). Or try Sunrise Journeys, a unique breakfast experience where music and laser projections on to the desert rock landscape recreate the paintings of three Anangu artists (£63).

Details Room-only doubles from £105 (ayersrockresort.com.au). Fly to Ayers Rock via Sydney

3. Park and ride on the Gold Coast



There's plenty to do at Dreamworld
TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND

Queensland's Gold Coast is loved for its long surf beaches, while the waterfall-dotted Springbrook National Park behind it offers a green escape. For Australians, though, the Gold Coast is known as Australia's theme park capital. Dreamworld has the most rides (dreamworld.com.au); Warner Bros Movie World has the huge DC Rivals Hypercoaster and live action shows (movieworld.com.au); while Wet'n'Wild brings the big water slides (wetnwild.com.au). Meanwhile, the cartoon juggernaut *Bluey* comes to life at the new Bluey's World in Brisbane, just north of the Gold Coast (£33; blueysworld.com.au).

Details 11 nights' room only — three in Brisbane and eight on the Gold Coast — from £2,799pp, including flights and car hire (travelbag.co.uk)

- [The ultimate guide to Uluru: everything you need to know](#)

4. Do a lap of Tasmania



Tasmania is packed with wildlife and ideal for a self-drive trip
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Green and packed with wildlife, Tasmania is relatively compact and ideal for a first-timer's self-drive holiday. Out of the car, highlights include the free-roaming marsupials of the Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary near Hobart, the pink mountains and white beaches of the Freycinet peninsula and the mirror-like reflections of Dove Lake near Cradle Mountain.

Details 13 nights' room only from £1,997pp, including car hire, full-day Bruny Island tour and half-day Gordon River cruise (discover-the-world.co.uk). Fly to Hobart

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5. Snorkel with humpbacks on the Ningaloo Reef



Humpback whales can be found on the Ningaloo Reef

Following studies into whale safety, new government licences for swimming with humpbacks have been granted along Australia's coasts. Jervis Bay in New South Wales and Hervey Bay in Queensland are among the new whale-swim hotspots. But it's on Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef that you can combine snorkelling with humpbacks and sailing on a liveaboard yacht. From the Shore Thing, newly inducted yachties can hang out with manta rays, visit Ningaloo's top snorkelling spots and kayak among turtles.

Details Seven nights' full-board — two in a Coral Bay hotel, five in a private cabin — from £2,849pp, including airport transfers and a humpback swimming tour (sailningaloo.com.au). Fly to Learmonth via Perth

6. Drift along the mighty Murray River



The most romantic way to see the river is aboard a Murray River Paddlesteamer

Australia's longest river, forming the border between New South Wales and Victoria, is lined with charming historic towns and national parks where koalas hug trees and galahs chirp noisily. The most romantic way to see the Murray is on a paddle steamer cruise, many of which leave from the giant wooden wharf in Echuca. Murray River Paddlesteamers runs one-hour taster cruises aboard the 108-year-old PS Canberra (£18). The three, four and seven-night cruises aboard the new PS Australian Star make more Murray magic — with barbecues under the stars and riverside winery stops included.

Details Three nights' full board from £1,266pp, including train transfer from Melbourne (murrayriverpaddlesteamers.com.au). Fly to Melbourne

- [10 of the best Australia cruises](#)

7. Score big in Melbourne or Adelaide



The Adelaide Oval is a cricket lover's dream

JOHN MONTESI

Cricket lovers dream of joining the Barmy Army on the Ashes tour in November and December. But visit Australia's big cities and the famous grounds can be visited year round. Tours of Melbourne Cricket Ground head into the changing rooms, media centre and around the boundary, with the Australian Sports Museum on site (£18; australiansportsmuseum.org.au). At Adelaide Oval, meanwhile, the highlight is stepping inside the manually operated vintage scoreboard. More adventurous types can take on the Adelaide Oval RoofClimb, clipping on harnesses and walking along the stadium roof (£58; roofclimb.com.au).

Details Six nights' room only in Adelaide from £914pp, including five-day Test match tickets (barmyarmy.com). Fly to Adelaide

8. Cruise over to Kangaroo Island



There's a sea lion colony on Kangaroo Island

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Look out for dolphins on the ferry crossing as part of Intrepid's five-day Kangaroo Island Adventure. This also packs in Kangaroo Island's strangely sculpted Remarkable Rocks, surfing down sand dunes, and the sea lion colony at Seal Bay. You'll hang out with penguins in Penneshaw, marvel at the white sands of Vivonne Bay and get a shearing demonstration on a sheep farm. Sealink launches its new purpose-built ferries to wildlife-packed Kangaroo Island this year, meaning more departures from the South Australian mainland.

Details Four nights' B&B from £1,062pp, including guide, transport, bushwalks and eucalyptus oil distillery visit (intrepidtravel.com). Fly to Adelaide

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9. Go wild in the west



Rottnest Island is home to quokkas

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Just off the coast of Perth, Western Australia, Rottnest Island is home to adorably cute quokkas — the mini marsupials that have become internet sensations (rotnnestisland.com). Stay overnight at the new Lodge Wadjemup and you'll have more time to hire a bike and explore the island's glorious Indian Ocean beaches (room-only doubles from £159; thelodgewadjemup.com). There's also a vast range of activities to choose from — sailing yachts, skydiving, Segway tours and seafood cruises covering just one letter of the alphabet. The smart move is to tag Rottnest on to a tour of the southwest. On the Go runs a two-night trip to the Margaret River region, including wild roos, ancient caves and towering kauri forests.

Details Two nights' half-board from £695, including transport, vineyard tours and a chocolate tasting (onthegotours.com). Fly to Perth

10. See stars from the water in the Northern Territory



Algothgarrng Night Tours show off the clear night skies

Croc-spotting cruises on the Yellow Water Billabong have long been a highlight of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. But the new Algothgarrng Night Tours show off the clear night skies. Stargazing guides blend astronomy, Greco-Roman myths and the cultural stories of the Gaagudju people (£50; kakadutourism.com). Self-drivers should allow two or three days to explore Kakadu's vast floodplains, birdwatching hides, dramatic stone cliffs and Aboriginal rock art. There are also Kakadu tours available from Darwin; four-wheel-drive trips include a bushwalk and plunge pool swim at Maguk, aka Barramundi Gorge.

Details Two nights' half-board from £1,003pp, including transport from Darwin and national park entry pass (kakadutoursandtravel.com.au). Fly to Darwin

11. Take the cross-continental train



The Indian Pacific has plush cabins
HEATHER DINAS

The most epic rail journey in Australia is becoming a bit more leisurely this year, with the four-day trip aboard the Indian Pacific expanding to five days. The 2,704-mile chug from Perth to Sydney is partly about gawping at the endless, entrancing desert, but also plush cabins and off-the-rails activities — such as dining in a Barossa Valley winery cellar and painting classes in an outback gallery — that make it big train, big gain.

Details Four nights' full board from £1,598pp, including drinks and activities (journeybeyondrail.com.au). Fly to Perth

12. Mix wildlife and wine in Western Australia



Vasse Felix is the oldest winery in the Margaret River region
ALAMY

Australia's wineries have moved way beyond bog-standard tasting sessions, with Ultimate Winery Experiences Australia offering estate tours, masterclasses and vineyard picnics across the country. One of the 100-plus options is the Epicurean Tour at Vasse Felix, the oldest winery in Western Australia's Margaret River region (£175; ultimatewineryexperiences.com.au). This goes behind the scenes into the barrel hall, and matches wines with a five-course tasting menu.

Details Ten nights' room only — with one at Rottneest Island and two in Margaret River — from £1,475pp, including car hire and a Vasse Felix Epicurean Tour (trailfinders.com). Fly to Perth

13. New stays in Cairns



Skyrail runs over the rainforest canopy between Smithfield and Kuranda
ALAMY

Cairns provides key access to the Great Barrier Reef, but with many water-based operators upping their ante, landlubbers have followed suit. The opening of three Crystalbrook Hotels (crystalbrookcollection.com) has also had what locals term “the Crystalbrook effect”: in short, a glow-up for Cairns. Dine at upscale waterfront restaurants such as Salt House and Ochre, wander around admiring the gorgeous architecture and visit Cairns Aquarium to learn more about the reef (£29;

cairnsaquarium.com.au). Fifteen minutes' walk away, Skyrail pilots you above the rainforest canopy, helping to deepen your appreciation for its relationship to the reef (£35; skyrail.com.au). **Details** Six nights' B&B at Crystalbrook Bailey from £1,445pp, including flights (expedia.co.uk)

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14. Explore Tasmania's underrated second city



Cataract Gorge is just 15 minutes from central Launceston
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Hobart, the Tasmanian capital, tends to draw the tourist crowds, but less-recognised Launceston has just as much appeal, with heritage architecture and a gluttony-inducing food and wine scene. Don't miss Stillwater Seven, one of the island's most acclaimed restaurants, where local food takes pride of place,

including cool-season truffles (two-course menu from £48pp; stillwater.com.au). As a river city it also has plenty of waterfront atmosphere, complete with stunning yachts and alfresco dining options. The Queen Victoria Museum combines art, natural science and history, while Cataract Gorge is a majestic natural wonder, with hiking trails, a chairlift, swimming pool and suspension bridge — all within a 15-minute walk of the city centre.

Details Thirteen nights' room-only from £3,199pp, including flights, car hire, some excursions and some meals (trailfinders.com)

Make it happen

Getting there and around

The only nonstop flight from the UK to Australia is from London Heathrow to Perth with Qantas. However, there are dozens of one-stop options. Emirates and Qatar Airways fly to several Australian cities from multiple UK airports, with connections in Dubai and Doha respectively. Flights are generally cheapest in the low seasons of mid-April to mid-June and October through November. Get an economy return under £1,000pp and you've done well.

If you're covering more than one area of Australia, it's likely you'll need a domestic flight. The three main airlines — Qantas, Virgin Australia and Jetstar — cover most of the country. The alternative is a long-distance bus from the likes of Greyhound. But those can be slow and not all that much cheaper.

Hiring a car

Distances are long but Australia's roads are easy to drive. Taking a week or two to drive between big cities is a great way to see the country. Plan several stops on a road trip to link beaches, wineries, national parks and wildlife. Most big international car hire chains offer rentals from the airports. Expect to pay from about £200 a week for a compact SUV. Camper vans are more expensive — from about £350 a week for vans sleeping two people — but they bring accommodation costs right down. Drive

Now is good for price comparisons (drivenow.com.au). If you're sticking to the cities you won't need your own wheels.

Visas

British citizens can get the free electronic eVisitor subclass 651 visa via Australia's Home Affairs website (immi.homeaffairs.gov.au). Grants are usually instant, but apply three or four weeks in advance to be certain.

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Risks

In the tropical north, stay a few metres back from the water to avoid being a snack for crocs. When bushwalking, tread noisily and keep an eye on the track ahead to steer clear of snakes.

Have we missed any must-try experiences in Australia?

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