

# A different kind of island paradise

A barely known archipelago off SA's coast is a wildlife haven that's been compared to the Galapagos. NATHAN DAVIES explores this natural sanctuary in our own backyard

THE silence alone is worth the price of admission. When tour leader and skipper Rod Keogh cuts the engine of the Asherah, the overwhelming quiet of St Francis Island settles and brings a feeling of calm that's increasingly hard to find in a world of smartphones, QR check-ins and 24-hour news cycles.

Over the next three nights and four days there will be very little that interrupts that silence – there's light rain falling on the roofs of our swags, the crack of whelks being dropped on rocks from on high by clever pacific gulls, the occasional night-time call of a fairy penguin or whooshing sound of a dolphin taking a breath.

Overall, though, silence prevails.

We've travelled to the Nuyts Archipelago, a chain of about 30 islands in the Great Australian Bight off the coast of Ceduna.

More specifically, we're in the Nuyts Archipelago Wilderness Protection Area, a special zone covering 17 of the islands deemed ecologically important.

St Francis, the biggest of these 17 islands, is home to bottlenose dolphins, Australian sea lions, an astounding array of birds, including thousands of shearwaters, bandicoots, snakes, lizards and, for the next few days, an intrepid bunch comprising four passengers, three crew, a National Parks observer, a journalist and a very lucky 11-year-old whose dad happens to be in charge of the expedition.

St Francis Island, or Eyland St Francois in the original Dutch, was one of the first places in South Australia to be seen by European eyes after Francois Thijssen visited in the Gulden Zeepaert in 1627.

The fact the Gulden Zeepaert was on a voyage from Holland to Taiwan and Japan suggests they were a little off course, but it wouldn't be the first discovery that was a happy accident.

Speaking of happy accidents, the archipelago's latitude and longitude co-ordinates also place it as the fictional island of Lilliput in Jonathan Swift's famous 1726 novel Gulliver's Travels.

MATTHEW Flinders was next to visit in 1802, with the famous English navigator

bestowing names on some of the isles, followed by his French counterpart Nicolas Baudin a year later.

Next came the whalers and the sealers, who set up rough settlements on the islands and exploited their most valuable natural resources – the southern right whales, sea lions and fur seals. It was a rough and ready industry, often pursued by men who were more than happy to virtually drop off the edge of the Earth.

And while the archipelago's isolation made it the perfect hideout for escaped convict sealers and privateers looking to make a quick buck, it also makes it an ideal destination for intrepid travellers looking for a true wilderness adventure.

This is something Mr Keogh – a commercial diver who also runs whale-watching tours out of Fowlers Bay – recognised the first time he saw the islands four years ago, and his tour has been years in the making.

Along the road he's battled everything from enormous start-up costs and bad weather to the reams of red tape that come with operating in a wilderness zone. It's been, he says, completely worth it.

"I always knew the islands were there but it was only when I took a tour out through the Waterhouse Club, who wanted to go and collect insects on St Peters, Goat and St Francis islands, that this idea formed," he says.

"I took four scientists out on a recce trip in a small boat to look for some landing points, and as soon as I saw it I knew what I wanted to do.

"That was four years ago and the first tour was in October 2020. I've done seven expeditions now."

One of the joys of these trips, Mr Keogh says, is meeting his customers, who tend to be travellers with an adventurous streak.

"I think the people that go out to the islands are environmentally conscious people who are looking for activities outside of the mainstream," he says. "They like the seclusion and being part of something that doesn't happen every day."

Mr Keogh has now spent 55 days on St Francis across the seven expeditions – perhaps the most amount of time since the sheep farmers called it a day in the 1950s – but he says he feels like he's barely scratched the surface when it comes to discovering the wonders of Nuyts.

"I'm trying to find the places to give people a unique experience and blow people's minds," he says.

"These islands need to be highlighted. People leave a place like St Francis feeling different. It's like being a castaway on a desert island. People like to feel alone."

IT'S a solid five-hour punch out to St Francis from Streaky Bay, and while the sea is far from as rough as it can get, it's still hardly a pleasure cruise and everyone is happy to finally spy the island on the horizon.

Anchored in the relative shelter of Petrel Bay, the rather daunting task of unloading

everything from the boat and setting up camp comes next.

Accommodation comes in the form of comfortable, but rather heavy, enclosed swags and these all need to be hauled up the low dune to the camp area along with Eskies, bags and everything else needed for a four-day stay.

Everyone pitches in, and soon guests have erected their swags on one of the many vantage points and the camp kitchen is up and running.

The food on the Nuyts expedition focuses, naturally enough, on local seafood and each night features ocean treats such as King George whiting, abalone, calamari, nannygai and fresh-shucked oysters. It's all washed down with Bird in Hand wines, and the whole dining experience adds a touch of luxury to what is essentially an off-grid camping experience.

THE days are filled with adventure. A hike around the island, carefully avoiding areas pockmarked with thousands of shearwater nesting burrows, takes in the abandoned sheep farming operation.

Little is left now beyond a ruined homestead and shearers' quarters, some drystone walling and small dams built to catch precious rainwater before it flowed down the rocky cliffs into the sea.

The halfway point is marked by a thrilling cliff jump into a deep ravine for those willing to take the plunge.

The walk back along the untouched beach sees Petrel Bay's resident dolphin pod – at least 30 animals – following our every step just metres offshore. They're naturally curious and playful, but nowhere near as interactive as the female Australian sea lion we encounter the next day while exploring some of the other islands.

In a beautiful cove on Masillon Island the endangered pinniped swims out to the boat from the rocks and, like a boisterous marine dog, makes it clear she's keen for a play.

What follows is a magical hour of snorkelling with the wild creature.

She dives when we dive, rises when we rise and hides in the weed on the bottom waiting for us to find her. It's a highlight of the trip.

The curiosity and lack of fear displayed by the dolphins and sea lions extends to much of the wildlife on St Francis which has been isolated and protected for so long.

White-breasted sea eagles and ospreys patrol the air, beautiful blue lizards and – yes – snakes scurry through the low brush although every one we see is of the nonvenomous variety.

Even the fish are unafraid, with huge blue groper a constant presence on every snorkelling trip.

Many of the species on the island have diverged from their mainland counterparts to become somewhat unique.

The two geologists on our trip – who are not only excellent company but also a wealth of knowledge – explain that Nuyts Archipelago is, in effect, a Galapagos in reverse.

While the famous South American chain was thrust out of the ocean by volcanic action, with animals eventually finding their way to the islands, Nuyts was cut off from the mainland by rising sea levels at the end of the last ice age, leaving the animals there stranded.

“It’s a unique excursion really in that we’re going into a part of the world that’s seen by so few people and it’s a part of Australia that’s as close to its natural state as you’re ever likely to find,” passenger and geologist Dr Geoff Hudson says.

The author travelled to St Francis Island courtesy of EP Cruises and the SATC.

The next Nuyts Archipelago Expedition leaves on December 11.

To book a spot go to [epcruises.com.au](http://epcruises.com.au) or call 0433 011 665