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Here's to the "Yorke": an insider's guide

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Every summer thousands of Adelaide residents load their cars and make the trek to the "Yorke", a narrow peninsula between St Vincent and Spencer Gulfs shaped a bit like the boot of Italy. The toe is capped with national park fringed by white sand beaches, the interior dominated by golden farmland and sleepy towns.

Little known outside South Australia, the Yorke Peninsula exists in a kind of time warp, an old-fashioned, lo-fi community of farmers, fishers and surfers, where holidays are all about simple pleasures and Famous Five adventures. Fishing and crabbing for dinner, lazy swims, drawing straws to see who's off to the kiosk to grab icy poles. Think candy-striped lighthouses and sunken ships; barbecues and country pubs. Or dangling a line from one of the peninsula's romantic old wooden jetties, built to load windjammers sailed from Blighty to collect grain ripened beneath a hot southern sun.

A two-hour drive from Adelaide, the 200km-long peninsula is fringed by unspoilt coastline. Regular visitors generally have a favourite beach and return year after year, but exploring the peninsula top to bottom is entirely doable.

First stop: Cornish pasties. You'll find them at most servos and corner stores. They are the peninsula's signature snack, harking back to a 19th-century copper boom that attracted thousands of miners from Cornwall, saving the colony from bankruptcy and introducing a handy snack that morphed from miner's staple to school lunch favourite. Somewhere in the Copper Coast town of Moonta there's a photo of Greg Norman tucking into a pasty when he was in town to check out his design for The Dunes golf course at nearby Port Hughes.

But seafood is the real star on the Yorke, and the king of the catch is the blue swimmer crab. When my boys were little, we spent lazy afternoons watching our pots as they dangled from the Moonta Bay jetty. Maggie Beer writes eloquently of hunting for crabs while staying at her husband Colin's family shack then cooking them in drums of seawater and making crab sandwiches with soft white bread.

Cooking up a feed of crabs on the beach is surely one of life's great pleasures but there are oysters too, and the chance to be a "Deckie for a Day", harvesting your own with Pacific Estate Oysters in Stansbury on the south-east coast. Departure times vary according to the tides; waders are provided then it's out to the leases aboard a working boat to lend a hand and scoff some plump molluscs straight from the sea.

Keen anglers have no trouble finding a good patch on the Yorke because they're rarely more than a few minutes from the sea (it's about 30 minutes coast to coast). Beach and rock fishing are popular; you can also drop a line from a jetty.

At Wallaroo, near the top of the peninsula, the jetty extends almost a kilometre out to sea into water 10m deep, making it a good spot for diving as well as well as fishing. Afterwards, have lunch at Wallaroo's popular Bond Store. Occupying a landmark 1856 warehouse that once stored rum and whisky, the restaurant shares space with a microbrewery and distillery. Local grain is used in its award-winning beer; downstairs in the cocktail bar, in-house gins are flavoured with Australian herbs and botanicals.

Fifteen minutes south of Wallaroo, the historic town of Moonta lies at the heart of the Copper Coast or "Little Cornwall". It hosts a biennial Cornish knees-up, the Kernewek Lowender Festival complete with maypoles and a gathering of bards, conducted in the Cornish language. The town has some wonderful honey-coloured stone cottages, churches and ornate civic buildings – evidence of the riches brought by the copper boom. The Moonta Mines Museum is well worth a visit. My children were agog at the Dickensian tales of the "Pickey Boys", as young as 11, put to work sorting the ore. These days kids need lift nothing heavier than a lolly, and the old-fashioned sweet shop, in the former Moonta Mines Post Office, is a must-visit. (Choo-choo Bar, anybody?)

As you mooch down the peninsula, past the pink salt lakes near Yorketown (once the hub of a thriving salt industry) and into the wilder southern end of Yorke, be sure to drop in on the Baker Bros Gallery in Warooka, which stocks local artists and vintage finds.

On the east coast, empty gravel roads slice through dense bush past Foul Bay (with views to Kangaroo Island on a clear day) to Marion Bay, a tiny seaside town with a sheltered swimming beach on one side, a surf beach on the other and a pub with great seafood. It's the jumping-off point for one of Australia's best-kept secrets, Dhilba Guuranda-Innes National Park. Lapped by sea on three sides, it's home to empty white sand beaches, rocky shores, sapphire blue seas, shipwrecks and excellent surf. This is also fantastic bushwalking territory (part of the peninsula's 500km circuit of walking and cycling trails) and the coastal scenery is stunning, with swimming on the west coast at Dolphin and Shell Beaches, and a popular surf break at Pondalowie.

Dhilba Guuranda-Innes National Park also forms part of the largest rewilding project in the country. Marna Banggara, formerly Great Southern Ark, aims to reintroduce locally extinct species including bandicoots, bettongs and quolls in a unique project that links the national park with farmers and community. A predator control fence has been strung across the foot (or more accurately the ankle) of the peninsula to deter cats and foxes. In August, 40 brush-tailed bettongs, locally extinct for more than a century, were reintroduced.

You can explore offshore with Marion Bay Ocean Safari, which offers guided boat trips of Pondalowie Bay to meet the resident pod of dolphins (keep your eyes peeled for white-bellied sea eagles and eastern ospreys). Or head across to Althorpe Island to spot Australian sea lions.

The southwest corner of the Yorke boasts world-class surf, with breaks to suit all skill levels. And for scuba divers, the Wardang Island Maritime Heritage Trail near Port Victoria has eight shipwrecks in clear, shallow waters within 16km of each other.

Given the Yorke's old-school holiday vibe, accommodation is generally low key, with some very charming options. It's even possible to rent a lighthouse keeper's cottage on tiny Troubridge Island, 6km off the heel of the peninsula. Bring everything you need and plan for a summer holiday circa 1956. There's little to do but commune with fairy penguins, admire the

storybook lighthouse and wave to Sammy the resident sea lion. Or prepare Famous Five picnics with lashings of ginger beer. And pasties.

Where to stay

Seafire

Seafire Beach House is a striking cliff-top house set above a private beach at Foul Bay, with wrap-around glass walls framing incredible views of this wild stretch of coast. The house sleeps four in two suites, with additional digs in the neighbouring Yondah Beach House. The owners, who began camping here 25 years ago, have created a private 120ha reserve, so you won't see a soul. From \$480 per night. seafire.com.au

Bayside Glamping

Located at gorgeous Marion Bay, this laid-back retreat has two options: a very cool bell tent (complete with pillowtop queen bed, organic cotton sheets, outdoor kitchen and indoor bathroom) set on a rustic-chic deck, and an off-grid shack that is the very essence of summer holiday charm. From \$195 per night. baysideglamping.com.au

My Sister and the Sea

Cute as a button, this whimsical weatherboard relocated from Sweden (and sleeping up to six) is tucked away in Marion Bay within an easy walk of several beaches. From \$330 per night. mysisterandthesea.com

Love and Mutiny

Sister property to My Sister, this adorable cottage sits amid a cluster of Aussie shacks at Chinaman Wells on the Yorke's west coast, overlooking Spencer Gulf. From \$400 per night. loveandmutiny.com.au