

A bayside paradise

JUST A STONE'S THROW AWAY FROM BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND'S MORETON BAY REGION OFFERS WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS, ADRENALINE-BOOSTING ACTIVITIES AND FAMILY-FRIENDLY BEACHES...

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The Moreton Bay region is an area often overlooked by tourists as they drive north from Brisbane to the famous surf beaches of the Sunshine Coast, but this laid-back beach community that I call home deserves a detour. Stretching from the north side of Brisbane to Bribie Island it includes the Redcliffe Peninsula – the site of Queensland's first European settlement in 1824 and home to some of the closest beaches to Brisbane.

COASTAL PURSUITS

My husband Matt and I grab a freshly brewed coffee from a seafront cafe and head to Pelican Park at Clontarf on the Redcliffe Peninsula to let our kids (Lincoln, 8, Reuben 8 and Eva, 5) run wild in the playground while we wait for the daily pelican feed.

At 10am the volunteer arrives with a bucket of fish and the gigantic birds flock to enjoy their breakfast. "We're pretty lucky to be able to start our >>

Main image: The sunken Tangalooma ship wrecks off Moreton Island

Sundays like this, aren't we?" a mum comments as we admire the view across the bay.

When feeding time is over, we take advantage of the food trucks at the nearby Redcliffe Jetty Markets for our own late breakfast. Redcliffe Parade hosts the bustling markets event every Sunday with rows of stalls selling crafts, toys and freshly grown produce.

After eating, we pause at the bronze statue on Bee Gees Way – a 70-metre laneway museum dedicated

“Redcliffe Parade hosts the markets, with stalls selling crafts, toys and fresh produce”

to telling the story of Redcliffe's most famous band through images, videos and audio. After emigrating from Manchester to Redcliffe, it was here that Barry, Maurice and Robin Gibb got noticed while performing at the Redcliffe Speedway.

With the sun still high in the sky, we leave the shops and head to Suttons Beach. Matt and I walk along the promenade with the dog walkers and families out for a Sunday bike ride while the kids hit the sand to collect shells, pausing every now and then

to spot boats in the bay. We come to a stop at Settlement Cove Lagoon. This large seafront pool is a haven for families. The man-made turquoise lagoon is fringed with palms and it has such a holiday vibe.

We throw down a rug and sit at the water's edge in the shade enjoying the smell of beach barbeques as we watch the kids paddle. It's winter so it's a little chilly for a swim, but the kids don't care as they wade in the shimmering, clear water.

To finish the day, we drive to a suburb along to Scarborough and go to Scarborough Beach Park. The enclosed park has a huge climbing tree, wooden train, pirate ship and swings that keep the kids entertained. After a play, we grab fish and chips from a café across the road and sit on the grass overlooking the beach as the sun goes down.

"I wonder if anyone is home today," says Eva as she runs to find the Gollum Tree on the way back to our car. One night years ago, somebody installed a wooden Gollum-sized door on one of the large trees that fringe the beach. We can't leave this park without knocking on the door and trying the handle to see if anyone is home.

WHALE ENCOUNTERS

In between the usual school holiday fun of play days and park visits, it's time for my annual whale

watching trip. This year, for the first time, I'm joined by my wildlife-mad eight-year-old son, Lincoln.

"Will we really see a few whales?" he asks me eagerly. I assure him that we will see plenty.

As we board Brisbane Whale Watching's vessel at Redcliffe Jetty, we see dolphins frolicking in the bay.

From June until November, Moreton Bay's tropical waters come alive as over 20,000 humpback whales make the journey between Antarctica and the Great Barrier Reef to breed and raise their calves in warmer waters.

It's a cool, windy day, so we wrap up in our hats and coats and sit on the top deck to enjoy the view. The boat speeds towards Moreton Island as we listen to Captain Kerry Lopez's commentary.

Lopez is the only female captain operating a whale watching venture in the South Pacific Rim and she holds one of only two commercial whale watching cruise permits in Moreton Bay.

From the commentary, we learn how Moreton Island was the largest land-based whaling station in the southern hemisphere in the 1950s.

During its 10-year operation, a staggering 6,277 humpback whales and one blue whale were killed and processed there. Thankfully the whale population recovered and now thousands of visitors come to enjoy the majestic sight of the whales passing through.

As the boat approaches the whales, Lincoln and I find ourselves standing against the barrier in the rain laughing as we don't know where to turn. There is a pod of whales close to the boat and a little further out we can see another three pods. These 12-16 metre-long creatures appear to be showing off for the boat, much to Lincoln's excitement.

We watch the whales slap the water, poke their heads out and swim alongside the boat captivating the passengers.

It's sad when the time comes to leave the whales behind, but the tour isn't finished yet; we sail into the turquoise waters alongside Moreton Island where we watch turtles swimming by the boat.

OLD TOWN CHARM

It is Sunday again and the school holidays are flying by. It's time for another of our favourite Sunday pastimes: a visit to Old Petrie Town. This heritage town is set in 52 acres of manicured grounds with rows of old fashioned stores selling wooden toys, sweets and handmade clothes.

There is a steam museum, a fire brigade museum, a working blacksmiths and a foundry to explore, plus an endless parade of shiny classic cars driving slowly around for you to admire. On Sunday mornings, the little town comes alive with an outdoor market.

Clockwise from below left: Pelicans at Redcliffe; stalls at Redcliffe Jetty Markets; Bee Gees Way – which tells the story of Redcliffe's most famous band

Clockwise from below: Lincoln and Reuben at Scarborough Beach Park; a breaching whale; Captain Kerry Lopez points out a couple of passing whales





Left: The family at the big red London bus cafe at Old Petrie Town; and *(bottom)* a couple relax on the beach at Tangalooma Island Resort

We have a regular routine here though: I unpack our picnic rug and let the kids loose on the bouncy castles while I send Matt to the big red London bus-turned-café which serves the best iced coffee around.

This is how memories are made – laying on a blanket in the sun surrounded by 300-year-old Moreton Bay fig trees, sipping ice-cream laden drinks, watching the kids have the time of their lives while listening to live music strumming in the background.

RESORT DAY

Another day, and it's time for our next adventure – a day trip to Moreton Island, which alongside North Stradbroke Island and Fraser Island is one of the largest sand islands in the world.

“Welcome to Tangalooma Island Resort,” says resort guide Maurie warmly as we disembark from the ferry that brought us across the bay.

Maurie shows us around the resort with its inviting white sandy beach. The tour ends at a glass cabinet

where he shows us some of the things that have washed up on the beach.

“I found a bottle with a message in it once,” he tells us. “It was from a little girl. I emailed her back and we got to meet in person when she came to visit the island recently.”

Our kids are fascinated at the idea of a message crossing oceans in a glass bottle and decide they want to give it a try.

After a beachside lunch, we join our guide, Doc, for the Desert Island Safari. A bumpy ride in the four-wheel drive bus takes us to Moreton Island's famous dunes for a sandboarding experience.

Doc is a character and has us in fits of laughter. “Do you know why kookaburras laugh? Because people keep falling off their sandboards!” he squeals.

We throw off our shoes, grab a board and watch Doc's demonstration about how to climb the dune and sandboard down without ending up eating sand.

“This is how you slide,” he shows us with the board raised off the ground at the front. “If you move

forward and the front of the board is low, bad things happen,” which he demonstrates by hurling handfuls of sand at his head.

“When the front of the board is high, you go fast. If the front of the board hits the ground, the board stops but you don't. So keep it high. Keep your elbows high

“A bumpy ride in a four-wheel drive bus takes us to Moreton Island's famous dunes”

Clockwise from below: The family watch Lincoln show off his sandboarding skills; the children knock the door of the Gollum Tree; the pool at Tangalooma Island Resort

like eagle wings. Remember, eagles fly, chickens die. Be an eagle!”

“Don't waste time at the top thinking ‘it's scary.’” He proceeds to hurl himself head first into the sand in front of us. “It's not scary, it's just sand!”

At the top of the steep dune, we lie on our boards, lift the front (with Doc's warnings echoing in our >>





Above: Hand feeding wild dolphins; and *(right)* family beach fun at Tangalooma Island Resort



ears) and glide down at full speed. It is so much fun. The kids use their endless energy to go up and down until it's time to get back on the bus.

Back at the resort, we have some free time so we jump in the heated outdoor pool for a swim and then amble over to the beach for a play on the sand.

As the sun goes down, Matt and I order cocktails and sit on the edge of the sand watching the kids play tag in the water.

We just have time for a delicious meal in the Chinese restaurant before it's time to hand feed the wild dolphins that visit Tangalooma every evening.

“At the top of the steep dune, we lie on our boards, lift the front and glide down at full speed”

We line up at the beach and take a fish before wading into the water with a member of staff to feed our dolphin. It is the perfect end to a perfect day.

“Do we have to go home now?” wail the kids. “Can't we stay a few days? We don't want to leave...”

I promise them next time we will stay longer as it has been magical.

On the ferry home, the children curl up and crash instantly. Matt and I sip a glass of wine and pinch ourselves because this isn't just a holiday for us: Moreton Bay is our home and we know we can do it all again another day. 🇺🇸

USEFUL CONTACTS

- Brisbane Whale Watching departs from Redcliffe Jetty. Adults cost A\$135 (£74) and children aged 4-14 cost A\$95 (£52). brisbanewhalewatching.com.au
- Day trips to Tangalooma Island Resort start from A\$89 (£48) per adult and A\$49 (£26) per child. The dolphin feeding cruise (featured in the article) costs A\$199 (£109) per adult and A\$149 (£81) per child. www.tangalooma.com
- Redcliffe Jetty Markets on Redcliffe Foreshore, Redcliffe Parade, take place every Sunday from 8am until noon. www.redcliffejettymarkets.com



A family on Redcliffe Jetty