



Located within easy reach of the east coast, Norfolk Island's natural assets include a quaint nine-hole golf course by the sea.

HOME & AWAY

Norfolk Island offers a terrific South Pacific getaway without needing to leave Australia.

BY MATT CLEARY. PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK EVANS



As John Travolta says in “Pulp Fiction” when he’s musing to Samuel Jackson about the merits of Amsterdam’s hash bars, things overseas are just a little different. And Norfolk Island, sitting like a pretty green asteroid in the deep blue universe of the South Pacific, is just a little different.

Example? Well, you can’t buy a beer in McDonald’s (there is no McDonald’s) but you can eat a feral convict chicken. The island is a self-governing external territory of Australia with a New South Wales postcode – but you need a passport to get in. As well as English they speak a curious hybrid of Tahitian and olde English called “Norfuk”. “Watawieh Yorlii” means how are you going, or something like it.

Alice Springs television is on the box. There’s a five-pronged starfish that exists nowhere else. The locals don’t pay income tax. It’s the only South Pacific island with pine trees, and no one knows why. Other

islands have coconuts and girls in coconut bikinis, and huge smiling muscle men with ukuleles. Norfolk has giant Christmas trees and devout Christians who are Fletcher Christian’s relatives.

Things grow here. The soil is fertile, volcanic black. Bananas shoot from old cars, the cemetery, the back of Woolworths; wild, tangy, delicious. The island has winding roads and waving drivers, an idyll in the South Pacific, with

the world’s most contented cows and under-worked cops.

Bordering the golf course is Emily Bay, perhaps the world’s prettiest and best swimming cove, a crescent-shaped scimitar of sand that winds out to a peninsula upon which sits Lone Pine, a singular, 500-year-old Norfolk Island pine which has stood sentinel and silent witness to some of humankind’s most indifferent behaviour (*see panel on the next page*).

OLD LINKS

In January 2010 after 12 months’ research, a team of historians concluded that Norfolk Island’s golf course – formerly known as Point Hunter Golf Course – is the oldest in Australia on its original site. Built by convicts in 1843, golfers today play exactly the same course as it was originally laid out 168 years ago.

“We ascertained that the course was constructed whilst Captain Alexander Maconachie, R.N., was superintendent of the Island,” says John Lovett of the Golf Society of Australia, Golf Australia’s history and heritage arm. “Thus it is the oldest existing golf course in Australia. This is not a claim, it is fact.”

Lovett adds that, “Norfolk Island Golf Club is not the oldest golf club nor was it the first course established.” New South Wales Golf Course was first played upon in 1839 but not on its existing site at La Perouse. Formerly it was considered that Ratho Links in Bothwell, Tasmania, was the oldest on its existing site, but Lovett says “it’s been established that golf was not introduced to Tasmania until 1860”.

Today Norfolk is *quaint*. There are meadows rather than fields, hobby farmers rather than grizzled cockies with thousand-yard stares. It’s Hobbiton mixed with Byron Bay 30 years ago, and you wonder why more Australians don’t visit (even though it’s cheaper to Fiji). Bombora’s Beach is a pristine cove with a surf break and boards left under a tree for anyone to come along and borrow. You wouldn’t get that at Bondi. There’s mountain-biking, snorkelling, diving and sea-kayaking. And the fishing – as you’d expect around a rock in the middle of the ocean – is unbelievable.

The golf course is a wind-polished, nine-hole gem. I am competing in the two-day Cadbury Christmas Classic, normally contested only by locals (though visitors are welcome), given that there are several other events that appeal to your visiting golf type (*see panel on the next page*).

The course is located within a World Heritage site and is officially the oldest in Australia (*see panel on the previous page*). It winds through convict ruins, along a perilous coastline of pounding surf and on by Australia’s oldest cemetery. It’s like someone built a links at Port Arthur.

The internal par 4s and par 5s are

‘The rough is thick, grabby, witch-finger kikuyu. Become embedded and you’ll need a scythe not a 6-iron.’

THIS SPREAD AND NEXT PAGE: BOB DEWELZEN



How did they get here?

Norfolk was first settled by Polynesians in outrigger canoes who stayed about 500 years then left, nobody knows why. The second settlement began in March 1788 after First Fleet boat *Sirius* was sent from Sydney to feed the colony because our early settlers didn’t know how to eat kangaroo or oysters. A few years later *Sirius* was wrecked on the rocks. Chickens escaped. Today their ancestors run wild.

The third settlement was the convicts, the ‘worst of the worst’, sent to Norfolk if Port Arthur didn’t discourage them from being bad. Norfolk was Australia’s Devil’s Island. It was a brutal “place of the extremest punishment short of Death”, according to official memorandum. Men who were sentenced to death wept with joy. Magistrate and penal administrator John Price, the worst in a 30-year list of utter bastard commandants, used his first speech to tell the assembled prisoners: “You cowardly dogs, I will make you eat each other.”

Yet love found a way and the penal colony was shut down after most of the men, from the lowest convict up to the commandant himself, entered into mano-a-mano relationships. With more than a thousand men on a rock in the Pacific, it was any port in a storm. And with most of them walking around nude because their clothes had rotted off, religious types who happened upon the place were mortified, and lobbied for the island-prison’s closure.

In 1855 Queen Victoria gifted Norfolk to the Pitcairn Islanders, the descendants of Fletcher Christian’s mutineers who had put Captain Bligh in a longboat and made off with the *Bounty*. And from there the progeny of Tahitian babes and Pommy sailors created a version of paradise, a model of disciplined Christianity, and an anthropologist’s dream.

nice holes with an open, linky feel. You can bomb it out there. But it’s at the extremities where Norfolk has theatre. While it’s calm most of the time on Norfolk – the island has a sub-tropical climate and a latitude like Coffs Harbour’s – when Momma Nature gets jiggy, welts of surf-spume can whip across the course like salty horizontal rain.

The signature hole is the fourth/13th, a tricky par 3 to a postage-stamp green bordered by the ocean and rocks to the right, and a drop-off left. The best play is to fade the ball to the right half of the green.

Go a bit further right and you'll bounce down off the bank. Too far right, though, and you're into the surf. Miss the green left and you're down a slope and pitching blind back up. It's a pretty good par and is Index 1 from the tips.

The raised tee for the par-5 fifth/14th hole is surrounded by cobblestones and juts into the sea. Into a northerly it's a full three-shotter. With a southerly buster – and while it's mostly calm on Norfolk, the south wind can bust a cap in your bottom – you can long-bomb it. But there's a large bank splitting the hole and out-of-bounds all the way along the right. Shank your approach shot and you could be fetching your ball from the headstone of a

mutineer's relative. So tread lightly.

The tee of the eighth/17th is adjacent to Emily Bay and Lone Pine. The other pines are sparse and not much concern unless you hit directly into one and the ball stays up among the stiff, upturned fronds. When the wind blows after a period of calm, locals gather underneath as balls spill out like pine cones.

The rough is thick, grabby, witch-finger kikuyu through which greens staff mow paths to ease cart movement. Hit into it and you'll either get the mother of all flier lies with the ball perched up like a ping-pong ball. Become embedded, however, and you'll need a scythe not a 6-iron. There's out-of-bounds a fair way around,

and eskies full of beer dot the course like blue oases. Locals will tell you of many a round that began brightly but which mutinied because of said bounty (ha!).

Outside competition times, etiquette is as laidback as the whole island. Locals play social rounds barefoot and bare-chested, in groups of how ever many they like. Some may even play nude like their convict forebears. We might never know.

We see a bloke in a Parramatta footy shirt with a pretty fair swing. It's Darren Anderson, who's been club champion every year from 1994 to 2009, and who three years running, '95-'97, beat all-comers – pros and amateurs – in the club's four-round pro-am, the Hardy's Wine Classic. He'll shoot 5-under today and not win the nett.

The 18th is a strong, 185-metre par-3 upon which you'll need to land – there's no roll up through the kike here. The hole heads straight back to the clubhouse, a heritage-listed building that used to be the chief magistrate's residence. Today, from its lovely verandah, drinkers dish out advice to their mates.

We enter scores into GolfLink (yes, it works on Norfolk) and find more people at the presentations than played in the comp. This is the Saturday night norm at NIGC. Unlike many clubs in your metropolitan centres, where a sprinkling of members and the last group in attend presentations, Norfolk's clubhouse is where people head to.

"Norfolk Island Golf Club women are really good looking and great golfers and great fun!" writes a local girl on a beer coaster before handing it to the journo hoping he'll spread the love. Too easy. The girls are as raucous as the fellows. They roar with laughter and rib each other, and drink beer from the bottle. Fletcher Christian would have approved. He may even have been enchanted.

The presentation winds up (my 36 points isn't close to winning a ball) amid laughter, beer and banter, and you muse that there's plenty to like about Norfolk Island and its fine little golf course. It's certainly different – but in a really good way. Like the whole place, really. ●



Getting there

Fly
Norfolk Air (norfolkair.com, 1800 612 960) flies from Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane several times a week.

Stay here
Governor's Lodge Resort Hotel (governorslodge.nf, +67 23 24400) has comfortable cabins and is centrally located.

Drive
Car hire can be found for about \$30 a day. Often your accommodation comes with a vehicle. Check out Travel Info norfolkisland.com.au

Eat here
Sunset "fish fries" are an island tradition and are held twice weekly at Puppy's Point. Trumpeter fish is the island speciality. Several fine restaurants dot the island. Try Barney Duffey's Charcoal Grill (+67 23 22365) and Hilli's Wine Bar & Cafe (+67 23 24270). Check out the Cyclorama next door for the island's history in half-an-hour.

Deals
For Norfolk Island travel tips, package deals and more, consider contacting Oxley Travel at oxleytravel.com.au or by phoning 1800 671 546.



Five majors

Along with the Cadbury Christmas Classic in December (usually for locals, though visitors are welcome), Norfolk Island Golf Club holds five major tournaments:

● **February: Air NZ Veterans** – Three-round tournament for over-40s with three

age divisions.

● **March/April: Air Menzies International** – Two-round Stableford event over Easter during the island's best weather.

● **June: Bounty Tournament** – Two-round strokeplay event held on Bounty Day, the island's national holiday.

● **August: Hardy's Wines Golf Classic** – The highlight of Norfolk's golf calendar. PGA pros from Australia and New Zealand compete with local and overseas entries over four rounds, the last on Friday.

● **November: The Governor's Cup** – A three-day pairs event that combines two-ball best-ball Stableford, two-person ambrose and two-ball aggregate Stableford.