

DESTINATIONS

ACTIVE & ADVENTURE | AUSTRALIA

Q&A

RAY MEARS, TV ADVENTURER AND BUSHCRAFT EXPERT

INTERVIEW BY Katie McGonagle

Q. As someone who's travelled extensively in Australia, where do you recommend for those who haven't been before?

A. If someone's going to Australia for the first time, I would say go to Kangaroo Island and the west coast. You'll get to see whale sharks, quokkas, kangaroos and koalas. You have the diversity of the marine ecosystem and a fantastic collection of Australian flora and fauna. The west has that really wild feel; it's like a microcosm of Australia.

Q. Audley Travel has included Australia in its 'alternative safaris' collection – do you think it has similar appeal?

A. I have guided safaris in Africa and as people get more experienced, they start to gravitate to places where the wildlife is more complex or harder to spot, and Australia is one of those places. The wildlife is staggering. Even the history of the naturalists who went there is amazing, as wildlife and history in Australia are very closely linked. Kangaroo Island was named by Matthew Flinders, one of our greatest explorers, and you can close your eyes and imagine what it was like for them. You feel a respect for nature which is very hard to find anywhere else.

Q. What makes Kangaroo Island so memorable for you?

A. I was in Kangaroo Island two weeks after the fires [in 2020]. The western half is all national parks, and I'd been there three



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RAY'S TOP TIP

Even if you don't have much time, it's easy to add a short trip to places like Ningaloo Reef or the Flinders Mountains, where the wildlife is very accessible

years earlier when it was dense forest, so it was moving to go back and see burned-out pine trees up to the sand dunes; the head ranger told me wildlife had been sheltering on the Remarkable Rocks. But even by then, the native trees that have adapted to this environment were already bouncing back, and the recovery since has been phenomenal. It's a great place if you like birds too – we saw beautiful glossy black cockatoos with vermilion and lemon-yellow plumage. They're not easy to find but they're real stars to look out for as a naturalist.

Q. What were your highlights in Western Australia?

A. Ningaloo Reef – every morning while filming, we would drive along the coast to see bustards and other birds, plus the marine life is incredible. A drift dive there is like a conveyer belt of wildlife, and it's the only place I've been

where you can also snorkel on a drift and still see everything you would see diving. If you've got a family where the children can't yet dive, you can have that experience together. It blew my socks off. The Kimberley is also really special – my love affair for Australia began in the 1980s with two places that really drew me: the Top End and the Kimberley. You have to commit enough time to slow down and explore. If you rush the Kimberley, you will miss it. I travelled with the traditional owners who have custodianship – they don't own the land but they belong to the land – and they know the stories associated with the sacred status of that country.

Q. What tips do you have for an adventure trip around Australia?

A. Travel with a guide – the guides I have worked with on Kangaroo Island are world-class. When you're going so far, having a good



PICTURE: Tourism Australia

guide enables you to get straight to the things you want to see. And if you have the chance, sleep in a swag under the stars and wake up to the sunrise. The swag

[a tent-sleeping bag combination] is a part of Australian culture, and even if you don't sleep, you'll look up at a billion stars and find the country has seeped into you in a different way. There's hope to be found in these areas of true wilderness – they are pristine places that remind us what the world was once like and what we might one day get back to. **TW**

BOOK IT

Audley Travel offers a 20-day tailor-made Wine & Wildlife – Australia's Ultimate Safari. It includes spotting wallabies and koalas on Kangaroo Island, fur seals in Flinders Chase National Park, quokkas on Rottnest Island, and whale sharks and humpback whales at Ningaloo Reef. Prices start from £10,755, including flights, transfers, car rental and excursions. audleytravel.com/australia