

Water wonderland

With a bay twice the size of Sydney Harbour, the largest sand dunes in the southern hemisphere and the freshest seafood this side of the sea bed, **Port Stephens** offers the ultimate coastal escape far from the stresses of city life.

Story: Michelle Meehan



Photo: Adobe Stock

Australians aren't short of options when it comes to planning their next beachside holiday. With almost 37,000 kilometres of coastline and more than 10,000 beaches along its shores, there are countless postcard perfect spots to soak up some sun or take a dip in crystal clear waters.

But while the white sands of the Whitsundays may grab the glamour spot and Bondi's iconic strip is on almost every

traveller's bucket list, there's no doubting the picturesque pull of Port Stephens.

A blue water wonderland located around two-and-a-half hours' drive north of Sydney, Port Stephens has been blessed by some of the most spectacular landscapes Mother Nature has to offer.

From densely forested national parks to the azure blue waters of the bay, not to mention the long sandy stretches of 26 beautiful beaches, Port Stephens is a nature lover's paradise.

But there's much more to the coastal region than just the scenery, with five-star accommodation, gourmet restaurants and edge-of-your-seat adventures all helping to entice more than two million visitors to Port Stephens each year.

So, whether you want to drop in for just a few nights or settle down forever, we've put together a guide to a few of the best ways to stay, play and savour the wonderful experiences on offer in Port Stephens. ▷

PORT STEPHENS

Where to play

■ SET SAIL FOR ADVENTURE

With a 98,000-hectare Marine Park and a bay twice the size of Sydney Harbour, it's little wonder so many of Port Stephen's unmissable experiences happen on the water.

For those visiting the Bay from May through to November, jumping on board the deck of a local catamaran and heading out into open water to check out the annual whale migration would have to be the activity of choice. Around 30,000 of the world's humpback whale population pass the Port Stephens coastline each year as they head north to warmer waters to breed. The whales make the 10,000km journey from Antarctica during May to August, returning south with their newborn calves between August and November. Nelson Bay is home to a number of cruise operators including Imagine Cruises, Envision Cruises and Moonshadow-TQC Cruises.

Each offer a range of whale watching cruises, with different vessels providing unique experiences for those on board. Moonshadow-TQC Cruises has a fleet of seven vessels, from the 18m MV Spirit of Port catamaran, complete with its own water slide into the ocean, to the 30m Hinchinbrook Explorer Supercat, which was originally designed to operate in the Southern Ocean waters of the Great Australian Bight.

■ WALKING TRAILS AND TRACKS

If exploring the natural environment by foot is more what you're after, Port Stephens is the perfect place to visit, with numerous walking trails and tracks through the Tomaree National Park, a 2310-hectare area of dense bushland that stretches along the coastline from the south head of Port Stephens (Tomaree Head) to Birubi Point.

The 2.2km return trek to the Tomaree Head Summit involves climbing plenty of steps but is well worth the effort,



Photo: JSpencer OEH



Photo/copyright: Malcolm Nobbs

delivering panoramic views of Yacaaba Head, Cabbage Tree, Boondelbah and Broughton Islands from the north platform and Zenith, Wreck and Box Beaches, Fingal Island and Point Stephens Lighthouse to the south.

On your way back down take a detour along the Fort Tomaree walk to check out the historic gun emplacements built in 1941 as part of Australia's World War Two east coast defence system.

■ LET'S GO ADVENTURES – DIVE NELSON BAY

Snorkelling and scuba diving tours offer other great options for those keen to get up close and personal with the wondrous marine life off the coast of Port Stephens.

Let's Go Adventures – Dive Nelson Bay is Port Stephens' longest established

diving centre, located on the waterfront at d'Albora Marina. Its certified diving instructors lead groups on a range of underwater adventures for beginners right through to more experienced divers, including guided shore snorkelling and snorkel boat trips to areas including Fingal Island, Boondelbah Island, Cabbage Tree Island and Little Wreck.

The centre also operates both shore and boat-based scuba dives throughout the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park, visiting areas off Broughton Island and around various local shipwreck sites.

Those wanting to walk away with something more than an unforgettable memory can also explore the variety of certified diving courses on offer, or obtain their boat or Jet Ski licence.

www.letsgoadventures.com.au



Photo/copyright: Malcolm Nobbs

■ ON THE BEACHES

Visitors keen to keep their feet on dry land are also well catered for in Port Stephens. If you're looking to spread out a towel and soak up some sun you'll be spoiled for choice with 26 beaches along the coastline, but if you really want to make the most of the sandy shorelines why not head out amongst the dunes for a day of quad biking, four-wheel driving and sand boarding fun.

Numerous operators offer guided tours through the Worimi Conservation Lands, which encompass the largest moving coastal sand dunes in the southern hemisphere.

This includes the award-winning Sand Dune Adventures, which is owned and operated by the Worimi Local Aboriginal

Land Council, as well as Port Stephens 4WD Tours, which is also in the running for honours at the 2018 Australian Tourism Awards in March.

Port Stephens 4WD Tours' Beach and Dune Tour offers the perfect snapshot of this amazing landscape, letting you explore the 2500 hectares of sand dunes that make up Stockton Bight on a fully guided tour in a purpose-built 4WD vehicle.

■ DOLPHIN SWIM AUSTRALIA

While the cruise operators also offer a range of dolphin watching tours, there's no better way to meet some of Port Stephens' resident dolphin population than by actually being in the water with them.

Based on a world-first concept, Dolphin Swim Australia is NSW's first and only permitted wild dolphin swim. Wearing a mask, snorkel and harness, swimmers hold on to a rope stretched between the two bows of a large catamaran as it moves slowly along. When dolphins choose freely to bow-ride alongside the vessel, swimmers find themselves surrounded by the graceful marine mammals, with the ability to view them at close range under the water.

Make sure to go to bed early as the entire experience takes around four hours and you will be setting off before sunrise to head out into the open waters off Nelson Bay where several different species of dolphins can be found.

<http://www.dolphinsswimaustralia.com.au/>

PORT STEPHENS

Where to eat

All these activities are sure to help you work up an appetite and there's certainly no shortage of venues to grab a bite to eat around Port Stephens. With a flourishing local fishing industry, the area offers a gastronomic gold mine for seafood lovers who can enjoy some of the freshest fish, prawns, oysters, lobsters and crabs, straight from the trawler to the table.



■ THE ANCHORAGE

Sporting a new range of food offerings following its recent award winning redevelopment, The Anchorage boasts two waterfront restaurants, each with a distinct yet delicious offering. With a more casual setting for a leisurely breakfast, long lunch or evening celebration, The Galley Kitchen features cuisine that celebrates the region's local produce. The resort's premium restaurant, The Wild Herring, offers a modern Australian seafood experience complemented by the magical views over the marina and bay. Head chef Michael Jenkins has constructed a mouth-watering menu, perfectly balanced to savour what's on offer locally, while enjoying the relaxed environment and stunning scenery.

■ RICK STEIN AT BANNISTERS

Initially created by the UK celebrity chef for the original Bannisters Resort at Mollymook on the South Coast, the signature restaurant has now found a home at the Bay thanks to the recent opening of Bannisters Port Stephens.

Rick worked closely with head chef, Mitchell Turner, to design a menu featuring local king prawns, sand whiting, snapper and blue eye trevalla as well as fabulous Sydney rock oysters from local growers. The menu includes his signature Fruits de mer platter, oysters Charentaise, fish and shellfish soup with rouille, Madras curry of blue eye trevalla with tomato and tamarind, as well as his ever-popular fish pie.

■ SOLDIERS POINT MARINA

Water views are also on the menu at the Soldiers Point Marina. While it offers award winning, first-class berthing facilities for boat owners, the marina is also home to a sumptuous selection of dining options including The Point Restaurant and The Deck Café and Waterfront Bar.

With breathtaking views of the stunning Soldiers Point waterways, an enviable location to watch the sun go down and menus that make the most of local ingredients, the marina's two dining venues offer the perfect place to sit back and relax on the balcony or the deck. They serve breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week.



■ TAILOR MADE FISH FARMS

If you're interested in learning more about where the food on your plate actually comes from, make sure you check out Tailor Made Fish Farms at Bobs Farm.

The internationally-recognised local business has been undertaking land-based intensive aquaculture farming since 1999, producing commercial quantities of barramundi and pioneering new technology to create Australia's first successfully integrated aquaculture and hydroponics system, which re-uses nutrient rich wastewater from the fish production facility to grow vegetables and herbs. Visitors can learn more about the innovative process during the guided

tours, which run twice a day seven days a week. The educational experience can also be combined with a mouth-watering visit to the on-site Cookabarra Restaurant, which offers a selection of modern Australian and Mediterranean cuisine including the freshest farm to table experience you could ask for thanks to their selection of home-grown barramundi dishes.

■ MOONSHADOW-TQC CRUISES

If you're looking for venues with spectacular water views, you can't really beat being on the water itself! Port Stephens has a range of dinner cruise options, including the popular two-and-a-half hour twilight offering by Moonshadow-TQC Cruises. Indulge in

mouth-watering local seafood, Hunter meats and vegetarian options while watching the sun go down across the tranquil waters of Nelson Bay.

■ FOOD FESTIVALS

The region celebrates its coastal cuisine every August with the Love Sea Food Festival, a weekend-long extravaganza of live cooking demonstrations, signature dinners, seafood lunch and dinner specials, oyster tasting and shucking. Tastes at the Bay runs in November, tantalising the tastebuds with a combination of fresh food, fine wine and cool jazz in Nelson Bay's CBD.

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To find out more about what's on offer across Port Stephens, head to www.portstephens.org.au

PORT STEPHENS

Where to stay

Look up any travel accommodation site and you'll find hundreds of listings for places to stay in Port Stephens. From highrise hotels to quaint bed and breakfasts, there's something to suit every taste and budget. But if you're looking to splash out on something with a little more wow factor, there are a few standout destinations to consider.



■ THE ANCHORAGE AT CORLETTE

If bayside water views are more what you're after, it's hard to go past The Anchorage. Combining five-star luxury with an absolute waterfront location, the idyllic Hampton-style resort is the perfect place to unwind.

The Anchorage has recently undergone a multimillion-dollar refurbishment to lift its premium offering to even greater heights, updating its luxurious range of spacious rooms and mezzanine-style loft suites, and adding even more guest facilities including the indulgent on-site day spa, which offers spa and steam facilities, two pools (including an adults-only infinity pool), and a fitness centre with one of the

world's best views to work out to.

For a truly decadent stay, why not splash out on the self-contained two-storey Anchorage Villa situated at the far end of the resort on Corlette Point, which includes two sumptuous king-size bedrooms with ensuites and 180-degree views over the picturesque marina from the balcony. There's also outdoor dining for 10 people, alfresco cabana lounges and an opulent six-person spa built into the shore.

www.anchorageportstephens.com.au

■ BANNISTERS PORT STEPHENS

Another resort that has relaunched with a multimillion-dollar new lease on life is Bannisters. A \$7 million overhaul of

the former Salamander Shores resort has created a luxurious offering on the beachfront at Soldiers Point, which retains the retro architecture of the original resort reinvented in four-star style.

The hotel features 80 rooms across four levels including four luxury suites and a penthouse. Fifty rooms have bay views over the Karuah River, with the remaining rooms offering forest and bushland outlooks.

The Penthouse represents the pinnacle of coastal living on the Soldiers Point peninsula, offering a bespoke combination of luxury and comfort with a beautiful interior design that opens out onto a shared terrace with the best views in the Bay. The communal facilities also make the most of the unimpeded water views, with a lofty, double-height lobby



that opens on to a huge infinity pool with pool bar.

www.bannisters.com.au/port-stephens

■ OAKS PACIFIC BLUE RESORT SALAMANDER BAY

Set amongst a lush, tropical landscape, the Oaks Pacific Blue offers the typical range of facilities you'd expect to find at an upmarket destination, from a day spa and gymnasium to a Japanese steam room, heated lap pool and tennis courts.

What isn't exactly standard fare is the resort's outdoor swimming pool. A colossal lagoon-style offering flanked on either side by the resort's self-contained units, it stretches from almost one end of Oaks Pacific Blue to the other and wears the crown of being Australia's largest

swimming pool. The resort offers ground floor units with direct swim-out access from their alfresco areas, while first floor units enjoy stunning views over its expanse.

www.oakshotels.com/en/oaks-pacific-blue-resort

■ FAMILY FAVES AND HOLIDAY PARKS

Backing directly onto the famous sand dunes, The Retreat Port Stephens offers different accommodation options for both families and couples. Their cabins, bungalows or duplexes are all self contained, complete with kitchen, dining area and outdoor settings. There is also a wide selection of holiday parks operated by Port Stephens Council - Halifax Holiday Park at Nelson Bay, Shoal

Bay Holiday Park, Fingal Bay Holiday Park, Thou Walla Sunset Retreat at Soldiers Point and Port Stephens Treescape, which is nestled on the edge of the magnificent One Mile Beach and Samurai Beach sand dunes. Perfect for families travelling on a budget, the five award-winning parks offer a range of accommodation options from camping and caravan sites to self-contained cabins and even deluxe three-bedroom villas.

While significantly lower price tags provide a finish that is more everyday basics than luxury living, you won't have to compromise when it comes to location, as you will enjoy some of the best pieces of real estate in the area.

<https://www.portstephens.nsw.gov.au/play/tourism/beachside-holiday-parks>