



# a world apart

Just minutes from Phillip Island by air, another life awaits you. Cassy Polimeni spends a morning immersed in history and nature on the untouched paradise of French Island

**N**othing beats the feeling of arriving by helicopter. As our chopper descends into an empty field on ruggedly beautiful French Island, I feel part rock star, part explorer. The seamless take off, propeller soundtrack and incredible fishbowl views of Western Port Bay from my seat beside the pilot add up to an experience fit for rock royalty, but landing in the secluded natural wonderland of French Island makes it easy to feel as if you're one of a lucky few to set foot here.

An accident of geography made French Island what it is today. While Phillip Island was linked to the mainland town of San Remo by bridge in 1940, French Island's coastline lies a little further out of reach and even today is accessible only by ferry or air. These days Phillip Island receives 3.5 million visitors annually, while French Island remains relatively isolated – and that's the way they like it.

French Island has no mains water, power lines or medical services. Two thirds of the island is national park, and it is home to the world's densest and most disease free koala population – so it's the perfect place to catch a glimpse of these unique critters in their natural habitat.

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Fourth generation islander Lois Airs greets us on the impromptu airstrip and takes us on a tour of the 20-hectare farm that has been in her family for over 100 years. Lois and her husband Keith are keen local historians and have conducted tours of French Island since 1980. Accompanying Lois today are Sharon Good and Linda Bowen who assist her on tours and volunteer with Landcare in their spare time to help preserve French Island. Each has a different story about how they came to call the island home, but one thing links all three women: their fierce love of this place and all it represents.

We spot our first koala slumbering in a eucalypt just metres from where we touched down. Koalas sleep for over 20 hours a day so once they've found a comfy tree they tend to stay put, allowing volunteers to tag their favourite trees with yellow markers in the morning and revisit them through the day.

We make our way towards the rusted red remnants of Bayview Chicory Kiln. Built in the 1890s, it is now a museum and tearoom for weary travellers, including passing cyclists, walkers and campers.

Vintage bottles of coffee and chicory essence are assembled on every surface, along with newspaper articles about Lois' ancestors. Lois' great uncle Ed Thompson was a chicory farmer who invented a device for spreading sliced chicory for drying. Lois points out the remains of his Macguyver-like contraption housed in a crumbling mezzanine, as we take our seats in the tearoom.

We tune into Lois' encyclopaedic local knowledge over her trademark homemade scones. They are light, fluffy and generously proportioned – truly some of the best I've ever eaten. We smear them with locally-made blackberry and pear and ginger jam, and wash them down with coffee and chicory as Lois shares stories from her childhood, like the time prisoners escaped from McCloud prison farm and hid out on the island, thrilling local children and terrifying their parents. The former prison now offers accommodation – from basic but atmospheric cells with communal facilities for those on a budget, to more upmarket guesthouse rooms housed in the former officers' quarters ([mcleodecofarm.com](http://mcleodecofarm.com)).

Filled to the gills with scone dough and local knowledge, we head outside to try our luck at another koala encounter before it's time to fly back to Phillip Island. The stillness and simplicity of this place has a soothing effect and a sense of calm settles over our little group. I can imagine holing up here to write a novel. We haven't been here long, but already the rest of the world feels very, very far away. **DA**

## NEED TO KNOW

Phillip Island Helicopters offer tours of French Island starting from \$295 per person based on two passengers travelling. Flying time is approximately 10 minutes each way and tours run approximately 2.5 hours including morning or afternoon tea. To book, contact Phillip Island Helicopters on (03) 5956 7316 or [info@phillipislandhelicopters.com.au](mailto:info@phillipislandhelicopters.com.au)

For more information on Lois Airs and her tours of French Island, visit [frenchislandtours.com.au](http://frenchislandtours.com.au)

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK