



There's nothing 'off' about Australia's offseason

[By Robert Selwitz]

American summers and Australian winters make a great combination.

Australia's climate is virtually the mirror image of North America's. That means June 21 is the shortest day of the year, and the winter it ushers in brings its coolest time. But - and it's a big but - cool doesn't mean cold. Snow almost never falls there, and temperatures are truly temperate, usually in the 50- to 60-degree range.

Therefore, if you can choose the time of your Australian venture, opt for cool in order to enjoy the many advantages wintertime Down Under has over its summer.

For starters, Australia's unique animal life - the single-best reason to make the long trip - spends much more of winter basking in the sun rather than hiding from it. And the creatures you didn't come to see - including Australia's incredible diversity of poisonous snakes and spiders - tend to stay out of sight much more in winter than summer.



Also, for those who are determined to visit overpriced and overcrowded Ayers Rock, mild winter temperatures make the experience much more bearable, rather than during the midsummer meltdown.

Furthermore, a cool and crisp climate is much more conducive to nature walks, city treks or car touring than sultry, often-triple-digit summers. And Australia's diverse culture scene, including its fine opera, theater

offerings and concerts, are in full bloom during its winter.

Kangaroo Island, a short flight south of Adelaide in South Australia, is a prime example of why winter visits are best. Separated from the mainland for more than 9,000 years, what is often described as "Australia's Australia" features kangaroos, koalas, wallabies, wombats and echidnas in a pure wilderness state. With the assistance of a savvy guide and driver, you can get a remarkable close-up view of these animals on their home turf.

A guide for Exceptional Kangaroo Island Expeditions said, "Here you see them living their lives, foraging for food, looking after their young and just resting. They're not afraid of humans, which, of course, have only been here since the 1830s. They've also been spared some of the predators introduced onto the mainland by overseas explorers and settlers. Therefore these animals are content to be themselves, and not hide from visitors who approach within reasonable distances."



The island also features several amazing geological appeals, including Admiral's Arch, a natural bridge formed by erosion that is home to huge numbers of seals, and the aptly named Exceptional Rocks, bizarre rock formations that are a photographer's dream subjects.

Do note that despite heavy promotion to the contrary, Kangaroo Island should not be visited as a day trip. Because the land-sea journey from Adelaide involves a four-hour-plus, mind-bending bus and ferry combination in each direction, one-day excursions leave very little on-island time to actually experience the wildlife. Instead, contact Regional Air Express and take the under-an-hour (and not much more expensive than the bus and ferry) flight. Match this with a quality jeep or van tour, and you're ready for something truly special.

Cool weather also makes other game reserve experiences more pleasant. For example, in the Bonorong Park Wildlife Center near Hobart, Tasmania, its Tasmanian devils, kangaroos, wombats, wallabies and echidnas are definitely more likely to appear in full view.

Cool climates are also a plus when visiting historic sites such as Tasmania's Port Arthur, an hour's drive from Hobart. From 1830-1877 it served as Australia's maximum-security prison compound. Built to restrain those who committed crimes en route to Australia, plus those who committed serious crimes after arrival, Port Arthur today consists of dozens of structures ranging from former cellblocks, a commissary, schools, homes of administrators and doctors, and an on-site insane asylum. Located on an island (attached to mainland Tasmania by a narrow bridge and road), Port Arthur allowed for no escapes.

Also here were inmate trade schools, all part of a system where those proving themselves worthy became eligible to "graduate" from the prison to become an indentured servant. Indeed, many inmates ultimately worked their



LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

way out of prison and back into regular society. The prison camp's value ultimately wound down after the 1850s Victoria gold rush when, it was found, growing numbers of poor U.K. residents committed petty crimes in order to be transported to Australia's newly found gold fields.

Tasmania itself is a wonderful slice of nature, full of accessible and remote wilderness that will please the most demanding outdoor enthusiasts. And Hobart, Tasmania's capital, features a gorgeous waterfront setting, excellent cuisine and the boisterous Saturday-morning Salamanca market, featuring a tantalizing array of local crafts and produce.



Cooler weather also benefits those taking mainland car excursions. For instance, driving Victoria's Great Ocean Road - which extends for 66 miles from Torquay west of Melbourne to Warrnambool - is simply more pleasant if you aren't being heat-seared every time you stop to view the remarkable scenery.

Highlights include the Twelve Apostles - erosion-carved pillars and arches in Port Campbell National Park. Other musts include the Blowhole, which produces great water sprays, the uniquely carved Grotto rock formation and the former London Bridge, the remnants of what actually resembled a bridge until 1990, when its eroded arch crashed into the churning waters.

Eight miles west of Warrnambool lies Tower Hill Game Reserve, located in the crater of an extinct volcano. Cool afternoons are the best time to view its emus, koalas and kangaroos. Aboriginal guides teach you about Aboriginal culture, crafts and herbal medicines.

Operated by Aboriginals, this is also a fine spot for purchasing local food, ties, scarves and complex works of art. Also emphasized is the fact that here, as in many other less-known Australian locations, you can encounter natives and experience their culture. As one guide noted, "This site is a good example of the fact that you don't have to travel all the way to Ayer's Rock in order to understand and appreciate Australia's original people and their cultures."

Another Victoria highlight is Ballarat, the beautifully restored town near the extraordinary gold finds that set off the great 1851 Australian gold rush. Just five minutes away lies Sovereign Hill, a re-created town, complete with an intriguing evening sound and light show entitled "Blood on the Southern Cross" that brings the gold-rush days to life. The show is best enjoyed after a day that should include visiting the structures, doing actual gold panning and touring a once-functioning gold mine.



Nearby lies another fine animal-experience site, Ballarat Animal Park. Here, owner Greg Parker houses his private animal collection including kangaroos, koalas - which visitors are allowed to handle - and wombats.

Cooler weather is also prime time for sampling Australia's performing arts. Melbourne boasts its Victorian Arts Centre, home to a fine symphony, theaters and productions by Opera Australia, which splits its time between Sydney and Melbourne.

Melbourne, well regarded as Australia's culinary capital, also boasts wonderful museums including the National Gallery of Victoria: The Ian Potter Centre for Australian

Art in Federation Square and the National Gallery of Art International.

Cool weather is also ideal for strolling Melbourne's intriguing downtown streets and arcades, and wending through Brunswick and Smith Streets, heart of the city's bohemian district and full of intriguing boutiques and dining choices.

Temperate times are also prime times for Sydney's art scene. Its iconic performing arts center features the opera house where Opera Australia performs, several theaters and the home of the Sydney Symphony.

In this great walking city, non-steamy times allow for comfortable ferry harbor crossings, strolls through the older Rocks district and a free walk (not the wildly overpriced bridge climb) across Sydney's Harbour Bridge. It offers unparalleled views of the city, Opera House and waterways.

IF YOU GO

Langham Hotel, Melbourne - melbourne.langhamhotels.com.

Henry Jones Hotel, Hobart - www.thehenryjones.com.

Hyatt Hotel, Adelaide - www.adelaide.hyatt.com.

Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney - www.fourseasons.com/sydney/.

Hilton Hotel, Sydney - www.hiltonsydney.com.au.

Exceptional Kangaroo Island tours - www.exceptionalkangarooisland.com.

Australian National Tourism - www.australia.com/.

Robert Selwitz is a freelance travel writer.