

DESTINATION AUSTRALIA

YORKE ON THE WILD SIDE

Christine McCabe

explores a slice of South Australia's coast that's refreshingly free of glitz

ON a map of South Australia, the Yorke Peninsula looks rather like the boot of Italy, albeit flat-footed, striding towards the distant Eyre Peninsula and the tuna barons of Port Lincoln.

An easy 90-minute drive from Adelaide to the upper peninsula, Yorke has long been a favourite South Aussie holiday playground refreshingly short on east coast-style flash and cash. The terrain is flat, dominated by vast golden fields of wheat and barley. There are no glamorous hotels and very few labrador-equipped Range Rovers plying the narrow country roads.

But history of the maritime and mining persuasions is thick on the ground. Copper was once the currency that lured intrepid adventurers; these days it's fish and crustaceans (including delectable blue swimmer crabs) and plump Cornish pasties, a lingering legacy of the miners who flocked here from England in the 19th century.

In the Cornish Kitchen bakery in downtown Moonta there's a photo of Greg Norman tucking into the local speciality, taking a break from designing his golf course for a planned residential development cuffing the white sand dunes of Port Hughes only minutes south of Moonta Bay.

Change, it seems, is as inevitable here as it is elsewhere along coastal Australia. Large holiday homes usurp ramshackle shacks; McMansions sprout like thistles in bare paddocks, their owners straining for a glimpse of the distant blue sea. Even so, this part of the upper Yorke Peninsula, the so-called Copper Triangle, incorporating Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina, remains a charmingly old-world holiday destination where days are whiled away in a rather Famous Five fashion: fishing, building sandcastles, messing about in boats. The flat coastline is punctuated here and there by long, sun-bleached timber jetties. For South Australians these elegant structures are as redolent of childhood summer holidays as running through the sprinkler or slurping on a Snip (a large ice lolly that seems to have gone the way of the dodo).

Once a hive of export activity, when ketches and windjammers queued to take on board grain and copper bound for Blighty, today, in Moonta at least, the jetty is the preserve of the recreational angler bagging tommyes (ruff), whiting, snook and squid. My 11-year-old fishing-mad son is delighted to find almost an entire aisle of the small Moonta supermarket devoted to rod and tackle. In the nearby bait shop he asks the lad behind the counter for a bit of crabbing advice and we leave laden with nets, extra rope and bait (tommyes for the crabs, cockles for the fish). And instructions to buy a rake, apparently an effective way to harvest blue swimmers from the sand (as a gardener, this is something I feel I may be able to master).

Then it's off to the Moonta jetty ("down beach" in Cornish settler parlance), a partic-



New angle: Clockwise from left, the Yorke Peninsula is a popular spot for fishing; the old mining town of Moonta; Beach 24b; fields of golden grain; historic towns dot the peninsula

ularly fine structure with a dedicated swimming area. After patiently tending lines and nets for a couple of hours I am dispatched by sons numbers one and two and their nanna to procure pasties for lunch.

Fear not, angling gourmants. The Moonta pasty is nothing like the drab cardboard-flavoured snack peddled elsewhere. Even the local tourist office has its own ideas on the subject: pastry must be stretchy (use lard), meat (preferably chuck or skirt steak) should have a little fat and be finely cut, not minced, and vegetables (traditionally potato, turnip and onion) should be chipped and layered.

Carrot seems to have crept into the 21st-century version, and vegetables are no longer neatly layered, but even today the Moonta Cornish Pasty (or oggie) is joined at the top with a thick crimp. This served as a disposable handle for miners who were often dealing with chemicals and poisons and had no chance to wash their hands while underground. (It's also quite useful for small boys with bait-smelly mitts.)

The late 19th-century copper-mining boom that made Moonta a briefly prosperous town doesn't feel so very long ago as you wander the sleepy streets. The central township has been lovingly preserved, the relentless southern sun softened by the honey-coloured stone

pubs, shops and miners' cottages. The streets are broad with deep gutters and the town square, shaded by Moreton Bay figs, feels a little like similar colonial outposts in India.

Lying on the outskirts of town, the old mining complex consists of a maze of ruins, abandoned mine heads and tailings heaps. On weekends, Wednesdays and during school holidays a small train, staffed by volunteers, chugs through the rambling wildflower-strewn site where crumbling walls are stained verdigris by lingering copper-sulphate wounds and the ground is strewn with pistachio-green rocks.

Thousands of miners once lived in a shanty town on this site; disease was rife in the early days and hundreds of children, many the victims of typhoid, are buried in the Moonta cemetery.

The train tour takes an hour and our jovial guide is, of course, a self-described "mine" of information, explaining jiggling and smelting and alarming small children with Dickensian tales of the "picky boys", 10-year-old lads sorting ore for the princely sum of 11 pence a day.

A museum is housed in the handsome former model school while an old-fashioned sweet shop occupies the mine's post office. The nearby railway station is an architectural

gem, built in 1909 in federation style with ornate chimneys and staircases.

History buffs are well served on the upper Yorke, where great care has been taken to document the oft-forgotten utilitarian. There's a farm shed museum in Kadina (as well as a banking and currency museum) and a nautical museum in Wallaroo, where the almost 1km-long jetty is still used for loading grain and the deep-sea port serves as home to the Spencer Gulf prawn fleet.

The Wallaroo foreshore is a curious blend of the historic and industrial, handsome 19th-century buildings and a smelting chimney, enormous grain silos and the various attenuated bulk-loading accoutrements that span the jetty. (From here you can jump a ferry to the Eyre Peninsula, cutting hours off the regular road journey.)

The legacy of the brave copper miners and their families is celebrated every two years at Kenewek Lowender, the largest Cornish festival in the world, with events staged across Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina (the next is May 15-17, 2009).

The last time I visited the Yorke, many, many years ago when dodos roamed the earth, Snips were readily available and you weren't fined for using a sprinkler on a summer's day. I stayed in a very basic shack

in Port Broughton with an outdoor privy and a kerosene fridge.

This time I've upgraded to an uber-modern holiday house, Beach 24b, set on the outskirts of Moonta, a three-minute walk from the beach, amid a sea of television antennas that my boys mistake for ship masts when we first wend our way from the old town.

Slick and spacious with gleaming stainless steel kitchen, wall-mounted plasma telly and press-button everything, Beach 24b has a balcony at the rear to catch the morning sun and a large terrace out front with views to the sea, the perfect spot for sunbathers.

The upstairs master suite is enormous and there are two other bedrooms and a downstairs bunk room with a large garage and backyard where son No. 2 assembles his various rods and new crab nets.

If you can't be bothered cooking, try the newly opened Henry on George, occupying the old butcher's shop (coffee, decadent cakes and good baguettes courtesy of owners Ross and Sandy who also run The Miner's Couch antique shop in Kadina), the Cornish Kitchen (Ellen Street) for oggies and, for dinner, La Cantina at the jetty, where pizza, pasta and fritto misto make up for our poor catch. (There are also several seafood outlets so you can pretend you have caught your own.)

YORKE PENINSULA



ELSEWHERE ON YORKE

- Surf the southwest corner, where beach and reef breaks include the notorious Chinaman's. Some of the state's best diving is off the Yorke Peninsula. The Investigator Strait Maritime Heritage Trail features 26 shipwrecks dating from 1849.
- SA Fishing Adventures offers bespoke deep-sea fishing charters from Marion Bay to Wedge, Kangaroo, Thistle and Neptune islands. www.safishingadventures.com.au.
- For fishing charters from Port Hughes and Moonta Bay: www.a1fishing.com.au.
- Tour Yorke with the Adjahdura Mob based at Point Pearce. Half-day, one-day and extended itineraries available. tours@adjahdura.com.au.

Christine McCabe

But the best culinary advice I can give (and this is what I plan for our next visit) is to pack a rake, dredge for blue swimmers and then cook them simply, a la Maggie Beer, in seawater. An activity I imagine is well suited to dusk when the magic of the sun-kissed copper coast is most potent. On the beach near Beach 24b the scene is timeless, more Mediterranean than Australian.

An elderly couple recline in deckchairs to watch the sun set, dogs fossick amid a bank of seaweed thrown up against the low, crumbling cliffs, a fisherman, tinnie pulled up on the sand, cleans his catch while children make finishing touches to their castles of sand. All pausing, now and then, to gaze across the flat, copper-burnished sea, the undramatic but strangely beautiful prospect that South Australians treasure.

Christine McCabe was a guest of the South Australia Tourism Commission.

Checklist

Beach 24b sleeps up to 10 people. From \$220 a night; \$20 a night for each extra person. www.beach24b.com.au. General touring information: 1800 654 991; www.yorkepeninsula.com.au.

BLOOD AND SORROW

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and the appointment of 18 military historians, one for each bus. But there is still room for personal attention. Passengers who want to visit a specific cemetery to pay respects to a relative need only put their request and, in most cases, a visit can be arranged. Australians are buried in 523 cemeteries dotted through the battlefields and the neat cemeteries are a credit to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Travelling in an organised group is one way to see the battlefields but there are other options. Several companies based in the Somme or Flanders areas provide personally tailored tours in small groups. Many of the companies are British-based and are well versed in the interests of Australians.

People who want to make their own pilgrimage to the battlefields need to plan carefully. Allow five days to see the locations of the main battles, three in the Somme and two in Flanders. But it can be done in less; a daytrip from Paris is possible if you want to visit the grave of a relative in the Somme. The battlefields attract tourists year round but it is fairly bleak in winter, so the best time to visit is between March and November.

Hire car companies at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris provide battlefield maps and guidebooks, which are also available at many locations throughout the region. Mat McLachlan's *Walking with the Anzacs*, published by Hachette Australia earlier this year tells many of the stories of heroism and includes maps of battlefield sights and walks.

After driving north on the A1 for less than two hours, a good starting point is Peronne, where the *Historical de la Grande Guerre* (Great War) museum provides a handy overview of the years from 1914 to 1919. You'll see soldiers' uniforms, their weapons and the phases of the war, and there are detailed maps on sale at the foyer shop. These are useful because visiting many sites requires driving on country by-roads through villages so small they don't make it on to larger scale maps.

On the outskirts of Peronne is Mont St Quentin, site of a savage 1918 battle, now marked by the Australian 2nd Division memorial. A half-hour west of Peronne is Villers-Bretonneux, the little town Australian troops wrested from the Germans on the night of April 24-25, 1918. This was the turning point of the war, where the German spring offensive of 1918 was stopped. Many of the 2473 casualties from the battle are buried in the Adelaide cemetery outside Villers-



Hard times: Australian soldiers of the 45th battalion on the Western Front, c.1918

WESTERN FRONT



Bretonneux and Australians will be pleased to see how determinedly the locals maintain their gratitude to our soldiers. A sign in the Victoria school says: "Never Forget Australia." Above the school is an Australian museum.

The Australian War Memorial, a wall of sandstone etched with the names of 11,000 Australians with no known grave, is on the outskirts of Villers and is a must-see. Also within easy reach is Le Hamel, where Australian general John Monash scored the first of many triumphs with his 93-minute set-piece battle successfully using tanks for the first time, and Sully Le Sec, site of the 3rd Division memorial.

There is plenty of accommodation usually available at Amiens or Peronne. On your second day, head north towards Albert and Pozieres. This is hallowed Australian ground, for within a 2km triangle around the town our forces suffered 23,000 casualties — dead, wounded or missing — in 41 days. It was our greatest military tragedy.

The 1st Division memorial is on a hilltop overlooking these killing fields, which include the German stronghold, Moquet Farm, known to the Diggers as

Moo-Cow Farm. Nearby is Thiepval, site of the British war memorial. It has the names of 75,000 British soldiers who died without a known grave.

Just outside Albert is Dernancourt. Stand in the Communal Cemetery and Extension among the white headstones, and you look across the fields where the battle took place. A railway line runs on an embankment 100m away; it was here Stan McDougall ran with a Lewis gun in his hands, firing as the enemy stormed the line. The gun barrel got so hot it seared the flesh from his hand, but he kept going and won a VC.

A little further north is Bullecourt, where a bronzed Digger's hat on a plinth serves as a reminder of the two great battles here, including the first tank battle of the World War I. It was a failure but it provided many valuable lessons for the future.

Bullecourt also features an Australian museum, a collection of war souvenirs salvaged by former mayor Jean Letaille, who presides over his world in a Wallabies jumper. His collection may be a little hokey but it is fascinating.

On the third day, a drive east along the expressway, or the dead-straight Roman road, will take you towards the last battles of the war, including Montbrehan where 430 men died a month before the Armistice. This is as far as the Australians got as they pushed the enemy back towards Germany.

Outside the village is the Hill Top cemetery, where Private Joseph Taylor lies in the most eagerly Australian grave in the Somme. Next to him is an unknown soldier.

The battlefields of Flanders are three hours north in Belgium. It is best to allocate two days to see these areas, which featured mainly in the 1916-17 campaigns. This is where Australian troops were blooded — literally — in places such as Fromelles, an engagement stuffed up in its planning and execution,

where Australia suffered 5533 casualties in 24 hours.

In fields of mud and slush thousands of men on both sides simply disappeared. Last month, the remains of six Australians found in a mass grave were re-interred. At VC Corner, more than 400 Australians lie in a mass grave, the only cemetery without individual headstones.

Nearby is the Cobber memorial depicting a soldier carrying a wounded mate. Just up the road is the house where Hitler was billeted when he was a soldier in 1916.

Other sites in the region include the beautifully serene Toronto cemetery in Ploegsteert Wood, Hill 60 where tunnelers laid huge mines under German lines, Passchendaele, Polygon Wood, where the Australian 5th Division memorial is located, and the Tyne Cot cemetery.

Tyne Cot is the largest Allied cemetery with 11,953 graves and at its centre is the concrete blockhouse the Australians had to overcome to wrest the ground from the Germans.

An interpretive centre has been recently built at Tyne Cot. As sepia photographs of the men who died appear on a screen, the haunting voice of a woman gives their name, age and rank. It is profoundly moving.

A visit to Flanders is not complete without attending the last post ceremony at the Menin Gate, Ieper (or Ypres). This event has been held at the going down of the sun since 1928, interrupted only by the German occupation of Belgium during World War II. As the last rays of the sun shine through an arch of the memorial, it falls on an inscription in stone: "Here are recorded the names of officers and men who fell in the Ypres Salient but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death." There are 55,000 of them.

Mark Day was a guest of Qantas.

Checklist

Mark Day will be a leader of *The Australian's Our Other Anzac Day* tour of the Somme and Flanders starting in Paris on April 23 next year. This tour is sold out but names are being taken for a reserve list in case of cancellations. Phone: (02) 9319 3007. Bookings are being taken for another tour coinciding with the 90th anniversary of the Armistice on November 11, 2008. Two programs are offered: five days to the Somme from Paris for \$2495 a person, or 12 days Paris to London (including Flanders) for \$4495 a person. More: www.militaryhistorytours.com.au. For information on other tour programs or self-drive tours:

- www.battlefieldtours.com
- www.battlefields.co.uk
- www.belmoretravel.com.au

GOOD BILLETS FEW AND FAR BETWEEN

LONG-SUFFERING partners of military history buffs, be warned: if your loved one assures you that the trade-off for tramping around the Australian battlefields of the Somme region in northern France is fine food and exquisite accommodation, they are uninformed optimists or big fibbers.

Because this is farming France, not tourist France, and British and Australian battlefields are not especially popular with the locals. The result is that the flash digs and fine food are a bit light on.

Not that there is any shortage of places to stay. The big regional centre of Amiens has most of the standard chains. But out where the Australians fought, quality accommodation is sparse. The small town of Peronne, worth a visit for its terrific World War I social history museum, has a range of average hotels but don't expect memorable meals in the bistros around the square. The best hotel in nearby St Quentin, at least according to a US guidebook we once used, demonstrates that best has many meanings.

The Mercure, at the Peronne-Assevillers truck stop on the A29 freeway, offers easy access to all the important sites and will suit those who like to stay in the middle of nowhere. And while the people of Villers-Bretonneux, Australia Central on the Somme, are friendly to a fault, they do not offer anything interesting in the way of accommodation.

However, there are options for anybody who wants something a little out of the ordinary. The rooms in the 19th-century Chateau d'Omicourt, 15 minutes from Peronne, are spacious and elegantly appointed. But the chateau is as isolated as it is possible to be in Picardy (the turn in the village is easy to miss; so is the village) and even with the well-regarded La Flamme restaurant at nearby Roye, the nearest reliable source of week-round dinners is Peronne.

This makes the Le Macassar bed and breakfast in the village of Corbie the best bet for people who need to pacify partners who are not that interested in the difference between the Australian memorial at Hamel and the Newfoundland one at Beaumont-Hamel.

Here, Miguel de Lenos and Ian Nelmes have restored an old mansion in art deco style. The bedrooms are comfortable, beautiful and guaranteed to improve the mood of anybody out of sorts after a day touring sites of slaughter. The house is built around a courtyard garden, where de Lenos and Nelmes offer guests pre-dinner wine and cheese on sunny afternoons. And the sitting and dining rooms house a spectacular collection of art deco antiques and furniture.

The pair are good-natured hosts and great breakfast cooks. A stay with them should restore harmony in relationships where one partner is



Safe haven: Le Macassar at Corbie is a fine place to stay in the Somme

delighted to be close to Australian memorials at Villers-Bretonneux, Pozieres, Hamel and not all that far from Bullecourt. And where the other is relieved to stay somewhere civilised, with hosts who think the Somme is just a river.

Stephen Matchett

- www.chateau-omicourt.com
- www.lemacassar.uniquelhomestays.com

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