

**This is a great lark**

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I BET Captain Cook never had as much fun in his Endeavour as modern visitors to the Town of 1770 have on the bright pink LARC.

Yes, the good captain might have shot a bustard, thus giving the crew their first fresh meat in weeks and providing a ready-made name for the bay where he anchored. But could he make sail through the waters and then push the Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang button to transmogrify his craft into a land-based vehicle merely by lowering some wheels?

And was his crew as cheerful as the groups who regularly take the journey in the LARC – which stands for Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo – the most delectable of amphibious vehicles, to discover kangaroos on the beach and toboggan down the dunes of Middle Island?

If so, then like me he would never have wanted to leave. The Town of 1770, Cook's first stopping place in what 60 years later became the state of Queensland, is one of the country's most enticing places.

Bustard Bay, where the little village is situated, curves around in a perfect semi-circle.

Across the sandy flats that stretch from the town itself is the wilderness of Eurimbula National Park with long stretches of untouched beach, tropical rainforest and coastal mangroves.

The waters of the bay are clear and unpolluted, and as you chug across them to the shores of the national park you are very likely to be accompanied by a pod of curious bottle-nosed dolphins and even great turtles, although they slip silently away when the LARC hits shallow water and converts to a land vehicle.

The birdlife around here is prolific. From the LARC we saw sea eagles keeping watch in the trees. Brahminy kites circled

overhead and tiny honeyeaters made ferocious attacks on any bushes or trees in flower.

Along the beach, those who wanted to get out of the LARC and fossicked for shells, although as this is a national park the shells had to be left behind.

On the other hand, how often do you get to walk on a beach where the only footprints are your own?

Camping is allowed in the park, but as the only way of getting there is by a rough dirt track, the happy campers are few. As the kayakers and swimmers prefer the more settled side of the bay, you can feel a bit like Robinson Crusoe with the advantage of knowing a cuppa and biscuits are waiting for you back at the LARC.

It's not all driving along the beach and through the water, though, for the main destination is the old Bustard Head Lighthouse precinct, way up on top of the headland.

Along with all the others along the Queensland coast, it is no longer looked after by a gallant keeper. The cottage has been renovated, and it's possible to walk through the buildings and see an eclectic range of items from the past, including old sea charts and massive shark jaws.

Stuart and Shirley Buchanan live there now as permanent unpaid caretakers, and they are full of stories about the tragedies that occurred in the early days.

One of the most tragic tales was that of Kate Gibson.

One morning in 1877 she walked past her husband and four daughters, who were having breakfast, went outside and cut her throat.

And later, one of the daughters was drowned when a boat she was travelling in to Bundaberg overturned in a storm.

After such sad stories it was good to go out into the bracing weather and have all the cobwebs blown away, while meditating on what drew people to this remote site. For it is beautiful beyond compare, with a spectacular panorama of the coast and creeks.

After we left the Buchanans and drove down the hill, we lunched in a shaded grove of casuarinas overlooking Jenny Lind Creek, where none of us, sadly, sang like nightingales, but rather squealed with glee as we tobogganed down the sand cliffs.

This trip is a bargain for a day out that gives you a fantastic overview of the area. But the water adventures don't have to end there. Next day we joined Luke at the jetty, and set out in a flotilla of kayaks on a sunset tour to another isolated bay.

Then it was romping in the water for the energetic crowd of young tourists while we did some sedate beach-combing, and we finished up with some indefinable cask wine which was just perfect for pouring on to the sand and making red patterns.

It also made paddling back very hard work.

And so the days passed, with fantastic meals at places like The Deck Restaurant, where Belgian-born Fred Gabriels makes a splendid Flemish seafood stew called Waterzooi that had us coming back for more the next day.

We stayed as usual at the Beach Shacks, my favourite place in this area, with three retreating storeys of Balinese bungalows overlooking the quiet waters of The Inlet, wide verandas and day-beds, hammocks, and silken cushions everywhere to make you feel like royalty – without the slaves waving fans, for this is very much a DIY experience.

1770's sister town, Agnes Water, is where the real development is, for it has surf beaches rather than the bay.

But things are starting to smarten up at 1770, too, so if you like the comfortable, old-fashioned, laid-back holiday life, get there before it takes off and becomes an identical twin to Agnes.

Even if it does get modernised (read, ruined), there will always be the wonders of Eurimbula National Park, and the lighthouse, and the laconic lads who run the LARC.

It's the perfect place for a family holiday – as long as you take plenty of repellent for the sandflies.