

PEDAL POWER & QUOKKAS RULE ON ROTTNEST ISLAND

Toni Krasicki explores Rottneest Island in Western Australia.

Ever met a Perth native who has never been to Rottneest Island? Nope, neither have I.

You can call it a rite of passage, but a pilgrimage to 'Rotto' for the annual family summer holiday, a weekend away with friends, or schoolies week, is unquestionably a Western Australian tradition!

Whether you arrive by private boat, plane, helicopter or with one of the passenger ferries, as soon as you set eyes on this sandy low lying island fringed with swimming pool hued waters, you wished you'd packed more underwear.

Not that you need it. That is, whether you are a day-tripper or staying a week, the one thing you can't go without is a swimsuit. All that hot Western Australian sunshine and crystal clear sub tropical waters that the south-western corner of Australia is blessed with, can convert the most adamant non-swimmer into a water babe.

Sitting just 18km west of Fremantle, the island sees up to 500,000 visitors annually (and that's probably not counting all those arriving under their own steam).

As you'd expect, school holidays, especially in summer, are exceptionally busy, as are weekends. Actually I don't know when Rotto has any down time, the place is popular in winter too, sporting a busy event calendar.

My partner and I arrive for the day, leaving on the 'once daily' departure from Perth City at 8am. If you've never been on, or haven't seen much of the Swan River, it's a smart way to combine a river cruise with a ferry trip. However, it does take nearly two hours on this particular Sunday to get to Fremantle, as we have to slow down to a crawl several times for sailing lessons and kayak races.

The Swan River actually feels more harbour than river during much of the

journey, but it's worth taking the Perth/Fremantle leg at least one way for just the cruise through Fremantle Port that's home to massive cargo carriers and tankers and enormous machinery. Actually cruising out to the island from Fremantle is like meandering through a ship parking lot. Great rusting metal hulks bob at anchor waiting for their next gig or port of call.

When on Rotto, do as the human locals do, and get around by bike. If you are someone like my partner who hasn't been on a bike for 20 years, make friends with the saddle, because the best of the island is outside of Settlement – the main hub.

Rotto operates like a well-oiled machine. To save time, passengers pre-purchase bike hire and collect bikes, helmets and pre-booked snorkelling gear from crew on the pier at disembarkation. There are also lockers where, for a small fee, you can store stuff you don't need while you trek around the island.





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To get us started we take a two and a half hour bike tour run by Two Feet and a Heartbeat. When we visit in March, it's a new addition to the island's activity portfolio, so we are the only ones on the tour. Even for us east coasters that know little about west coast history, the tour commentary is a bit basic and we were hoping for something more 'localised' and that we couldn't read about in the brochure.

Covering the main points of interest close to Settlement, it's a good introduction for those who don't want to do too much riding or map reading. With a guide more experienced in the ways of Rottnest i.e., someone who has a history of visiting the island since youth, this could be a cracker of a tour.

The island tourist map and markers are superb; easy to follow and is all you need to plan your day of riding and to get you to historic military sites, gorgeous bays and lighthouses with sensational views. For those who prefer not to ride, the Island Explorer bus services 98 per cent of the island, and the Oliver Hill Railway makes the trek up to the Oliver Hill Gun placements.

Hikers have a choice of several walking trails that all pass by points of interest.

An honourable mention goes to the quokkas, the island's cute little furry mascots after which the island is named. Dutch sailors passing by in the 17th century mistook the quokkas for giant rats, and so naming the island Rottnest, meaning 'rat nest' in Dutch.

Quokkas are endemic to the island and apart from zoos; you won't find these marsupials anywhere else in the wild. These guys are friendly, too friendly when it comes for their quest for food. Look but don't touch.

After 20km in the saddle, my normally non-riding partner has had enough and we meet later in the beer garden at Hotel Rottnest. If you aren't used to Western Australian prices, take your credit card to the bar, \$20 won't even buy a couple of beers. But as they say, when in Rome do as the Romans do, and when in Perth be sure to make the pilgrimage to one of the west coast's favourite holiday destinations, gorgeous Rotto.

Trip Notes

Getting there: Rottnest Express has a daily departure from Barrack Street Jetty in Perth City and frequent departures from two locations in Fremantle.

www.rottnestexpress.com.au

Staying there: Thankfully the ballot system has been ditched for peak periods but you will still need to get in early. Accommodation catering for every budget includes campsites, dormitory-style rooms and self-contained cottages and can be booked up to 18 months in advance.

www.rottnestisland.com/accommodation

Must Do: Hire a bike, it's the best way to sightsee and explore all the beaches and bays. If you are short for time and want a commentary, take a Rottnest Island Bike Tour with Two Feet and a Heartbeat (except winter) www.twofeet.com.au

Swim or snorkel in one of the many swimming hotspots dotted around the island. Make the trek out to Wadjemup Lighthouse for a tour; the sweeping views from the top are worth it.

Find out more at www.rottnestisland.com

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