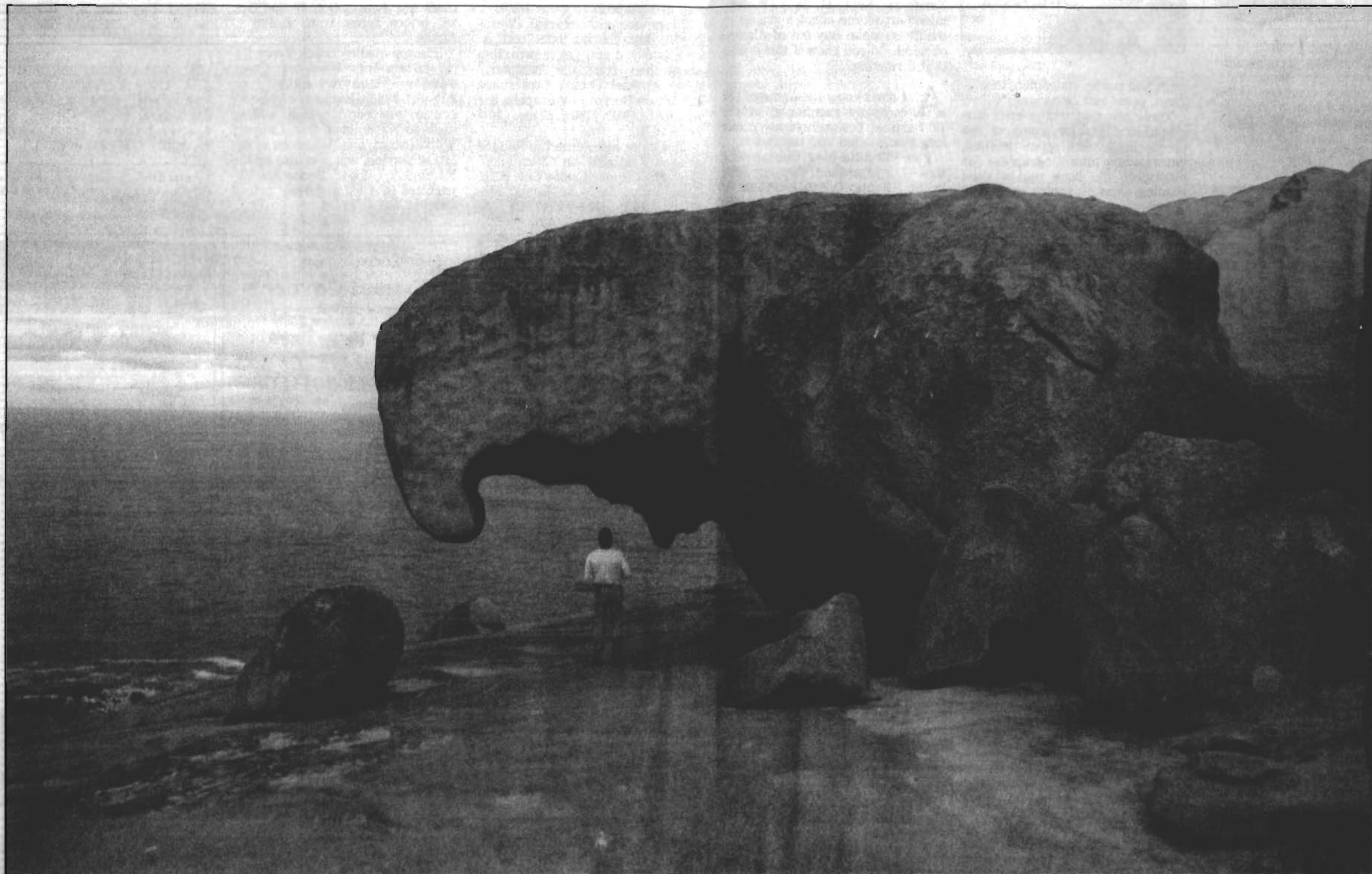


# Travel

Inside:  
Arts & Books  
and Living



A remarkable rock formation hangs over the water on Kangaroo Island

THE ISLANDS OF

# AUSTRALIA



An Australian sea lion off Kangaroo Island

*From Bathurst and Melville islands  
in the north, home of the colorful  
Tiwi people, to the wildlife haven of  
Kangaroo Island to the south, the land  
Down Under offers unusual diversity*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Eric Hoffman is the biggest marketer of alpacas in the United States. He also raises llamas in Bonny Doon and writes for various magazines. This article is adapted from his book, "Adventuring in Australia" (Sierra Club Books, 1990, \$14.95).

Story by ERIC HOFFMAN  
Special to the Mercury News

**A**USTRALIA is the island continent, known for its unique wildlife and slightly irreverent English-speaking culture as shown by Paul Hogan in the exaggerated character of Mick Dundee in "Crocodile Dundee." Little known to the outside world is that ringing the continent's 23,000-mile circumference are hundreds of smaller islands. Among them are some of the most unique and least-known adventure travel opportunities on the planet.

The islands' diversity includes the greatest concentration of wildlife found anywhere in Australia; extensive temperate rain forests and alpine walking tracks over button grass meadows punctuated with towering dolerite peaks; remote islands teeming with rare wildlife and suitable for charter sailing; the largest island of the world made entirely of sand with mysterious "perched lakes" and towering rain forests, wild horses and dingoes; the sun-drenched coral cays of the Great Barrier Reef and an island playground centered on the Whitsundays with everything from swank resorts to deserted islands with pristine beaches; rugged Hinchinbrook Island, the largest island park in the world; and finally, Bathurst and Melville islands at Top End near Darwin, the land of the Tiwi people, who spend their days perfecting their colorful totem-like art, collecting turtle eggs and hunting crocodiles and goanna as they have for thousands of years. In all there are more than 300 islands encircling the Aus-  
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Eric Hoffman — Special to the Mercury News

Swimming can be a solitary affair amid the low-growing tropical forests of Bathurst Island, near Melville Island about 50 miles north of Darwin.

# Islands in time issue call to adventure

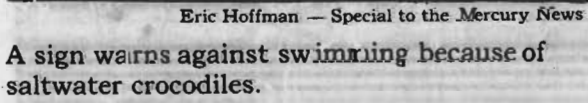
ISLANDS, from Page 1T  
 tralian mainland. Here is a look at three of them:

## Kangaroo Island: Wildlife paradise

Chances are your travel agent has never heard of Kangaroo Island, in South Australia near Adelaide. Australian Geographic Publisher Dick Smith told me Kangaroo Island is the best place to view wildlife in Australia. Smith ought to know: He has flown a helicopter around Australia's 23,000-mile shore in search of the top wildlife areas. It took me 40,000 outback miles on my own before I was convinced Smith was right. To do this island justice, set aside at least three days to investigate the national parks and three small towns of Kingscote, Penneshaw and American River, plus the spectacular coastal areas. If you fancy yourself a wildlife photographer bring plenty of film.

Kangaroo Island is a wildlife haven for several reasons. First, European settlement never has caught on in a big way here, and even Aboriginal man died out some 2200 years before Europeans first arrived. The result is that wildlife has developed with uncharacteristic tameness. Also, species from the mainland that were threatened by feral foxes and cats have found new life and thrived on Kangaroo Island. The platypus and koala are the best examples.

Native animals that are easy to find include the Kangaroo Island Grey Kangaroo, often weighing more than 100 pounds and standing 5 feet tall; the tiny Tamar wallaby (a miniature kangaroo about the size of a large rabbit); the goanna (a large, harmless lizard); and the echidna (an egg-laying mammal that eats insects and protects itself



Eric Hoffman — Special to the Mercury News  
 A sign warns against swimming because of saltwater crocodiles.

with a coat of quills). Aquatic life forms also live here. Australian sea lions, perhaps the most handsome of all sea lions, are readily approachable, as are New Zealand fur seals. Even an occasional leopard seal is sighted. These large predators sometimes stray into the waters from Antarctica, the next land mass to the south.

The island is a birder's paradise. There are more than 216 species including 12 raptors, open ocean species such as penguins, gannets and albatrosses, eight kinds of raucous cockatoos, laughing kookaburras, and more than 36 kinds of waterfowl.

## Wildlife on Kangaroo Island has developed with uncharacteristic tameness. Sea lions are readily approachable.

There are only about 30 miles of paved road on the island that connect the main towns of Penneshaw, Kingscote and American River. The island residents are mostly dryland farmers with a strong environmental tilt. There are about a dozen national parks and preserves. The most notable are Seal Bay and Flinders Chase national parks. Seal Bay is the home of a colony of Australian sea lions that have little fear of people. Flinders Chase takes up the west side of the island and can only be reached on somewhat treacherous dirt roads. In half a day here I saw sea eagles snatching fish from the sea, koalas plodding along the ground, platypus pattering about in the shallow stream, kangaroos, emus (large, flightless birds), wallabies goannas, fur seals and about a dozen varieties of parrots. There is camping in the park and if you're lucky, quarters can also be found at the Cape de Couedic lighthouse or in an old cottage near the ranger's station.

Getting to Kangaroo Island involves an hourlong ferry ride or a 20-mile flight from Adelaide in a small plane. Procuring a rental car allows you to see the island at your own pace. The towns have economy accommodations. If you're after the ultimate wild-

life experience, try to hook up with naturalist Mike McKelvey, who runs the Pelican Lagoon Centre for Ecological Research and Education.

McKelvey is a U.S. transplant who has been on the island 17 years. He knows the island like the back of his hand and puts together itineraries for visiting scientists and naturalists from all over the world. To enlist his services send \$5 (U.S. currency) for first-class return air mail to: Mike McKelvey, Pelican Lagoon, Penneshaw, Kangaroo Island, SA 5222, Australia.

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more general information on Kangaroo Island contact Tourism South Australia, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 1210, Los Angeles 90067; phone (213) 552-2821.

## Fraser Island: Sand and water

Fraser Island sits at the bottom of the Great Barrier Reef about 110 miles north of Brisbane in southern Queensland. Few Americans have heard of Fraser Island, yet there are Australian naturalists and adventurers who think the island rivals the reef itself. Fraser Island is the world's largest sand island and was created by tidal action and river sediment over the past million years. It is about 90 miles long and 15 miles wide.

Though it is surrounded by ocean, the island is saturated with fresh water. The fresh water bubbling out of the ground makes crystal-clear streams that cut through lush rain forests or heath lands. The island's 39 equally clear lakes are unique. They are "perched lakes," which means they are created entirely by rainwater and have no inlets. Towering tropical rain forests around Central Station are spectacular, especially around dusk when hundreds of flying foxes cruise through the upper canopy.

The island also contains 75 Mile Beach, huge sand blows, wild horses (brumbies), the purest strain of dingoes (Australia's wild native dog), more than 240 species of birds, flying foxes, a healthy population of dudong (a cousin of the Florida Manatee) offshore, shipwrecks to explore, a remote turn of the century lighthouse (1881), tropical island dune ecology and three low-key resorts.

There is no other place in the world like Fraser Island. It is continually rearranging itself — burying forests, creating new lakes, changing coastlines and forming new sand mountains.

Adventurers will be intrigued by the mode of transportation on Fraser. There is only one puny, pockmarked 4½-mile stretch of road on the entire island. Vehicular travel is mainly along the beaches or on narrow tracks into the interior that are marginally passable in four-wheel-drive vehicles, provided you are a reasonably skilled driver. You're on your own if you get "bogged." I have spent two hours driving down 75 Mile Beach without seeing another vehicle.

Activities include fishing, hiking camping, swimming (lakes as well as ocean) and not bad snorkeling at the "Champagne Pools" and "Aquarium" near Indian Heads.

Visitors get to Fraser Island either by taking a World War II-style landing barge (Gordon Elmer's Barge or the Rainbow Venture) across a narrow channel from the mainland or flying to one of the island's three resorts in light aircraft from Brisbane or other points on the mainland. Tours are available in four-wheel-drive buses. The Polynesian-style Orchid Resort, on the north side of the island, is my favorite resort on the island.

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information, contact the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corp., 611 N. Larchmont Blvd., Los Angeles 90004; phone (213) 465-8418.

## Bathurst/Melville: Crossing cultures

Bathurst and Melville islands, home of the Tiwi, lie about 50 miles north of Darwin in the Arafura Sea. Visitors usually reach the islands by a 30-minute flight in light aircraft, sometimes a vintage DC-3. Melville is the second largest of the islands ringing Australia. Only Tasmania is larger. Bathurst is about one-third the size of Melville. From an airplane the islands appear to be irregularly shaped sections of flat, fuzzy green carpet afloat in an azure sea. The carpet is really a low-growing tropical forest rising into the sky are columns of smoke that mark where the island's indigenous Tiwi people have pursued game by lighting the



Mercury News



Author Eric Hoffman says there is no place in the world like Fraser Island.

than the one-day tour is. Once on Melville's dirt landing strip you are taken to the camp some 18 miles away. The camp is a small tent village that overlooks a pristine beach. There is a small sign that warns against swimming due to the presence of saltwater crocodiles, the largest and most ferocious crocodiles in the world. Here, you and as many as 12 other guests are fed excellent meals before being met each morning by a pair of Tiwis, who then take you on their food-gathering forays.

One day two Tiwi women I was with caught a goanna and roasted it. (It tastes like chicken. But if the thought of trying exotic meat bothers you, don't worry; they don't make you eat it.) On another day Justin, a gentle and friendly elderly Tiwi man, caught a sea-going turtle for his family's dinner. Still another day, while collecting wild oysters in a mangrove area, a large crocodile cruised past us. That was the day Justin, who led my small group of tourists, approvingly said to me, "You are a white fella that can hunt." I had prided eight oysters from the mud, the same number as Justin, while the Europeans with us had caught one among the three of them.

## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information on Bathurst and Melville islands contact the Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 1230, Los Angeles; phone (213) 277-7877.

brush on fire.

The special aspect of Bathurst and Melville islands is interfacing with the friendly, low-key Tiwi islanders, who are living much the way they have for centuries. Tiwis are hunter/gatherers with a rich culture that is different from that of the mainland Aborigines. Tiwis are world renowned for their abstract art, which sells at the small commercial center in Ngiu on Bathurst Island. My time spent with the Tiwis at Putjamirra was by far the most memorable cross-cultural experience I've ever had in Australia.

Visiting the Tiwi islanders isn't something you can do on your own without going through considerable red tape to get special permits. Most visitors go on organized tours. There are two types of tours:

the safari camp at Putjamirra and Tiwi Tours, which focuses on the art and history of the Tiwis on Bathurst. The Tiwi tour is a one-day affair with a docent and well worth the money (about \$150 in U.S. currency). You are allowed to shop in the Bima Wear Shop, Tiwi Pottery and Tiwi Pima (totem-like carvings) in Ngiu. Tiwi carvings and prints are shown in the world's best museums, primarily in Europe. There is a resemblance between their art and the totem art of the Northwest Indians, but it is in appearance only. Tiwi art is abstract and colorful, not symbolic. Generally you can buy items in the island shop for 25 to 50 percent less than in galleries on the mainland.

The Putjamirra Safari Camp is more of an immersion experience

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