

WORDS ELISABETH KING

LUXURY LURE FOR STAY-AT-HOMERS

IT happens all the time. You arrive at a stunningly beautiful place only a couple of hours drive from home and wonder why you book so many international holidays in inferior beauty spots with beaches you wouldn't walk to the end of the road to look at. Port Stephens is only a two-and-a-half hour run up the Pacific Highway from Sydney and, although it has plenty of attractions of its own, this string of over 20 beaches and coves and a harbour bigger than Sydney's world-famous inlet makes a great stopover driving to and from the Hunter Valley. Many people squeeze in a visit to Port Stephens during a trip to NSW's most famous wine region because its only 100km away.

The Anchorage Hotel & Spa has represented the cream of accommodation in the area for some years, but a recent multi-million dollar renovation has revitalised the 80 rooms and suites, eateries and bars, and added a luxury spa that can compete with rivals anywhere in the world. A message punched home in Hemingway's Bar, refurbished into three spaces evocative of a plutocrat's beach house. The Pavilion, the Captain's Room and the Whiskey Bar, a swish lounge crammed with rich mahogany and polished leather seating.

The first thing you notice in the Captain's Room is a huge, dark timber table used for daily whisky tastings which can be booked at 5pm just prior to Happy Hour. Even though the bar's name has an extra "e", the spotlight is on single malts, including the legendary Port Ellen from Islay.

Sundowners are almost mandatory, as you relax overlooking a huge pool, million-dollar ocean views and the sort of marina filled with the sort of expensive yachts and boats routinely depicted in

travel brochures. Bar appetisers quickly appear just as you start feeling like the captain or mistress of your own ship as you peruse the list of fancy cocktails, quality wines, many from the Hunter, craft beers and - yes - more whisky.

Every room and suite has water views and the Hamptons' style architecture picked out in cool greys and whites, and resident pelicans are equally Instagram-worthy. The new Spa Lucca is a highlight of the stylish makeover, featuring four treatment rooms, including a couples suite spread over two storeys. A mini-booklet of body treatments, relaxation therapies and facials prompts many guests to come back twice during their stay.

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As you would expect only a short stroll from an oceanfront boardwalk dotted with the sort of striped umbrellas that wouldn't look out of place on the French Riviera, spa manager Danielle Bondini has curated the sort of treatments that are as restful to the soul as they are to the body. I don't mean that in a New Age way, either. Those in search of total relaxation can sign up for the Mineral Immersion which uses Himalayan salt, green tea and sandalwood to exfoliate the body, followed by an all-over therapeutic massage.

The engagingly named Soul to Sole treatment releases tension with hot stone massage, house-made Serenity oil and a foot restore ritual using Sodashi skincare, one of Australia's best-known and exported spa brands. The Especially for Men package begins with a back exfoliation to loosen up the shoulders and give the flick to stress, backed by a deep cleansing facial that tones and firms the facial muscles to reveal what seems like a younger guy staring back from the mirror.

In such an aquatic setting, seafood is the star of head chef Michael Jenkins' menus in the Wild Herring signature restaurant. Many "outsiders" who live in the ritzy beach mansions nearby are regulars so listings change frequently. We kicked off our meal with entrees of salmon, crab and prawn ravioli and rock oyster spring rolls with wasabi mayonnaise and yuzu dressing. Steamed knobby snapper with shellfish vinaigrette and broccoli and lamb loin with celeriac cream, spiced lamb croquette and gaufrettes stilled a hunger whipped up by an afternoon sail off Corlette Point. Calling for two spoons, we demolished the cinnamon and vanilla pannacotta with compressed plum, yogurt meringue and apple granita.

Many people who book a two or three night stay at The Anchorage don't leave the property, to be honest. Eating, drinking, hanging out in the spa, swimming or strolling along the nearby deserted beach are more than enough activity to while away a short stay. But Port Stephens, the Dolphin Capital of Australia, boasts a laundry list of attractions to tempt you to jump in the car.


Aussies love a geographical superlative and the largest moving coastal sand

mass in the southern hemisphere can be discovered at Stockton Bight Sand Dunes, where you can sand board down the 30m hillocks of sand or ride a quad bike.

For those who aren't visiting the Hunter, Murray's Craft Brewing Co, one of Australia's leading craft brewers, shares space with the Port Stephens Winery. Quaff a Firehouse Irish Ale or a Murray's Short Supply English Wheat Beer or visit the cellar door for tastings of 20 local and regional wines. Beer is also the hero ingredient in several of brewery's popular restaurant offerings, starting with the legendary scones made with Dark Beer Porter. But if some of the best hand-crafted pizzas and burgers and gourmet barbecue and smokehouse mains have more appeal - all matched with appropriate beer recommendations - you will understand why people come from far and wide.

Approximately 140 bottlenose dolphins call Port Stephens home and sightings are almost guaranteed. Another not-to-be-missed half-day out is the hike to the top of Tomaree Headland near Shoal Bay for the ultimate views of the Port Stephens coastline with its World War II gun emplacements that didn't fire a shot in anger.

Port Stephens has it all just a short drive from Sydney - iconic bushland, beaches to die for and beer that's worth the drive. As we went for a swim in Shoal Bay, an eight-year-old boy on the beach got it in one. Out of the blue, he said to his mother - "Why do people go overseas, Mum? We've got it all right here in Australia". At that moment, he couldn't have been more right.

The Anchorage Hotel & Spa, Corlette Point Rd, Corlette. Visit www.anchorageportstephens.com.au. 

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