



Rottnest Island

The sand is squeaky white, the Indian Ocean that surrounds it is sparkling blue and, with 63 pristine beaches to escape to, you can do as much or as little as you please on laidback, family-friendly and picturesque Rottnest Island.

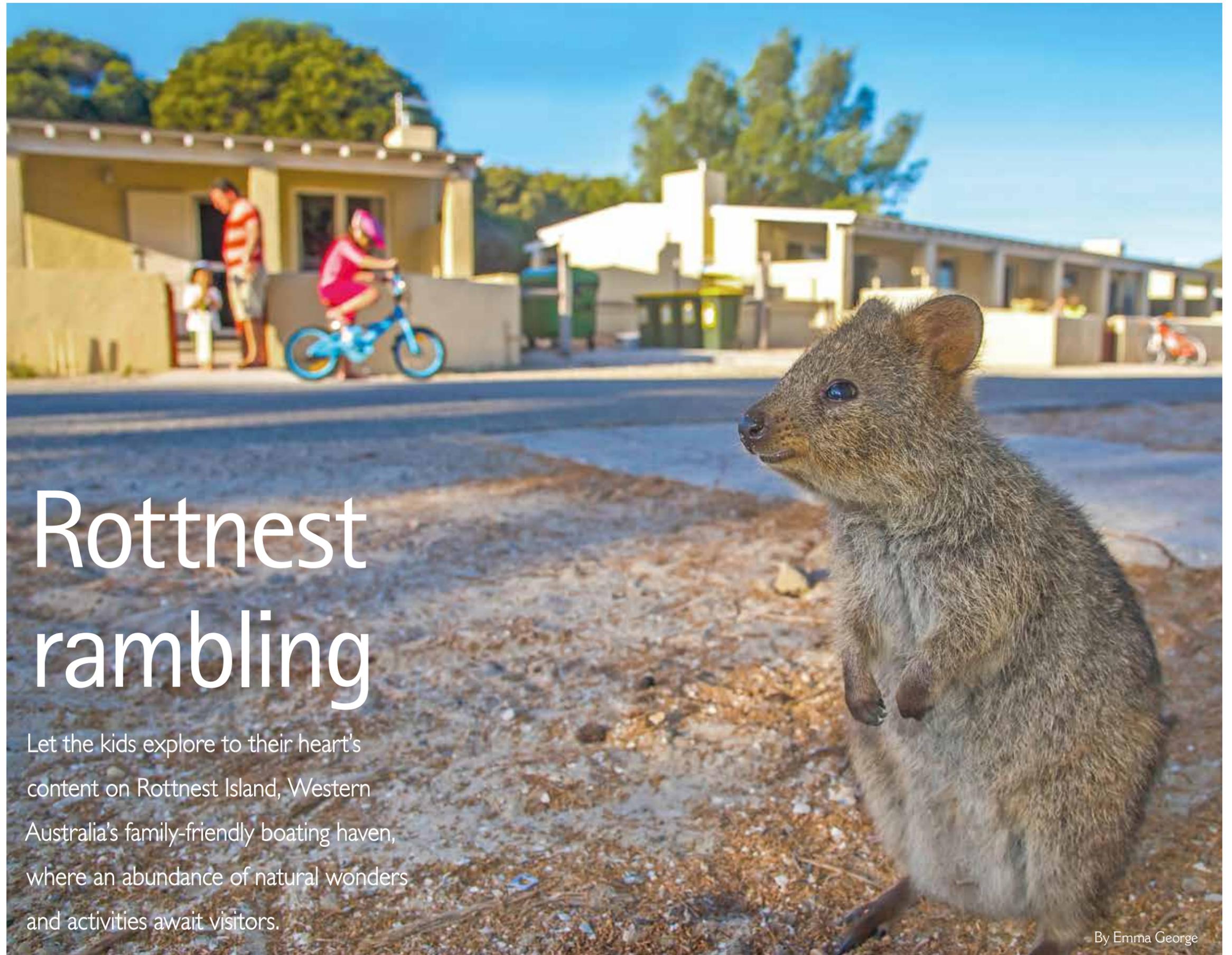
'Rotto', as the island is locally known, is unique in that there are no private vehicles on the island and tourists get around by bicycle, bus, or on foot. The island and its lighthouses are visible from the Perth coastline and visitors make the 18km journey from Fremantle by ferry, private boat, or a 12-minute flight.

It is pure bliss to relax on your private balcony and look out for ospreys, dolphins or whales, and maybe spot one of the many resident stingrays cruising along the shallows ... or just sit and let the world pass by.

It's ironic that such a beautiful island was so wretchedly named 'Rotte nest' – rats nest – by Willem de Vlamingh in 1696 due to the abundant quokka population. These exceptionally cute and very friendly marsupials are more like mini wallabies and these days attract tourists in droves. You don't have to go very far to see one and chances are they might find you first, particularly if you are enjoying lunch outside. They look at you with their lovable little eyes and sweet smile hoping to share your sandwich – but beware, they have no qualms in rifling through your bag for snacks. While it is illegal to feed them, the kindest thing to give a quokka is freshwater, which is not easily found on the island.

Quokkas aren't shy and although you'll see them during the day, the little critters are much more active once night falls. One of my boys' favourite activities is 'quokka spotting' at night with a torch in hand, traversing the quiet streets and counting quokkas as they go.

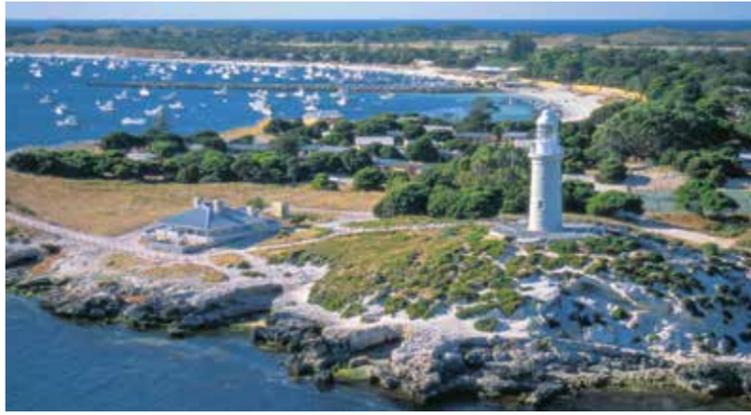
Rottnest is a wonderful place to let your kids run free. You can sit back and watch them splash in the ocean from your balcony and they can safely stroll or ride their bike – traffic-free – to the shops to spend their pocket money. Even the storekeepers are patient with the hundreds of parentless, indecisive kids drooling over lollies and ice cream cabinets.



Rottnest rambling

Let the kids explore to their heart's content on Rottnest Island, Western Australia's family-friendly boating haven, where an abundance of natural wonders and activities await visitors.

By Emma George



Bikes are the most popular mode of transport on Rottneest Island, but it isn't the Lycra brigade on their way to the coffee strip – it's kids on training wheels, teenagers cycling in their boardies with their boogie and surfboards strapped to the back, parents towing young ones in bike trailers, grandparents and plenty of tourists rediscovering their long-lost bike skills.

The casual pace of the island is evident when every second holidaymaker is sauntering through the shops in bare feet dusted with sand. It's a holiday place that's basically timetable free ... unless you want to catch the bus or do one of the many tours.

Over the last few years, we have just about done the lot – the Oliver Hill 'Gun and Tunnels'

tour, the train ride from Settlement Railway Station, and scaled the Wadjemup Lighthouse multiple times while enjoying the panoramic views across the ocean and the mainland.

BOATING MAGNET

Western Australia has the highest boat ownership per capita in Australia, so it's no wonder the island has 180,000 visits from the boating public each year.

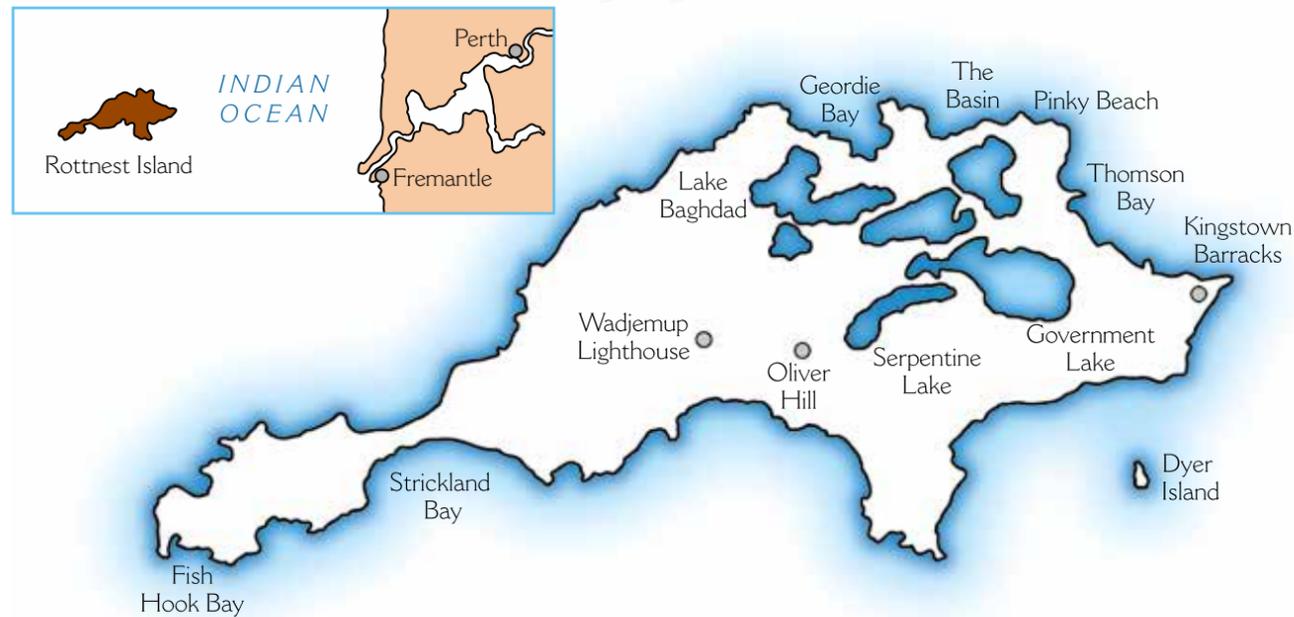
On a good day, it only takes us 30 minutes in our seven-metre LeisureCat to get from Fremantle to the main settlement on Rotto. We generally do a bit of fishing, go for a snorkel and then head ashore to buy a good coffee for us and some ice-cream for the kids before they hit the playground.

When it's calm, we love to have dinner at Geordie Bay Café, then drop anchor in the adjoining bay, with all five of us squeezing into the cabin for an overnight stay. I can only dream about the many cruisers and superyachts on display, but even if we could afford a luxury vessel, getting your hands on one of the 849 privately leased moorings is a challenge in itself. Despite the mooring fees and yearly maintenance, some of the popular bays have 19-year waitlists.

The good news for us mere-mortal boaties is there are 20 bays around the island, some with safe anchorages, and some 100 public swing moorings, beach pens, jetties and beach anchoring points, which provide a number of options for day visitors or extended stays. While this may sound

Above: The white sand and calm turquoise water are some of Rottneest Island's many drawcards.

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adequate, securing one of these during holidays and fine weather can be a challenge. Luckily, Club Marine recently installed a further 12 beach moorings, which are free to use and accessible on a first-come basis, giving day-trippers the opportunity to moor their boat securely alongside the beach without any extra cost.

ACTIVITY-PACKED HOLIDAYS

Activities are almost unlimited on Rottnest Island, particularly if they involve water, which is literally at your doorstep. Snorkelling, swimming, surfing, paddle boarding, fishing, whale watching, eco cruises, canoeing, scuba diving ... or just lying on the beach and creating fabulous sandcastles.

And if you want to take a break from the water, there are great walks and bike riding opportunities, a country club with a bowling green

and golf course, a rustic cinema, mini-golf, many museums and tours, and a railway tour to the top of Oliver Hill.

Fishing is a favourite pastime for many visitors, and herring, whiting, skipjack trevally, salmon, tailer and kingfish can be caught from the beaches or rocks. Charter boats will get you offshore and into reef species such as the endemic West Australian dhufish or baldchin grouper, arguably one of the best table fish in Australia.

If sports fishing is your thing, then jigging for massive samson fish is exhilarating and a trip to the offshore Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) is unforgettable. There's a spectacular mahi mahi aggregate during the summer months, and big marlin can be caught around Perth Canyon, which drops from 700m down to 4000m. Closer to shore, Spanish mackerel and tuna turn up while trolling around the Western side of the island when the water is warm.

The limestone reefs around Rottnest provide spectacular diving with huge open caves and unique tunnel systems. Coupled with over 135 species of tropical fish and 20 species of coral,

diving at Rottnest is a real highlight. The visibility in winter can sometimes exceed 30m and there are plenty of options from 5m to more than 40m depths for divers to explore.

During the western rock lobster season, divers and proficient snorkelers can use loops to catch these tasty crustaceans. But cray pots are by far the most common way to catch a feed and marker buoys from the pots can be seen in their hundreds, scattered across the reefs.

Bays such as The Basin, Parker Point and Pinky offer great snorkelling straight from the shore. All you need to do is pull up your bike, put on your mask and snorkel, and off you go. It is a great place for kids to learn to snorkel, as there are plenty of safe shallow spots with no current where they can explore the coral and limestone reef structures and see plenty of fish.

Along with the quokkas, the island is a haven for birds and boasts colonies of Australian sea lions and southern fur seals. The sea lions can be very social ... if you are lucky and snorkelling near Dyer Island, one might even come up to say hello.

Surfing is another popular pastime, with Strickland Bay among the top 50 breaks in the world. Winter is the best time to catch waves and there are a number of hot spots on the island to please beginners through to experts.

Once you have exhausted yourself with all the physical activities, there's no need to cook as there are many restaurants, cafés and bars to choose from. You could also indulge in a bit of shopping, get a massage, a haircut or pamper yourself at the day spa.

DUTCH DISCOVERY

In their search for a shorter route from the Cape of Good Hope to Batavia (Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies, many Dutch sailors landed on Rottnest Island during the 17th century.

Rottnest was a challenging place to navigate, particularly prior to the construction of lighthouses and navigational markers, as there are numerous shallow and dangerous reef structures. More than 13 shipwrecks occurred around the island, with the most tragic loss in 1899 when *City of York* ran aground at Bathurst Point, killing 11 people.

You can snorkel or scuba dive the wreck along with those of *Lady Elizabeth*, *Macedon* and *Denton Holme*, which all lie in four to eight metres of water.



Europeans settled on Rottnest in 1829, with the Governor building his summer residence in the 1860s. This grand old building now houses the iconic Rottnest Hotel, where people can stay, enjoy a meal and quench their thirst. It is also the finishing line for the famous Rottnest Channel Swim, where participants test their open-water skills each year, swimming 19.7km from Cottesloe Beach on the mainland to Thomson Bay.

It's difficult to imagine that an island, which today epitomises fun and frivolity, has a dark past. It was a prison for some 3700 aboriginal men and

Above: Bikes rule the roads on Rottnest ... it's like cycle heaven – not many hills, no public cars and over 45km of tracks to explore.

Below: Western blue devils are easy to spot with their electric-blue scales.





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to let your kids run free*

boys, some aged only eight, who were jailed for minor offences such as stealing food.

Before European settlement, the local Noongar people knew Rottnest as Wadjemup – ‘the place across the water’ – which is a more flattering name than the one used today.

After almost 100 years of incarcerating indigenous people, the prison closed in 1931. During that time, over 369 prisoners died in the appalling conditions, with the deceased buried in unmarked graves on the island.

‘The Quod’ was an octagonal prison that held 167 prisoners in just 28 small cells. This former jail now functions as accommodation for guests who book the ‘Quod Rooms’ at Rottnest Lodge. Although they are not exactly disclosed as former prison cells, they are advertised as being ‘rich in history’. This will change in 2018, when the lease for Rottnest Lodge expires and the right to the historically significant buildings returns to the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA).

War touched the Island as it was a prisoner-of-war camp in World War I, but it played a much bigger role during World War II, when the army used Rottnest as the first point of defence for the important port of Fremantle Harbour.

Two 9.2in guns were installed at Oliver Hill, along with other guns across the island, batteries, a hospital, army barracks, workshops, stores and other defence equipment. While the guns were never fired, they are a reminder of the region’s history along with the underground tunnels. The

tours are very interesting and are an accurate snapshot of wartime Australia.

BOOK EARLY

Over half a million people visit Rottnest each year and during peak holiday periods the island’s population can swell to 15,000. Apart from The Lodge and Rottnest Hotel, accommodation can be booked up to 18 months in advance through the RIA. Summer holidays are the most difficult to secure and even though the RIA has over 2500 beds, the island soon books out.

Many of the buildings on Rottnest date back to the colonial period and are constructed from locally quarried limestone. These charming, but basic cottages are slowly being refurbished, although they still retain their rustic heritage.

Accommodation is predominantly in self-contained units, with many villas boasting uninterrupted water views. Visitors can also pitch a tent in the camp area, share a dorm in the old army barracks at Kingstown Dormitories or, if they’re lucky, stay in the original lighthouse keeper’s cottage with wonderful views over the ocean.

Whether visiting for a day trip or an extended holiday, a fishing, scuba diving or wildlife tour, a bike ride around the island or just dropping by for lunch, Rottnest Island is the perfect island escape. And no matter how long you stay, it’s never quite enough.

For more information, or to book accommodation, go to: RottnestIsland.com. 



Above: Bailey says hello to one of the estimated 12,000 quokkas found on Rottnest Island.

Right: Wadjemup Lighthouse sits regally above the natural pink lakes that are beautifully coloured due to the high salt content of the water.