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Experience Melbourne's wildlife island

By Lisa Treen

Just two hours drive from the centre of Melbourne is a true gem of a nature park—Phillip Island. Famous for its dusk parade of Little Penguins, the island features world-class attractions where you can experience Australian wildlife in its natural habitat.

The Churchill Island Heritage Farm is the site of Victoria's first crop plantings in 1801. Churchill Island features historic buildings, a working farm, heritage gardens and walking tracks. This tiny island of only 57 hectares is open to the public and has regular demonstrations of working sheepdogs and blacksmithing. Visitors can get up-close and personal with baby farm animals and experience a heritage farm. There is a licensed café that has stunning views of the bay. The café offers fresh salads, gourmet sandwiches and more hearty fare.

“Famous for its dusk parade of Little Penguins, Churchill Island features world-class attractions where you can experience Australian wildlife in its natural habitat.”



Top: Penguin caption; Right: The penguins of Phillip Island at sunset; Bottom: Churchill Island.

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Above: Boardwalk tours of the Koala Centre.

“Visitors can get up-close and personal with baby farm animals and experience a heritage farm.”

A short 15-minute drive from Churchill Island you'll find the Koala Conservation Centre. The centre allows visitors the opportunity to see these cute critters in their natural habitat. The Koala Centre is well planned with elevated boardwalks so you can see the furry residents foraging for eucalyptus leaves, snoozing and cuddling their young.

Other park inhabitants include possums, wallabies, echidnas and snakes and over 100 bird species have been recorded at the centre.

But it's the spectacle of Little Penguins coming ashore at sunset that is the real attraction of Phillip Island. As the light fades, you can watch

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Penguin Facts

- Penguins in Australia are the smallest in the world reaching only 33cm tall. Their largest cousin is the Emperor Penguin from Antarctica who stands tall at around 70cm. Use this rule of flipper-cooler the climate the larger the penguin, warmer the climate, smaller the penguin.
- Penguins are only found in the Southern hemisphere. You'll never see a Polar Bear and a Penguin together in the wild.
- The name 'Little Penguin' is now used instead of 'Fairy Penguin'. This is not some politically correct term, their name has now changed because it's a more accurate translation of their scientific name *Eudyptula minor*.
- Penguins' eyes are specialised for seeing underwater and on land in low light. For this reason they are sensitive to sudden bright light.
- A penguin can stay at sea for weeks, diving for fish and their waterproof feathers are nature's best wetsuit—they keep a penguin's skin completely dry.
- Penguins can sleep at sea—they can doze while floating on the surface.
- Penguins can swim 15 to 50 kilometres a day searching for small fish to eat. One penguin was recorded travelling 100 kilometres in just one day.
- Natural hazards for penguins are sharks, bird of prey, rough weather and fish shortages. Foxes also are a threat to penguins. A fox can kill as many as 30 to 40 penguins a night—sadly this is for sport and not for food.



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Top: Skybox at twilight; Above: The Ultimate Penguin Tour ; Below: Baby penguin.

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dark shapes in the water surge towards shore. Within minutes hundreds of Little Penguins waddle onto shore and make their way to their sand dune burrows. They arrive in waves after spending all day fishing for food. Many of the burrows are located high on the sand dunes and it's fascinating to watch these tiny birds make their way up the steep incline.

There are a number of viewing options to suit families and individuals. From a guaranteed private, front-row experience with a knowledgeable ranger allowing a maximum of 15 people, to the popular main tiered seating which provides a 180 degree elevated view of the Little Penguins arriving.

For value for money and to be shielded from the elements, I would suggest the Penguin Sky Box that is an elevated, enclosed viewing tower that allows for un-interrupted views of the swimming mass of penguins to their appearance on the sand and their waddling climb up the sand dunes. You have a ranger who is full of information and always ready to answer questions and impart information. I went in the depths of winter in Melbourne and I can honestly say that it was extremely cold but none-the-less enjoyable—thermal layers and outdoor clothing suited for snow—helped to keep the wind and cold at bay.



"It's the spectacle of Little Penguins coming ashore at sunset that is the real attraction of Phillip Island."

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