

## Saving an Oz Icon

*Rottnest, Australia's island-for-everyone, seeks to keep its style. Also: Better-boating tips*

By Jonathan Tourtellot

I just met a bloke I hadn't seen in 24 years," the man called to bar mates in the beer garden. Typical. Just about everyone in Western Australia vacations here on Rottnest Island sooner or later.

Picture an open, nine-mile-long isle. Cars are banned. Tight clusters of cottages are grouped at one end. Here, at budget prices, you can spend your days bicycling, beachgoing, snorkeling, surfing, hiking—then join other vacationers over a pint before retiring to your simple seaside cabin. Nature has even given the island its own mascot: half-wild, foot-high mini-kangaroos called quokkas, seen almost nowhere else.

Just off the coast near Perth, Rottnest ("Rotto") faces an odd threat. Not to its environment—as a nature reserve it's doing fine. No, Westralians worry about loss of vacation style.

They call it the "Rottnest ethos"—outdoorsy, no-frills, convivial, egalitarian R&R. With no cars and with bicycles all over, the place feels like a national summer camp for adults (kids are okay, too). The state refrains from hiking

prices to meet high demand. Instead, a lottery resolves overbookings.

But the icon's facilities need refurbishing, and opinions have clashed over how to pay for it. One plan called for a tall luxury hotel charging fat rates for revenue. But critics say any scheme involving high style and high prices would spoil the Rottnest ethos.

I agree. A tower of pampered plutocrats wouldn't suit this special isle of healthy fun for everyone. The latest plan is a compromise: Fix-up funds from taxes, plus a semiluxe eco-resort.

\* Geo-savvy tip The island does have small hotels, but for an authentic Rottnest adventure, reserve a rental unit for a few days and kick back with your Aussie neighbors. Book a year ahead, and avoid the school holidays in January. Consult [www.rotnnestisland.com](http://www.rotnnestisland.com).

Sparing the Seven Seas

Good: Your snorkel-tour leader briefs you on why touching coral harms it, how to see different fishes, and so on.

Bad: Tour leader just says "snorkel over there," sits back, and pops a soda.

Incredibly bad: Guides break off bits of live coral to give to the girls.

Tourism has become a daily presence for marine

creatures. So that it not be a daily threat as well, a conservation consortium has aimed a new report at the marine recreation industry on how to minimize abuses. You can help by chiming in—whether you're diving off Maui, fishing in Florida, or snorkeling in Cozumel, whose battered reefs helped earn the region its poor 46 score on our Destination Scorecard (note box below, left). These tips from the report tell you what to look for and what to request if missing:

\* Eco-orientation: Tour leaders who tell you how to see and protect sea life.

\* Whale-watching boats that approach animals obliquely, never chasing them.

\* Scuba tours that make sure all divers have good buoyancy control before approaching pristine reefs. Even practiced divers often crash into the coral.

\* Skippers who use mooring buoys rather than anchors amid coral areas and who keep deadly monofilament line from being tossed into the sea.

And one last good sign: a tour leader who suggests using the loo on land; it's easier on the environment. For more tips, see [www.coralreefalliance.org/programs/tourismhandbook.html](http://www.coralreefalliance.org/programs/tourismhandbook.html).