



ABOUT THE WRITER...

TNT editor **ANDREW WESTBROOK** is a multi-achiever. Despite last year losing his TNT Tea Bitch title, his mantlepiece still boasts the Biggest Freeloader Award (which he refused to chip in for), Best Monkey Impression and Under-12 Snap Champion (won aged 14). He'll do anything for a Tim Tam. Anything.



ENTER SANDMAN

We heard Moreton Island was as skill as Fraser Island, except without the crowds, so sent **ANDREW WESTBROOK** to check it out. He came back with tales of pirates and thrash metal...

Armed with little more than a soggy bread roll, I'm half expecting a crazy-eyed Captain Jack Sparrow to jump out at me from a passing porthole.

I'm paddling between the jagged carcasses of ships long past their prime. A majestic white-bellied sea eagle keeps a watchful eye from atop the crumbling masts, while all around me a multi-coloured cloud of tropical fish are feeding frenziedly from my hand.

I catch sight of a very strange, beaked fish beneath my toes – it turns out to be a hungry cormorant diving down to hunt.

The whole scene is surreal and quite possibly the best place I've ever been snorkelling.

I'm splashing around the Tangalooma Wrecks off Queensland's Moreton Island, a place that enjoys the enviable status of being just over an hour from Brisbane, but without the crowds that normally invade such easy city escapes. In other words, it's kind of a win, win

situation really.

The wrecks are the rusting hulks of 15 once seaworthy vessels that now huddle together on the western side of the island.

They were all purposely sunk, from the 1960s to 80s, to create some sort of creaking *Pirates of the Caribbean*-style harbour for boats looking for shelter when big storms made the final push to Brisbane too dangerous.

But in the decades that have followed, Tangalooma's eerie edifices have transformed into an artificial reef that has resulted in a dramatic natural playground and a hotbed of marine activity.

At last count the site was known to be home to at least 120 species of fish, but that number is growing each year.

And judging by the swirls of colour in every direction, I'm getting to meet most of them. We dive down to look through sunken portholes while fish zip one way and then the other, giving me only the slightest of furtive glances from

the corner of their boggly eyes.

The best is saved for last however, when just as we enter the final straight, a stunning lionfish regally refuses to pay us any attention.

Even if I did nothing else on Moreton Island, the snorkelling alone would have made the trip worthwhile.

Walking the plank

And it had still been just a few hours since setting off from sleepy Brisbane suburb Redcliffe.

On the way over, with the Glass House Mountains and Brisbane skyline in the background, we'd eagerly spotted some of the 600 bottlenose dolphins that live in the local waters, before the remains of the WW2 defences that still dot Moreton's beach came into view.

However, simply getting a boat from one place to another is too simple for Queenslanders it seems.

While we stand around bemused, the crew chuck a rope net off the back of the boat, encourage us into wetsuits



The Tangalooma Wrecks. Keep your eyes peeled for the Black Pearl...

and start herding us towards the water. Despite feeling like we're being made to walk the plank, we happily oblige, flinging ourselves onto the netting.

We grab a secure grip and the skipper wastes no time in putting his foot down (or whatever they do on boats).

This, we're told, is boom-netting. As the boat picks up speed we're dragged through the surf, thrown left and right.

There's only three things we can do: cling on to the rope for dear life, cling on to our swimmers for dear decency and occasionally try and get a mouthful of air rather than water. Oh wait, there's a fourth as well – laugh manically the whole time. If there was a fun, sporty version of drowning (without the actual dying bit of course), then this would definitely be it.

Back on the safety of the boat, and then dry land, it's time to explore the giant sandpit that is the island itself.

Just 40km north-east of Brissie, Moreton is the world's third largest sand island, securing bronze in the charts behind fellow Queenslanders Fraser Island and Stradbroke Island.

Like Fraser, Moreton also boasts inviting freshwater lakes, lengthy white beaches and plenty of very bouncy 4WD action.

But it also has The Desert. These ever-moving sand dunes sweep up towards the brilliant blue sky and, with sand boards beneath our arms, that's where we head.

Dune riders

Having clambered up the seemingly-vertical 35m dune, I find myself lying face down on a piece of flimsy wood, with my nose teetering over the edge.

There's just time for a quick prayer, Metallica-style ("Now I lay me down to sleep. Pray the lord my soul to keep..." it's "Enter Sandman" people, keep up), before I feel myself starting to drop.

Desperately trying to remember the three golden rules (board up, head up, elbows out), I begin hurtling down the dune.

However all fear immediately disappears as I fly, at roughly the speed of sound, down the sandy bank.

Even a mouthful of sand can't stop me screaming as I race towards the bottom, skidding and tumbling into a giggling sandy mess of limbs.

"EVEN A MOUTHFUL OF SAND CAN'T STOP ME SCREAMING, AS I TUMBLE INTO A GIGGLING MESS OF LIMBS"

Suddenly the climb seems more tempting and I head back up for another go. And another. And another.

Our adrenalin glands satisfied, and our legs unable to take any more climbing, we then jump in the 4WD to really explore the island, over 90 per cent of which is national park.

First stop is the Blue Lagoon, which is to Moreton Island what Lake McKenzie is to Fraser. With our surroundings reflected serenely in the lake's inviting water, it's the perfect place to recharge our batteries with a cold beer and a quick paddle.

It's then back onto the sandy tracks and over to Moreton's eastern side, where we drive up the beach until we reach Cape Moreton, at the north-eastern tip of the 38km long island.

There, as the sun begins to set, we clamber up to Queensland's oldest lighthouse and stare out towards the open ocean, hoping to spot one of the

thousands of humpback whales that are currently migrating up the east coast.

Unfortunately, we seem to have picked one of the rare days when none of the giants are spotted, but I'm not fussed. Watching the sun sink towards the mountains is more than enough to keep me entertained.

With darkness rapidly falling we make our way to camp for a quick barbie before heading down to the beach. Once there, it's all about the tinnies of XXXX, crackling campfire and millions of stars, all accompanied by a screaming Acca Dacca soundtrack belting out of our Land Cruiser at full volume. I'm not sure I've ever had a more Aussie experience!

Up early the next morning, it's back in the 4WD and down towards Mt Tempest. Soaring just 280m towards the sky, you could argue that Tempest has perhaps been generously named, but regardless of that, it's still easily the highest point of the island, and is supposedly the world's tallest coastal sand hill.

The trek to the top is strenuous but short, and the 360° views that greet us as the summit make it more than worthwhile.

Looking out across the island and thinking of those Tangalooma Wrecks put in place to protect other ships, it's hard to resist thinking this giant sandpit would not be the worst place to be shipwrecked.

The damage & the details: Andy did a combination of two tours; the Eco Explorer Guided Tour with Micat (Ph: 07 3909 3397, www.micat.com.au), which costs from \$150pp; and the Eco-Tour with Dolphin Wild Island Cruises (Ph: 07 3880 4444, www.dolphinwild.com.au), which costs from \$115pp. Beds are available at Redcliffe's La Vida on Anzac (www.lavidaonanzac.com.au). Visit www.moretonislands.com.au for more info.

Continued ►►►

GET OUTTA HERE!

Other Brissie Breakaways

How on Earth did the Brits manage to turn North Stradbroke Island, with all its natural beauty, into a convict settlement, a nuthouse and a leper colony?!

Seems to us the colonialists were the crazy ones. It's a fabulous chunk of sand, seemingly purpose-built for natural hedonism. It ranks squarely between Fraser and Moreton as the world's second largest sand island, but is very different, being far more developed, almost suburbia-like, with towns and sealed roads.

Get to 'Straddie' from Cleveland, a

bayside suburb accessible by train from Brisbane. Or stay overnight in a Manly hostel and cut the trip time down. All transport arrives in Dunwich, then a 20-minute bus ride takes you to Point Lookout, where you can stay within spitting distance of the beach.

Although not the most imaginatively named place, it's a stunning spot. You can hike around the foreshore, crossing beautiful beaches, bays and rocky outcrops and maybe even spot a migrating whale, dolphin, turtle or shark.

Crocodile Hunter fans may feel no trip

to Australia is complete without a visit to Australia Zoo. One of the country's biggest wildlife centres, it's home to everything from Tasmanian devils to Bengal tigers... And a lot of crocs.

Expect endless tributes to Steve Irwin and plenty of "crikeys!" Adult entry is \$57 and the cheapest transport is a return trainfare to Beerwah – then a free bus.

If you're in the mood for hiking, rock climbing or gawping at dramatic scenery, then have a think about the Glass House Mountains. Trains go from Brisbane. Visit www.glasshousemountains.com.au.



Look out! It's Straddie's Point Lookout



You shouldn't struggle finding a spot on the beach

