



WADDLE THIS WAY

When darkness falls, a group of little penguins waddle back to their burrows after a day spent looking for prey at sea. Visitors get a rare glimpse of these creatures as they make their journey back home in Australia's Phillip Island.

 TEXT **BHAVANI**

The sand was soft and it sunk in as I got comfortable, entering my shoes and promising days of sand-filled socks like a bottomless pitcher that never empties out. Around me, anticipation rose like a wave as people pressed forward, eager for the show to begin.

There were more than a thousand of us at the beach, and we weren't there for the pristine sands, the sea, or the beautiful sunset. Nor were we sunning, building castles, playing games or resting on beach towels. Instead, we were seated neatly, in three stands along the shore, waiting to watch a parade—a procession if you may—that was scheduled to begin at sunset.

The word 'parade' usually brings to mind a marching band, or a coterie of

colourfully dressed people, maybe some floats... but what lay in store for us was none of this—it was a parade of penguins, and everyone was geared to ogle!

The Penguin Parade takes place every evening at Phillip Island, around 130 km from Melbourne, Australia. During the parade, visitors, seated in stands, are given a rare opportunity to observe little penguins—a species of the flightless bird—as they waddle their way back to their homes in the sand dunes at sunset after a day of fishing. It's a rare glimpse of the little penguin in its natural habitat, and the Phillip Island authorities strive to ensure that the ecological balance and the safety of the penguins is not harmed in any way.

As we settled in, the park rangers told us about the creatures, found in Australia and New Zealand. Little penguins are the world's smallest penguin species—they're just 13 inches tall and weigh a mere one kilogram. Unlike their black-and-white brethren, the adults of the species have blue-and-

Facing page:
The boardwalk offers you an unhindered view of little penguins moving around, unaware that all eyes are on them!

Image courtesy Phillip Island Nature Parks

Penguin Parade

white feathers. They come ashore after sunset to avoid attacks by predators and, recognising that there is safety in numbers, emerge in groups.

We were repeatedly told not to take photographs, use a flash, or startle the penguins in anyway. The disclaimer was necessary, because a thick rope was all that separated us from the penguins. These birds are used to people staying

within the boundary defined by the rope—step out and you invade their space. Here, the wildlife was at home, in its natural setting; the humans were the outsiders, their movement restricted, and rightly so.

THE WILD SIDE

The sun slowly dipped into the horizon, stars blossomed across the night sky, the winds picked up and my decision to wear a thin jacket suddenly seemed foolhardy. The beach became a hazy mush, while the sea, reflecting the starlight, shimmered, and the white froth drew endless lines as far as my eyes could see. I waited, listening to the waves crashing onto the shore. “There they are!” someone shouted, and pointed a finger. I peered into the distance, not knowing what I was looking for. Penguins, yes, but how do you spot them in a dark sea with eyes trained to see only in light?

A few false alarms later, they emerged as white dots in the inky black water.

The first group of penguins was greeted by cries of delight as all heads turned to the same side and



Clockwise from left: The skies are still lit when you reach your seat and the penguins take another half hour to begin their march inwards; The Penguin Museum is an interesting place to get acquainted with this species before you move to the viewing area; Also called the Fairy Penguin in Australia, this species has a short lifespan of seven years in the wild.



all hands pointed in one direction.

Then, a few brave ones began their homecoming. Like a slow waltz set to a wavering beat, they stepped forward, ducked back into the sea, then forward again, standing still before moving backward once more, swaying mildly... and so on. That short stretch of land that they journeyed across seemed to pose a great test of their spirit and persistence. One shaky step at a time, they made their way to the safety of the bushes, close to where I sat watching, my heart

Penguin Parade

LITTLE PENGUINS

- These are one of the 17 subspecies of penguins, found only in Australia and New Zealand.
- They usually live in burrows—they could dig their homes into sand dunes, or among rocks and sea caves.
- A typical day in the life of the little penguin comprises a lot of time spent in the ocean searching for food. They are born swimmers and are at home in the sea for hours together. They waddle back to their homes after dark.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

- Book your tickets online in advance. If it happens to be a long holiday weekend in Australia, General Passes might be available, but the limited Penguin Plus get sold out.
- The park is open through the year, but it gets a little chilly post sunset, so those coming from warmer climes should try visiting between October and February, Australia's spring and summer months. All viewing areas are unprotected from rain and wind.
- Pack a good pair of binoculars, jackets, shawls/rugs to spread out on the sand, snacks and water.

ONCE YOU'RE HERE

- The parade begins after sunset and continues for 50 minutes. It could begin as early as 5:30 pm or as late as 8:45 pm, depending on the season. Check penguins.org.au for the exact time.
- Get there an hour before the penguins arrive to get a good place towards the corners of the viewing area, and also to schedule some time to browse through the penguin museum (part of your ticket cost).
- There are multiple options for sighting penguins; the walk from the shore to the visitor centre is common to all, and offers great views of the penguins. The General Pass offers decent views, though it may not be at as close quarters as the Penguin Plus or the Guided Ranger Tour.
- If you wish to know more about the penguins, download the Penguin Parade app in advance; more details at: penguins.org.au/visit-us/penguin-parade-app. The Wi-Fi at the visitors' centre is spotty, so best to do it at your hotel/home.
- Keep some time for a visit to the Nobbies Centre for its great views, and for a walk through Cowes, if you aren't staying there.
- Photography and filming of the penguins is not allowed, please respect and follow the guidelines.



Phillip Island also has a Koala Conservation Centre that offers an up-close view of Australia's native animal that sleeps around 20 hours a day!

Kevin O'Hara/age fotostock/Dinodia

in my mouth. They stood there for a while as they caught their breaths, and as I sat cross-legged on the sand, I was at eye-level with them. Once my heartbeat settled, they scampered up the slope and disappeared into the shrubs in search of their burrows.

After the first set made it, the penguins began arriving in hundreds across the beach. It was moulting season—the time of the year when they shed their old feathers and grow new ones. During this time, they need to be ashore for weeks at a stretch as they are not waterproof without their feathers. So, they gorge on fish to stock up for two-odd weeks, which makes their stomachs protrude more than usual, making it hard for them to balance.

Penguin Parade

Some of the penguins we saw ran as fast as their short legs could carry them, and often fell face down on the sand, quite comically. They then struggled to get up and ran again, only to fall back down.

“No cameras, no photography, no flashlight,” the ranger yelled again. Startled, I looked towards the penguins but they hadn’t even noticed the loud voice. Feeling as though I was missing a limb without my camera, I tried to capture every visual detail in my mind, but some visitors were unable to resist and slid out their cameras, stealthily. The rangers, though, were experts and were used to camera-crazy tourists like us. They admonished us again, and finally, a rebellious few were sent back to the visitors’ centre.

CLOSER HOME

The penguins continued their trek, unbeknownst to the rustle they had caused in our ranks. After 50 minutes of ogling, it

was over, the lights were switched off and the rangers shooed us away. I didn’t want to leave, as penguins would continue to arrive for another hour, and I lingered till I was the last one left with the now irritated ranger. I tore myself away from the shore, and turned to walk back up the pathway to the exit. People were crowding the boardwalk and curious, I joined them.

On either side of the boardwalk, we could see penguins waddling along, calling out to mates, socialising, and searching for their burrows, often close enough to touch. Once in the safety of their colony, these penguins did a volte face. That timid, skittering bird that awakened my maternal instincts

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The rocky coastline of Cape Woolamai, Phillip Island’s highest point. Here, you’ll find walking trails and viewing platforms from where you can take in breathtaking vistas.



Radius Images/Radius Images/Dinodia



Phillip Island is a surfer's paradise and should you wish to try your luck, Island Surfboard is one of Australia's best Surf Schools. They offer classes at Smiths Beach.

Image courtesy Phillip Island Nature Parks

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways operates daily flights from Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai to Singapore, from where our codeshare partner Qantas connects you to Melbourne, Australia.

Phillip Island is 140 km from Melbourne and is accessible by car, cab, bus, ferry and via a helicopter service (Phillip Island Helicopters).

ACCOMMODATION

There are several self-contained apartments, hotels, resorts, hostels and the like in and around the islands. Genesta is a B&B set in a 100-year-old home at Cowes in Phillip Island. It is near the beachfront and ideally located for a languid stroll down the Esplanade. (genesta.com.au; 00-61-359523616; 18 Steele Street Cowes, Phillip Island Victoria, 3922)

RESTAURANTS

Pino's Trattoria does some great pizza and has been running for more than 20 years, if you reach after the Penguin Parade, this is one of the few places that might not turn you away hungry. (pinostrattoria.com.au; 29-31 Thompson Avenue, Cowes 3922; Lunch and dinner; 00-61-359522808; from ₹500) If you wish to unwind with music and great Mediterranean food then head to The Goat in the Boat. (www.thegoatintheboat.com.au; 69 Thompson Ave, Cowes 3922; Dinner only, extended trading hours during busy periods; Thursday to Monday)

was now a noisy yapper. Their loud calls, which sounded identical to the human ear, are in fact unique, so that their mates can identify them, and they all called out at the same time.

The entire hill was buzzing with their rambunctious chatter and their musty, damp odour filled the evening air.

Dusk had slowly dissolved into night as I made my way to the car-park, while the chatterboxes

went on. There were torches flashing in the parking and rangers peeping under cars. At

times, a penguin settled under a car, so a quick check ensured none got killed as the car left. Does this actually happen? I asked a ranger. Yes, once in a while, he replied.

As I walked towards the parking spot, I couldn't help but hope that I'd find one waiting under my car—so that I could get one last, close glimpse of a little one, *my* little one, before moving it to safety! ■