

STAY THE CAUSE

Travellers are doing their bit for conservation by getting hands-on at Australian lodges and resorts

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One of the most rewarding aspects of travel can be when you arrive at a destination and become instantly and unexpectedly embroiled in something bigger than yourself. At Spicers Hidden Vale in southeast Queensland a couple of years ago, I barely had time to dump my bags before I was bundled into a bus and driven into an oasis of bushland to join a research team tracking radio-collared koalas through the treetops. Guests at Tasmania's Saffire Freycinet are usually surprised to learn that the luxury lodge is part of a program trying to save the Tasmanian devil from extinction, and that they can help. At South Australia's Arkaba Conservancy, you don't just marvel at the results of 15 years of tireless native-flora regeneration efforts; you get out and plant some trees.

Many of Australia's top lodges and resorts actively participate in crucial yet often overlooked conservation projects that guests are invited to be a part of. They feed our desire for immersive, hands-on experiences, where we both learn about and contribute to a cause we might not have been aware of before checking in.

If you want to support operators making a demonstrable difference to conservation, consider these options for your next trip.

Spicers Hidden Vale

Spanning nearly 5000ha of native bushland near Grandchester, an hour from Brisbane, Spicers Hidden Vale is what happens when country charm meets conservation. Once a vast sheep station, its focus started

shifting towards conservation in 2007 with the establishment of a 3090ha nature refuge to preserve habitat and provide a wildlife corridor for threatened species. In 2017, the \$18m Hidden Vale Wildlife Centre opened. The research, teaching and breeding facility is operated in partnership with the University of Queensland and was funded by Spicers Retreats owners Graham and Jude Turner through their Turner Family Foundation. Guests can tour the centre, meet researchers, hold native reptiles, and visit the enclosures to try to spot an elusive breeding pair of rufous bettongs, populations of which have been decimated by foxes and cats.

The towering eucalypt forests of the nearby nature refuge offers sanctuary to about 40 healthy koalas, part of the Hidden Vale Koala Project. The animals are tracked via electronic collars, providing data on their movement and behaviour. The collars are also handy for pinpointing which treetop to train your binoculars on during a koala safari, where you'll learn why these creatures are in such serious strife in southeast Queensland, and the conservation strategies aimed at ensuring their survival. It's hoped that some of these animals can be translocated to areas where populations have been lost. Although if I were a koala, I'd be quite content to stay here in the peaceful and protected Lockyer Valley.

"It's a land of wild beauty, and stunning flora and fauna," says Jude Turner. "Sharing the experience of this land with our guests is our privilege and our passion, and something we're deeply committed to protecting."

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Spicers Hidden Vale has 34 guestrooms in restored colonial cottages surrounded by gardens. The modern



homestead overlooks bucolic countryside and houses the award-winning Homage Restaurant, serving local, farm-to-fork produce. Rooms from \$559 a night, twin-share.

spicersretreats.com

Saffire Freycinet

It's hard to decide which guests have it better at Saffire Freycinet – the human ones cosseted in their private pavilions, gazing across Coles Bay to the rose-tinted granite of the Hazards mountain range, or the Tasmanian devils chowing down on fresh chunks of wallaby and possum inside their private enclosure a few doors down. The devils are retirees from the Save the Tasmanian



Fitzroy Island Resort's marine conservation program has guests volunteering at the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, preparing food for injured sea turtles, and monitoring their populations in the ocean (discover a new turtle and you get to name it). You can also snorkel over Australia's first offshore coral nursery – viewing new corals planted by the Reef Restoration Foundation – and launch a search and destroy mission on the coral-eating *Drupella* snail. Every visitor who takes a full-day trip to the reef contributes \$8 towards management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Fiona Merida, director of reef education and engagement at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, says citizen science projects such as Eye on the Reef – a phone app that collects real-time data – help guide conservation efforts and management decisions. "It empowers people who love and visit the reef to play an active role in safeguarding this natural wonder for current and future generations," she says.

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Lizard Island resort from \$2419 a night, twin-share.

lizardisland.com.au

Orpheus Island Lodge from \$3850 for two nights, all-inclusive.

orpheus.com.au

Fitzroy Island Resort studio rooms \$209 a night.

fitzroyisland.com

Lady Musgrave HQ upper deck queen glamping beds from \$1800 a night.

ladymusgraveexperience.com.au

Royal Mail Hotel, Dunkeld

Conservation and agriculture might seem like unlikely bedfellows, but they get along pretty well at the Royal Mail Hotel in Dunkeld, western Victoria. Owned by a local pastoral company, the property boasts one of Australia's top regional restaurants (the fine-dining Wickens) and boutique accommodation in restored 1850s bluestone cottages that once housed farm workers. A 95ha chunk of adjacent land has been ceded to create the Mount Sturgeon Biodiversity Reserve, a protected area managed for its core diversity values, and ringed by a predator-proof fence. A captive breeding program for southern brown bandicoots, eastern quolls and fat-tailed dunnarts is run onsite, and in July staff celebrated the release into the reserve of three quolls, animals that had been extinct on the Australian mainland since the 1960s.

"It's a wonderful example of conservation in practice on agricultural land," says Royal Mail Hotel conservation manager Kai Dailey. Guests can take a guided tour of the enclosures and meet the animals as part of a Wildlife Conservation Education experience. "Interactive education is hugely important," says Dailey. "We show people how these unique animals have evolved to fill a niche in the environment, and what happens when that niche is no longer filled. And we teach people that everyone can play a role."

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Deluxe Mount Sturgeon one-bedroom cottages are \$650 a night, two-night minimum.

royalmail.com.au

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Devil Program, the state government's response to devil facial tumour disease, an infectious, fatal cancer that threatens the species with extinction. Having played their role as part of an insurance population for breeding, they live out their days in a sort of luxury retirement village filled with native plants.

Guests get to visit the devils at feeding time as part of Saffire's Tasmanian Devil Experience, a unique opportunity to observe and learn about the iconic species in its natural environment. Saffire partners with immunologists at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research in Hobart, who are working on a ground-breaking vaccine for this contagious cancer. Guests can support the research through the Adopt-a-Devil program, with funds going directly towards the vaccine effort. "The devils are ambassadors for their species," says head devil guide Nicole Dyble. "We have guests from all over the world stay

here and they take the story of the devils home." Dyble says there's a magic moment when guests first approach the enclosure. "All of a sudden these little devils start stepping out of the wilderness. It blows them away every time. People get so excited they don't really listen to anything you say after that."

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Saffire Freycinet's all-inclusive accommodation packages include the Tasmanian Devil Experience, along with wine tasting at a local vineyard, a beekeeping outing, a visit to Freycinet Marine Farm and more. Luxury suites from \$2800 a night, twin-share.

saffire-freycinet.com.au

The Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef offers visitors opportunities to engage with conservation projects throughout its entire 2300km length, from Lizard Island in the north – where you can slip out of your hammock at the resort and stroll over to Lizard Island Research Station for a tour of the coral reef research facility – to Lady Elliot Island in the south, where guests contribute to manta ray research by snapping underwater photos of the gentle giants and uploading them to the Project Manta database.

Lady Musgrave HQ – a liveaboard pontoon in Lady Musgrave Island Lagoon – invites guests to become a marine biologist for a day, assisting scientists to gather underwater data. And if you can tear yourself away from your luxury villa at Orpheus Island Lodge, you can venture to Orpheus Island Research Station for a tour of the wet laboratory and a chat with scientists studying the impact of climate change and rising sea levels.



Koala at Spicers Hidden Vale in Queensland, main; Spicers Hidden Vale resort, opposite; Tasmanian devil, left; Great Barrier Reef, above right