

Hi Everyone

It's only about three weeks since I returned home from my Lord Howe Island and Snowy Mountains tour and in less than two weeks, I will be off to Japan with a group of 18 people. It's beginning to feel a lot more like old times! There's a tour report on Lord Howe below along with the usual round-up on what's going on tour-wise and at home.

Tour updates

Something to note about all these tours. My programme for 2024 is already in place and I even have a draft plan for 2025 and none of the tours for 2023 is going to be repeated.

Along with the **Japan and Croatia** tours being full, my **Spain and Portugal** tour in September and **Egypt and Jordan** tour in November are now both confirmed departures.

Ireland – we have one place left on this tour.

Spain and Portugal – we only have one room left for this tour so you will need to move quickly if you'd like to join me as time is running to secure seats on our flights to Spain and also to confirm hotel rooms.

Egypt and Jordan – it's a similar scenario for this tour. There's very, very limited space now on this tour, mainly because we've only got about one cabin left for the Nile cruise section of the tour. So, you'll have to move very quickly on this tour and contact Moray soon to see if that cabin is still available.

A Special Note on Ecuador and Galapagos (July 16 – Aug 4, 2023)



This is the only one of this year's tours that is not a confirmed departure, and I really don't want to disappoint the people who are already booked on it, if I can't reach our minimum numbers. I am urgently looking for about four more people to join this tour.

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My guide and tour operator is an Ecuadorian, so knows and loves his country incredibly well, plus he's an outstanding nature guide and photographer. As well as introducing us to the Galapagos Islands' extraordinary wildlife he'll also be taking us to some of the scenic and cultural highlights on mainland Ecuador. We'll be seeing volcanoes, stepping across the equator itself, looking for condors and visiting traditional villages and the Unesco World Heritage-listed town of Cuenca with its dazzling array of beautiful crafts and art.



This is definitely a one-off tour and if the Galapagos has always been on your bucket list, this is the perfect time to visit before tourism numbers really start to climb and because no-one really knows how this wonderful archipelago and its animals are doing to cope with climate change and sea-level rises.

Do get in contact with me or Moray as soon as possible if you'd like to join this tour.

Lord Howe Island and the Snowy Mountains, Feb 17 -Feb 28



Almost all of us on the tour discovered that there are a lot of people out there who didn't even know where this island is! So, after our less than two-hour flight from Sydney it wasn't really a surprise to find that the island is certainly not overrun with visitors (only 400 people are allowed to visit at any one time). Scenically it's spectacular with its two high mountain peaks at one end of the island and its encircling coral reef (the world's most southerly).

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During our five-day stay we went swimming, biking, walking snorkelling (on one occasion in the company of seven Galapagos sharks!), saw magnificent turtles, rare birds, went a point-to-point island cruise, walked to a clifftop vantage point where gannets and other birds were in flight and had an island tour that covered just about every bit of road on the island.

The island has a great way to make sure everyone benefits from visitors. The golf and bowls clubs both host evening meals, breakfast catering is shared around and even the tiny school benefits by staging a nightly short film show of classic old short documentaries about the island.



It was relaxed, beautiful and for many travellers a perfect way to relax after all the stresses and strains of the past few years. I'm definitely thinking about taking a group back there some time!

We also spent a few days up in the Snowy Mountains of NSW and had perfect views of Australia's highest mountain Kosciuszko and explored Canberra, which many New Zealanders never visit. The city, once the brunt of jokes, is now leafy, vibrant and the visit to the Parliament was a real highlight, as was the great lunch we had in the Parliament café.

This Month's Feature Tour

Winter Wonderland in Scandinavia

Jan 27, 2024 – Feb 16, 2024

This will be a once-in-a-lifetime tour, it's bucket-list territory with sleighbells on!



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The timing of this tour is not just to ensure we get to experience majestic, stunning Scandinavian scenery. It also gives us the very best chances of seeing the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights. There are no guarantees of this, but by taking you above the Arctic Circle and with nights both on a cruise and in a glass-roofed igloo I'm surely giving us a great shot at seeing this eerie, mesmerising sight.

The tour also features three Scandinavian capitals – Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki and a four-day cruise along the Norwegian coastline.

Along the way we'll be visiting Santa Claus' village, and staying in glass igloos from which, conditions permitting, you can lie in bed and watch the northern lights in comfort and spend a night in a fantastic ice hotel.



I've packed this itinerary with everything I can think of that makes a classic winter Scandinavian adventure. We'll have sleigh rides pulled by reindeer, swish over the snow on dog sleds, meet reindeer, try ice fishing on a frozen lake, go snow-mobiling and, of course, meet Santa Claus! We will also meet the Sami people who live in the Lapland region of Scandinavia and learn about their culture and history.

Our city tours in the three capital cities will include Helsinki's World Heritage-listed Suomenlinna Fortress, Stockholm's Vasa ship and the City Hall's legendary Golden Room and in Oslo we'll see the Fram icebreaker, the Vigeland sculpture park and visit the Polar Explorers' Museum.

The cruise sails from Tromso to Bergen in Norway and is renowned, not only for passing through some spectacular Norwegian coastal scenery including archipelagos and fjords, but for its superb, locally sourced food and onboard talks on the region.

It's going to be cold outside but don't forget the saying: There's no such thing as cold weather, just incorrect clothing! And everywhere indoors is always beautifully heated (with the exception of the one night in the ice hotel, of course, but that's an amazing experience and your bed is guaranteed to be warm).

Numbers will be very limited on this tour, mostly because of the number of cabins we will be allocated on the Norwegian cruise section, so if you'd like the full itinerary, please get in touch with Moray soon. There's already plenty of interest in this tour.

On the Home Front

As mentioned last month, it's been a busy time in our household with so many birthdays.

Natey is now four and about to start football (soccer) and is proving to be a great dancer, Zoe is one, prefers to crawl rather than walk and is sometimes known as La Destructa for her ability to destroy Natey's games and for her love of hammering. Meanwhile, Georgia, who is about nine months old, has been on her first overseas trip to visit her other grandparents in Melbourne. She's also becoming very mobile.



Georgia



Zoe, Rachel, Emily, Georgia



Natey, Zoe

Next month Rachel, Atkins, Natey and Zoe are making their first visit to Zambia as a family. It's six years since Atkins has been home so he's so excited to be taking the children home to meet his parents and siblings for the first time. They've just got to get through the long-haul flights to Dubai and then south to Lusaka with a toddler (if Zoe decides to start walking before they leave) and an active pre-schooler!

Derek's been mowing the lawns and has cleaned the car while I've writing this so clearly, he's just fine as well, and looking forward to his trip to the UK in mid-May.

That's all for now and the next newsletter will be in late April after my tour to Japan.

Very best wishes

Jill