

Hands-On in the
**AUSSIE
OUTBACK**

LESSONS IN LIVING OFF THE LAND AND SEA
ON THE RUGGED EYRE PENINSULA

Text & Photographs By Rishad Saam Mehta

Sea lions are often called the puppy dogs of the sea as they are friendly and curious. This one is enamoured by her own reflection in the snorkelling mask.



“WATCH WHERE YOU STEP,”

Lunch said, trying to warn me about the ants underfoot. I didn't see what the fuss was about, but he broke off a twig and poked it into an innocent-looking pile of mud. In an instant, it was swarming with big, angry ants. Lunch told me his grandfather had been stung once. He had also been shot with a bullet, but maintained throughout his life that he'd rather have been shot twice than bitten once. After hearing that, I walked more cautiously.



Abalone or the black lipped sea mollusc is worth more than its weight in gold. The punishment by law for plucking more than five a day can attract penalties as high as 5 lakh rupees.



Lunch leads the way to a rocky cove on a beach strewn with coral and seaweed. Years of experience have taught him where to find this delicacy underwater.

David Doudle, better known as Lunch, grew up on a family farm in southern Australia's Eyre Peninsula. Falling off trees, being kicked by a kangaroo, getting bitten by spiders—these experiences were all a part of growing up, as was walking about barefoot until it was mandatory to wear shoes to school. There were no supermarkets or public swimming pools back then, and definitely no Internet. Lunch learned to swim in the ocean and fish and hunt for the table.

My guide tried to impart some of the hands-on outdoor education to me as we walked into the bramble forest around Mikkira Station, a historic homestead 30 kilometres from Port Lincoln. This was the first part of the Eyre Peninsula to be settled, as early as 1842. When Lunch's ancestors had arrived in this strange new land, they had gone through the process of learning about its surprising flora, fauna and marine creatures. The knowledge they gathered from aboriginals and through trial and error metamorphosed into the Australian outback way of life.

We had driven to Mikkira in Lunch's Land Cruiser, its tyres red with mud, in order to see koalas in the wild. I had almost rolled my eyes at the prospect, but Lunch quickly put me right. "Try to cuddle these chaps," he said, "and they will tear you in half with their claws."

Indeed, Mikkira had none of the usual tourist trappings of a boardwalk or informative placards that I had come to expect of Australia. There was no hint of modern civilization at this over-

grown outpost. Despite Lunch's warnings, I almost stepped on something fat, black and green. In a flash, Lunch grabbed it and thrust it into my hands. There I was, gawping at what looked like a miniature scale model of a crocodile, as it gawped back. I, who had once slept in my car because there was a gecko in my hotel room. Surprisingly, this creature was dry and leathery, not slimy as I had expected.

"It's a shingleback lizard, or sleepy lizard" Lunch explained, walking on nonchalantly, as if he'd plucked a ripe apple and handed it to me. In fact, aboriginals consider the shingleback a juicy delicacy, and roast its fleshy tail over an open fire. "Don't worry, it has no teeth," Lunch called back. "So it can't hurt you. But, don't let it bite you because once it grabs something it doesn't let go." I promptly dropped the lizard and watched it lazily waddle away.

We saw plenty of koalas that day too, sitting in trees like wise old men. Their claws had never been clipped, and I could see how long and sharp they were. A swipe from this "cuddly" bear could do some serious damage.

I survived that day free from scratches, bites, or stings. The next morning Lunch decided to up the ante a bit. He showed up at my hotel towing a tarp-covered trailer behind his Land Cruiser to take me to beaches and bays where I could learn how to hunt, fish, and live off the land.

Turning off the highway, we drove over a few kilometres of dirt to arrive at a secluded beach. Lunch announced that we would

harvest abalone, an edible mollusc that grows on rocks underwater. Out came snorkelling gear, two knives, and a netted "catch" bag. We walked to the beach in our swimming togs. Lunch strode confidently over rocks and shells, the soles of his feet hardened by half a lifetime spent barefoot. I followed gingerly.

It was a sunny day, and the cold water was a shock as we swam to a cluster of rocks about 800 feet away. We dived down, and Lunch pointed out the molluscs which attach themselves to the rock to feed on algae. So well camouflaged were they that I would never have found them on my own. I watched him prise one off its perch, and did the same with my knife. Lunch told me that by Australian law, a person is allowed to pluck no more than five abalone per day.

As we swam back to the beach, a group of sea lions came up to us, as friendly as puppy dogs. I think they were fascinated by their reflection in my mask and often swam right up to my face. I would have liked to play with them for longer, but Lunch insisted we head back to shore immediately.

As we gutted the abalones, beating them against a rock to relax their muscles and make them more tender for eating, he casually explained his haste. Apparently, great white sharks hunt sea lions, and are often a threat around a pod. My face must have betrayed me, because he added that only four or five abalone hunters get eaten by sharks every year. "But you'll see that it is so tasty, that it is worth a small risk," Lunch said, not very reassuringly.

After a short drive, we veered off the tarmac again, this time towards some sand dunes. Lunch notched the Cruiser into four-wheel drive to navigate these, but eventually the going was so tricky that we first unhitched the trailer, and then simply parked and walked, lugging our fishing rods and tackle through the soft sand. As we crested a dune, a beautiful hidden beach with fine sand and turquoise water appeared.

We baited our hooks with pilchard, a fish salmon love, from our icebox. Within minutes of casting our lines I had caught a magnificent Australian salmon. Meanwhile, Lunch's line had been bitten clean through. A tell-tale dorsal fin ominously glided by, about 20 feet from where I was standing. A small great white shark had taken the pilchard and the line. I beat a hasty retreat out of the water, much to Lunch's amusement. "C'mon mate, it's just a baby!" he said.

But what if the mother comes looking for it, I wondered. I tiptoed back into the water, and eventually caught another salmon.

We now had enough for a fine lunch, so we drove to yet another beach. Here, Lunch pulled the tarp off the trailer to reveal a mobile kitchen, complete with high-pressure propane stoves, a spice drawer, a cutlery and crockery chest, and a compartment full of pots, pans, and cooking implements.

While Lunch filleted the salmon and heated the wok, I thinly sliced the abalone and chopped some garlic, red chillies, and shallot. These we added to the wok, after a dollop of butter, some wine and vinegar. The abalone, which is very delicate and needs to be stir-fried for only a minute at most, went in too. Fortunately I got the texture right; not rubbery and overcooked, and somewhere between scallop and calamari. Purists eat abalone cooked in its own juices, but I thought the slightly salty, buttery flavour of the flesh—redolent of algae and seawater—was perfectly complemented by the garlic, wine, vinegar, some cracked pepper, and a chilled Riesling. We cooked the salmon in butter for an even shorter time and it was perfect.

Lunch told me that he could count on his hands the number of times in his life he'd gone shopping for meat or fish. "When you own a sheep farm, and live by a bountiful ocean, there is hardly ever the need," he said. One could drive right across the continent of Australia without ever needing to eat at a restaurant, he said. Provided of course you know the secrets of survival in the bush.

Travel writer and photographer **RISHAD SAAM MEHTA** is the author of two books, the latest being *Fast Cars and Fidgety Feet* (Tranquebar, 2016).

THE VITALS

ORIENTATION Eyre Peninsula is a picturesque peninsula in South Australia, sheltered by the Spencer Gulf to the east and the Great Australian Bight to the west. Known for its bountiful waters, secluded beaches, and limestone cliffs, it is one of the continent's best locations for fishing and enjoying seafood.

GETTING THERE The peninsula is a four-hour scenic drive from Adelaide. It is also possible to take a flight or coach from Adelaide. Ferries operate between Wallaroo on the Yorke Peninsula near Adelaide and Lucky Bay on the Eyre Peninsula.

THE OUTBACK EXPERIENCE For an active Aussie Outback experience in the Eyre Peninsula that will get your hands dirty, contact Goin Off Safaris at goinoffsafaris.com.au



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1 Outback guide David Doudle or Lunch parks his car on a deserted beach where a meal is then cooked outdoors in the pretty setting. 2 Abalone needs to be cooked just right to be sublime. Too little and it is pasty, too much and it becomes rubbery. 3 The sleepy lizard or the shingleback has no teeth, but if it bites, it doesn't let go easily. 4 Lunch fillets a freshly caught salmon. 5 The writer tackles an Australian salmon, which looks small, but can put up quite a fight.



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