

Bill couldn't help but marvel at the sight. It was like a scene from *The Call of the Wild* out there, the dog gliding through the landscape, seemingly oblivious to the men. It appeared to be determined to keep its distance and follow its solitary path.

Bill, who had been studying the island's koala population since 1998, had just spent the day coaxing koalas out of trees in the island's densely bushy hills. Seeing the running dog on St Bees, though, was an unwelcome novelty. There were wallabies all over the island and there were still plenty of goats, descendants of the animals that were introduced more than a hundred years ago. But by 2009, the approximately 800-hectare island was almost all national park, and protected from both human development and non-native animal species on account of its abundant birdlife, from sacred kingfishers to sea eagles and kites, as well as its occasional snake, and lots of (mostly harmless) spiders.

This dog had no business being on the virtually uninhabited island, in a zone where domestic pets were prohibited. Neither Steve nor Bill was surprised to see it, though. Steve had been aware of the dog for weeks, ever since David Berck, one of the leaseholders of St Bees' only private section, Homestead Bay, called to let him know that there was a dog roaming the island and that it seemed to have come over from Keswick Island, St Bees' neighbour. Some of Keswick's fourteen or so residents had also spotted the dog in December, and then later noticed it on St Bees, which was clearly visible over the narrow but rough ocean channel of Egremont Passage, a few weeks later.

The dog had seemingly been out there for months, yet no one had reported their pet missing. There had been no call to Mackay office of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service from distressed dog owners reporting that they had lost their beloved pet whilst out boating. Of course, it had been known to happen: picnicking locals would head out to the islands, their dogs would get lost in the bush and the owners would have to leave them behind in order to catch the tides back to the mainland. But they always alerted the authorities. So for the last few months, Steve and his colleagues had been baffled as to where exactly this dog could have come from and exactly how they should deal with it.

Now, out on St Bees for the first of several annual trips that the Mackay-based rangers made in their supervision of the island, Steve Burke was on a mission. It was time to finally trap this dog. Trapping was the most humane way that he and his fellow rangers, most of them dog lovers with dogs of their own at home, could think of to remove this mysterious animal, who posed a threat to every species on the islands.

But it wasn't going to be easy. The dog had already eluded several attempts by St Bees' sole resident, Peter Berck, to befriend it, tempting it out with cans of dog food. It was giving every impression that it wanted to be left alone, and there were a whole lot of places on St Bees for it to hide. The island is craggy and volcanic, approximately four kilometres from shore to shore and shaped like a cartoon egg that has been hastily cracked into a pan. The rangers were only out on the island for four days of solid work and, if they weren't able to lure the dog into the wire trap they'd borrowed from the Mackay Regional Council, Steve knew they were going to have to use more drastic measures. Nobody wanted to take that thought to its conclusion, but the fact was, this dog couldn't be here. If it was behaving antisocially, it could be dangerous. If it was feral, they might have to put it down.



So, the first step was to set the trap in a place the dog was likely to venture to. While there were plenty of spaces to harbour itself, in order to leave St Bees, the creature would have to swim. Steve was counting on it being smart enough to know this, as well as hungry enough to sniff its way into the trap. He and his ranger colleague, Ludi Daucik, hopped into the inflatable dinghy sitting on the shore and headed out to their boat, *Tomoya*. Between them, Steve and Ludi manoeuvred the empty but hefty metal trap from *Tomoya* to the dinghy and then motored back to St Bees. They pulled up beside a rusted line boat that lies on Stockyard Bay, emerging and receding with the tides, looking almost as if it's had a bite taken out of it by one of the hammer-head sharks that live off the reef.

The two men picked a patch under a low-hanging beach-scrub tree above the high tide mark just back from the shore between Honeymoon and Stockyard Bays. It was one of the few sheltered spots visible from Peter's house on Homestead Bay. Steve set about filling a hessian bag with the sloppy contents of several cans of Pal that he'd picked up from the supermarket. He'd bought the fancy beef and gravy recipe, thinking, *this has gotta do the job*. His mind on his kelpie and border collie cross playing safely at home in his Mackay back-yard, Steve swished the food around, making sure the gravy seeped into the bag so that the scent would travel further towards this hungry castaway dog's nostrils. He tied the bag to a spring mechanism at the far end of the trap. Any pressure on the hessian bag and the trap would fall down behind the mysterious hound.

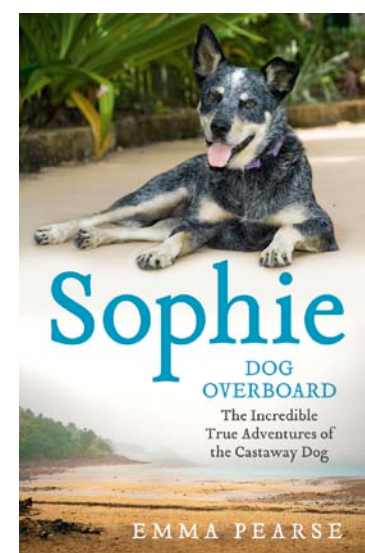
After that, there was nothing to be done except to head back to *Tomoya* and get settled for the night. Steve, for one, was looking forward to relaxing in front of the TV, while Bill was ready for a beer.

Bill had been scanning the beach for more evidence of the dog, but there was no sign of it. 'I hope this works,' he said, pointing at the trap now looming in the dusk.

'You and me both, mate,' said Steve.

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SOUTHERN SPLASH

The Sapphire Coast spoils with splendid wilderness beaches, unvarnished heritage and so many places where dogs are welcome.

BY MELISSA RIMAC

The humpback whale leaps out of the inky depths, breaches and then flips its tail playfully — near enough for us to make out its facial markings. This up-close encounter with one of the earth's most majestic creatures takes place in a secret little cove that conjures potent memories of the Mediterranean.

Oblivious to our wide-eyed wonder, our dogs, Onyx and Pierre, are chasing and dunking each other with such zest, we can barely tell them apart in the blur.

There's lots to love about an untrammelled coastline where you hardly need bother with swimmers — all the more so when you can take dogs for long joyous romps, throughout the day, without fear of a looming ranger.

We're at Beares Beach at Bermagui, on the far south coast of NSW. Surrounding us is spectacular rock art: swirls of ochre and mauve, bolts of quartz and upturned layers of rock shelf which give the impression that very recently, the earth had an almighty hissy fit here. Unfurled beyond is a jagged coastline fringed with clinging mountains and vividly textured forest.

Stretching from Bermagui to the Victorian border, the Sapphire Coast lies just a half day's drive from either Melbourne or Sydney, making it a great option for get-togethers of scattered packs.

Bermagui's low slung houses and old-style gardens suggest that not much has changed in this fishing village since the 70s. There are no tacky tourist shops, no high-rise apartments and no tedious affectation. We're soothed by the hush and the horses who graze in our street.

Like unpretentious Bermagui itself, our home here — simply known as 56 Bunga Street — is unfrilled, comforting and ideally located. A short stroll brings us to either dog-friendly Beares Beach or the picturesque harbour.

The excellent yard, however, comes up trumps. Usually limited to a courtyard, our teenagers kick up their heels in delight and play hide and seek. Onyx wastes no time letting the garden gnomes know who's boss!

The swishing sound of the nearby ocean seems so close we almost expect to get our feet wet. Whip-bird calls ring from nearby gums.

Next morning, the pelicans treat us to slow motion landings against a dramatic mountain backdrop. The huge dog park overlooks the harbour and pristine coast dotted with tiny beaches.

Again accompanied by whales, we walk around the promontory, then follow steps leading down to the sublime Blue Pool. The extensive rock shelves suggest great snorkelling.

For our afternoon beach romp, we take Onyx and Pierre to Cuttagee Beach, a short drive south. As we 'spa' in little pools framed by rocks, a large pod of dolphins plays very close by. We have the stunning, long beach all to ourselves.

The drive south to Tathra — another endearingly sleepy hamlet — could, theoretically, take less than an hour. But we encounter constant prompts to pause: at tiny secluded beaches; at spotted gum and cycad forests; overlooking lush

valleys and rambling farmhouses; at rattling timber bridges; at small galleries tucked into rainforest.

Making our way along the sand dunes fringing Tathra Beach, the sea mist is so viscous, we can hear and smell but not see the ocean.

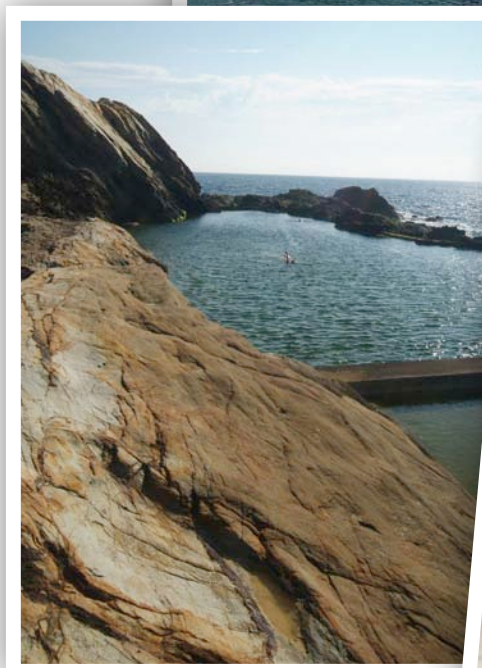
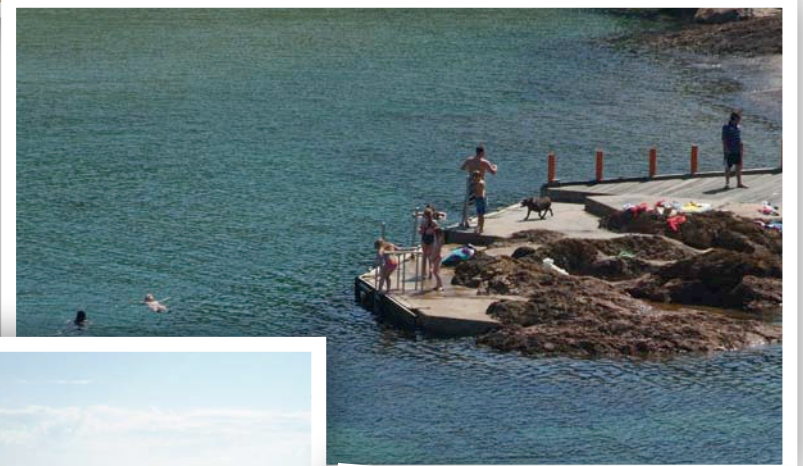
Like Bermagui, Tathra is blessed with the sort of views that inspire drawn out, deep sighs. Stretching out to infinity, bush-fringed headlands and painted cliffs drop suddenly into a glassy sea.

A seal swims under Tathra's historic wharf, relic from the steam-ship era. Fringed by forest, farmland and endless sea, it's little wonder that locals say they feel as if they live on an island.

The Aegean comes to mind again at tiny, rock-encased Kianinny Bay, perfect for sheltered swims and snorkelling

Groups of lounging kangaroos signal our arrival at Pambula Village, where many of the buildings hark back to gold rush days.

It feels as if the living room segues directly into the ocean at Cove Cottage, our Pambula Beach home. From the deck, the miniscule beaches of Ben Boyd National Park look close enough to run our hands over the ghostly gums. A sea eagle hovers close overhead.



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