

A daylong drive to a remote steel town for a 45-minute swim with cuttlefish? **Max Anderson** thought he was being had. Then he found himself in an underwater disco, eye to eye with an amorous mollusc. Photography by Carl Charter.

EXPERIENCE

**W**hen I text a friend to say I'm going to swim with giant cuttlefish, he thinks I'm being taken for a ride.

"You're joking, right?" he replies. "Swimming with dolphins I can understand but swimming with cuttlefish? I just hope it's not a 'damp squid'."

A cuttlefish isn't a fish at all; it belongs to the family of cephalopods of which squid and octopus are fellow members. Not only do I appreciate my friend's pun, I also share his scepticism. Enthusiasts can swim with many marine animals off South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, including dolphins, great white sharks and Australian sea lions. While all of these are guaranteed to inspire a degree of awe, the word "cuttlefish" is unlikely to inspire much of anything – unless you've owned a budgie, in which case you'll know that a husk of cuttlefish bone is useful for beak sharpening.

But on a bright winter's morning in 2017, I join Marie-Christine Lamy and Mike Bartram, two owners of Adelaide-based travel company PureSA ([puresa.com.au](http://puresa.com.au)). After two years escorting visitors on walking and wildlife tours in and around Adelaide, PureSA has decided to take the plunge with an inaugural Swim with the Giant Cuttlefish tour (trips for the 2018 season take place in July).

If I am being taken for a ride, it's a long one: the experience amounts to a two-day, one-night trip, including a drive from Adelaide to the remote steel town of Whyalla on the Spencer Gulf. It's a round trip of 800 kilometres for a swim that lasts for less than an hour – and it costs \$649 per person.

"Yes, we're a bit nervous about it," laughs Marie-Christine. "Most people we speak to have never heard of cuttlefish. But we hope that's going to change. A film crew was recently in Whyalla filming the cuttlefish for three weeks. It turns out they were working on David Attenborough's *Blue Planet II*."



WHYALLA

South Australia

# GO FISH





A diver gets her first look at a giant cuttlefish (below)

While I'm no clearer on what it is I'm about to swim with, the journey in the PureSA minibus goes surprisingly quickly. We break for coffee at the Jitter Bean Oasis in Lochiel, overlooking a lake made bright pink by salt-loving bacteria. Lunch is taken in Alligator Gorge, about 300 kilometres north of Adelaide, a place of echoing chasms and soaring gums that's so empty of people it feels as though I'm the first to discover it.

It's dusk when we reach Whyalla. Maintaining its lonely vigil over the Spencer Gulf, the town is tidy, quiet and bathed in pale light. We check in to the town's premier accommodation, the four-star Foreshore Motor Inn [whyallaforeshore.com.au].

Though modest, it's friendly and functions exactly as it should. The TV at the end of the bed is well sized, there are sachets of instant coffee and small pods of milk in the fridge. And in keeping with the curious nature of the trip, I learn that only two weeks earlier, the same motel had accommodated British billionaire Sanjeev Gupta. He came to announce he had bought the town's troubled steel works and was investing \$1 billion – a huge relief to Whyalla's 22,000 people.

Before the billionaire's rescue, it's no secret that some locals were pinning their hopes on another visitor: *Sepia apama*, the Australian giant cuttlefish.

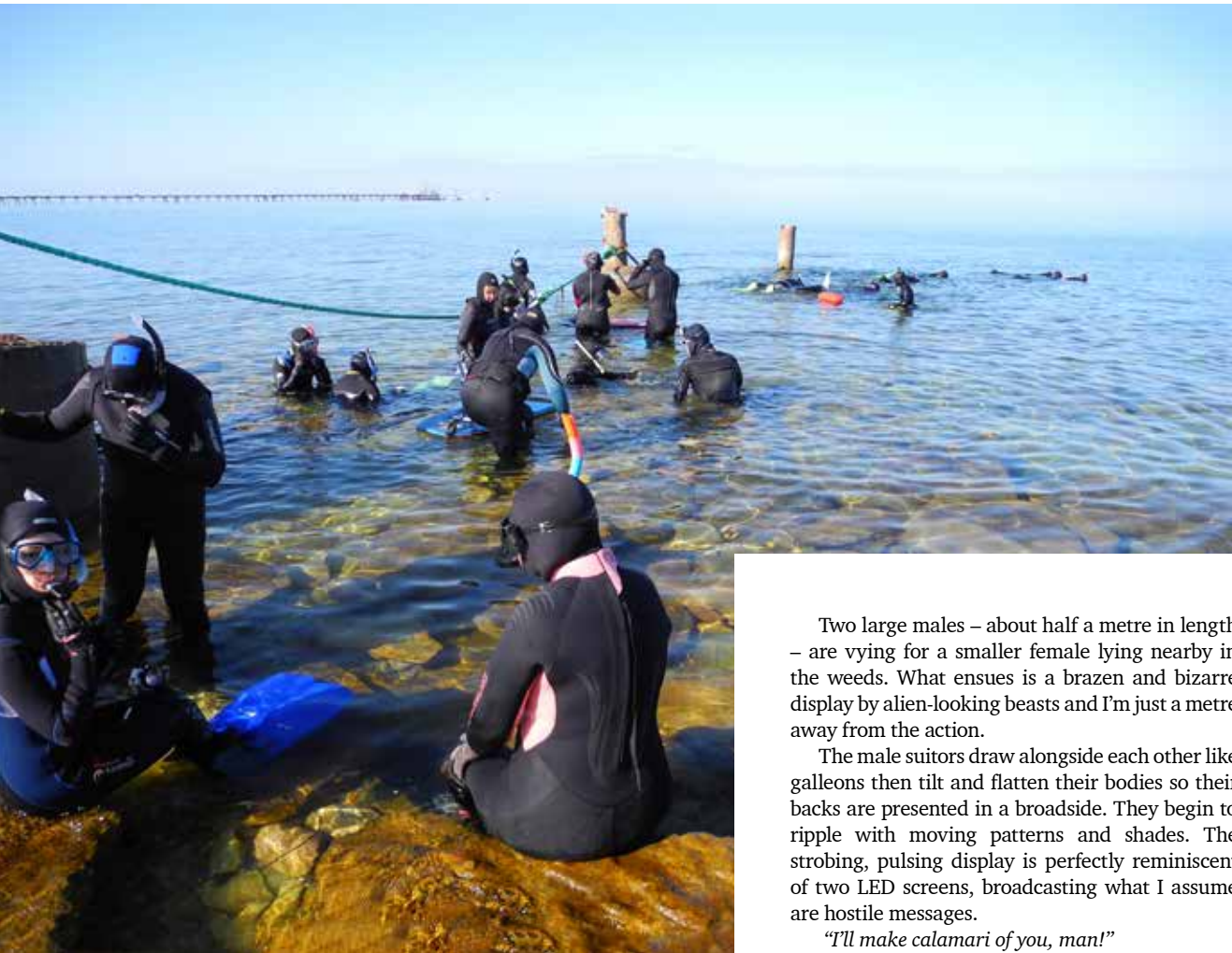
## **“Once a year, Australian giant cuttlefish swarm in the waters off Whyalla. It happens nowhere else in the world.”**

Carl Charter is a dive instructor, underwater photographer and self-confessed cuttlefish maniac. He gives a presentation at the motel's restaurant, explaining how he'll conduct tomorrow morning's snorkelling expedition. Over Coffin Bay oysters, delicious Atlantic salmon and a bottle of Clare Valley riesling, he helps us to understand what it is we're about to see – and why we're lucky to see it.

“Once a year, from early June to the end of August, Australian giant cuttlefish swarm in the waters off Whyalla. They number around 200,000 in what is called the ‘aggregation,’” he says. “It happens nowhere else in the world.”

Stony Point, 40 kilometres east of Whyalla, is one of those places you'd call pretty-not-pretty. The air is fresh and the waters of False Bay are smooth as glass. Look west and you can see the town of Whyalla. Look east and you see the stacks and tanks of a gas fractionation plant.





Snorkellers don wetsuits and gloves before wading into the shallows at Stony Point

Romantic? Not really – unless you’re the world’s largest cuttlefish. These otherwise solitary animals come together en masse to get jiggy at this 10-kilometre strip off the coast. Scientists believe they come for a trifecta of conditions found nowhere else: the 12 to 15°C temperature window; the salinity; and the local geomorphology, a thin, shattered rock found in the shallows. Resembling broken crockery, the plates of rock render cuttlefish eggs – and the subsequent hatchlings – almost impervious to predators.

At 9.30am, I’m squeezed into a suit of seven-millimetre-thick rubber (including a neoprene balaclava) and when I follow Carl into the water, the clock starts ticking. This is not because of any time limit enforced by our hosts but because 45 minutes is about as much as the body can stand in 13°C water. Launching into the clear shallows, I soon begin trumpeting in alarm as the chill water “primes” my wetsuit. But I pipe down just as quickly when I realise that directly beneath me are three cuttlefish.

Two large males – about half a metre in length – are vying for a smaller female lying nearby in the weeds. What ensues is a brazen and bizarre display by alien-looking beasts and I’m just a metre away from the action.

The male suitors draw alongside each other like galleons then tilt and flatten their bodies so their backs are presented in a broadside. They begin to ripple with moving patterns and shades. The strobing, pulsing display is perfectly reminiscent of two LED screens, broadcasting what I assume are hostile messages.

*“I’ll make calamari of you, man!”*

*“Your mother was a bêche-de-mer!”*

The whole time, they’re stretching themselves out, elongating their eight arms and puffing up their bodies, increasing their volume by 50, 60, 70 per cent. It’s enough to have female cuttlefish (and budgerigars) swooning with excitement.

All the while, the diminutive female stays low, her iridescent mantle oscillating like a flamenco dancer’s skirt.

After the males finish squaring off, they resort to some brief arm-to-arm combat. The loser is quickly chased away and darts off to try his luck elsewhere, while the winner is left to approach the female and give her his heart.

Actually, he has three hearts – which pump blue blood. And he’s no brainless street fighter. Scientists believe cuttlefish are as intelligent as a family dog and, like their octopus cousin, are capable of problem-solving.

Snorkelling in an area the size of a tennis court, I see scores of cuttlefish in acts of combat and courtship. I'm astonished by the variety of their size and shape. Generally, they look rather like an armoured gauntlet with the hand drooped but they constantly strike different poses. Occasionally they resemble squid but at their most swollen, the head of a big male is almost lion-like.

They're completely oblivious to me – even when I duck dive to within 30 centimetres of one animal and we're almost eyeball to eyeball – and I don't have to flipper very far to watch behaviours I'd learned about last night.

Cuttlefish are chameleon-like in their ability to assume colour and pattern and hide against backgrounds of rock, sand and weed (doubly remarkable because they're colourblind). They can also change their body surface to emulate the texture of that background.

I don't appreciate just how radical this is until I see an animal lurking in the weeds. The cuttlefish is spiked and puckered all over, with brown and black blotches – so completely has he restyled his body that I think I'm looking at a different species. Cunning males often use their morphing capabilities to impersonate females, lulling the real female into a false sense of security before striking.

Eventually, I see the sex act itself. Cuttlefish mate face to face, with the male completely enclosing the female's face with his arms. He enacts a fertilisation process that's perhaps best left to the pages of science journals but certainly it's another one for the file marked "Not something you see every day."

This action-packed cycle continues for three months in a frenzy of fighting, copulating and egg laying that leaves the undersides of those flat plates of stone studded with small white eggs.

All this underwater love is having results. In the late 1990s, local fishermen realised there was a profitable Asian market for cuttlefish meat and it's said they scooped 270 tonnes from the waters in three weeks. It took almost a decade for numbers to recover but now the area is a marine sanctuary and the aggregate is returning to the heady days when 250,000 cuttlefish were said to gather in a single season.



A snorkeller gets up close with the courting cuttlefish

"Last year, we counted 177,000 cuttlefish," Carl tells me during one of many head-above-water interludes. "I'd be surprised if it was lower than 190,000 this year."

"So do the adults go back out to sea after they've finished?" I ask.

"No, they wear themselves out," he says. "After the season, they literally disintegrate – in August, you'll see the adults swimming around with bits falling off them. And we don't know where the hatchlings go either. That's the funny thing. Nobody knows where the cuttlefish come from or where they go."

This is a truly unusual trip, in fact, as unusual as the cuttlefish itself. And I reckon it's destined to attract naturalists of all stripes.

As for the rest of us, I can say this: cuttlefish are not majestic dolphins, fearsome great whites or cute sea lion pups. But my 45 minutes in the freezing waters off the little steel town was a moment in time that properly lived up to the promise of an immersive and intimate encounter with wildlife.

If you drop a cuttlefish onto your bucket list, you won't regret it. I've been dining out on the story ever since. ●



Travel Insider

Whyalla's natural wonders don't stop at cuttlefish. To find out more, go to [travelinsider.qantas.com](http://travelinsider.qantas.com).



GETTING THERE

QantasLink flies to Adelaide from Brisbane, Sydney and Perth, with additional connections. [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)

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