



One of Flinders Island's quiet little bays

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Images by: Michael Veitch

Intrigued by a scary story he was told as a child, Michael Veitch encountered rickety planes, towering stinging nettles and a host of kindly larger than life inhabitants in his quest to discover the islands we so often forget, the Bass Strait Islands.

A third of the way into his highly unusual tour of the Bass Strait Islands, forced on shore to recover from violent sea sickness – tired, famished, and near fainting – Michael Veitch hears men shouting. Thinking it might be a mirage he approaches a wooden hut where a party is in full swing. Men from Parks and Wildlife greet the bedraggled Michael, and immediately start a jocular disagreement as to which TV program they've last seen their uninvited guest on. 'One with red hair and a squint looked at me as steadily as he could. "Hey, didn't you used to be that funny bloke from, you know, that show?" Since abandoning a career in television comedy, or rather it abandoning me, I have, on a regular basis, been assailed with comments such as this. My heyday seems to have entwined itself with certain non-specific memories in some people's minds, and I am constantly being asked to explain the source of these nebulous recollections. I'm used to it now. After years of answering such enquiries sensibly, I now concur with whatever happens to be suggested. It's much easier. To some people, I've appeared on television shows ranging from Homicide to Gardening Australia, and I have even apparently read the news in several states on many different networks'.

Cringing despite his dilapidated appearance, too late to make an escape to the beach and the waiting yacht, Michael enters the hut. In his dehydrated state he quickly impresses the maintenance team by downing a beer followed by two greasy sausages in white bread – before falling into a deep sleep. Waking in panic, he stumbles back to the broken yacht, dreading that he's been left behind.

There are many such stories in *The Forgotten Islands* – in which, despite near misses, Michael never actually gets left behind. Michael Veitch, the book's affable, meandering narrator, seems to know roughly where he is going, loosely speaking. And yet he's open to the story he's telling in a way that makes an itinerary redundant. Far more a journey than a trip, he keeps his eyes peeled and ears flapping as he makes his way around many but not all of the Bass Strait islands that we Australians are generally so forgetful of.

# THE FORGOTTEN ISLANDS OF BASS STRAIT

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The Forgotten Islands is a playful book but it's also a considered one. Although Michael has clearly read up on the islands, he tells me pointedly that he did his research after his journey had ended. He didn't want to know too much beforehand. He was keen 'to keep a sense of stepping into a void'. This seems to work, giving his text a distinct freshness. Wherever he happens to be he takes the reader along for the ride – whether it's struggling up Stanley's The Nut on his middle-aged pins, losing his companions entirely on Three Hummock Island, or stumbling down the degraded track to the story's end at a rocky cove near the Deal lighthouse.

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Michael Veitch, he may be pleased to know, is not a lighthouse person, in that he's perfectly able to convey to the reader what's interesting about his obsession with the islands strung out between Victoria and Tasmania. The journey he undertakes is as much a discovery of the people he meets on King, Flinders, and various other islands, as of the landscapes he finds there. He's particularly drawn to the mild eccentricity of various men (there aren't many women), formed by their contact with these islands. Because as a narrator Michael is fairly effacing, many of these characters seem larger than life. There is Robert Alliston, whose parents thought nothing of bringing up a family on the remote Three Hummock Island, who, despite his advanced age, bounds like a goat along familiar grassy tracks. There's Geoff the pilot, whose Cessna has a habit of bolting up the runway, 'like a large African animal suddenly released from a cage'. And then there's the enigmatic Parks and Wildlife ranger, Wayne Dick, whom Michael is warned to approach 'with an appropriate level of nervousness and respect, or else my journeys onwards might not, let's just say, prove as easy as they could'.



Lighthouse at Cape Wickham,  
King Island - Australia's tallest



Michael about to embark  
on a tricky voyage



There is, Michael suggests, no 'official' guide to Bass Strait and her islands – and certainly this book doesn't aspire to being one. There is something endearingly shambolic about the series of linked journeys that give this book its backbone. This was, Michael tells me, his aim. When he got back from his tour of the islands initially he did nothing, letting the experience wash over him for a while. Then, as he started putting it all together, he found odd things. A sequence of recorded audiotape, for example, mistakenly left on as he stomped up a stiff hill, with just the sound of his grunting and the dirt path underfoot.

Rather than tell his story chronologically, he decided to tell it in a way that was true to his experience, allowing for the mishaps and upturns of luck that he'd so regularly encountered. He was especially keen to take in everything – the history, the islands, the people and, not least, the water that envelops everything. Above all he wanted to evoke a sense of place.

A big part of his journey, its mystery and complexity, he finds in the islanders themselves. Away from the pressures and conventions of the mainland they appear to him 'fully realised, confident in themselves - and unbothered by all the things which bother me'. They seem strengthened by their singular existence, without being rigid or 'steely'. Their flexibility, their ability 'to absorb other people and be challenged by them', stays in Michael's mind well after the journey's end. Yet because he observes them fondly rather than clinically, there's no sting in his descriptions. 'More Bill Bryson than Paul Theroux', is his way of putting it.

Did the people he met, I ask, know that they'd end up as characters in a book? 'No, I don't think so, not really', he replies. 'I didn't really know myself, actually. There were moments when I said to myself, "Yes, thank you, I've got something here I can write about". But generally I was in neutral, trying to give everything the same attention.' And even then, he explains, it took him a good while to work out how to write about it. "I'm not a good note-taker. And I did quite a lot of ruminating. But the tape recorder helped to bring it all back.' He leans forward. 'I think the aural element is essential, the sound of a place – things you can't pick up in notes'. He pauses and stares out at the street scene, hundreds of kilometres away from where his memory has taken him, I presume.

'I really tried to write it in a style that I myself like to read. And yes', he adds, as we start to wind up, 'I think I did underplay myself in order to amplify other elements – people and place, mainly. Although, having said that, I write quite a lot about myself. There's a fair bit in the book that's autobiographical. A number of people have remarked that I give a lot away about my family, and particularly my parents. But for me this was really important in setting the scene'. Both his mother and father have passed on now, he tells me - leading his aunt to contact him to suggest that he might not have described his mother as he does, had she still been alive. 'But', he ends, staring out into the street once more, 'I think my mother would have liked it'.