



Australian sea lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) flipping upside down to get a unique perspective on life

Perth's playful pinnipeds




Picture yourself in clear, shallow water — white sand on the bottom alternating with patches of sea grass. There's sun and blue sky above, sea birds calling through the air.

A slumbering sea lion stirs on the beach and waddles to the sea. Headfirst, it plunges into the water, slipping through the surf with the grace of a ballet dancer. You follow the animal's dark form easily against the lightly coloured sand. You stand up, make a few splashing sounds with your fins, and quicker than you can pull your mask over your face, there's a cuddly curious sea lion — frizzy whiskers and all — just a few centimetres away from you.



To read more about Tony's experience with the sea lions and see more images, refer to the trip write-up on his blog.

 www.tonywublog.com/20070121/socialising-with-sea-lions.html



a. An inquisitive young pup swimming along the edge of the seagrass, checking out awkward snorkellers like me
b. Sea lions are naturally curious, this one nosing in and posing for the camera.

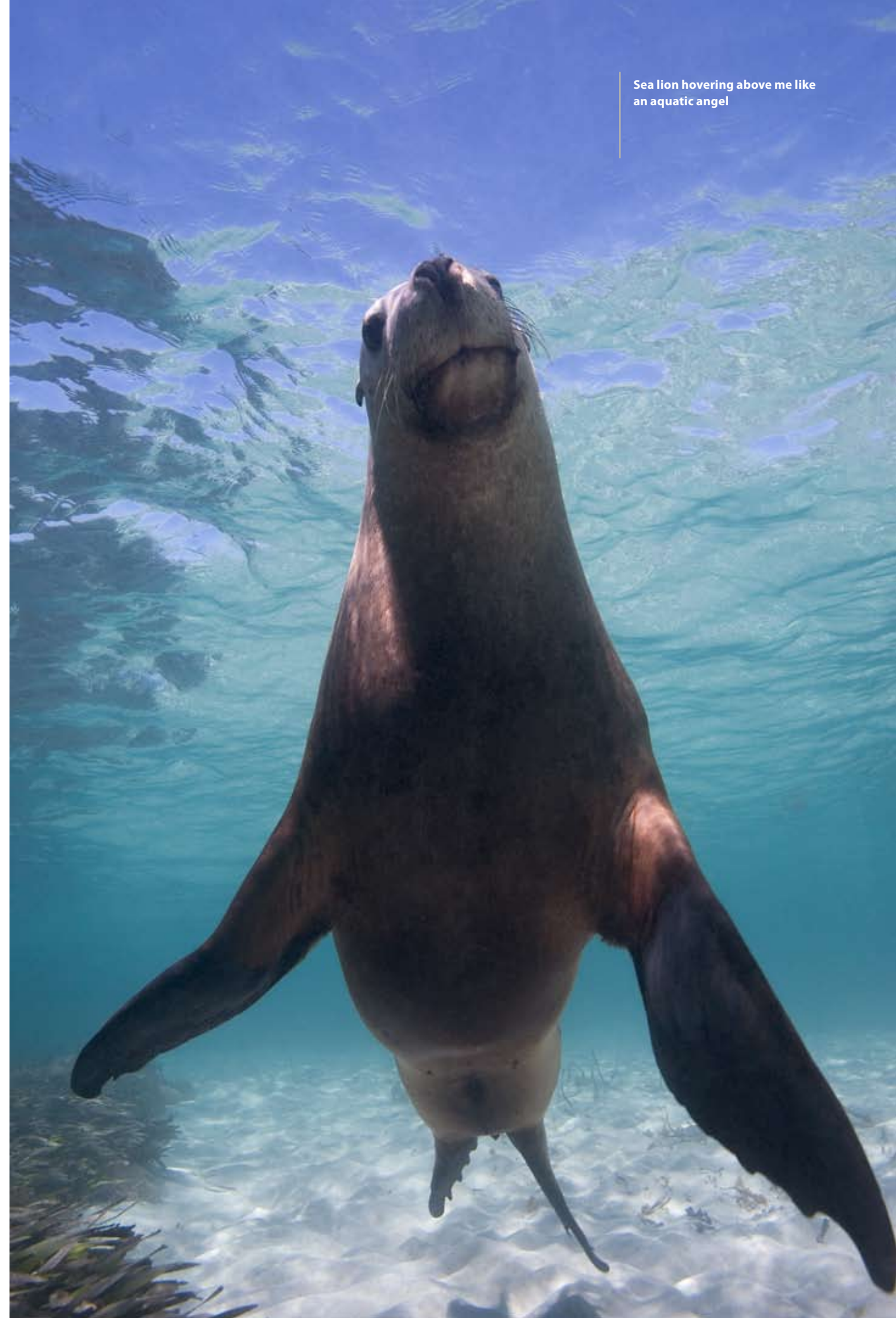
Duck your head under the water, and you notice that it's a young pup, perhaps three to four years of age, blond-beige in colour, with big chocolate-brown eyes that melt your heart. It reminds you of an inquisitive Labrador retriever puppy. Nose-first, the sea lion glides toward you, veering at the last second in a graceful loop, flapping his front flippers to propel himself through the water in a big arc and ending up right in front of you again.

Around and around the sea lion goes. Soon you're joined by another sea lion, this time an older bull, which doesn't move quite as frantically as the young pup, but still displays the trademark curiosity of these animals. Staying near the surface, he floats toward you, occasionally sticking his nose out of the water to breathe.

You jump in surprise as the younger sea lion unexpectedly appears underneath, confronting you face-to-mask, giving you a quick kiss on the forehead, as if to say, "Welcome to my world."



Sea lion hovering above me like an aquatic angel



a.



b.



- a. I couldn't help but twist my head in response to this sea lion's endearing gesture.
- b. Back scratching on the sand is a favourite sea lion pastime.

Blowing bubbles is a form of communication among these sea lions. I responded in kind with my own set of bubbles, resulting in over 30 minutes of hyperactive play.



Determined to engage the playful pinnipeds, you swim frantically toward them. They jump clear of the water and splash down beside you, taunting you to join them for a game of tag.

You try as best you can to keep up, but the sea lions are on home turf, and it's all you can do to keep them in sight. When they disappear into the blue however, they almost always come back. Often, they'll slow the pace down to let you catch your breath, resting patiently on the sandy bottom, watching you with their puppy-dog eyes.

The younger one rolls over and wiggles from side-to-side to scratch his back in the sand, like a little bear rubbing against a tree. It's a comical sight, and you can't help but laugh, releasing a stream of bubbles into the water. The pup looks up and responds in kind, with a burst of bubbles in your general direction.

Congratulations. You've just had your first sea lion conversation.

The sea lions are just a hop, skip and jump away from Perth. To obtain more information or book a trip to visit the sea lions, contact the West Australia Dive Centre in Perth.

 www.watrandive.com/english/index.php

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If this sounds like an adventure you'd like to have, believe it or not, all you have to do is head over to Perth and board a nice, comfortable boat for a daytrip out to Carnac Island, where you can see and interact with Australian sea lions.

My first encounter with these lovely marine mammals was several years ago, when I had the good fortune of visiting and photographing a colony of them in South Australia.

Fascinated by their playful personalities and adorable appearance, I spent quite a bit of time reading about Australian sea lions, in the hope that I would have another opportunity to interact with them.

There are only about 12,000 of these animals left, spread mostly through South and Western Australia. Australian sea lions were more abundant in years gone by, but loss of habitat, competition with people for food, and other pressures have led to a gradual decrease in sea lion numbers. Fortunately, these graceful pinnipeds are protected by law, which hopefully means that their populations will recover with time.

Visiting the sea lions at Carnac Island is an easy day trip. From Perth, it's a 20- to 30-minute ride to the port town of Fremantle, then a relaxing 30-minute boat ride to Carnac, which lies 10 kilometres off the mainland.

Even better, the bay where sea lions congregate has shallow, protected waters, so it's a great experience for everyone. It certainly helps if you know how to snorkel, but even if you don't, the water is shallow enough in many places to stand.

- a. Falling sound asleep for hours at a time is a highly developed sea lion skill.
- b. Large Australian sea lion soaking up the rays, albeit from under the waterline

When visiting this pinniped playground, it's worth keeping in mind that the sea lions are wild. In other words, they're not trained performers, so it's not appropriate to harass them or expect them to perform on cue.

Don't worry though, I can tell you from personal experience that the sea lions are incredibly playful. All you have to do is show up, and when the mood strikes them, these inquisitive animals will have you frolicking and giggling like school kids at an amusement park. 🐟

SPECIAL THANKS to the Western Australian Tourism Commission and West Australia Dive Centre for their help in organising this trip.



Tony Wu

FROM THE AUTHOR

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"Seeing and interacting with these lovely pinnipeds is a unique experience you'll never forget."



- Many major airlines operate direct international flights to Perth, and there's no shortage of domestic connections from other major cities in Australia.
- Water temperature is chilly by Southeast Asian standards. A 5mm suit or more is advisable for a visit with the sea lions. You'll need a mask, snorkel and fins, no diving equipment (though it is possible to dive in the area).
- AVG TEMP**

Month	Temp (°C)
JAN	25
FEB	24
MAR	22
APR	19
MAY	16
JUN	14
JUL	13
AUG	13
SEP	14
OCT	16
NOV	19
DEC	22

AVG RAINFALL (CM)

Month	Rainfall (cm)
JAN	10
FEB	10
MAR	10
APR	10
MAY	10
JUN	15
JUL	15
AUG	10
SEP	10
OCT	10
NOV	10
DEC	10
- With the exception of Australian and New Zealand passport holders, all visitors to Australia must have an Electronic Travel Authority (ETA) or visa, a valid passport and a return air ticket. Details are available on the Australian Department of Immigration website.
- Domestic GSM network and international roaming. Internet access is widely available.
- 240V, 50Hz
- Australian Dollars. Tipping is not obligatory, but 10% for good service in cafes and restaurants is appreciated.
- No vaccinations are required, though using insect repellent is recommended.
- GMT + 10 hrs

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