



Homing in on fun

ANITA BEAUMONT doesn't have to go far to find adventure for her young family.

NOT so long ago, my husband and I decided that anything within a two-hour radius of Newcastle would be where we would holiday for the time being.

With a three-year-old and a one-year-old, we'd found car trips any longer usually meant we came home just as exhausted as when we'd left.

Previous visits to Port Stephens in spring and summer had involved building sand castles on the beach, eating fish and chips, and having a daily afternoon ice-cream in Shoal Bay. Which was great. But this particular wintry weekend, we had an action-packed family adventure planned.

We began with a trip out to the dunes for some sand-boarding with Port Stephens 4WD Tours.

I wasn't sure how the kids would go, but after a demonstration on how to position ourselves and the kids to sit on the boards – and how to slow our descent – we all had a great time.

The little one and I stuck to the smaller slopes, while my adventurous three-year-old tried to convince her dad she was ready for the biggest, steepest part of the dune.

The bright blue sky against the white sand was a sight to behold, and the giggles that came from gliding down the dunes topped off a great morning.

We stopped to have lunch in the sunshine at Cookabarra Restaurant at Bobs Farm.

While the grown ups enjoyed a glass of wine and a beer, the kids were given pellets to feed to the big pond full of barramundi surrounding the restaurant.

It was a great way to distract the kids while we awaited the beautiful fresh seafood we'd ordered – sizzling garlic prawns, and a whole baked barramundi with preserved lemon, crunchy chips and a salad.

We also enjoyed a tour of the barramundi farm and hydroponic vegetable garden before heading off for our next adventure at Irukandji Shark and Ray Encounters, just up the road.

We'd mistakenly thought it would be like an aquarium, where you look at the sharks and the rays in glass tanks.

But it was a much more interactive and educational experience.

We hadn't packed the togs to wear under the provided wetsuits, but we were assured the experience would be worth getting our underwear wet.

It was.

Holding the kids, we shuffled into a tank of little rays, and were shown by our guide how to feed them and pat them, as well as how to spot the differences between species.

Our little girl clung to me like seaweed, but our fearless one-year-old boy loved every second.

We also patted some tawny nurse sharks and fed baby sharks in the "aqua nursery."

But the highlight was climbing into a larger,



waist-deep tank with the 350-kilogram black sting ray, Rasputia.

She glided passed us and patted each of us along the way.

She let us pat her in return, allowing us to feel the sliminess of her skin.

After our big day, we returned to the beautifully peaceful grounds at One Mile Beach's Port Stephens Treescape.

While the little one napped, the rest of us enjoyed a spa before heading to Nelson Bay for dinner at the sleek Little Beach Boathouse.

When we arrived, we were relieved to see other young children sitting at tables.

After our big day, we weren't sure ours would be on their best behaviour.

But the helpful waiter assured us the earlier sitting in particular was very family-friendly.

My husband and I enjoyed the hand-cut seafood spaghetti and the 3 Pigs – pork belly, chorizo and croquettes – washed down with a lovely glass of red, while the kids opted for fish, nuggets and chips.

Day two began with breakfast at the stunning Birubi Beach cafe, Crest.

The view was spectacular, as was the food and coffee.

We didn't spot any whales, but we were comforted by our Boston-style baked beans and waffles served with berries and ice cream from the specials' board.

The wind soon picked up, and the sea turned choppy, so we decided to skip the

dolphin cruise that morning and head to Oakvale Farm on our way home instead.

The kids loved feeding the huge array of animals there.

They bottle-fed piglets and lambs, they patted ponies, waved at donkeys and camels, and hand-fed kangaroos, goats and cows.

Our trip home was eerily quiet as the kids dozed.

We hadn't realised quite how much family-friendly fun and adventure was right on our doorstep.

The writer was a guest of Destination Port Stephens.

My three-year-old tried to convince her dad she was ready for the biggest, steepest part of the dune.



Local family fun includes sand-boarding at Port Stephens, feeding stingrays at Bob's Farm, baked barramundi for lunch and breakfast at Birubi Beach.



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