

#SUSTAINABILITY #KANGAROOISLAND

The potion in the ocean

Off the coast of South Australia sits one of the country's finest lodges with a focus on wildlife and sustainability running through its core.

By Katrina Holden



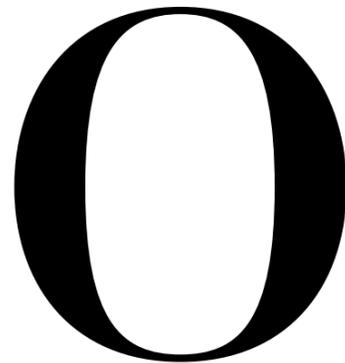


OPENING IMAGE: Sunset at Southern Ocean Lodge; THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE: Remarkable Rocks, Kangaroo Island; sea lions at Seal Bay Conservation Park; a baby koala at Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. OVER THE PAGE: Outlook from a Flinders Suite at Southern Ocean Lodge; and The Great Room.



CHRIS BRAY

The South Kangaroo Island Marine Park protects several hundred square kilometres of these coastal waters to ensure the survival of several species of marine life.



ON A FIELD OF DENSE GREEN COASTAL vegetation, a lone kangaroo appears out of nowhere, proudly leaping through shrubbery. My group is nearing the end of a 14-kilometre hike over limestone cliffs on South Australia's unspoiled Kangaroo Island. It's unclear where this namesake mascot is heading as he leaps purposefully in the direction of the headland's edge, perched high above the powerful waters of the Southern Ocean. The closest destination beyond this shore – some 4,500 kilometres away – is Antarctica. Already today we have seen koalas in the wild, a colony of long-nosed fur seals, short-beaked echidnas, incredibly rare Cape Barren geese and wallabies. It's dusk and we pause along our track in awe at the sight of this endemic Kangaroo Island kangaroo and at the abundance of wildlife in this pristine ecological playground.

For five hours we've walked under the expert guidance of Kelly Gledhill, experiences manager at Southern Ocean Lodge – an architectural masterpiece that sits virtually camouflaged within its surrounds, its 21 suites forming a serpent-shaped path into a landscape of native

green mallee. Considered one of Australia's finest luxury lodges, the multiple-award-winning property is the flagship in the Baillie Lodges portfolio – also operators of Longitude 131° in Uluru; Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island; and Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree. Upon our approach the previous day, the entrance doors appeared to automatically open with seamless precision. But there's no automation here, just two staff members who open the thick double doors in perfect synchronisation – they've done this before. The view immediately seduces. The Lodge and its 'Great Room', designed by Kangaroo Island-born architect Max Pritchard, is formed into a circular shape around a central fireplace and floor-to-ceiling glass windows that take full advantage of the natural theatrical performance before us. A signature scent of native lemon myrtle fills the clean air. A neutral colour palette – woven through bed linen, crockery, staff uniforms and furnishings alike – ensures that nothing competes or clashes with Mother Nature. There are no TVs in our rooms – and why would you possibly need one? This is a place to completely disconnect, where one

of Australia's best wilderness experiences is at your fingertips on the country's third-largest island. With no foxes here, the wildlife flourishes, earning the island's reputation as "Australia's Galapagos".

Similar in size to the Indonesian island of Bali, Kangaroo Island is home to 5,000 residents. Some 40 per cent of the island is either national park or conservation park. It took the Baillie team more than five years to conceive, design,



KATRINA HOLDEN

seek approvals, work with the residents of Kangaroo Island and ultimately build this completely secluded escape – which exudes a strong sense of environmental responsibility – before it opened in 2008.

Southern Ocean Lodge, like all the Baillie Lodges properties, operates under a detailed Sustainable Management Policy. Approximately one per cent of the total 102 hectares purchased by Baillie Lodges was cleared during construction, leaving 99 per cent of this land protected and untouched. Before any construction took place, the management conducted extensive flora and fauna surveys to identify the rare bird species found on site and to include buffer zones, strict access controls, guest awareness programs and monitoring.

In collaboration with the Federal and South Australian governments, a set of 225 solar panels were installed on the roof and on other external frames to ensure a constantly moving renewable energy source. The lodge installed an Australian-owned wastewater system using a chemical-free process to convert organic waste, wastewater and sewage into clean irrigation water – ensuring wildlife are not attracted

by food waste. Not wasting a drop, the lodge collects water from roof surfaces, which is then stored in tanks with a capacity of 1.5-million litres, with a key goal to have the property rainwater self-sufficient for nine out of every 10 years. To date, the Southern Ocean Lodge Environment Fund has donated more than \$350,000 to native vegetation projects on Kangaroo Island.

Out in the field, the experiences team is equally passionate about sustainability measures that can be shared with their guests. The lodge staff signed up to a voluntary plastic-waste monitoring program funded by the Australian Federal Government – called the Australian Marine Debris Initiative through the Taronga Blue Foundation – which tracks the movement of debris waste that washes up in different parts of Australia under different tidal conditions. Commonly found marine debris includes fishing ropes and plastic remnants as well as plastic bottle lids, straws, wrappers and toothbrushes. Guests are encouraged to get involved by collecting any debris they may find on the shores and placing them into the bins installed along the boardwalk. The contents are

routinely measured and documented, and the data is then submitted to the Initiative.

Despite earning a reputation as arguably Australia's most exclusive property, there's a relaxed and accessible atmosphere in the lodge. The service is unquestionably polished yet lacking pretension. There's an unspoken feeling of inclusivity where guests from all corners of the globe gather at the open bar to pour and mix themselves drinks, including Kangaroo Island wines and baillies9 Gin, produced exclusively by local spirits company, Kangaroo Island Spirits. All suites, each named after actual shipwrecks that have occurred here, are ocean-facing and have private terraces where you can curl up under a blanket in winter and listen to the thunderous clap of waves hitting the shore. Winter is one of the best times to visit, when the national park is at its greenest and the wildlife is on full display. In spring, the island is covered in a colourful array of wildflowers.

At sunrise from my Flinders Suite, I stand on my terrace and watch the vegetation shake stoically against the elements. Birds begin their morning call and the golden lights of the Great Room flicker from the main lodge on the hill. There's a profound sense of drama here from every viewpoint and it can be hard to peel yourself away from your meditative state. But the experiences offered by the lodge leave me with true appreciation for the

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unique characteristics of Kangaroo Island.

On our 'Kangas and Kanapes' evening tour we learn that the Kangaroo Island kangaroo is a smaller, darker sub-species of Western Grey kangaroos from the mainland. These 'KI' kangaroos are named after the island (and the island, ironically, was named after the marsupial by Matthew Flinders in 1802 when he discovered this land).

On a visit to the Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, we wander slowly through a collection of tall eucalyptus trees where several koalas are either eating or sleeping. The sanctuary's well-trained dog Maggy stirs from her resting place on the pathway to alert us to an adult koala on the ground just a few metres away, making its way from one trunk to another. With sharp claws that attach definitively to trunks,

the koala slowly hoists itself up to the next available meal, as pieces of bark strip and fall to the ground. Further along the track, we stop and come to silence where a joey is making its way precariously down a thin vine of a branch. Although we are unsure if it will hold its weight, he doesn't hesitate to climb further and further along to reach the good stuff – the greenest, crunchiest leaves dangling temptingly at the edge.

On the 'Wonders of KI' adventure, we visit Admirals Arch, just past the Cape du Couedic Lighthouse. The rain falls lightly and the wind gusts heavily as we make our way down a long, purpose-built walkway to the natural archway. As I peek out from beneath the hood of my jacket, I meet the harsh wind against my face feeling pure exhilaration from the vigour of the forces

of our environment. I'm so distracted by the frothing waters that I take longer than most to notice the large colony of long-nosed fur seals, blending into the colour of the boulders. Some are lying on the grass, huddled and content while they sleep and rest, bracing themselves for another journey at sea hunting for food.

The next day, we visit the Seal Bay Conservation Park where Australia's third largest colony of sea lions gather, and which more than 100,000 people visit each year. The lodge's naturalist guide Ashleigh walks us down to the beach front, taking care that we don't disrupt the sea lions in the midst of their breeding season. The threatened species is one of only six surviving species of sea lions around the world. Although protected, sea lions have not recovered from hunting by 18th- and 19th-century sealers. It is estimated that there are now less than 12,000 Australian sea lions, with 42 known breeding sites located in South Australia. Surveys indicate that South Australian populations have declined by almost 25 per cent during the past decade. Conservation work helps Seal Bay sea lions produce approximately 240 pups per breeding cycle. The South Kangaroo Island Marine Park protects several hundred square kilometres of these coastal waters to ensure the survival of several species of marine life. In the Visitor Centre, artwork by local school children is pinned to the walls. Sketches

and drawings of sea lions are posted with captions such as 'Stop Treating Our Oceans Like Trash'; and 'More Animals Die from Our Pollution than We Do By Sharks'.

On the beach we watch the spectacle as sea lions waddle from the dunes to the water's edge, taking a rest after a few paces before sliding, belly first, on the wet shoreline into the sea. Back in the dunes, a frustrated male can't understand the lack of affection and energy from his lady lion. She's lethargic and loudly releasing what seems like a pained cry. Our guide notices that the pregnant sea lion is experiencing a still birth and is in prolapse, which apparently occurs for a handful of female sea lions each breeding season. The on-site conservation team will monitor her closely over the coming days. Unsure what (if anything) she may be feeling, but clearly sensing her pain, I can't hold back the salty tears that slide down my cheek. While an unfortunate reality of nature, my visit here has formed a connection with this environment, the ocean and these creatures that call it home.

A visit to Southern Ocean Lodge is not simply about resting in the finest accommodation, but submerging yourself into the privilege of viewing these protected lands and its species – and a subsequent sense of responsibility; a reminder that we all have a part to play in our earth's protection. 🌍



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
Qantas and Regional Express fly from Adelaide to Kingscote on Kangaroo Island. Self-drive options are also available via the SeaLink ferry.

qantas.com

rex.com.au

sealink.com.au

STAYING THERE
Southern Ocean Lodge offers a unique and exclusive travel experience on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Rates at Southern Ocean Lodge start at \$1,250 per person, per night and include all dining, open bar with premium wines and spirits, in-suite bar, signature experiences and island airport transfers.
southernoceanlodge.com.au

