



Soaring coastlines, active wildlife and five-star accommodations make Kangaroo Island a dream destination. Leave the chilly winter behind and discover this whimsical Australian gem.

Seaside Escape

By Amber Nasrulla



I'm visiting a historic Australian settlement called Grassdale. Behind me is Edward's Cottage, which island settlers erected more than a century ago, but all I can focus on is that I'm surrounded by mobs of western grey kangaroos. Thank goodness marsupials are herbivores because there are only two humans in this field—me and interpretive guide Rob Ellson of the touring company, Exceptional Kangaroo Island. I'm close enough to reach out and touch a kangaroo. "Best not to disturb their natural behaviour," says Ellson as they chew grass. It's as if he read a cartoon thought-bubble above my head. I'm having trouble processing their presence because I've only ever seen them on the National Geographic Channel. One kangaroo stands up and scratches its belly. It looks at me unperturbed and then springs away like a gigantic rabbit—minus the cottontail. It's an awesome moment. Welcome to Kangaroo Island, I think. Those 24 hours spent travelling from Toronto to Dallas to Brisbane to Sydney to Adelaide to Kingscote were worth it. Completely.

KI, as the locals refer to it, is known as the Galapagos of Australia and is a 20-minute flight from Adelaide in the state of South Australia. Animals outnumber humans on the island by thousands. Considering that 80 per cent of KI is a national park and the animals lack natural predators, I'm convinced I'm being watched, not the other way around. To start, there are 4,600 people and an estimated 70,000 kangaroos. There are 11,000 koalas in the sugar gum or eucalyptus trees. They were introduced to the island in the 1920s because on the mainland hunting, disease, fire and habitat-clearing threatened their survival. On top of that, an estimated one million Tamar wallabies bounce around the island. Then there are Australian sea lions, the most precious and lively sea creatures you will ever see, 1,000 of which live and breed on the aptly named Seal Beach. It's winter and babies abound; I spy koala and kangaroo joeys peeking from their mothers' pouches. In essence, KI is a giant zoo without fences.

I muse aloud that Kangaroo Island sounds like my first grader named it. The truth, Ellson says, is a story of survival. South Australia is the only state that wasn't established as a penal colony and, in 1802, as British explorer Matthew Flinders was charting the island his crew came close to starving. When they landed on the north coast they managed to ensnare some kangaroos so Flinders named the island in honour of the meal that saved his men. Seeing my expression, Ellson says that kangaroo meat is tasty when eaten rare. In case you're wondering, no, I didn't indulge in kangaroo sashimi.

There is an abundance of activities on the island. We head to one of the most popular attractions, the Seal Bay Conservation Park, home of the endangered Australian sea lion. Dozens of seals scamper on the silky sand with their adorable pups. At Flinders Chase National Park, I'm in awe of the leviathan-size granite boulders known as Remarkable Rocks. The koalas are plentiful at the Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. In a grove of sugar gum (otherwise known as eucalyptus) trees, I spy sleepy marsupials clinging to branches. At the tiny desert called Little Sahara I huff and puff my way up a vivid white sand dune to watch locals surf the ridge. I devour honey ice cream and buy three pounds of sugar-gum honey from Clifford's Honey Farm, an apiary that produces sticky golden goodness made with Australian plants by Ligurian bees (brought from Italy in the 1880s).

Ellson drops me off at the Southern Ocean Lodge, my home base for the next two days, whenever I'm not exploring the island. The lodge celebrates luxury. It opened in March 2008 and was named the number one resort in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific by *Travel & Leisure* in 2012. The first thing I see upon entering the lobby (which is also called the Great Room) is the breathtaking panorama of the ocean and cliffs that glisten emerald green after a mid-winter July rain. To my left there's Sunshine, a kangaroo sculpture made of recycled equipment. It's a whimsical homage to the marsupial as well as the island's agricultural history.

Architect Max Pritchard designed all aspects of the lodge to accommodate the island's weather patterns and to accentuate earth, wind and water. The eco-friendly destination has louvered windows and solar panels. The entire property was built using local, organic and recycled materials including refurbished spotted gum walls and recycled timber. The lodge was built into, rather than on top of, the cliff, so that each of the 21 consecutive suites—named in honour of local shipwrecks—descend further and further along a sloping hallway towards the Southern Ocean. And each has a hypnotizing view of Hanson Bay. The Great Room itself is an enormous pavilion of golden sandblasted limestone. There's a suspended wood-burning steel fireplace and tables laden with Australian tourism magazines and books on local birds and wildlife.

The five-star treatment begins when manager Alison Heath greets me by name as she opens the door. As do all staff, from the fellow who offers me fresh lemonade and canapés to the one who carries my luggage. I begin to wonder: does the lodge make up intelligence dossiers with photographs of its guests?

I dress for dinner in my luxurious split-level suite and am momentarily spellbound by the view. I stand in the sunken lounge, stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows at whitecaps and listen to the sound of the ocean, but it's not gentle like those CDs that help you fall asleep. This is the mighty ocean letting me know that there's nothing but 6,000 km of turquoise water between the lodge and Antarctica. From the glass-walled bathroom I can gaze at the ocean when I'm soaking in the giant tub. The sandblasted limestone floors are heated and, at turn-down, housekeeping switches the fireplace on and leaves a handful of koala-shaped chocolates. There's also an outdoor terrace.

I have dinner in the Main Lodge with co-managers John Hird and his wife Alison Heath. A large walk-in wine cellar gives guests the option of selecting their dinner wines—Penfolds Grange, Two Hands Wines, Shaw and Smith, for instance. I opt for sparkling water while we chat about the possums and wallabies that have been raiding the kitchen herb garden.

Pondering my relationship with wildlife, I stuff myself with braised abalone, cauliflower "couscous" and thyme crumbs followed by pan-roasted fillet of Coorong mullet, celeriac purée with mushroom broth and puffed quinoa. For dessert I order caramelized local honey cream with whipped South Australian organic carob and carob crumbs. This is a working holiday after all. "Come here, relax. Make yourself at home," Hird says. Oh, no need to insist. I am relaxed—even if thousands of marsupials are watching me. ♦