

THE Daily Telegraph

Life's swell on Kangaroo Island

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May 14, 2008 12:00am

GIANT swells roll in from the great Southern Ocean.

Unfettered by landfall for thousands of kilometres, they crash into the rocks and rain down on the coastal scrub.

On the beaches, sea birds dance in the gusts as they struggle to keep a foothold. Tiny, shy Tamar wallabies scurry through the undergrowth.

It's approaching winter on Kangaroo Island, a land so rich in wildlife and plant species that it's been called the Galapagos of Australia.

In 2002, James and Hayley Baillie stood on the headland overlooking Hanson Bay on the island's southwest coast and knew they had found what they were looking for.

The adventurer and philanthropist Dick Smith, Hayley's father, had suggested they see this South Australian wilderness for themselves. Smith had holidayed in the shacks there and knew Hanson Bay could fulfil the Baillies' criteria: to build a luxury lodge in a magical location, leaving a small footprint and setting a new standard of experiential travel.

It took two years to buy the American-owned 102ha parcel of land between two significant tracts of national parkland; another two and a half years to overcome widespread opposition from islanders and get permission to build; and a further year to see their vision realised.

They cleared one hectare for the building and placed all but 2ha of their land under a heritage agreement to protect against future development.

The result is a showcase of what is possible when the design team works in harmony with the land.

Southern Ocean Lodge snakes along the cliff-top and down towards the bay, low and snug behind the coastal brush.

As we arrive by road, we can see only the wave-like roofline and the upper glass of the long breezeway connecting the 21 suites with the lodge's Great Room, protruding above the scrub.

Recycled timbers, glass and limestone are the predominant materials, and the result couldn't be more startling. Every structural wall is stark white limestone: rough-hewn blocks pieced together like a jigsaw by a local mason in the porte cochere, entrance walkway and 50m-long Great Room, the

hub of lodge life; and precision-cut blocks on floors and walls in the suites.

But the sea is the star of the show, on display through every floor-to-ceiling glass window.

Lodge guests can sit before eco-friendly methylated spirit fires or lounge in deep tubs or veranda spas and watch the storms roll in and the rainbows form and fade. Or they can rug up and head outside to tramp the bush trails in air so fresh you could bottle it.

Every cloud and gust tells you winter is coming but, if you needed a reminder of Kangaroo Island's reputation as a wild and woolly coast, each suite is named after an island shipwreck.

Yet even this southern outpost has a gentle side. The week before we stayed, placid waves had lapped the shore and turquoise water reminded guests of the Mediterranean. But the lodge never aims to be a beach holiday resort, even in summer.

While there's luxury at every turn – a heated infinity-edged pool off the lounge deck; chic glass-walled spa on the hill; heated floors in all suites; and a chef who concocts wonders with local marron, abalone, crayfish, king crab, lamb and angus beef – Southern Ocean Lodge is all about wilderness and wildlife.

The coastal brush comes within a metre of the walls, raised boardwalks protect the undergrowth from tramping feet, and rain water is harvested from roofs for the 1.5 million litre storage tank.

The beach is a bird breeding area, rare ospreys nest on rocks in the next bay and sea eagles joust with sea birds in the blustery skies.

Days can begin lazily in the glass-wall restaurant, or at sunrise with coffee overlooking Seal Bay's colony of noisy sea-lions and a walk with a ranger among the pups and juveniles on the beach.

The lodge encourages guests to experience the island through private tours with wildlife guides, and includes all activities in the nightly tariff.

Exceptional KI, twice winner of a tourism award, is one such outfit, taking lodge guests on private tours visiting Remarkable Rocks, Cape du Couedic lighthouse and the fur seal colony nearby, then an al fresco barbecue.

Or there's beach fishing, a coastal cliff top walk, an exploration of Kelly Hill Caves, a coastal hike on original settlers' tracks, an epicurean tour, and cocktails and canapes with the kangaroos in a field near the lodge.

All meals and snacks and most wines, spirits and beers, both at the open bar and the bulging mini bars in the suites, are included in the tariff, with guests encouraged to select their own from the walk-in cellar or the long bar.

It's just a prelude to former Capella chef Tim Bourke's marvellous dinners, a showcase of local or South Australian ingredients: a feast of Coffin Bay oysters with a Vietnamese dressing; marron with ginger, snow pea and wood ear mushroom; roasted duck breast, confit leg, foie gras and sauce soubise; and champagne chiboust and champagne and lavender syrup.

It's all a marvellous complement to the sight of a sea eagle hunting, crested terns dancing in the wind and hungry sea-lion pups playing in the surf.

The writer was a guest of Baillie Lodges.

The Sunday Telegraph

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Luxurious ... a heated infinity-edged pool off the lounge deck of Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island

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