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Sunrise with sea lions

Susan Kurosawa walks with the animals and checks out a new luxury lodge on South Australia's Kangaroo Island | *May 31, 2008*

FROM above, the sea lions look like old velveteen beanbags flung about the beach.



Kangaroo Island's Southern Ocean Lodge stretches like a frozen wave along the clifftops near Hanson Bay

We are at a raised lookout point in Seal Bay Conservation Park with our ranger, Ben. He is serving slices of banana bread and pouring our little group its first coffees of the morning from a sturdy vacuum flask and assuring us it isn't really all that windy. We are wont to disagree; our chilled noses are running and we haven't worn gloves. My hair has been gust-propelled to funny angles, as if I've put my finger in a live socket.

Then one of us says that here we are alone on the very edge of Australia and he wouldn't be dead for quids. He is right; despite the unseemly hour and the blowy cold, we have arrived on a booked tour before the park officially opens and we are about to enjoy a private encounter with the denizens of this protected bay.

We make our wind-assisted way along the sloping path to the sea and shore; as crested terns and Pacific gulls wheel above us, the sea lions begin to assume exact form and distinguishing features. They appear first as just a palette of wrinkled creams and fawns; then we see they are whiskery and mottled, with soulful expressions and big brown eyes as lustrous as cognac. The bulls are simply enormous and even rolling over appears to be a supreme effort, accompanied by a succession of groans.

Ben ensures we walk quietly and keep back at least 10m as he tells us these sea lions are among the rarest marine mammals. About 5 per cent of the world's population of an estimated 12,000 lives at Seal Bay; there would be many more if traders hadn't decimated the sea lion and seal populations on Kangaroo Island in the 19th century.

One especially cute pup is calling for its mother; it's a keening cry that cuts through our hearts like a blade. The parent has been off foraging for food in deep water for several days and the pup is hungry and distressed. It waddles up and down the long beach hoping to find Mum, who could well have just collapsed on the sand where she has swum ashore.

As we walk back up to the visitors centre and ranger station, its wails follow us, carried by the relentless wind.

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KANGAROO Island was named by Matthew Flinders in 1802, not so much for the beauty of the animal as for its usefulness. According to Flinders Ranges Research, the explorer noted in his journal, "The whole ship's company was employed this afternoon in the skinning and cleaning of kangaroos. After four months' privation they stewed half a hundredweight of heads, forequarters and tails down into soup for dinner, on this and the succeeding days, and as much steak given, moreover to both officers and men as

they could consume by day and night. In gratitude for so seasonable a supply, I named this south land Kangaroo Island."

The island is 155km long by 55km wide and more than one-third of that territory is national or conservation park; humans are the intruders here. More than 45 species of plants, including the full-skirted Tate's grass tree, are found nowhere else. Tammar wallabies, heath goannas and echidnas can be spotted in wild abundance; the island's isolation has protected its fauna from pests and predators such as rabbits and foxes, but not from bushfires. The effect of last year's blazes, which were started by lightning strikes, can be seen in the blackened trees and scorched yakkas in Flinders Chase National Park, and the koala population has been depleted.

On my last visit to Kangaroo Island, in the late 1980s, I recall koalas neatly wedged into the crooks of gum trees in such profusion they could have been placed there, like Christmas decorations; this time we spot just one and it surveys us with utter boredom, managing a small yawn. The koala has not always had the best time here; ranger Ben tells us their fur was exported as "Australian chinchilla" in the '20s.

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LOOK at an aerial photograph of Southern Ocean Lodge and it flows like a gymnast's ribbon unfurled in occasional little ripples along its clifftop site. From ground level, too, this just opened 21-suite luxury lodge sits lightly above Hanson Bay on the island's southwest coast, its serpentine lines in communion with its sloped surroundings. As with all great design, this new property from James and Hayley Baillie, the team behind Capella Lodge on NSW's Lord Howe Island, has not been an effortless creation. It is the result of years of planning and environmental impact and sustainability studies.

The low-energy lodge and its surrounding infrastructure occupies a 1ha clearing within the 102ha package of land adjoining Flinders Chase and Kelly Hill national parks. Under a heritage agreement, the rest of the site will not be developed.

Materials such as recycled timbers, a veritable acreage of glass and pale Kangaroo Island limestone -- including a stunning 200m-long wall built by a local stonemason that curves into the Great Room, the lodge's hub -- make for a spare, organic design with no unnecessary falderals.

The stormy blues, smoky greys and muddy greens of the decor merge with the heath and sky beyond. There seems little point in trying to compete with the view and floor-to-ceiling windows ensure a panoramic outlook of near-wraparound proportions. There are enviro-friendly methylated spirits fires, rainwater is harvested and stored in giant tanks, and an abundance of untreated surfaces, sometimes with a rough edge of earthiness, emphasise the lodge's intimate connection to its site.

The Baillies are self-confessed lodge junkies and have taken inspiration from New Zealand's best rural examples; it's fair to say Australia has never seen a wilderness lodge of this level, or one so attuned to its surroundings. The Baillies are mad about good design, too, and if you look at the fit-out here, it's all about the cream of the Australian crop, from Khai Liew's bespoke timber furniture to Jodie Fried's woven and embroidered rugs and cushions.

During my visit, so many guests are inquiring about how to buy the sleek salt-and-pepper shakers and the South Australian-made Small Indulgences soaps and toiletries that Hayley Baillie is rethinking how she should stock the lodge's little boutique.

Guest suites in four price categories are ranged in a long line, like a retreating wave, and reached via a glassed-in timber-floored walkway that echoes the feel of the raised outdoor boardwalks. Those who don't like walking should request a suite close to the Great Room and the central facilities, as reaching one's bed at the far end can feel like a heroic effort.

But such exertion is in keeping with the reason most visitors are here; it's not an idling destination but one to explore with vim. Comparing Southern Ocean Lodge with a pairing of the world's best sanctuaries and personalised expeditions, the Baillies describe it as "a blend of Amanresorts and Lindbland Expeditions"; certainly one could hope for no finer base camp.

Our days are filled with lung-expanding walks; many activities are included in the tariff and the lodge has linked up with award-winning operator Craig Wickham of Exceptional Kangaroo Island to offer a range of informative small group and tailored excursions, including the must-do sunrise with sea lions outing.

We also visit the wind-sculpted Remarkable Rocks and Admirals Arch, sheltering its colony of frankly odorous NZ fur seals, and historic Cape du Couedic lighthouse. Overseas guests, in particular, love the lodge's late-afternoon outing to nearby Grassdale for a drinks-and-nibbles congregation with tamar wallabies and kangaroos that has been dubbed Kangas and Kanapes.

Our energetic virtuousness is rewarded each evening by chef Tim Bourke's splendid cooking. Formerly of Capella Lodge, he is a convert to SA produce; much of what he uses is from the immediate parish, including free-range eggs and chicken, sheep's milk yoghurt and cheese, strong and fruity olive oil and spanking fresh abalone, lobster, king george whiting and big, burly prawns.

There are oysters from the island's American River, milk-fed lamb from Southrock farm on Kangaroo Island's eastern tip and lavender-infused oils, dessert syrups and vinegars from Emu Bay.

His breakfast chef, he tells me, is growing hydroponic herbs for the lodge and Bourke's aim is to harness into action as many of the top local producers as possible. The perfect accompaniment to such light and inventive fare (think: salad of rock lobster, zucchini flower, asparagus and lobster vinaigrette; a zingy pineapple carpaccio and star anise ice cream) is a well-chosen bottle from the walk-in cellar (wine is included in the tariff), which exclusively features SA labels, including a smattering from Kangaroo Island wineries such as Bay of Shoals, False Cape and the perhaps propitiously named Hazyblur.

We find time, too, to hunker in our suite and contemplate that seemingly limitless view. All room categories are extra spacious and each is named for a shipwreck off the island's unforgiving coast; there are plans to put a book about these ill-fated vessels, from Amber Star and Loch Sloy to Stella and You Yangs, in each suite. With the signature Baillie attention to detail, it will be covered in the Julie Patterson fabric of recurring kangaroos also seen in the Great Room's soft furnishings. Luxe touches in the suites are well evident, from the platter of liqueur-coated lamingtons that greets each guest to comforts such as goosedown pillows, Danish linen pillowcases, woollen doonas and soft and roomy gowns.

There are Bruce Gould linocuts of indigenous fauna and flora on the creamy walls and the minibar comes stocked with SA beer and sweet treats such as Perryman's gingerbread babies and Aunty Joan's gourmet toffee.

All accommodation features a glass-walled bathroom, a sunken sitting area and a petite terrace with a cushioned limestone bench, beyond which a tufty carpet of heathland stretches to the edge of the cliff. Beyond lie roiling waves and a mist-blurred horizon. The lodge has been well-named; it is above and of the ocean. James Baillie says that a week before our visit it was like the Amalfi Coast, all serene and tropical blue.

But our group agrees the changeability of the sky and sea and this weekend's show of great foamy swells and wind-bundled clouds is a more fascinating prospect.

We feel we are living in the Weather Channel. The exclusive position, free of the intrusion of neighbouring buildings or pollution, makes the lodge feel intrinsically linked to the elements. The oxygenated air fairly fizzes this blustery late April and the light is an extraordinary mix of grey-blue and gold; it feels charged by a current, sending wake-up signals to our urban-dulled brains.

As I progress from the lodge proper along the boardwalk to the Southern Spa Retreat (where treatments are based on local ingredients such as Shoal Bay mineral salts, pink clay, lavender and honey), I feel buffeted about, like a lightly tethered dirigible. Seabirds are being whirled around and around in the gusts; I fancy they are cooing happily at such effortless fairground fun. Yesterday I walked along the clifftop to see an osprey's nest; in today's conditions, such an exposed excursion could see me lifted off the ground and hurried south. Next stop, Antarctica.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Baillie Lodges.

Checklist

Kangaroo Island is 12km off the coast of South Australia, south of the Fleurieu Peninsula; get there via car ferry from Cape Jervis (two hours from Adelaide) to Penneshaw or by Rex Airlines from Adelaide to Kingscote. More: www.sealink.com.au; www.rex.com.au.

Tariff at Southern Ocean Lodge is from \$900 a person a night, including breakfast, light lunch, four-

course dinner, selected beverages, complimentary minibar and guided excursions; return transfers from Kingscote airport also included if required. No children under six; there is a minimum two-night stay. Valid to September 30 is a stay four and pay for three nights deal that includes a \$100 spa voucher and Bollinger champagne on arrival; from \$2700 a person twin share. More: (02) 9918 4355; www.southernoceanlodge.com.au.

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