

{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

# Walk to the animals



Southern Ocean Lodge, perched high above the dramatic coastline of Kangaroo Island, is one of Australia's new breed of elite retreats

## Close encounters on wild and wonderful Kangaroo Island

KENDALL HILL

THE things you learn on a luxury getaway. We 20 travellers are two days into an indulgent week-long escape when we are informed, quite unexpectedly, that the male pelican has no penis.

According to Indiana James, the Kangaroo Island artist, teacher and renowned expert on all things Pelecanidae, genital drag would impede the bird's aerodynamics so it has evolved without one. Pelicans practise something called cloacal mating instead, "where you just roll around until the right stuff goes in the right hole". James deadpans to his wide-eyed audience. "Isn't that the way we all did it the first time?"

Well I never. Of course, the whole point of being here on South Australia's Kangaroo Island is to explore nature's wonders, red in tooth and claw and all that, and to become acquainted with this unique corner of the Australian backyard. Pelican penises, or the lack thereof, are just one of the surprising truths we will learn during a week of outdoor education-meets-indoor indulgence.

The seven-night expedition kicks off in late July when KI can be wild and windy one day, calm and sunny the next. But fickle weather is of little consequence when ensconced at Southern Ocean Lodge, one of the nation's new breed of elite coastal retreats.

The experience is not cheap but guests are guaranteed to be pampered to their heart's and stomach's content. Picked-up days of slow-cooked Southern Ocean abalone, salty-sweet South Rock lamb ham and local marron (among many other gastronomic treats) washed down with a bottomless selection of fine SA wines. Regular feasting in the lodge restaurant is offset with worthy exercise in the form of bracing hikes, wildlife encounters and even a spot of speleology.

At the end of each day's expedition there is the lodge to look forward to; the sunny welcome (always by first name), the open



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### Meeting the locals in KI's Seal Bay Conservation Park



CRAIG MALIN

### Cape Borda Lighthouse

bar, the excellent kitchen and 21 seriously stunning suites arrayed above the cinematic beauty of Hanson Bay.

The company of your co-expeditioners is another big attraction. There's a testimonial on the lodge's website from a guest who writes: "If you want a memory of a lifetime, Expedition Week is very special. Be pampered, wine and dine, meet really nice people, be busy or do nothing. You will never forget it."

This past guest is spot-on about the nice people. Our bunch of fellow travellers hails from four

Regular feasting in the lodge restaurant is offset with worthy exercise



SATC

### A tammar wallaby

states, only a handful know each other beforehand, but by day two a real camaraderie starts to develop. It helps that we are staying in dreamy surrounds where no guest need lift a finger and free-flowing wine kindles conviviality, but still, like-minded travellers make such a difference.

Outings are led by genial resident naturalist Craig Wickham and the engaging Hayley Baillie who, with husband James, created this remarkable lodge. The Baillies started Expedition Week at sister property Capella, on NSW's Lord Howe Island, where it ran for five years until Hayley opted for a change of scenery.

For the past two years it has been held on KI where the size of the island (at 155km long, it's almost as big as Bali) and the diversity of wildlife and environments make for a compelling do-to-list.

Wickham, who has lived on KI

for 40 years, is a former wildlife ranger and deputy mayor who runs bespoke tours through his company Exceptional Kangaroo Island. He urges us early on to let him know if we have any particular passions — wildflowers, birds, history — and he will factor those into commentary and activities.

On arrival at Kingscote airport we are met by a fleet of vehicles and whisked away down the highway over Ice Age sand dunes for a picnic lunch at blowy Bales Beach and a chaperoned walk among Australian sea lions. Every excursion is an enjoyable lesson in natural history. The most salient thing we learn about sea lions is that they are big carnivores, with huge teeth, that move much faster than humans on sand. "So if one comes at us we grab Hayley and stand behind her," Wickham grins.

We are told to act "boring" to deter animals from coming to play but they are preoccupied anyway with nuzzling in the sand and bodysurfing the waves, occasionally leaping from the water like electrocuted logs. We are so close at one point that when one of the adult creatures sneezes, I see the mucus fly out of its snout. Mostly, however, they are extremely cute and quite happy to pose for photos.

En route to the lodge Wickham plies us with island trivia. It is home to 780 plant species, 50 of which are found nowhere else. The most striking is the one we can see out the vehicle windows now: *Xanthorrhoea tateana*. Tate's grass tree, with its plume of spiky blades splayed like a 70s mood lamp. The sight of a koala in a manna gum beside the road sparks a lesson in chlamydia; apparently koalas harbour seven strains, five of which cause sterility. KI koalas, relocated here last century in an ark-type exercise to save the species, have the other two strains, which explains why there are now an estimated 27,000 of them munching their way across the island.

Meanwhile, up in the sky, two wedge-tailed eagles scan the earth for endemic tammar wallabies, their preferred snack food.

The aptly named Great Room provides an unforgettable introduction to Southern Ocean Lodge. This vast, glass-walled gallery, strikingly furnished with custom-made pieces and a rotating fireplace suspended from the ceiling, seems to float on its ridge above the sea. The spectacular conflu-

ence of the man-made and natural can have such an overwhelming effect on the senses that when Oprah Winfrey's Chicago audience arrived here in 2010 on their all-expenses-paid Australian tour, some guests burst into tears of happiness. "One woman even came up and gave me a hug," says Hayley.

The itinerary allows ample time to enjoy the lodge's comforts, including daily cocktails and canapés as the sun melts into the mallee forest, and exploring the best assets of this 80,000ha wilderness. At the Kelly Hill Caves we are led into a magical underworld of stalactites, stalagmites and helictites.

At Scotts Cove we stand atop 300m-high sheer granite cliffs above lapis waters as a sea eagle plies the sky above us. And at Cape Borda Lighthouse, Australia's shortest (it's on a very tall cliff), the collected logs of 19th and 20th-century keepers reveal the terrible fates of pioneering people, including a Captain Woodward who went for a walk in the bush one day, got jabbed in the eye with a stray stick, went blind and died.

The expedition is well balanced, varying from a day spent touring Kangaroo Island's renowned natural producers to a Zodiac zip along the coastline and a lecture by Dr Peggy Rismiller, the world's leading authority on echidnas.

But if the lure of the lodge proves irresistible, it is OK to stay put and ponder the wonders of nature from your suite, or the Great Room, or the infinity plunge pool. I call it the Diana option, after a lucky member of our group with that name who stayed in one morning and was rewarded by the sight of 20 dolphins surfing in Hanson Bay. Perhaps not strictly in the spirit of the KI safari, but a totally reasonable response to such cossetting surrounds.

Kendall Hill was a guest of Southern Ocean Lodge.

### Checklist

Expedition Kangaroo Island will run from July 28-August 4. From \$6900 a person twin-share, includes air transfers ex-Adelaide, all expedition activities and lectures, lodge accommodation, all meals and drinks. More: (02) 9918 4355; southernoceanlodge.com.au; baillielodges.com.au.

# Masterpieces and makeovers in the national capital

A heritage hotel in downtown Canberra is having its own grand renaissance

SHARON FOWLER

## STATE OF PLAY

I AM standing before a *Madonna and Child* canvas, its paint deftly applied more than half a millennium ago by Venetian artist Carlo Crivelli. Mary is draped in scarlet and an intricately patterned gold mantle as she cradles baby Jesus. Behind is a landscape that morphs from sumptuous to sparse; fleshy fruit dot the edge of the canvas.

It is one of several such works, the mothers all delicate and refined, the babies cherubic with dimpled cheeks and russet-topped heads. A silver-haired couple to my left are discussing the virtues of this masterpiece in hushed tones. The young chap to my right has a more upfront take on the subject matter for his bemused female companion: "Sausage babies."

The painting is on show in the Renaissance exhibition of 15th and 16th-century works at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. On loan from the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo, Italy, the collection features portraits, altarpieces and scenes by Italian masters such as Botticelli, Bernini, Titian and Raphael.

With thousands of viewers so far, the exhibition is proving a hit, yet it's by no means the only rebirth in town. My family and I are in Canberra to sample Mercure Hotel Canberra's Renaissance package. To most locals, the Mercure in Braddon, a short

drive from the NGA, is still Olims, the name it has carried since 1989. Yet that is just one of the hotel's many guises. It first opened in 1927 as the Ainslie, its construction coinciding with the completion of Parliament House.

Walter Burley Griffin, Canberra's designer, and his wife, Marion Mahony Griffin, were just two of the hotel's esteemed original guests. It was also known for many years as Spendloves Hotel (after the then owners) and served a stint as a home to female public servants during World War II.

Built in "English deco" style, it's recognised on the Australian Institute of Architects' Register of Significant 20th-Century Architecture and is classified by the National Trust.

### Elements of the jazz age can be found around the property

The centrally located 128-room hotel, a short drive from the NGA, is nearing completion of a major revamp that has seen it spruced up with new furniture, floor coverings and facilities. Guests have a choice of standard or superior rooms, studio lofts or two-bedroom apartments, which we discover are particularly spacious with two living areas. Decor is conservative but tasteful in neutral earthy tones with splashes of burgundy in cushions and throws. A highlight is the supremely comfortable king bed,

with a plump mattress topper, duvet and crisp linen providing an ideal haven after a soothing soak in the newly installed tub.

Elements of the hotel's jazz age history can be found at intervals around the property. The small wood-paneled reception lounge evokes a glimpse of days gone by with high-backed armchairs, high brick fireplace and a glass divider panel featuring an etched lyrebird, the hotel's original symbol.

The upstairs corridors are whitewashed, light and airy, with framed photographs illustrating the property's history. Wood-framed panelling windows in many guestrooms overlook the central paved courtyard edged with sprays of vibrant fresasias, the central fountain that has stood since 1927 and the restaurant, now just a year old, where the seasonal tasting menu includes entrees of scallops with prawn tortellini and salmon with capers salsa; for mains, grilled salmon or porterhouse steak with mushrooms and hand-cut chips.

Be sure also to visit the National Library near the National Gallery, where a fascinating exhibition, *Handwritten*, on show to March 18, features original letters and manuscripts by historic luminaries including Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein, Mozart, Bach and Goethe.

Sharon Fowler was a guest of Accor.

### Checklist

Renaissance package from \$229 a night in a refurbished room, full buffet breakfast and two tickets to the exhibition. Stay two nights and receive \$50 towards food and beverage. Valid to April 9. More: (02) 6243 0000; accorhotels.com.



The courtyard of the revamped Mercure Hotel, a short drive from the National Gallery



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