



Great expectations

South Australia's Kangaroo Island is luring a new breed of food tourist, but can it meet the demand?

NECIA WILDEN

GOING off the beaten track can really spook a couple of city-dwellers. We are driving from Snellings Beach, on Kangaroo Island's north coast, to Hanson Bay, about 50km away on the island's opposite side. Most of the journey is on dirt road, and our tinny four-wheel-drive hire car, obviously built for speed humps in North Adelaide, is not coping with the bone-jarring corrugations. We don't pass another vehicle. There is no mobile reception. It's starting to rain. What if we break down?

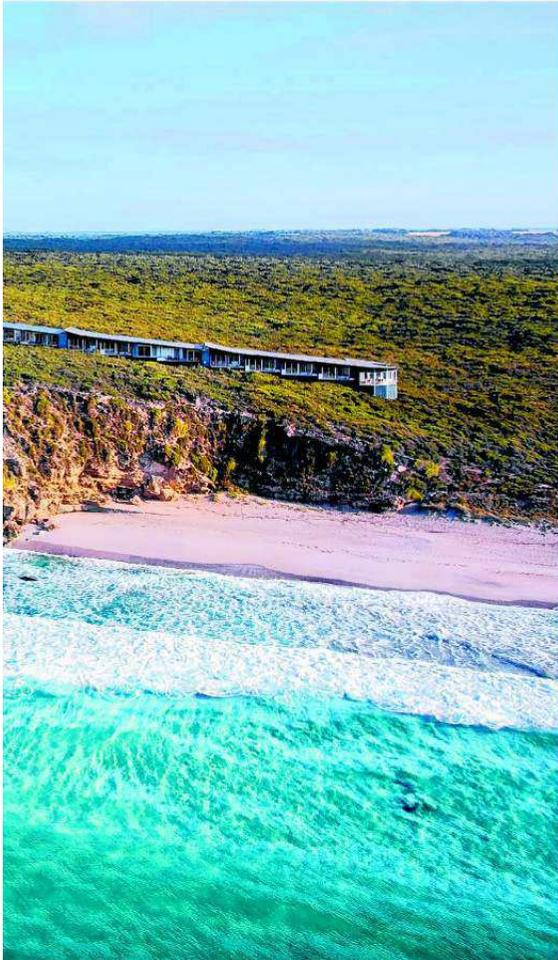
It's a relief to reach our destination, the remote, wind-swept, breathtakingly luxurious Southern Ocean Lodge, where the wilderness is safely on the other side of the glass and the only anxiety is in deciding what to order for dinner. Anxiety, because while SOL is the best restaurant on the island, it's only open to house guests, and at more

than \$900 a person a night, prospects of a return visit seem, well, remote. There is locally caught squid, abalone, trevally; local lamb; and a dessert made using the local organic honey, produced by the only colony of pure Ligurian bees remaining in the world.

Remoteness, once the inescapable burden of Kangaroo Island and the defining trait of its settlement history, is now its sales pitch. Not just to the seal-spotting, self-driving internationals but also, increasingly, to the new breed of food-loving travellers, who don't camp and don't care if the only wildlife they see is roadkill. Who just want to get stuck into all that exclusive artisan produce from the pristine land and sea.

Yet remoteness can be a mixed blessing. Back in the





main
The luxurious Southern Ocean Lodge sits above a rugged cliff on Kangaroo Island's southwest coast

above
Necia Wilden sampled local green-lipped abalini and marron on Kangaroo Island. Artisan produce is overtaking rustic fishing holidays and seal spotting as the island's main drawcard

1970s, when I came here with my family on holidays from Adelaide, we stayed at American River and spent most mornings fishing in a dinghy out the front of our shack (it's not really a river, incidentally — the American whalers who named it in the early 19th century might have been drunk at the time). The garfish jumped out of the water on to our handlines and were turned into lunch soon afterwards. Only the pelicans had fresher fish. Doused in flour and quickly pan-fried in butter, it was one of the best things we had eaten, and the memory of it competes for endurance with the time I nearly trod, barefoot, on one of the scorpions that liked the place as much as we did.

But the rest of the food was dreadful. The only supplies came from one white-bread-and-cornflakes local store, and the less said about the nearby "restaurant" the better.

Of course, things have changed since then; there were no wineries, for instance, and today there are about 30 growers, among them the premium Cape d'Estaing. But the challenges posed by the island's isolation remain.

Justin Harman is chairman of Good Food Kangaroo Island, an industry group formed to protect the integrity of the island's produce. He is also an owner of Island Pure Sheep Dairy, producers of haloumi, yoghurt and other dairy foods that have helped give the KI brand such a strong reputation on the mainland.

"We have the demand from tourists, but we're not able to meet it," Harman points out. "People come here with expectations of great food all over the island, and they're

disappointed (to find) they can't access it all that easily."

Part of the island's attraction is that it's free of rabbits, foxes and many of the diseases that plague mainland flora and fauna. On the other hand, it has no public transport, no taxis and no strong restaurant or cafe culture. And it has become a two-speed food economy. The wealthy can effortlessly access the gourmet glories with a weekend at Southern Ocean Lodge; the average tourist, meanwhile, can arrive at Penneshaw or Kingscote, walk down the main street and wonder where all the local

At 4500sq km, Kangaroo Island is seven times the size of Singapore, and not that easy to get around

produce is. Many don't realise — until they arrive — the sheer size of the island. At 4500sq km, it is seven times the size of Singapore, and not that easy to get around.

"The virtue of Kangaroo Island is our small-scale artisan produce," says Harman. "The challenge is to preserve those qualities while also expanding production. At the moment, producers can't meet the demand."

We meet Harman and several other producers at one of the island's most fashionable places to stay, Lifetime Private Retreats, where owner Nick Hannaford — a third-generation islander — cooks lunch for us in the property's former boatshed, now converted into a



taverna on idyllic, and usually deserted, Snellings Beach.

Among the producers is Neil Pontifex from KI Pure Grain, which sells more than half its annual production of 12,000 tonnes of canola to Japan. The canola is GM-free, an export advantage strengthened by the island's isolation from the cross-contamination risks on the mainland. The company is also trialling a cold-pressed canola oil for sale within Australia and produces television chef Simon Bryant's new line of Dirt(y) Inc's pure nugget lentils and red nipper lentils.

Launched in 2009, KI Pure Grain is one of a plethora of food initiatives to have sprung up on the island in the past few years. Opened in late 2010 in American River, The Oyster Farm Shop sells locally farmed Pacific oysters under the Kangaroo Island Premium brand, as well as farmed local abalone and marron, and sustainable local fish including King George whiting, garfish, snapper and tommy ruff (Australian herring). There's also excellent barramundi, fresh or smoked, from the "farm" run by students of the aquaculture training program at Parndana Campus KI Community School.

If there is an emerging food capital of KI, it's Penne-shaw on the island's northeast coast, where the ferries from Adelaide drop anchor. The town is home to a monthly farmers' market; the Kangaroo Island Source Cooking School; a couple of decent hotel restaurants, including Sorrento's at the KI Seafont Resort, where consultant chef Andrew Fielke has introduced an emphatically local menu; and the island's famous fish

cafe, Fish, where British expat owner Sue Pearson sources local seafood and cooks dishes such as South Australian scallops with buttered cabbage and bacon. (It's disappointing to discover, then, that the best-selling dish is made with Vietnamese prawns, though Pearson says she sources local product when available.)

And in May, the first batch of food and wine trails based around cellar doors and farm gates will be launched in various locations across the island, an initiative of Tourism KI.

Back at Southern Ocean Lodge, a reasonably adventurous eater could work their way through the produce of up to 30 different local suppliers over a two-night stay. Taste the breakfast eggs here, or the calamari in the salad we have for lunch, or the barramundi with cockles, herbs and marinated seaweed for dinner, and it makes other eggs, other calamari, other barramundi you've eaten taste like pale imitations of the real thing. Of course, you can't give all the credit for that to the producers: Mother Nature, the chef and the setting all play their part. But you wouldn't want to underestimate their contribution.

They're a hardy, resourceful, self-reliant lot, these islanders. As Harman says: "If you just wanted to make money you'd (be a producer) on the mainland. So the people who are here are doing it because they're passionate about it."

Necia Wilden travelled to Kangaroo Island courtesy of SA Tourism and was a guest of Southern Ocean Lodge.