

ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S
BEST-KEPT SECRETS.
KANGAROO ISLAND IS ALL
ABOUT HOPPING WITH THE
WILDLIFE AND EMBRACING
THE GOOD LIFE BY CHONGWAN TAY



BEACH FISHING



AERIAL VIEW OF THE SOUTHERN OCEAN LODGE

into the wild



SOUTHERN OCEAN LODGE

Bright blue sky, twinkling sunlight and sparkling waters frothing on the bone-white beach of sand so perfectly soft and fine—yet I stand, at a frustratingly “safe” distance, just watching. Watching what? Silver seals with skin shimmering from their nightly fishing expeditions, resting, playing and basking in the sunny glory, mostly ignoring the groups of human visitors who have politely gathered about 30 metres away to observe them. I have never envied seals till now.

On Kangaroo Island (affectionately called “KI” by the locals) in South Australia, animal envy happens very often. The said beach Seal Bay is, as its name implies, a magnificent stretch of sand reserved only for its namesake creatures. Twenty, or perhaps 40 of them claim the beach every day in blissful oblivion of the tourist groups. If you’re luckier, you may get to see a few pups (the young sea lions) tease and chase each other around. This proximity to wildlife is par for the course all around the island. Take a drive or a walk and you might run into a darting wallaby here, a happy kangaroo there, or spot a rare species of the 267 types of birds that are found on the island. Cheerful creatures, they all are.

Life is pretty good on KI—and not just for the fauna and flora. Australia is a land abundantly blessed by nature, but KI, located just a skip and hop away from Adelaide (get there either by ferry or small plane), takes the cake and the icing too. From whispers among the finicky well-travelled circle, I heard about the award-winning boutique hotel, Southern Ocean Lodge (SOL). Upon arriving in Kingscote, KI’s gateway of entry, we drive an hour along scenic and rugged roads toward the resort in Hanson Bay, the southernmost tip of KI, where we would stay. As our car rollicks to a halt at a secluded gate with an intercom system, surrounded only by bushes and other vegetation, we think we’ve arrived at a private and vast bushland estate. Beyond the forbidding gate lies a rather long narrow road that takes us to even further seclusion, till we finally reach the resort foyer.



REMARKABLE SUITE



GREAT ROOM FIREPLACE



REMARKABLE ROCKS

The good life

Nothing can quite prepare one for the view at SOL. We amble through the large wooden door, tired and hot from the drive—and it hits us. Jaws drop, eyes dilate, we snap back into life seeing the panorama of endless blue of sky blending into ocean, next to craggy cliffs. This is the spectacular backdrop of our stay for the next few days. The resort treads ever so lightly on the cliff with nothing else within miles, along the coastline without a barrier between it and Antarctica. That view of azure infinity is welcomed through full-glass doors that are used in lieu of walls in the resort's eco-sensitive building.

For all its isolation, SOL is about living it up. The design is luxuriously modern-chic and rather urbane. Each of the 21 suites has a sunken lounge that looks out to the surroundings. Even from the bathroom, you can see vegetation and ocean. To get even closer to nature, chill out upon the day bed on the outdoor deck and watch the sun rise or set. The resort is designed to look like a huge home with an expansive living room (aptly called the Great Room) and dining room, and a long hallway leading to the guest suites that are all quaintly named after shipwrecks around the island from the 1800s.

In the Great Room, check-in and checkout are done unobtrusively as you sip on whatever you wish while you watch the waves pounding the cliffs. The dining room shares the spectacular view that threatens to almost distract you from your food, if the cuisine isn't quite so exquisite. Evenings can be spent mingling with other guests at pre-dinner wine-tastings and canapés, games and general socialising at the bar and communal table.

Since South Australia has gained quite a reputation as a gourmet's destination, SOL has upped the ante with resident chef Tim Bourke and his team. Every meal is a gourmet experience, and lunch and dinner are three- to four-course affairs with wine pairings. After a long hike and dinner, you can savour your cheese platter in the Great Room by the burning fireplace with a glass of port or, if you like, Penfolds Grange.



The hopping island

The main excuse for such grand gastronomic indulgence is the activities programme that has us pretty much on our feet all day, if we so choose. Hikes on the Hanson Bay limestone cliff, scaling the Remarkable Rocks for its Dali-esque granite boulders, kayaking, beach fishing—all promise to work up our appetites and inspire a trip to the Southern Spa. This little sanctuary offering superb treatments is perched on the cliff, a short, scenic trek away from the main building.

For slightly less strenuous adventures, go on the KI Farm Gate and Cellar Door Trail to visit the honey and lavender farms, South Australia's only eucalyptus distillery, vineyards and cellar doors, while tasting some marron and cider along the way. Produce lovers must not leave the island without a decent stash of Ligurian honey. Unique to KI, the gentle and productive Ligurian bees can't be found anywhere else on the planet.

For a thorough exploration of the island, a weeklong stay is ideal because wildlife watching takes time and energy. These creatures in their natural habitat are the highlight of any trip to KI. A nocturnal tour to Hanson Bay Sanctuary reveals a world that comes alive while we sleep. Koalas snacking on gum trees or their males sending out weird guttural mating calls are just part of the fun. You can also spot echidnas, bats and possums. During the day, watch fur seals sun themselves on the rocks at Admirals Arch. On the exploration tours, it's a game of spotting the intriguing platypus, the elusive osprey, the exotic snakes and birds lurking around.

Part of SOL's bespoke experience is an evening called Kangas and Kanapés, which takes us to Grassdale, a historic island property where kangaroos and wallabies congregate to graze. Creeping up on these marsupials for a close-up photo-op is well worth the trek on the fields covered with their waste. Nature trumps hygiene this time. After kanga-spotting, we watch the sunset with wine and canapés made with local produce.

It is a different kind of safari, some say. And that is why Kangaroo Island is called the Galapagos of Australia. ■