

Make some unusual new friends at

Australia's top wildlife destination

Experience the ultimate in animal magic on magnificent Kangaroo Island. By **Daniel Scott**

Cute, quirky and found nowhere else on the planet, Australian animals are among the Great Southern Land's greatest draws and nowhere else on the sun-soaked continent offers better odds of encountering them than Kangaroo Island, off the coast of South Australia.

The wild, lightly populated island is a million-acre natural refuge. That KI, as locals call it, is a haven for wildlife is partly thanks to its early settlers who, fearing the possible extinction of several mainland species, imported a variety of creatures in Noah-like fashion.

The establishment of a bee sanctuary in the late 19th century proved particularly prescient. The island's colony of Ligurian bees produces some of the purest honey on Earth. Among other creatures to flourish have been koalas, which number in their thousands on the island, as do rare Cape Barren geese.

More than a third of Kangaroo Island is covered by national park or conservation area, ensuring the integrity of native vegetation where animals and birds make their home. Flinders Chase is the largest national park, a vast wilderness where Kangaroo Island kangaroos – darker and shorter than their mainland cousins – Tamar wallabies and echidnas are common. Elsewhere, coastal wetlands such as Murray lagoon attract a variety of birdlife including stilts, pelicans, ospreys and sea eagles and the endangered glossy black cockatoo is also found on the island.

While land-based wildlife benefited from the early islanders' foresight, marine creatures were less fortunate, with whaling and sealing once prevalent. Australian sea lions remain officially endangered, their population fewer than 15,000 worldwide, which makes encountering them at Seal Bay, on the island's south coast, a rare privilege.

There is no more endearing sight than a wet-nosed pup being reunited on the beach with its exhausted mother as she returns after a long fishing trip in the Southern Ocean. On a ranger-led tour at Seal Bay, visitors can get within 30ft of the sea lions, which is close enough when they include grumpy bulls weighing 55 stone. There are more big boys, some jostling for territory, among a colony of New Zealand fur seals at Cape de Couedic, the island's southwestern tip. But most are slumped on slanting ledges framed by the jagged edges of Admirals Arch, a rock formation shorn from limestone cliffs by the pounding of the Southern Ocean.

More natural artistry is evident in the Remarkable Rocks nearby, scattered like discarded giants' toys on a rounded granite platform high above the ocean. Weathered over 500 million years and adorned with red lichen, they have earned their name, appearing like finely honed objets d'art and resembling anything from bear's heads to whale vertebra.

Along the south coast, at Little Sahara, the limestone has been even more eroded to form immense sand dunes, dipping and peaking like a tumultuous caramel-coloured sea. Yet the island also encompasses gentler coves and bays such as Vivonne, where the turquoise ocean barely raises a wave, and Stokes, a magical stretch of golden beach reached via a narrow passage in the coastal rock.

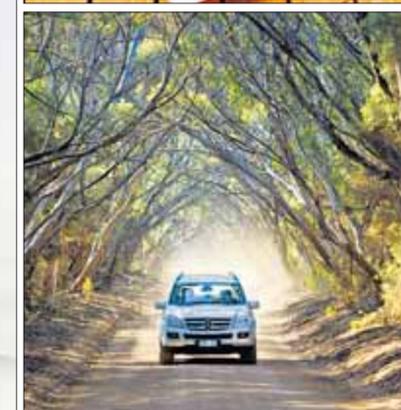
Kangaroo Island's natural assets are not confined to its wildlife and scenery. Uninhabited for 2,000 years before colonisation and far removed from

Close encounters: clockwise from right, mingling with kangaroos; sumptuous seafood; small group 4x4 touring; Kangaroo Beach Lodge; Kate Humble mixes with the locals; a sea lion; Remarkable Rocks; Southern Ocean Lodge

Southern Ocean Lodge

With grandstand views of the south coast, outstanding service and superb South Australian food and wine, Southern Ocean Lodge occupies the top echelon of extravagant Australian accommodation. Named number-one resort in Australia and New Zealand in *Travel and Leisure's* 2014 awards, the property offers total indulgence while focusing guests' attention, through floor-to-ceiling windows, on the extraordinary environment outside. More information: southernoceanlodge.com.au

Trailfinders exclusive offer: stay three nights/pay for two. Prices from £1,199 per person includes three nights' accommodation at Southern Ocean Lodge, all à la carte meals, beverages (including spirits and premium wines) and small-group four-wheel drive touring. For more information or to book, visit trailfinders.com/discoveraustralia or call 020 7938 0212.



industrial pollution, its untainted environment has fostered the production of some of Australia's purest and most flavoursome food and wine.

Vines were planted on the island as early as the 1830s but it has taken until the past decade for its cool-climate wines to become widely recognised. Now nearly 30 boutique vineyards are spread over its coastal hills and hinterland, many overlooking the ocean.

Bay of Shoals winery, near the main town of Kingscote, has one of the most splendid settings, with views across the choppy Gulf St Vincent separating the island from the mainland. It produces award-winning bottles of shiraz and sauvignon blanc bearing droff pelican labels that reflect KI's wildlife.

A little inland from here is KI Spirits, South Australia's first boutique distillery, where a delicious range of gins, vodkas and liqueurs is handcrafted using locally grown and native botanicals. Visiting its cellar door is a heady experience with the aroma of roasting fruit emanating from the distillery and island flavours prominent in the samphire vodka or walnut-and-honey liqueur. There is also the opportunity to blend your own gin using anything from juniper to lemon myrtle, a favourite indigenous ingredient.

Kangaroo Island's food producers also benefit from the clean, green environment. Small-scale operators make a virtue of disease- and chemical-free processes to create top-quality grain, potatoes, dairy and honey products. Tastings are available at the island's farms and apiaries, with organic honey particularly popular. The Island Beehive, in Kingscote, is a one-stop shop for the amber nectar, honey ice-cream and a range of body lotions and creams. And, while bathing in ewe's milk is not yet possible, it is the chief constituent of the irresistible Greek-style cheeses and yogurts at the Island Pure Sheep Dairy.

Kangaroo Island's seafood is infused with natural goodness, too. Its freshwater crayfish, the marron, is tender and sweet; and its oysters, nurtured in the clean, shallow bay fronting the hamlet of American River, are plump and juicy.

Purveyors of the island's gourmet food and wine have much to celebrate and they do so in style at the annual FEASTival which brings together chefs, producers and the public for degustations and pop-up dining events. In 2015, FEASTival has been extended from five to eight days (May 1-8) and features leading Australian food educator Stephanie Alexander and prominent local chef Kate Sumner.

There are also cooking demonstrations and tastings throughout the year, on the first Sunday of every month, at Penneshaw Farmers' Market, and the island's various producers are linked by the Farm Gate and Cellar Door Trail.

Kangaroo Island has so many riches and one of the best ways to experience island life is on a fly-drive holiday, preferably in a vehicle that can negotiate its dirt roads to reach attractions such as the Cape Borda lighthouse, built on its north-western cliffs in 1858. But the island can be seen on anything from coach trips from Adelaide to in-depth four-wheel-drive wildlife tours and guided multi-day treks.

The wide range of accommodation blends in perfectly with its environment, from coastal campsites and beachfront cabins such as those at Hanson Bay, to the cliff-top settings of luxurious properties such as Southern Ocean Lodge (see box, left). Lifetime Private Retreats on the north coast and Seascape, set above Emu Bay.

While it's the wildlife and untouched nature that lures visitors most, the high quality of its food, drink and hospitality also makes a stay on Kangaroo Island unforgettable in a truly holistic way.

Top tips

To make the most of this unbeatable wilderness experience, Trailfinders recommends joining a two-day, small-group tour taking in the dramatic coastline and vast swathes of bushland while getting close to native wildlife. Prices from £599 per person including coach/ferry transfers from Adelaide, one night hotel and two picnic lunches with wine.

Alternatively, enjoy the freedom of stopping where and when you choose – combine the lush wineries of the mainland with the wildlife of Kangaroo Island on an 11-day motorhome holiday, from £1,259 per person including international flights, two nights' Adelaide hotel and eight nights' maui motorhome hire. Call Trailfinders on **020 7938 0212** to start planning your Australian adventure or visit trailfinders.com/discoveraustralia