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“I don’t want other people to decide who I am. I want to decide that for myself.”
EMMA WATSON
The Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island has views that will take your breath away.

WILD AT HEART

Off the southern coast of Australia lies an island with a checkered history, an extreme climate, thriving fauna and a natural reserve of culinary wonderments.

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Our tiny, twin turboprop swoops through the clouds, revealing glimpses of wild crashing surf and steep cliffs below. Appearing as a speck surrounded by red earth, Kingscote – our destination – is the largest city on Kangaroo Island. Officially established on a craggy isthmus on the north coast in 1836, Kingscote is not the most likely candidate for capital, but there were indeed once plans for the town to step up as South Australia’s number-one city.

Kangaroo Island, or KI as it’s known locally, population 4500, covers an area of 4400-square-kilometres (about seven times the size of Singapore) – it’s hard to miss on the map.

Still, it was by accident that British explorer Matthew Flinders and his crew ran ashore on the northern tip of the island’s peninsula aboard the HMS Investigator in the early 1800s. Legend has it that having been at sea without meat for more than six months, the men were overwhelmed by the sight of hundreds of Western grey kangaroos grazing in paddocks where the ship came to land. Flinders and his crew didn’t have to work very hard for their next meal: without natural predators, the roos were extremely tame. According to records, the troop feasted on more than 30 animals over the following days, leading Flinders to declare the land “Kangaroo Island” in tribute.

In the years following Flinders’ landing, the area was overrun by a motley crew of whalers, sealers, escaped convicts and ship deserters. They brought Aboriginal women from Tasmania and abducted others from the mainland. Before long, the area had a reputation as one of the most lawless places in the British Empire.

Separated from the South Australian coast about 10,000 years ago, KI was devoid of many animals by the mid-1800s. Few
marsupials could survive the hot, dry conditions and so pests, such as dingoes, foxes and rabbits, were also unheard of. When early islanders began importing animals – wallabies, possums, bandicoots, Cape Barren geese, platypuses, koalas, fairy penguins – they thrived in their new environment, without predators or disease.

Early settlers also brought in fruit plants and bees from Liguria in Italy. Today, KI has the state's oldest berry tree (still producing mulberries, 170 years after taking root), and the world's only disease-free colony of Ligurian bees. There are strict quarantine measures in place to protect the island's unique assets and, because it's been maintained as such a pristine environment, everything tastes good. The melaleuca and banksia honeys are dark and tangy, the mulberry jam has an unexpected zing, the free-range eggs are almost creamy, and the marron is sweet and tender.

The local wines are also developing a reputation: over the last 10 years, close to 30 vineyards have sprung up across the island, producing everything from crisp chardonnays to cabernet franc and merlot. Still, most of the farms and cellar doors are far flung and, as such, we plan to visit them all in one day as part of an epicurean tour offered by the island's ultra-luxurious, cliff-hugging Southern Ocean Lodge.

The drive from Kingscote to Hanson Bay on the southwest coast is long and lonely. We pass through countryside that looks like a Fred Williams painting: earthy browns, taupes, tawny reds and slivers of orange and yellow all smudge into one another. The endless expanse of burnt-ochre soil is spiked with the green of bushy mallee, and spear-like yakka flowers shoot metres into the brilliant blue sky. Etched on the horizon are the blackened skeletons of trees and shrubs, a stark reminder this picture was created by forces greater than the changing seasons.
South Australia is the driest state in the driest inhabited continent on the planet. The year 2007 was one of the worst on record for rain. In December that year, lightning struck during a storm, starting the worst fire the island had seen in 50 years. For three weeks, a team of 1200 fire fighters battled the flames, which at times travelled up to 80 kilometres an hour along the windswept southern coast, licking the fence that borders Southern Ocean Lodge.

At the end of it all, more than a fifth of the island was transformed into blackened land like that in front of us. Not to mention the koalas – the island lost thousands of them.

But although these marsupials face near extinction in some parts of Australia, on KI, you’re just as likely to see a koala as a kangaroo. Recent estimates place their numbers at close to 30,000 – one of the largest populations in the country.

There’s little change in the landscape as we head further west. A light drizzle causes the tarmac to steam and a flock of crimson rosellas swoop overhead. The only sign other people have shared the road with us are tire skid marks, zigzagging into the dusty verge.

**AN OCEAN OF ACTIVITY**

Flinders and his crew were lucky to make it ashore, but since the HMS Investigator’s landing, more than 80 ships have fallen to a watery grave. The wild Southern Ocean surrounding the island is peppered with wrecks – which does, admittedly, make for excellent diving provided you have thick skin and a drysuit – ranging from international sailing and steam ships to coastal traders and local fishing craft.

When we arrive at Southern Ocean Lodge, I find my room is named after one of them: *Amber Star*, a 440-ton shark fishing boat that went down on January 14, 1973 off Cape Bouguer, somewhere in the deep-blue sea that shimmers before me through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my sunken living room – just one of the niceties enjoyed across the 21 suites at the sleek eco-lodge that clings to a limestone cliff just up from the remote Hanson Bay. During winter, guests have reported spotting southern right whales from their beds, with the massive marine mammals moving north from Antarctica to the warmer South Australian waters.

For all its international appeal, the lodge has a distinct local focus: sculptures and paintings throughout are by South Australian artists; bottles in the impressive wine cellar are sourced from the island and neighbouring wine regions; and the complimentary in-room minibar is stocked with goodies such as Barossa Valley cheeses and home-baked lamingtons. In mine, I find a Bay of Shoals sauvignon blanc, which I take with me on a stroll to a hidden nook up the cliff-face overlooking a protected osprey nesting area. Black clouds gathering offshore signal my retreat indoors, just in time for dinner.

The restaurant at Southern Ocean Lodge is one of KI’s highlights, with a menu that changes daily to make the most of fresh, local ingredients that executive chef Tim Bourke plucks from surrounding fields – what he can’t find, he sources from the island’s remarkable array of artisan producers. Our meal tonight begins with a pretty plate of Kangaroo Island Spirits wild gin-cured Atlantic salmon with juniper-lime cream, organic kale juice and gin powder; it almost outshines the oh-so-tender slow-
cooked cheek of Barossa Valley Berkshire pig on a bed of Jerusalem artichoke, apple, walnuts and capers.

By the open fire that evening we savour a full-bodied Cape d’Estaiting shiraz with a selection of South Australian cheeses: a mousseline vache curd with lemon-lime undertones from the Barossa Valley; a nutty cloth-bound cheddar from the Limestone coast; and a creamy, sheep-milk kefalograviera from the island itself.

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS
It's still drizzling the next day at breakfast – double-smoked bacon, free-range eggs, roasted button mushrooms, warm potato bake and spicy tomato relish – and the rain continues as we make our way east to Seal Bay, one of the many places on the island named without much imagination. Rainy Creek tends to overflow when it rains, Snake Lagoon is notorious for its stinky reptiles, Rocky River has a pebbly base, Breakneck River flows at a pretty rapid pace … and Seal Bay is home to a colony of more than 600 sea lions, one of the largest gatherings of the animals in the world.

We hear them before we see them: the lone mornful cry of a baby looking for its mother rings across the bay, followed by a chorus of deep yelps in reply. As we reach the beach, a 300-kilogram adult male barrel-rolls down the dune beside us, knocking the baby out of the way as he flops into the sand beside a crew of sun-bathing females. The lions are tame enough to walk among, although since their days as shark-bait in the 1950s, regulations limit visitor contact to a 10-metre buffer zone. When they're not out at sea diving for their dinner – scientists are still trying to understand how they stay underwater for up to 30 minutes on end – the sea lions tend to spend most of their time sleeping in the sand, storing the energy they’ll need to dodge the great white sharks that riddle the waters beyond.

In the afternoon we drive to Grassdale Cottage, an old farmers hut donated to the National Parks and Wildlife foundation a number of years back and now used as a base for rangers when they’re in the field. It's also the site for Southern Ocean Lodge's nightly "Kangaroos and Kanapes", a sunset event to bring guests closer to
CULINARY COURSE

Tappping in to the island’s breadth of culinary offerings, Southern Ocean Lodge now organises a KI Food Safari (the next is August 20-27, 2016), giving guests a unique taste of the region’s top producers. Highlights include visits to:

- Island Pure Sheep Dairy, where you can sample and purchase superb feta, kefalotiri, haloumi and manchego, which pair delectably with locally made fig-and-olive tapenade.
- Island Beehive, where bees produce some 30 tons of Ligurian honey annually. The gift shop and visitor centre is stocked with everything from cosmetics and candles to sweet treats, all infused with the liquid gold.
- The 300-hectare Island Estate Winery, where you can sip and swill the estate’s excellent cabernet franc, malbec, sangiovese, viognier and semillon.
- The KI Community Education Centre, which sees kids play a role in rearing and producing barramundi in aquaculture facilities based at the school – the final product is used across the island, including in meals at Southern Ocean Lodge.
- Kangaroo Island Spirits, where Jon Lark distills some of Australia’s finest gins and spirits using local botanicals and flavours. Don’t miss the Mulberry Gin.
the hundreds of roos and tammar wallabies that gather in the clearing surrounding the cottage. We join them, with a flute of sparkling shiraz in one hand and freshly shucked oysters in the other. Almost oblivious to the carload of visitors staring at them, the animals graze and play between the stumpy yakka trees.

**TAKING SHAPE**
Kangaroo Island has 21 national parks, and Southern Ocean Lodge is nestled between two of the most impressive.

On day three, we explore the adjacent 34,000-hectare Flinders Chase Park, spanning the western rib of the island. It's home to the Remarkable Rocks, a cluster of precariously balanced boulders resting on a granite dome some 75 metres above the ocean. Throughout history, the rocks have been weathered by the sea, wind and rain into shapes that resemble prehistoric animals at one turn and avant-garde sculptures at the next. Mossy lichen clings to the rocks, giving them a warm, tawny glow that changes from minute to minute as the sun shifts position overhead.

The forest that surrounds the rock formations has been moulded by the same forces of nature: from the knee-high mallee cascading down to the ocean, the foliage cases into a primary growth of yakka, melaleuca and sugar gum eucalyptus – a world away from the soaring giant stringy barks and endless procession of casuarinas that hug the sheltered north coast along the Investigator Strait. We cut to a clearing at Cape du Couedic (named by French explorer Nicholas Baudin, less than a year after Flinders' visit) and park by a series of historic lightkeepers cottages, built in 1907 from limestone and today transformed into lodgings with slate roofs and polished-pine floors.

**Wooden walkways lead us down to Admirals Arch where the island's other famous seal colony – New Zealand fur seals – frolic amid rock pools under a granite arch that looks like a window out to the sea, framing the button-like Casurina Islets in the distance. A chilling wind sends a flutter of foam into the air, reminding us just how close we are to the bottom of the earth.**

Back at the lodge, chef Bourke has a fire and goblets of red wine waiting. The storm that was brewing over Antarctica earlier hits as we're pouring second glasses, whipping the ocean into a frenzy and sending bolts of light through the night. The howl of a koala echoes through the starless sky. It's like nature has put on a show just for our pleasure.

**MiNDFOOD.COM**
Go online for more images of Southern Ocean Lodge.

**KEYWORDS:** SOUTHERN, OCEAN