

STAR

HIKING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD. ON KANGAROO ISLAND,
JO MCKAY DISCOVERS THE LUXURIOUS WAY TO WALK.

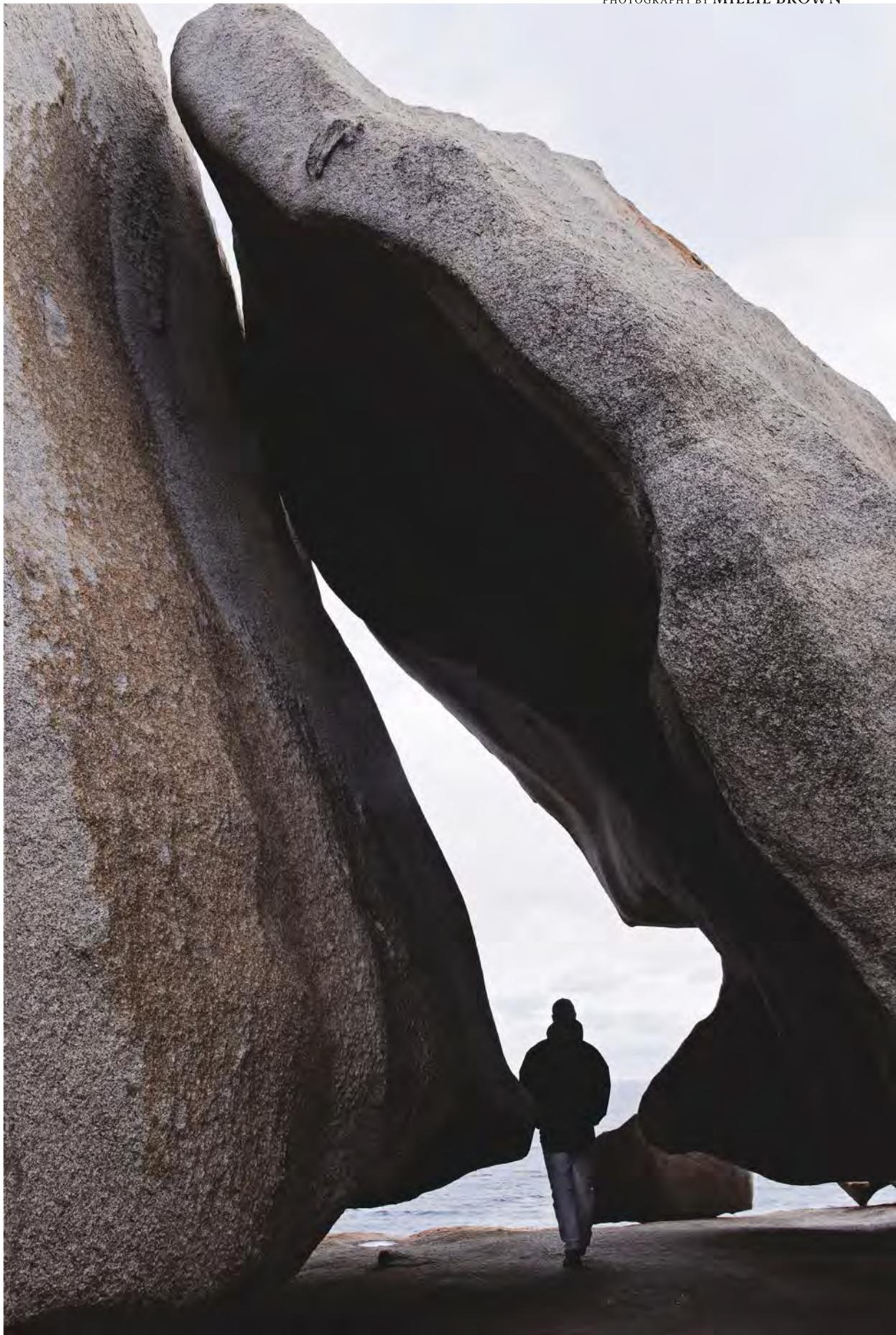
TREK



Walk



On the Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail (left), “you’re seeing a little of everything”, says Michael Caspar, dwarfed by the Remarkable Rocks (right)





IT'S AS if I'm standing on the edge of the world. Behind me lies a thick expanse of greenery: tea-tree, mallee and banksia; at my feet, coastal natives are interspersed among limestone rock. Five metres in front, a pale, craggy cliff plunges 40 metres into a frothing sea. In the distance, the ocean stretches into oblivion – that is, until you reach Antarctica.

This is the south-western coast of Kangaroo Island – half a kilometre shy of Cape Younghusband to be exact – and this 360-degree panorama is just one of many majestic sights on the Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail (KIWT). Launched in October last year, the 61-kilometre track (kangarooislandwildernesstrail.sa.gov.au) is designed to be tackled over five days. Starting from the Flinders Chase Visitor Centre, it traces rivers, meandering through native vegetation and along these cliff tops that rim the ocean, as well as taking in iconic sights such as Admirals Arch and the aptly named Remarkable Rocks. There are four good camp sites along the way – clean, sheltered, well maintained and spaced perfectly for each night spent on the trail.

But, frankly, I'm not here to camp. At the end of my walking days, I'll sink into a plush king-size bed, having dined on a four-course meal, probably having snuck in a glass or two of Barossa red. It's likely I'll have had a

Hanson Bay's desolately beautiful coastline (above)

long, hot bath, too, in a deep tub overlooking the ocean. I'm not staying at a camp site; instead my lavish base is Southern Ocean Lodge (southernoceanlodge.com.au).

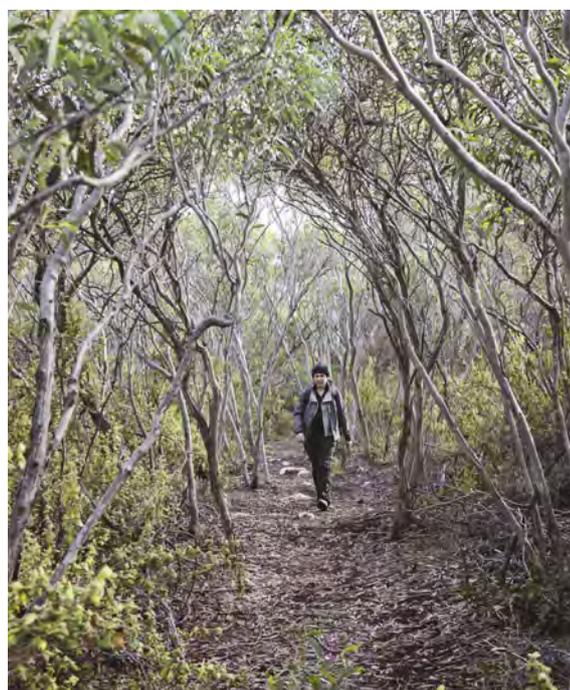
The 21-suite boutique retreat is perched on the coastline only six kilometres from where I'm standing and while bushwalking has always been a part of the lodge's offering, the new trail has expanded the possibilities. My goal is to experience the lodge's take on the KIWT, which means tackling the last few days of the KIWT itinerary. With me through it all is guide Michael Caspar, who shows equal measures of patience and enthusiasm.

So far, the day has been capricious. This morning it was overcast but by 11am, as we started our 15-kilometre hike from Remarkable Rocks, we were accosted by driving rain. But while the showers rolled over us for a good two hours, I have this to say to those following in my footsteps: don't be put off by weather, wet or otherwise. It can be changeable in this part of the world. Right now, standing at Cape Younghusband, we've found a pocket of bright sunshine. It's warming us through and at the same time painting the sea myriad shades: violet, cerulean and aquamarine. It's remarkable to look at, just like the rocks in the distance.

Unquestionably, the highlights outweigh any inclement weather: there are moments when kangaroos bound across our path, times when we peer over the cliffs and discover seals basking on rocks, stretches when we survey the ocean because its waters are flush with dolphins. And when the extravagance of the lodge is there at the end of the day, does it really matter if there's a spot of rain? (Answer: no.)

As we walk, Caspar says the trail is special for many reasons. "For the plants, for the animals, for the seclusion – and you get to see parts of KI that are totally unspoilt." The track isn't too taxing, either. According to the Australian Walking Track Grading System, the KIWT is a four, which means "some sections are long, rough and very steep". It's remote, yes, and there are ankle-twisting risks (those limestone rocks are a case in point) but it doesn't feel as tough as the grade suggests. While familiarity with bushwalking and a moderate level of fitness

(Clockwise from below) Southern Ocean Lodge guide Alex Neale; passing through a woodland habitat; the island is home to the third-largest sea lion colony in Australia



are required, it's more than manageable for daytrippers. Good kit, though, is a must – all day, I'm grateful for warm layers, wet-weather gear and proper hiking boots.

During the day, Caspar talks about the island; he covers wildlife, botany, history, geology and sustainability. His expertise is intrinsic to the lodge's offering – as is his hospitality. Not only has he brought along my water and lunch (chicken baguette, quinoa salad and homemade trail mix) but as we make our final approach through tea-tree scrub, he radios to reception. The order? A gin and tonic. This delightful touch emphasises the appeal of staying at Southern Ocean Lodge while walking the trail.

Each room has uninterrupted views of sea and sky. In the communal Great Room, wraparound windows showcase the ocean and the seemingly unending vegetation that blankets the inland. The panoramas all say "rugged, raw, untamed" but inside, every feature is sophisticated, whether it's the architectural grandeur or smaller design details like heated tile floors, rain showers and soft Bemboka linens. There's a decadent



Creature comforts at Southern Ocean Lodge include (from top) gourmet meals – smoked salmon tartine with toasted horseradish, sour cream, fennel and dill – an infinity plunge pool with views, and deep bathtubs

Flight path

KGC

From December 2017, Qantas will fly to Kangaroo Island from Adelaide year-round and from Melbourne during December and January.
qantas.com

spa for post-walk indulgence and in the Great Room, the fireplace roars on cold nights, the bar is always open and the daily menus are flavoursome and nourishing.

Later, as I tuck into my main course (a tender Coorong sirloin with short rib and smoked bone marrow), lodge manager John Hird explains there are plans afoot to enable guests to do the entire trail (the lodge only has access to days three through five of the KIWT). By the 2018 walking season, expect four- or five-day itineraries with drop-off and pick-up each day.

All this will be teamed with the lodge's other signature experiences: tours of a koala sanctuary, the Admirals Arch fur seal colony and Remarkable Rocks; a trip to Seal Bay, the home of Australia's third-largest sea lion colony; an evening excursion to watch kangaroos and wallabies graze on nearby pastures; and a guided hike along a stunning cliff-top trail on the lodge's property.

For me, though, it's back to the KIWT. For campers the KIWT is a one-way track but as we're daytrippers, we're starting at the finish line, Kelly Hill Caves, and plotting



Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary harbours koalas and other native animals (below); the lodge beckons on the final beach leg of the walk



the 12 kilometres back to the lodge instead. The first few hours are through eucalypt woodland then beside lagoons and wetlands rich with birdlife. We amble along the banks of a glassy river and eventually re-emerge at the coastline. As Caspar says, “The walk takes you through a lot of what the island has to offer. You aren’t just seeing coast or inland; you’re seeing a little of everything.”

We pass few other hikers and a sense of beautiful isolation pervades. As we make our way up the final stretch of Hanson Bay back beach, two endangered hooded plovers scuttle across the sand and then, as we approach the lodge, a large roo springs across our path. I’d call it the perfect ending but, really, that gong goes to the three-course lunch waiting for us at the restaurant.

Later that afternoon, sated and reclining in my suite’s bathtub, wine in hand and a broad view of beach, ocean and sky in front of me, it’s hard not to be relaxed. And impressed. When you combine such rugged beauty with luxury, you get the best of both worlds. ●

Natural selection

Four other luxury walking expeditions to add to the list.

Tasmania

THE MARIA ISLAND WALK

Called a “soft adventure” by Great Walks of Australia, this four-day 42-kilometre trek (mariaislandwalk.com.au) explores the unique landscape and history of the east-coast island. Accommodation ranges from deluxe bush cabins to a restored heritage homestead. As always in Tassie, the emphasis is on excellent food and wine.

Western Australia

WALK INTO LUXURY

Exploring various sections of the 135-kilometre Cape to Cape Track near Margaret River, Walk into Luxury (walkintoluxury.com.au) offers itineraries ranging from two to eight days. All trips make the most of the region, with long winery lunches and topnotch accommodation such as Cape Lodge and the Injidup Spa Retreat.

South Australia

THE ARKABA WALK

This four-day, three-night all-inclusive experience (arkabawalk.com) takes in the geological and ecological wonders of the Flinders Ranges. Daily walking distances range between six and 15 kilometres and the first two nights are spent in Arkaba’s “star beds”, superior swags on elevated decks set under the twinkling sky. The final evening is at the chic Arkaba Homestead.

Queensland

SCENIC RIM TRAIL

Run by Spicers Retreats, these two- and four-day treks (scenicrimtrail.com) can cover up to 38 kilometres through pristine Australian bush and rainforest. Nights are spent at permanent glamping site Spicers Canopy, with the final evening at the stunning Spicers Peak Lodge. Expect gourmet meals throughout, as well as Spicers’ distinctive personalised service.



Want to go walkabout? For the best hiking trails in Australia, plus a walking safari in Kenya, go to TRAVELINSIDER.QANTAS.COM.AU.