On a bleak night in May 1860, the crew of the Finnish barque *Fides* found themselves in a serious pickle off the northwest coast of Kangaroo Island. Be- calmed in shifting seas, the pinewood ship bound from London to Port Adelaide was being pushed by currents towards rocks beneath a fearsome cliff.

Unable to steer, its fate was sealed. In the small hours, amid heavy seas and thunderstorms, the *Fides* and its crew of 15 were swamped and thrown against the island. In desperation the chief mate jumped into the sea and swam to the shore; just then, a huge wave washed over the boat. Only four others survived.

I know this because I am also sunk deep – in my extremely dry, warm and cosy bed at the luxurious Southern Ocean Lodge, where I've pulled from the bookshelf *Kangaroo Island Shipwrecks*, filled with tales of the 81 vessels that have come to grief off the shores outside my panoramic windows. And since my room is named *Fides* (all the Lodge’s 21 rooms are named after wrecks), it seems only right to discover what fate befell its namesake. I huddle a bit deeper into the covers.

I've kept the shades up, though, so I can still see the white foam of the Southern Ocean’s rolling breakers as the surf pounds the cliffs around, throwing spray dozens of metres into the air. But it’s the sound that is most evocative, even with the sliding doors tightly shut: a deep, percussive thump that you can feel as much as hear. It’s a night you wouldn’t wish to be on a wallowing ship that’s missed its turn into Gulf St Vincent; far better to be tucked up here against the winter chill, drifting slowly off under the spell of the ocean’s song, a Kraken’s lullaby.

In daylight, it’s easy to see why this spot was chosen for a world-beating lodge promising exclusive, opulent, isolation. Situated on a cliff overlooking Hanson Bay, there’s nothing but churning sea between here and Antarctica. Low slung in the landscape, crouched under the south-westerlies, it’s perfectly situated to take advantage of a view that incorporates the elemental beauty and danger that Kangaroo Island throws up.

John Hird, who manages the Lodge with his wife Alison Heath, says winter is his favourite time of year, a message he says he’s succeeding in sharing with the
KI’s appeal is a mixture of beauty and danger

Lodge’s well-heeled clientele. Summer is still the most popular time, but he’s convincing more guests to experience winter’s big seas, storms, and cooler weather for long coastal cliff hikes.

It’s all about perspective. We enjoyed a 13km hike on the KI Wilderness Trail along a cliffstop trail, fortified by packed lunches and bottles of spring water. The Fides survivors also had a coastal hike – but they had to climb the 90m cliffs first, at night, in a storm.

Then they pushed through 25km of scrub, living on a barrel of scavenged herings and a sheep that had survived the wreck, to reach the only nearby outpost of civilisation, the Cape Borda Lighthouse. That’s the danger.

It’s this mix of beauty and peril that makes Kangaroo Island so appealing. And it’s the remoteness of this perch above Hanson Bay that led owners James and Hayley Baillie, with Hayley’s father Dick Smith, to choose it for their ambitious project back in 2002. Initially, they looked at the northern, calmer part of the island but soon realised the “winds of the South Coast was the place to be”.

So, with KI-born SA architect Max Pritchard, the low-impact design was drawn up, with its enormous circular lobby and restaurant just below the top of the ridge, and the 21 suites flowing down the slope in a single 300m corridor, each room with ocean views. It has just been named by Travel + Leisure magazine the top hotel in Australia and New Zealand, and number 21 in the world.

But when your standard tariff starts at $1250 per person a night twin share, for a minimum of two nights, it’s not all about the views or the history.

For a start, the rooms also need to be terrific. Which they are. In my standard Flinders suite, the decor is modern with rich timber highlights and carpet or heated limestone underfoot. The walk-in robe has a minibar in which everything is complimentary, including the four or five tea varieties all loose-leafed for a teapot.

There’s a bathroom with both rain-shower and wall shower; and for entertainment a Bose sound system. There’s no TV – if you want something to watch, sit in the sunken lounge and enjoy that view, or in warmer weather laze on the covered patio.

Then it needs to feel magnificent. The main lobby, or Great Room, delivers. Its vast windows frame a panorama that extends from bush in the north to cliffs and beaches in the east, and white-capped ocean to the south. Inside, a long, curving wall of white limestone frames the room like a cliff.

The space looks big enough for a hotel catering for hundreds of people; the Lodge has, at most, around 50 guests, which is fewer than the number of staff.

The atmosphere is relaxed and informal. Guests are addressed by their first name, and you can serve yourself from the well-stocked bar as you kick back with a cocktail or wine in front of the fireplace at the centre of the Great Room. There’s even a cellar from which you can pull a nice red, all included in the tariff. A separate spa sits atop the cliff (there’s no gym).

The restaurant is first class. Chef Asher Blackford says nobody comes to the Lodge just to eat his food – but at the same time his regionally-focused menu must hit the mark for guests used to luxury hotel fare. The focus is local. The barramundi, for example, is farmed by students at the local Parndana High school; the partridge and quail are hand-delivered by a local couple; the chicken is from Saskia Beer in the Barossa Valley; native plants like the slender honey myrtle make their way into the dishes as do foraged mushrooms.

The staff are young and enthusiastic for KI’s fauna and flora. On a nature tour to Seal Bay, Flinders University graduate Ashleigh Wycherley guides our walk among the Australian sea lions (eared seals), some of them extremely cranky. When the males weigh 400kg and run as fast as we do, nobody argues when Ashleigh advises we bunch together “because it will make us seem bigger”.

The truth, though, is we’re the real threat. Sea lions are no longer hunted for their blubber, but plastic rubbish and ocean debris, along with an endemic hookworm, are forcing this endangered species into decline – unlike the smaller long-nosed fur seals we see near Admiral’s Arch at Cape de Couedic, which are thriving.

At nearby Hanson Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, we find the koalas are, similarly, booming. They came in 1923 when a farmer’s wife introduced 18 of them to her Tasmanian blue gums. There are now 50,000. Less successful was the introduction of wombats – two males, unsurprisingly, failed to produce any offspring, so the island has none. The kangaroos, of course, were already here, and the reason Matthew Flinders (who feasted on them) named it “Kangaroo Island”.

Our flora lessons come on that 13km hike along a section of the KI Wilderness Trail, from the oddly-shaped granites of Remarkable Rocks to the Lodge, mostly along clifftops. With small limestone outcrops underfoot, you need to watch your step. It’s a sporadically sunny July day in which a few showers in no way spoil the enjoyment – but do provide a spate of rainbows.

One of the Lodge’s guides, “nature nerd” Kelly Gledhill, provides fun facts along the way: here’s a southern coastal mallee (very adaptable; might be scrub here and 12m trees inland), there a xanthorrhoea (a yakka or grasstree, which loves bushfires but explodes if it gets too hot), and under our feet the edible succulent pigface (or ice plant, which sacrifices some leaves by filling them with salt, turning them red).

This natural world was much on the minds of the resort owners when they were mulling what to name the rooms. But six weeks before the opening they still hadn’t come up with something they liked.

Hayley Baillie was thinking about linking the suites to local wildlife, but then changed tack.

All suites looked over the Southern Ocean, so why not name them after the ships that met their fate out there? It would be an evocative connection to both the island’s history and the wildness that dictated the resort be built there in the first place.

And just so curious guests could learn the stories behind the names beside their front doors, she hunted down enough copies of Gifford D. Chapman’s Kangaroo Island Shipwrecks to add to the mini library in each suite.

On a wild night with a pounding surf, they certainly tell a bedtime story with a difference.

The author was a guest of Southern Ocean Lodge.

Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, top, and the Flinders suite, above. Photographs: Supplied