

Great Southern hospitality calls

TRAVEL SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Marguerite Winter, The author travelled with the assistance of the South Australian government.

We should resist the pull of warmer climates in winter and head into a bit of real weather for a sense of the season, writes Marguerite Winter.

When the Great Southern Ocean washed up against Hanson Bay in January this year, its motion was leisurely and peaceful; its colour, a deep bright blue. Come winter, this benign spectacle turns into something a lot more dramatic, and you could be catching all the action snug in front of a roaring fire in the exceptional comfort of Southern Ocean Lodge.

No places do weather better than islands and the southern ramparts of South Australia's Kangaroo Island - which have confronted the Antarctic blast since this continent drifted northwards 55 million years ago - does winter better than most.

The island's unique ecology has bequeathed a pristine wilderness with an abundance of wildlife and a remarkably preserved flora in a setting of rugged beauty.

More than half of this 4500-square kilometre island remains virgin bushland. A third is given over to conservation zones.

Although there is a pastoral presence, primary production is limited to small, independent operators who have created the island's enviable reputation for organic and gourmet produce - such as honey from the only Ligurian bee colony outside Italy.

Southern Ocean Lodge has weathered only one winter in this dramatic setting, but the low-lying stone and timber structure has so artfully insinuated itself into the landscape, you couldn't guess at the amenity its spare frame enfolds, or the degree of comfort at its core.

James and Hayley Baillie's benchmarking for the lodge was positively audacious: it models no less than New Zealand's acclaimed Huka Lodge and the unparalleled Amanresorts of South-East Asia. As such, it is an exercise in getting everything right. If the building is less imposing on the landscape, it's only because sustainability is integral to the kind of luxury it's offering to guests.

The Baillies were ambitious for the environmental credentials of the 102 hectares of this remote clifftop site above Hanson Bay in the south-western corner of Kangaroo Island. Native vegetation clearing was minimised by using existing firetrails and tracks for access roads and the lodge itself uses only 1 per cent of the land . . . the rest is under a heritage agreement to protect it against future development in a wildlife corridor that sits between two national parks.

Their dream of ecological harmony stretches from energy-management systems for water, power and waste, to the orientation of the building, which maximises natural weather patterns; it includes flow-through ventilation and glazing to capture sunlight and store natural heat.

On approach, along an avenue of mallee trees that form a rustic triumphal arch and south over a corrugated drive through coastal heath, the building comes suddenly and inconspicuously into view - a high wall of local limestone just beginning its journey along the disappearing contours of the lodge. Once through two huge rusted doors, the drama of sea and sky opens up and a sanctuary of calm, uncluttered luxury wraps you. The common areas of architect Max Pritchard's unassuming building consist of a series of zones at various levels of a huge meandering space which, like the 21 guest suites, offer floor-to-ceiling views to the sea

across a short run of coastal heath.

The reception, great room, lounge, dining room, bar and terrace that float in this space are rendered in recycled timbers, limestone and chalk-white local limestone, and are furnished in pale timber pieces by local artisan Khai Liew and Melbourne duo Pierre and Charlotte Julian.

Soft furnishings on a palette of blues, greens and taupes are from designers such as Julie Paterson, Jodie Fried and the late Florence Broadhurst. It's almost Scandinavian in feel, except for the warmth.

The 21 suites slope off a wide, louvred passage that falls gently to the premium Osprey pavilion. All have generous, well-appointed sleeping and dressing areas, sunken lounges, glass-walled limestone bathrooms and outdoor terraces and echo the textures and tones of the common areas. Signature interiors feature the work of local and mainland artists.

Boardwalks at this end of the building lead to clifftop walks and the beach on Hanson Bay. Another, off the western end of the building, winds through heath to a spa standing in splendid isolation on a knoll above the cliffs. Here, tailored treatments use the Li'tya spa range.

Limbering up for dinner in the great room, the cocktails seem to echo the wellness thing; the dexterous Jason appears to have tipped several punnets of raspberries into the daiquiri and he prepares a mean negroni should all that fruit sound far too health-giving.

In the kitchen, Tim Bourke has a rare ability to fetch up a cuisine that manages to appear light and unfussed while delivering a fine dining experience. His deftness allows the produce to do the talking: local marron, whiting, cheese, yoghurt, olive oil and chicken, augmented by premium South Australian produce often including Spencer Gulf prawns and saltbush lamb . . . the whole enhanced by being served on exquisite handmade glazed stoneware pottery by Malcolm Greenwood. Wines on offer include a surprise or two from the island.

The attentive staff include four nature guides - who all add value to the exceptional excursions that are part of the offering.

The lodge didn't have to wait on being awarded the prestigious Tatler 2009 Hotel of the Year award for Europeans and Americans to discover this bliss station at the bottom of the world.

By Christmas last year, about 60 per cent of guests were already international visitors.

GETTING THERE

Regional Express and Air South fly regular daily services to Kingscote, Kangaroo Island.

www.regionalexpress.com.au. Sealink and Kangaroo Island passenger and vehicle ferries cross from the Fleurieu Peninsula several times a day. www.sealink.com.au and www.kiferries-sa.com

Tariff: Rates from \$900 per person per night (twin share), including all meals and selected wines, mini bar, open bar and local guided adventures.

Winter package: Stay 4 nights, pay 3 | From \$2700 pp for 4 nights, normal rate inclusions + 2 x \$50 Spa Treatment Vouchers; KI Epicurean Hamper. Valid May 1 to August 31.

Geographic area:

SA