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Food, wine and stunning sites make Kangaroo Island the new luxury escape

Brian Crisp | escape | March 19, 2010 4:51pm

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Stunning views from Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Picture: Escape

DON'T be daunted by its distance from civilisation - visitors to Kangaroo Island are sure to experience rugged isolation in fine style.

The bitumen road disappears not long after we leave Penneshaw, the gateway to South Australia's Kangaroo Island. For a little while, at least, it is replaced by a concrete carriageway that takes us towards Cape Willoughby lighthouse. When the concrete runs out we find ourselves slipping and sliding along the corrugated dirt road.

At 40km/h we bounce like Beyonce in a skin-tight top. At 80km/h we skip across the road, dust swirling behind us - not quite out of control, but close to it. Kangaroo Island is an off-the-beaten-track experience. You can stay on the main road but, if you do, you will miss so much of what makes this island special.

Foodies delight

Our first stop is the Chapman River Winery at Antechamber Bay, run by Diana and Bruce Keir. They came to Australia from the UK in the 1970s, having packed their lives into a four-wheel-drive to head overland, through Afghanistan, before landing in Perth. The plan was to keep driving and eventually settle in Sydney. They only made it as



The island boasts gorgeous, untouched beaches and an abundance of life. Picture: SA Tourism



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far as Adelaide.

Bruce forged a career in advertising, Diana as an artist. Diana's English accent is still prominent, but Bruce's Scottish lilt has disappeared - although it could be said that he has morphed into Sean Connery, at least in looks. When I point this out, Diana chips in with: "And I look a lot like Diane Cilento, Sean's wife." And you know what? She does.

This couple was born to do something like run a winery. They are natural hosts. The winery itself is still relatively young, having opened its cellar doors in 2008. The main building used to be an aircraft hangar. Netting designed to keep the birds out of the engines still falls from the roof. The polished concrete floor, timber and iron walls make the building rustic, rather than refined. And that's probably a fair description of the wine as well. But I must admit the Happiness 2008 Rose goes down well over a shared platter (\$36) at lunch.

Sated, we continue the journey to Cape Willoughby, the site of South Australia's first lighthouse, built in 1852. It is here that you realise just how rugged and isolated the Dudley Peninsula and, for that matter, Kangaroo Island itself, is. The wind pushes and pulls us along the 1.9km self-guided walk from the lighthouse.

Size matters

One of the most popular misconceptions made about Kangaroo Island is its size. Kangaroo Island is seven times bigger than Singapore. It is four times the size of Hong Kong. To be precise it is 155km long and 55km wide, which makes it Australia's third largest island. But with only 4500 residents it means that there is about 1sq km of land for every resident.

Our base for the first two nights is Thorn Park on the island, an upmarket house at the top of a hill, with views back to the mainland. The house has three bedrooms, gourmet kitchen, huge lounge and dining area and a deck that allows you to sit back and commune with nature.

We are greeted at the front door by about a dozen Tammar wallabies. They sit outside our window and watch us unpack. As we move from room to room, they move with us, making sure we are not doing the wrong thing.

The house has everything you will need, from an amazing old record collection to a DVD selection that covers all genres. The kitchen is stocked with every spice and sauce needed and enough pots and pans to cook up a feast. Our feast, however, has just arrived with a knock at the door.

Susan Pearson from 2 Birds & A Squid is struggling under the weight of a seafood platter that includes marron, prawn mousse, South Australian smoked salmon, ceviche of garfish, baby abalone, marinated squid, scallops with soy mayo, and grilled prawns with aioli. To accompany this is a rocket and parmesan salad and some local cheeses with biscuits. Like everyone else on the island, Susan champions local produce. We spent the next day finding out what the fuss is all about, stopping at Cliffords Honey Farm, the Kangaroo Island Pure Sheep Dairy (worth it just to see the sheep being milked) and Sunset Winery.

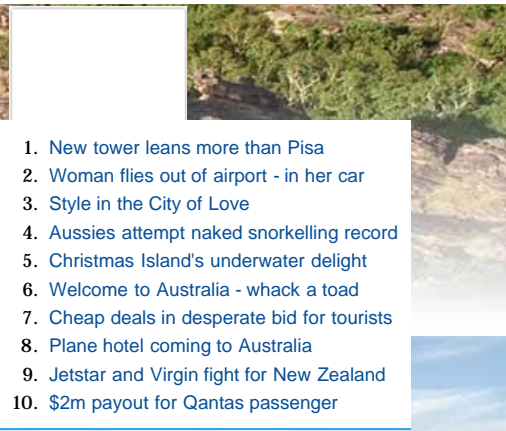
Our next two nights on KI were spent at the other end of the island, at one of the places that has made this island a hot international destination. For the most part, Kangaroo Island is not a magnet for Wall Street brokers, movie stars and travel industry multi-millionaires. But that's exactly what the amazing Southern Ocean Lodge, at Hanson Bay on the island's southwest coast, is.

Luxurious accommodation

The 21-suite lodge is about a 90-minute drive from the ferry terminal. Most of the drive is on a sealed road, but like all good things on KI, you must venture off-track to find the entrance. The lodge's main gathering area is called the Great Room. That probably doesn't do it justice. I'd call it extraordinary. With floor-to-ceiling glass windows and indoor/outdoor seating areas, you will struggle to find a better beach-ocean view anywhere in Australia, or the world for that matter.

It took me about 15 minutes to fill in my lodge registration form because I was captivated by the waves of the Great Southern Ocean crashing on the rocks and the beach below. My room, the Osprey Pavilion, is the only suite not named after a shipwreck. It is a 230m walk from the Great Room. It is the best suite the lodge offers and, although you would never call the others shabby, this clearly is the jewel in the crown.

It curves around the end of the building and makes the most of the views with floor-to-ceiling



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windows. You walk down stairs into a sunken lounge, which is also curved to make sure no one misses out on the view. A flick of the switch on the Bose sound system fills the room with the sound of music. The bathroom has dual rain showers, an inviting hand-sculptured tub, and local bath products. Outside our king-sized bedroom is a private plunge spa and daybeds.

The lodge is full on both nights that we stay. That in itself is amazing when you consider the most affordable room starts at \$1350 for a single, or \$1800 a night for a double. The Osprey Pavilion is \$3600 a night for a couple. Most guests stay three nights. The room rate includes all meals, beverages (except the cellarmasters list), island airport transfers and the guided adventures.

Take a tour

We did the Wonders of KI tour, which included a visit to the stunning and spiritual Remarkable Rocks, Admirals Arch (fur seal colony) and a koala-spotting excursion. These tours allow you to see our Australian icons in the wild, much better than a zoo.

The American and French guests on the tour were amazed at how close they could get to these animals without disturbing them. And just as our Sealink Ferry leaves KI, a pod of dolphins waves us goodbye and sends us on our way.

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