



Cape Willoughby Lighthouse on the rugged coast of Kangaroo Island

WILLIAM ROBINSON/LAMY

THE WONDERS OF OZ

With duties on long-haul flights due to rise, now is the time to book a trip to Australia's magical islands. **Charles Starmer-Smith** suggests Kangaroo Island; **Mark Chipperfield**, overleaf, selects his favourites



Perched on the cliff above Hanson Bay, I gazed out at the Southern Ocean. With no land mass between here and Antarctica to dampen the swell, the waves were pounding the sugar-white sands with alarming ferocity. It was no surprise to hear that 86 ships had come a cropper on these reefs. Prints marked the sand – left not by stranded sailors but by the

local wildlife, which, with just one human being per square mile, still roams free. Kangaroo Island (KI), off the coast of South Australia, is wild, elemental and unforgiving. But I can think of few places in which I would rather be shipwrecked.

Britons continue to be drawn to Australia's great outdoors: gap-year students treading the well-worn tourist trail, sports tourists following

England's rugby or cricket exploits (the Ashes start in six months and already packages are being snapped up), emigrants in search of sunshine and the surf-and-turf lifestyle. That controversial marketing slogan, "Where the bloody hell are you?", could be replaced with "Why the bloody hell are there so many of you here?"

But for how long? Britain's new

coalition Government, trying to plug a financial black hole, sees travel as part of the answer. Air Passenger Duty has risen by up to 325 per cent since 2006; the question is not whether it is going to rise again in next week's emergency Budget, but by how much. If the Liberal Democrats' manifesto plans are adopted, revenue from this tax (now being described as a "per plane tax") could rise from £1.9bn to

£5.3bn, and long-haul holidays, for all but the wealthiest, could be in real danger of becoming once-in-a-lifetime trips. If that happens, you will want to make them count.

"Hold on, folks – we've hit rush minute here," said Jen, who had greeted my wife and me at the tiny airport in Kingscote with a smile as broad as her Aussie twang. We had reached a three-car tailback at one of

the island's few intersections as we bounced along the Southern Ocean road. We had passed a line of postboxes. Not a sight that usually warrants a second look, but here the postboxes were a washing machine, an oil drum, a spin dryer, a jerrycan and a lavatory seat.

It was this kind of quirky

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individuality that encouraged Jen to leave her home in the Northern Territory – a place she felt had become unrecognisable from a decade ago, as her beloved “outback” around Kakadu National Park had become a commercial enterprise, crisscrossed with tarmac roads and flooded with tourists.

Thankfully, the lack of fresh water and the poor soil on KI has kept the population low and made it easier for conservationists to protect vast swathes of the island. But with the demise of the wool industry, tourism has become a vital industry here, too. The island has always had plenty of good-value, basic hotels and rental homes, but the demolition of the luxurious Southern Ocean Lodge in 2008 was the missing piece in the jigsaw. The architects of this wilderness-and-wellness retreat have taken care to ensure it blends into its surroundings. From the moment you walk into the limestone-clad, open-plan lobby you are confronted by a wraparound screen of floor-to-ceiling glass to show off the setting, and the views from all 21 suites (all named after shipwrecks) are no less impressive.

KI is billed as Australia's answer to the Galapagos Islands: koalas, seals, sea lions, wallabies and, of course, kangaroos, are abundant, while echidna, platypus, southern right whales and penguins can be spotted by those who are more patient. Evening “Kangas and Kanapas” drinks on the 600-acre estate of nearby Edward's Cottage, which teems with kangaroos, give a taste of what the place can offer, but to have any hope of scratching beneath the surface of an island the size of Sussex, you need an experienced guide.

Early on our second morning we met Tim – a big, brash, sports-mad Australian (is there any other sort?) whose comments on flora and fauna were offset by a refreshingly un-PC stream of one-liners. On a recent shark attack: “Look, the guy was surfing against a seal colony in a dark grey wetsuit – it doesn't take a genius to work out that that is not a great idea.” On the recent forest fires: “We ran out of marshmallows in a week.”

After a morning in Koala Alley, craning our necks for more than the odd glimpse of a furry rear, I began to question Tim's assertion that these laid-back marsupials, introduced in 1923, were once in danger of overrunning the island. Such was their rate of reproduction (perhaps that is why they need 19 hours' sleep) and voracious appetite for vegetation that the government considered a cull, until an international outcry left neutering as the only option.

As if on cue, there was a rustle in the bushes and a young male rummaged through the



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Island basics

- Charles Starmer-Smith stayed at the Southern Ocean Lodge (0061 2 9918 4355; www.southernoceanlodge.com.au), which offers a four-night package, staying in the Flinders suite, from £1,580 per person, including all meals, drinks, guided experiences, transfers and spa treatment.
- Flights to Kangaroo Island are operated by Rex Airlines (0061 2 6393 5550; www.rex.com.au), which offers connections from seven airports in South Australia, including Adelaide.
- For more information, see www.tourkangaroo.com.au

undergrowth towards us, almost close enough to touch. As we all fawned and cooed unashamedly, I could not help wondering whether his doleful expression owed more to a recent snip than to a eucalyptus-induced stupor.

Behind all Tim's “tree-hugger” bodgeinage was a genuine concern about the regeneration of the island's rare plants, more than 40 species of which are unique to KI. We climbed out of the 4x4 in the heart of Flinders Chase National Park (named after Matthew Flinders, the Englishman who first charted the island in 1802) to find sweeping views over the vast forests of the interior, where thick brushstrokes of grey swept across the green canvas. This scorched earth was the result of fires – some accidental, some deliberate – that the authorities are desperate to avoid but that Tim believes are vital for the survival of rare species.

“While the American attitude would be to carefully cut a sample,

test-tube it and take it to the Smithsonian Institution,” he said, “here we start a fire.” It seems perverse, but he maintains that from the embers of charred earth species rise that would otherwise be choked by more vigorous plants. He points to the tunnels of foliage that form over the roads; pleasing to the eye, he says, but they leave the forest floor almost devoid of life.

There were few such concerns for the health of the New Zealand fur seals. Basking in the sunshine on the rocks at Admirals Arch, they timed to perfection their slither into the swirling rock pools in the face of the oncoming tide. They seemed unconcerned that nearby sharks were deliberating whether to have seal on the rocks or in the soup.

Before any feeding frenzy could begin, Tim whisked us to Remarkable Rocks on Kirkpatrick Point, where a series of formations, sculpted by the Southern Ocean, offered a display of which Henry Moore would have been proud, their

rust-coloured surfaces reddening as the setting sun cast contorted shadows all around us.

But it was our trip to Seal Bay early the next morning that will live longest in the memory. Accompanied by a naturalist, we crept down to the beach, deserted but for a 600-strong colony of sea lions – the last remnants of a population hunted almost to extinction. Crouching on the sands, we fought the urge to move forward as pups stomach-surfed their way down the grassy dunes behind us or rode the waves with excited bleats. The adults, by contrast, were positively catatonic, their hulking bodies sprawled across the sand after days of playing hunter-gatherer. Fathers wearily swatted away playful pups, rising only to stretch their necks skyward before flopping down again; mothers occasionally glanced towards our group whenever an inquisitive youngster approached us.

“It's the females who have it toughest,” our guide said, to a series of knowing nods from the women present. “After a 17-month gestation period, they have one or two weeks off, and then it's back to work.” Cue a round of approving smiles from the men. This was a schedule to rival that of the former French justice minister, Rachida Dati, who last year returned to work just five days after giving birth.

We sat and stared long after our camera batteries and our allotted time had run out, reluctant to move on from a scene that we might never witness again – particularly if Dave agrees with Nick and makes the long-haul flier pay even more.

A sea lion mother and cub enjoy one of Kangaroo Island's empty beaches: a lounge with a view at the luxurious Southern Ocean Lodge