

Kangaroo Island, eight miles off the coast of South Australia, is a sliver of Oz, a remnant of the real Australia. Australia as it was. While the continent seems to have floated off to do its cosmopolitan thing on the other side of the strait self-deprecatingly called Backstairs Passage, Kangaroo Island (KI to the locals) has been left to its own atavistic ways.

Several examples of Kangaroo Island wildlife have developed subspecies, the glossy black cockatoo and purple-gaped honeyeater among them. About 50 plant species are found nowhere else, and even the kangaroos are smaller and darker than their mainland counterparts. But when it comes to Homo sapiens, it is the mainlanders who have evolved; the islanders – and there are only about 4,600 of them – have remained close to the original Aussie: independent, iconoclastic, innately suspicious of authority and fiercely defensive of their way of life.

Craig Wickham, a leading light in the island's tourism industry, said, 'We want people [to come] who are looking for the same things that we enjoy.' In other words, take us or leave us. And about 200,000 tourists a year do both. Wickham is managing director of Exceptional Kangaroo Island, one of the island's tour companies. After spending a day with him, I began to see things his way.

The island is the third largest in Australia. (Tasmania and Melville Island are bigger.) On the map it is the shape of an emaciated turtle, 96 miles long and 36 miles at its widest. From the ferry that crosses from Cape Jervis on the mainland to Penneshaw, it looks long and low, as if nature had placed a sleeping policeman on the Southern Ocean. The highest point, grandiosely named Mount McDonnell, is less than 1,000ft. In summer, when green has been sucked from the land, it is the colour of camouflage.

'What we are passing there are ice-age sand dunes,' said Wickham as he eased his Mitsubishi 4x4 on to one of the two east-west bitumen highways.

It was during the glacial period about 20,000 years ago that the island was last connected to the continent. The ice left a sloping plateau of rich geology that nurtured an assortment of vegetation and wildlife. The plant list tops 1,000 species and there are 263 species of birds: Britain has 574 but is 52 times the size.

Wickham continued, 'A third of it is national park. What else are you going to do with it? You can't farm it.' In the 1950s 70 per cent was virgin bush, mainly tough eucalyptus scrub, mallee. To clear it they invented a special plough with a single enormous blade. It was called the Ripper.

The island's white settlers were as sinewy as its undergrowth. 'Frontiersmen,' Wickham said, nodding approvingly. The earliest, who arrived at the beginning of the 19th century, came from some of Oz's toughest stock: whalers, seal hunters, smugglers, deserters and escaped convicts. For a while this was 'the most vicious place in the British Empire'. In 1836 it was chosen as the location for Australia's first free European-settled colony.

Most of the settlers left within four years: water was short and the timber unsuitable for building. But a few doughty individuals stayed and founded a community.

We turned left on to one of the gritty, red dirt roads that lattice the island. After the Second World War, 174 servicemen and their families were provided with land under the Soldier Settlement Scheme. Wickham explained: 'The deal was they got a house and a block of land. About a third of it was cleared and they had to clear a certain amount more each year. The cost of getting off the island was so great that people had to stick it out.' The cost of the house had to be repaid over 30 years. Nearly half the island's 400 farms were established in this way, and some quarter of a million acres of bush cleared.

We drove through a sallow landscape erupting with big sugar-gum trees. Grassland, green in winter, was now silvery. Forty years ago it would have been bush; today it's sheep pasture. There are some 800,000 sheep on the island, 3,000 of them owned by Ian Larcombe. With a mop of white hair

Where the wild things are

Kangaroo Island is a haven for wildlife, from the purple-gaped honeyeater to koalas and wallabies. It is also home to that lesser-spotted species, traditional Aussie man – and one of the best hotels in Australia. By **Peter Hughes**. Photograph by **George Apostolidis**

Folds of wiry scrub drop down to a creamy beach on which the sea advances in strips of brilliant blue. Cobalt becomes kingfisher, then turquoise

Southern Ocean Lodge is a luxury wilderness retreat posited on a 500ft cliff on Kangaroo Island's south coast

and wayward beard, he would pass as a shepherd from Hardy's Wessex.

At his farm off Tin Hut Road, the annual shearing was starting. We entered a large, dark shed clad with corrugated iron. The sheep were penned at one end; the shearers worked in front of them on a raised semi-circular stage. It was noisy with bleating and the rattle of the shears.

Three shearers were at work, each stooped over sheep reclining awkwardly between their knees, legs pointing skywards. The animals adopted expressions of Zen-like resignation as their coats were peeled off. They were crossed with merinos so their fleeces were puffed in thick piles like extravagant wigs. Shorn, they were suddenly half the size, as white and naked as oven-ready poussins.

The fleeces, stripped off in single greasy rugs, were flung over the grading table, a big round grille of stainless steel. For the wool, this was the first leg of its journey to the clothing factories of China.

Wickham took me to lunch on another sheep station, the Ella Matta Stud. 'This is one of those restaurants you've got to know,' he said as he swung the car off the dirt track, past a metal gate and into a big paddock. We parked at the far end, at the edge of the bush. Yacca plants exploded in great bursts of vicious spikes, thinner and sharper than rapiers. Up to 15ft tall, they are like a botanical take on sea urchins. Wickham appeared with a wheelbarrow loaded with Esky cool boxes.

I followed him into a stand of scrawny tea trees where a canvas awning had been rigged above a

There are penguins here and pelicans; sea lions, possums, black swans and bandicoots; porcupine-like echidnas, and seals...

picnic table. Within minutes he was chopping salad and sizzling fillets of King George whiting on a hot plate, which he splashed with riesling from one of the island's boutique wineries. All good, fresh Kangaroo Island fare.

There are penguins here and pelicans; sea lions, possums, black swans and bandicoots; porcupine-like echidnas, endangered dunnarts – a mousey marsupial – and seals. With no foxes or dingoes to predate, or rabbits to ravage the vegetation, other species prosper. The Rosenberg's goanna, a breed of giant lizard, got rid of the rabbits. And there are kangaroos, which are particularly active at dawn and dusk, as drivers are constantly warned.

It was the English explorer Matthew Flinders who named the island in 1802, not out of sentiment but relief. After four months without fresh food, here was a place leaping with meat. He and his shipmates knocked off 31 'roos immediately. 'In gratitude for so seasonable a supply,' he wrote, 'I named this southern land Kangaroo [sic] Island.'

Today, it could be named after the tammar wallaby or koala. Both species thrive here. The koalas, introduced in the 1920s, now account for a seventh of Australia's total. There are so many – about 13,000 – that they are destroying their own habitat by stripping the gum trees on which they feed. Koalas are 'too cute to shoot' so females are being sterilised to control the population.

Right koalas were introduced to Kangaroo Island in the 1920s; a road through Flinders Chase National Park



Above a subspecies of the glossy black cockatoo is unique to the island. Right kangaroos are smaller and darker than those on the mainland

I took a tour with Jamie Bowden, another islander born and bred. 'I'm 62 years of age and I've never locked a door in my life,' he said. Bowden quickly found a pair of koalas doing what koalas do. One was slumped, asleep in a treetop; the other munched sombrely on eucalyptus leaves. We left them to it and drove round the west coast through Flinders Chase National Park.

Bowden had collected me from my hotel, Southern Ocean Lodge. About an hour and three quarters from the ferry, it is built into a cliff, 500ft above the sea. But you are not aware of its setting until the big, rust-red front doors have been swung open and you face the sweep of windows overlooking the ocean. Folds of wiry scrub drop to a creamy beach on which the sea advances in strips of brilliant blue. Cobalt becomes kingfisher, then turquoise, before the sand is lasciviously slathered with snowy foam. They say Kangaroo Island has none of Australia's scenic icons. Wrong. It has the coast and a string of superb sand beaches.

Those rusty-looking doors open directly into the Great Room, a split-level limestone concourse. With its huge curl of windows it is like an observatory, but one that combines a restaurant, bar and sitting area. In the middle is a fire pit whose slender flue rises like a piece of Scandinavian sculpture.

The hotel's 21 suites, served by one long corridor, are named after shipwrecks. There is scope for expansion, as more than 60 ships have foundered off the island. My room, Master Jack, was like a miniature of the Great Room – on two levels and

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with floor-to-ceiling windows angled towards a colossal view of the sea.

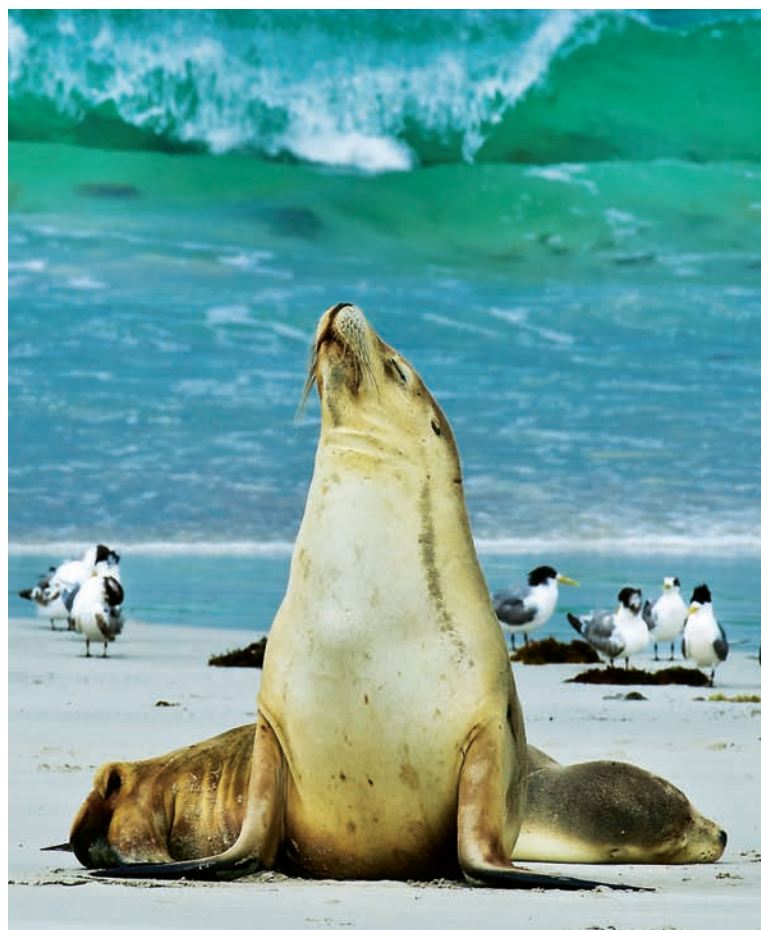
The view, though, is tantalising – the currents here are treacherous. It is a 40-minute walk, or a one-and-a-half-mile drive, to the nearest beach at which it is safe to swim. There is a minuscule plunge pool at the lodge, but no swimming pool. Apparently, that could compromise the hotel's eco credentials.

Like Kangaroo Island itself, Southern Ocean Lodge knows who it wants to attract – no children under 10, and folk who will stay a minimum of two nights; people who like to be active by day and enjoy the pleasures of the table at night. The menus are imaginative, and the wine store contains 45 different reds alone, to which you can help yourself: all drinks are included in the price.

Southern Ocean was one of the earliest of Australia's luxury wilderness lodges. The fact that it brought high style to Kangaroo Island with the rest of the continent at its disposal says much about the singularity of the place. It is summed up for me by the Ligurian bee. It came from Europe, is particularly friendly, highly protective of its hive and seldom robs fellow bees. Kangaroo Island, declared a Ligurian bee sanctuary in 1885, is the only remaining colony of the pure-bred variety in the world. You could say the same for the island's Australians.

Bridge & Wickers (bridgeandwickers.co.uk) can tailor-make a two-week South Australia stay, including four nights on KI, return flights from Heathrow, and six days' car hire, from £5,150pp

Right the Great Room at Southern Ocean Lodge; there is a colony of sea lions on Kangaroo Island



Above pelicans thrive on the island.

Right the Remarkable Rocks, in Flinders Chase National Park