



Kangaroos adrift

RACHAEL OAKES-ASH has a close encounter with a sea-lion as she hops around Kangaroo Island, only to discover a big country-town wilderness of native animals, eco-friendly locals and Australia's own Little Sahara.

The island of Kangaroo is a deceptive one. Daytrippers from Adelaide to Kangaroo Island step off the ferry in Penneshaw and soon wish they'd packed an overnight bag. Overnight visitors step onto the tarmac at Kingscote Airport and soon lament not packing for a week.

Few realise the island is the third largest off the coast of Australia, with 500km of coastline and 4,300 square kilometres of land. That's a lot of nature to discover, so choose your time, then double it.

A third of the island is declared National and Conservation parkland. With no rabbits and no foxes pillaging the island's vast native wildlife, it's virtually an open plain zoo of Australia's native animals. Those on self-drive sojourns are warned not to drive at dawn and dusk lest the four-wheel-drive get intimate with the island's namesake, the kangaroo.

City folk, like me, may find the driving challenging as the island features only two bitumen roads running each length of the land and connecting with back roads of red dirt that bogs

with rain. It's all part of the rural fun as I navigate the island's plethora of natural attractions, stopping for gourmet treats in between. There's an element of wild woman when one has red dirt encrusted boots and a car whose duco is now camouflaged with mud.

Kangaroo Island is one big small town adrift off the South Coast and as such comes with buckets of country-style hospitality. Kingscote, American River and Penneshaw townships sit along the north-east coast with scattered villages and farms throughout the rest of the island. Tourism is the second largest industry in Kangaroo Island and accounts for more than \$50 million annually. Translated, this means something for all traveller types.

Most lodgings, restaurants and cafes are locally owned and operated. There are no chain stores, franchises or international accommodation outlets, and mobile phone coverage is sketchy at best. If you want five-star service, bellboys and a fax machine, then choose an alternative holiday destination.



Open fields on Kangaroo Island; (left) Life Time Cliff House
Photos: Rachael Oakes-Ash

The main attractions sit around the coastline with the large Flinders National Park in the south-west. It's here you'll find Remarkable Rocks, a collection of wind-blown granite boulders the size of an apartment building perched on a natural stone dome dropping to the ocean.

Sealed with a near miss

With only 48 hours on the island I found myself hitting the pedal and rarely giving the attractions the time they deserve. No time to stop and take in the view, search for koalas, echidnas and platypus. Instead it's straight to Seal Bay on the opposite coastline for a guided tour of the seal colony.

Seal Bay is as touristy as it gets here. Groups are guided onto the rugged beach by rangers who ensure they keep the required distance from the colony of Australian sea-lions that call this home. A word of warning, it's best not to get directly between a sea lion and the ocean, and if one charges, which one did, stand still and tall. Thankfully he mistook me for a rock and all was forgiven.

The beauty of a self-drive sojourn on Kangaroo Island meant I could change my itinerary at will. A minor detour to Little Sahara afforded me some time to climb the desert sand dunes that seem to be lost on a foreign continent. Another detour saw me taking in the rugged beach view of Vivonne Bay and its sustainable energy homes.

The locals of Kangaroo Island are ferociously loyal and guard their territory with pride. Everyone knows everyone. Mentioning my lodging to the park folk at Seal Bay, they tell me tales of my hosts before I have met them. It's part of the charm for the tourist, but must drive the locals mad.

Rachel Hannaford is a third generation land-owner on the island. Her grandmother, Pru Holden of the Holden automobile name, and her grandfather purchased land at Snellings Beach on the north-east coast of the island more than 50 years ago. It was a wise move – the land will now never be built out and is home to Life Time Retreats' three houses, Cliff House, Sky House and Stone House that share beachfront and hilltop land and a grand sense of theatre.

Book accommodation and you'll receive one of the three houses all to yourself and your partner. The Life Time experience, complete with round turret bedrooms and shelves filled with games is pure Enid Blyton lost in time, only the lashings of ginger beer are now laced with alcohol.

Dinner is served in a shearer's shed turned Bedouin tent with drapes, velvet, dripping candles and communal table. In summer supper is served inside a hollowed out fig tree big enough to seat 10. Rachel's mother, Belinda, is a delightful dinner companion with stories of fishing trips, dolphin swims and bonfires on the beach as a child.

Wake up late? No problem, 'drunch' is a mix of dinner



Shearer's shed at Life Time Retreats

Rachael Oakes-Ath

Wholesome flavoured food is a staple in these parts. With fresh local wines, free range poultry, seafood and the award winning Kangaroo Island cheeses on offer, it's just as well the island sports plenty of bushwalks to get the metabolism burning.

Marion Chambers, of the Penguin Stop Café, has been on the island 10 years and married a fifth-generation Kangaroo Islander but has another 10 years to go before she'll be considered a local. Attracted to the perfect lifestyle of clean healthy living, open fields, fresh produce

and the island's remoteness, Marion opened the Penguin Stop Café four years ago in Penneshaw, where the ferry offloads the island's visitors.

"If you don't eat well on your holiday it detracts from the experience," says Marion, who serves up epicurean delights in an art gallery setting. Steal a coffee after the lunch rush and hear Marion's own story of falling in love with a man and his island. Combined, she and her husband David have six children in their twenties.

When I next return, and I will, there is talk that a new eco resort on the south coast will have been completed by the owners of Lord Howe's Capella Lodge. The plans are impressive but the development has locals split over the use of national park land. No doubt there will be heady debate at the next local council meeting.

It's a classic dilemma in paradise. When you have your own slice of a gem like KI you don't always want others to know about it. Either way, I'm bringing my dollar back to the island – two days was only a tease.

The writer was a guest of South Australian Tourism.

leftovers and lunch served mid-afternoon on the croquet lawn. With not a pub, shop or post office for miles, the isolation of Life Time is its biggest selling point.

Further south on the island, inland from the sea sits Stranraer Homestead, a working farm owned by Lynn and Graham Wheaton. Twelve hundred hectares of lush, rolling land are home to cattle, sheep and birdlife. It comes complete with its own cricket pitch and corrugated iron pavilion used by the community cricket team each Saturday in summer.

The homestead was purchased by Graham's grandfather in 1911 and renovated in 1998 to its original form. It took four years to complete as it was done mostly by Lynn and Graham while she continued to work as the principal of the local school and he worked the land. OBEs and black-and-white prints of time gone by line the hall walls and everything has a story.

At Stranraer it's all about the dining room. Most guests spend their days on eco, adventure or gourmet tours, returning to the homestead in the evening to soak in the claw-footed bath, then share tales over a three-course meal.

Getting there

Rex Airlines flies from Adelaide to Kangaroo Island from \$64 one-way. Tel: 13 17 13; website: www.rex.com.au

By car/ferry, Kangaroo Island Sealink operates four daily passenger and vehicle ferries between Cape Jervis and Penneshaw. Tel: 13 13 01; website: www.sealink.com.au

Where to stay

Budget: Kangaroo Island Wilderness Retreat

An eco-friendly lodge with wild wallabies, sits on the edge of Flinders Chase National Park. Rates start at \$140 for an eco lodge room. Website: www.kiwr.com

Mid-range: Stranraer Homestead

features four guest rooms, open fires and gourmet dining. Rates start at \$208 per room including breakfast. Website: www.stranraer.com.au

Luxury: Life Time Retreats

Solstice package includes transfers from Kingscote Airport, breakfast and dinner, yoga and beach shuttle – for \$600 per person. Tel: (08) 8354 2368; website: www.life-time.com.au

Where to dine

The Penguin Stop Café, near the ferry wharf at Penneshaw.

Don't miss

Pick up some of the award-winning

Kangaroo Island cheeses at bargain prices, and while you're in the mood, try the fresh seafood, free range poultry and local wines.

Insider tips

KI is bigger than you probably think. Stay for twice as long as you had originally planned.

Stay tuned for details of a new eco resort to be built on the south coast by the owners of Lord Howe Island's Capella Lodge.

Further information

South Australia Tourism Commission's Kangaroo Island Tourism Tel: (08) 8553 2657; website: www.tourkangarooisland.com.au