

Treasure island

Get a taste of the alluring South Australian isle's spirit.

By CHRISTINE MCCABE



Sea lions at Seal Bay Conservation Park on Kangaroo Island. Picture: SATC/Ben Goode

A few weeks ago, when the world was a different place, I was sitting on a remote beach on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula observing the distant shores of Kangaroo Island. Across the foggy waters of Investigator Strait the island shimmered into view, and then disappeared again, swallowed by the sea like some sort of Brigadoon.

Anyone stepping ashore on KI, as South Australians know the island, quickly falls under its spell; time slows and the wider world seems to melt away. Although I've visited many times, that magic never fades. It's an alchemy of landscape, wildlife and the islanders themselves, whose resilience was cruelly tested by the summer's fires.

Visiting in early March before the coronavirus put tourism into hyper sleep, I'm exploring the island's east, an area unaffected by fire, and contemplating a gin flavoured with native coastal daisy. Kangaroo Island Spirits' O'Gin blitzed the awards season last year, scoring best contemporary gin in the world at the International Wine & Spirits Competition in London.



Jon Lark of Kangaroo Island Spirits.

This was no surprise to the many fans of Australia's first dedicated gin distiller founded in 2002 by Jon and Sarah Lark, kicking off a trend that's become almost ubiquitous. Jon's brother, Bill, of Tasmania's famous Lark whisky distillery, warned at the time there was no future in gin. "I remind him of this often," laughs Jon as we sit in his slightly eccentric cellar door and garden that feels a bit like a cross between your granny's backyard and WOMADelaide, complete with tasting marquee and food truck.

Up the road, Mike Holden is busy brewing beer. A builder by trade, he fashioned his off-grid microbrewery from stone found in the paddocks and scrap materials from old shearing sheds. Since opening four years ago, Kangaroo Island Brewery has become a popular haunt for visitors and locals alike, with Mike's kelpie, Leela, acting as maitre d' and a pop-up kitchen operating when there's someone around to cook, most recently a visiting backpacking French pastry chef.

Everywhere I go I meet blow-ins with great backstories. Barbara Sibley runs a cute little antique shop, KI Past & Present, in Kingscote following a long career in publishing; she started out taking dictation for Sir Frank Packer and arrived on the island seven years ago. At the little supermarket in Penneshaw, the manager shows me a display of garlic products produced by a local volunteer firefighter who lost his house. Friends and army kept his business running while he fought the fires. Stories like this are commonplace.

The longer I'm on-island the more I wish I had a ute with a kelpie in the back and fishing rod on the roof, instead of telegraphing my tourist credentials by tooling around in a shiny new hybrid rental vehicle with the hire company's name emblazoned on the side. It's come in handy though because I bought a lot of stuff at Barbara's (and a load of garlic) and the vehicle making a fair fist of the island's

many dirt and gravel roads. They crisscross a variable landscape of hardscrabble scrub and forests of towering riverside trees, bare sheep paddocks, a pink salt-lake, dramatic coastal cliffs and wild surf beaches.

I'm heartened to see plenty of kangaroos and to be woken one day of my stay by a grunting koala in a tree outside my bedroom window. And on a chilly morning beneath gunmetal skies, Elijah from Kangaroo Island Ocean Safari is skimming us close to shore near Penneshaw where we spot a colony of fur seals lolling on the rocks. The coastline here is a geological curiosity, twisted like a flipped layer cake, with sheets of rock breaking off cleanly to lie like builders' rubble, attesting to wild seas. Today is calm, allowing us to flirt with dolphins darting beneath our boat. A resident pod of about 30 is almost guaranteed to put in an appearance; they're Elijah's surf buddies and supervised swimming with dolphins is popular with visitors.



Retro charms of Hamilton House. Picture: SATC

The following day, 76-year-old Jamie, a guide with Exceptional Kangaroo Island, is showing me another island, one his farming family has known since 1948. We mooch along empty roads, chatting 19 to the dozen, on our way to Seal Bay Conservation Park, slowing for kangaroos who've come out to drink from puddles. As we walk down to the beach, Jamie calls out to watch for a tiger snake sunning on the path ahead. Beneath raised boardwalks and tucked into sun-warmed dunes, sea lions doze, mother and child embracing, flipper on flank. On the beach, pups galumph up the sand playing chase and annoying the grownups trying to sleep.

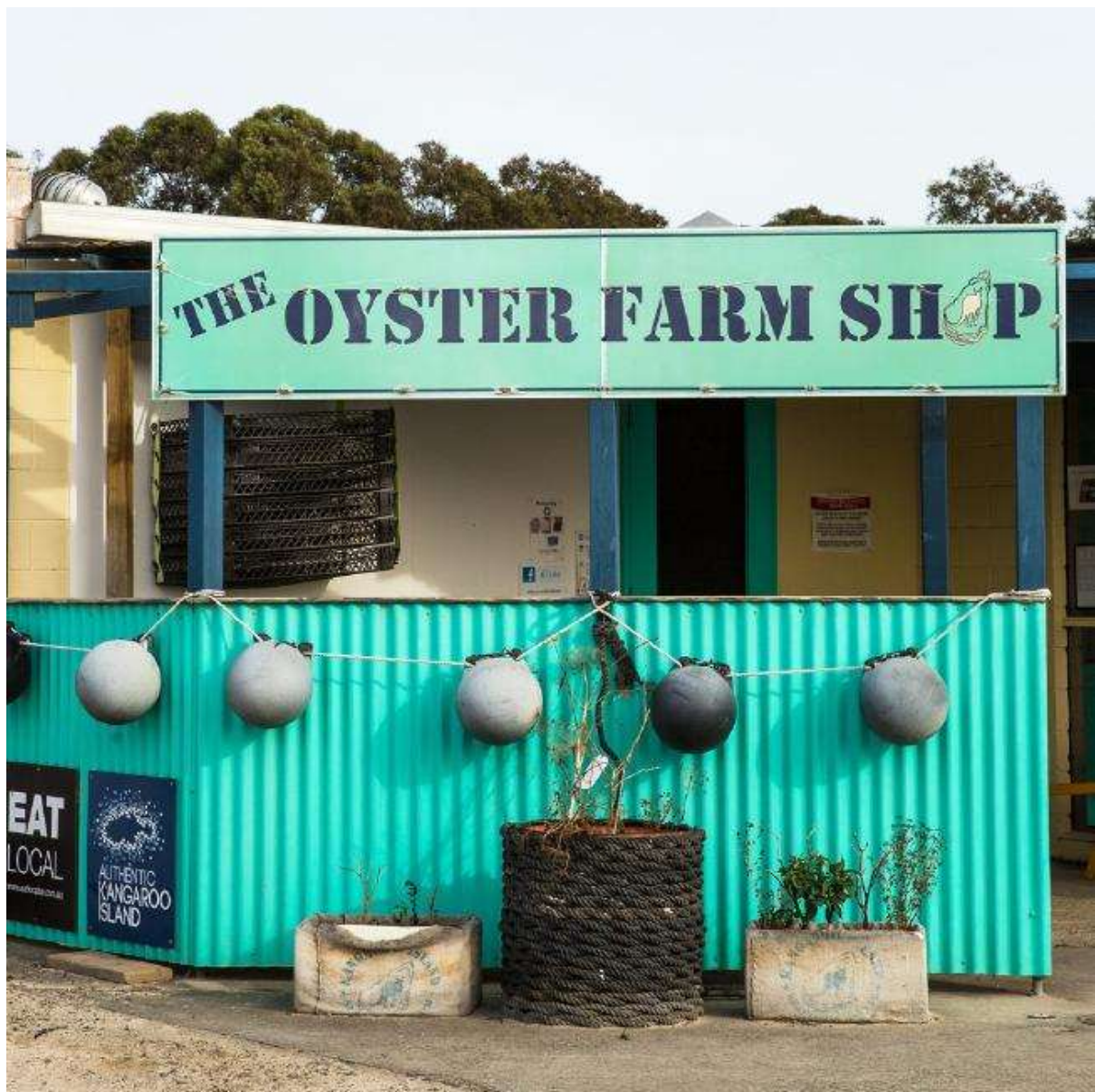
Seal Bay is famously home to a large colony of Australian sea lions, an endangered species found only in South Australia and Western Australia, and the opportunity to walk among these wild creatures is exhilarating. It's easy to see why early sailors called them lions; the large males, weighing up to 400kg, appear to sport a golden mane and cut an impressive dash, or more often a stately lumber.

Stunning, empty beaches are a KI stock in trade, and on the 4km-long Emu Bay on the north coast the only sounds to be heard are the gentle lapping of waves, the clanking of two lonely yachts on

moorings and the occasional snatch of French and Italian as two families, the only folk for miles, enjoy the novelty of a drive-on beach.

Emu Bay is an old-fashioned seaside settlement. where a couple of gnarly chaps are fishing off the century-old jetty, and the scent of lemon blossom draws me to Hamilton House, my overnight bivouac.

Perfect for families or groups of friends, this sprawling beach house dates from the 1950s and although it's been thoroughly modernised remains firmly fixed in the mid-20th century. Every piece of vintage furniture and accessory is on point, including the 60s and 70s dinnerware, bar stools and lamps; all that's missing is Mad Men's Don Draper. Oversize art adorns the enormous living areas opening onto a deck with long, dreamy views across Emu Bay. The house is set up for self-catering (although you can whistle up some in-room dining if you wish) and I'm provisioning as I go.



Oyster Farm Shop on Kangaroo Island. Picture: SATC

At the quaint Oyster Farm Shop at American River, stock up on freshly shucked oysters and fantastic smoked mussels and Coorong Mullet. Then pop by Sunset Food and Wine, near Penneshaw, for a Spencer Gulf blue swimmer crab milk bun (I'd swim from the mainland for another of these).

In Kingscote, have the fish tacos at the raffish Cactus, then take a drive to Clifford's Honey Farm at Haines for delicious honey ice cream.

I end my island sojourn in style at the new Oceanview Eco Villas, a pair of seriously smart off-grid digs marooned far, far from the corona crowd on a sprawling pastoral property with long ocean views above the dramatic Redbanks beach.

Built with love and meticulous attention to detail by Tim and Tamsin Wendt, the fully hosted villas (each with two double ensuites) are the last word in luxury, lavishly stocked with local wine and food and offering a full meal and concierge service. The ocean views from bed, bath and living room, with its enormous stone hearth, are mesmerising.

Before dinner, Tamsin appears with a large gin garnished with professional pizzazz (she took a course at Jon Lark's), leading me to ponder that other KI spirit, the one that draws visitors back time and again. Some, like Tim and Tamsin, never leave.

Christine McCabe was a guest of the South Australian Tourism Commission.