

REGENERATION

With the much-anticipated REOPENING of Southern Ocean Lodge, *INCREASED* flights and a slew of *SUSTAINABLE* development, South Australia's Kangaroo Island is *BOUNCING* back with *CONFIDENCE*.

WORDS CELESTE MITCHELL

ISLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY: SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION (OYSTERS); @SALTYTHEBUS (SNELLING BEACH)

FROM LEFT: Floating in the crystalline waters of Snelling Beach; Freshly shucked morsels at The Oyster Farm Shop.



The island's coastline unravels below, hemmed by sheep-studded farmland and deep valleys intersected by snaking rivers. The only sound is the distant shushing of the Southern Ocean lapping the shore.



PHOTOGRAPHY: SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION (REMARKABLE ROCKS); REMY BRAND (WANDERPOD EXTERIOR); GUILLAUME DE LAUBIER (SUNSHINE)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Remarkable Rocks are perched above the sea in Flinders Chase National Park; The sleek and spacious interiors of an off-grid CABN X at Cape St Albans; 'Sunshine', Southern Ocean Lodge's metal kangaroo sculpture that survived the fires; All four of the freestanding WanderPods have expansive ocean views.

IF THE RESILIENCE OF KANGAROO ISLAND had a face, it would be 'Sunshine'. The bronzed, hulking kangaroo – masterfully crafted from scrap metal by local sculptor Indiana James – was the only sign of life after Southern Ocean Lodge literally burned down around it in January 2020.

On the back of the Black Summer fires that raged across the country, the Kangaroo Island fires were beamed across news telecasts from Manhattan to Madrid – a ferocious and unstoppable force that wiped out almost half of the island, including great swathes of Flinders Chase National Park.

In the years since, as locals picked up the pieces and worked to rebuild their homes, farms and businesses, the spotlight has shifted from one of tragedy to optimism. 'Hot list' inclusions and predictions from *The New York Times* to *Lonely Planet* and *Time* shouted that Kangaroo Island was back in 2023. 'Sunshine' has stayed standing throughout and will take pride of place once again at Southern Ocean Lodge when it reopens to the world on 6 December after a \$55 million rebuild.

The lodge's reconstruction presented a unique opportunity for co-founder James Baillie. "It's pretty rare to be able to do something again and to be able to look back and go, 'What could you do differently and what could you do better?'" he says.

The beloved Great Room has been reproduced almost exactly, right down to the fabrics – co-founder Hayley Baillie had kept all the original swatches – but just below the view line, a new infinity swimming pool awaits. →

Conscious traveller

The 66-kilometre, five-day KANGAROO ISLAND SIGNATURE WALK will reopen to independent hikers from December 2023. AUSTRALIAN WALKING COMPANY has launched its pack-free guided tour along sections of the trail, staying in the newly restored CAPE DU COUEDIC LIGHTKEEPER COTTAGES. By booking with a local operator, walkers contribute to continued conservation efforts in Flinders Chase National Park, with a portion of visitor fees dedicated to recovery, parks. sa.gov.au; auswalkingco.com.au



PHOTOGRAPHY: KANGAROO ISLAND TOURISM ALLIANCE (KOALA); REMY BRAND (WANDER ON KANGAROO ISLAND CABIN, DETAIL); JACQUI FAULKNER (FOOD); SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION (SNELLING BEACH)



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The island's WanderPods are stunning in both design and location; A guided coastal cliff-top walk is a signature Southern Ocean Lodge experience; Guests of Wander on Kangaroo Island can order a pantry box and cook with delicious local produce. OPPOSITE (from top): A koala is spotted in the gum trees near Cygnet River; A peaceful stroll along Snelling Beach.



As creative directors of the lodge, James and Hayley worked with original architect Max Pritchard to reorient the 25 suites to “take in the theatre of the crashing waves”, adding twin vanities, bathtubs and fireplaces to all. A new day spa with a gym, sauna and outdoor wellness terrace with hot and cold plunge pools amps up the experience, while an ultra-premium Ocean Pavilion has also been added to the accommodation.

Though you'd never guess by looking at it, this sumptuous luxury has been designed with the lessons of the past in mind. “It's been built in a totally different style in terms of fire-retardant materials,” explains James. The landscape has also been fireproofed, with a new 20-metre wilderness buffer encircling the lodge, planted out with fire-retardant succulents.

The sustainability here is not just lip service, it's been built into the daily operations. More than \$2 million has gone into the solar array system alone, the lodge is rainwater and aquifer self-sufficient, and more than half of its fresh produce comes from the island.

This rebirth is a story of resilience, but it's also a story of celebration. Whether you stay at Southern Ocean Lodge or not, it has undeniably been a core part of the attraction for Kangaroo Island since it first opened in 2008. The Baillies have long known that KI is a special place – they've called it Australia's answer to the Galápagos – and the lodge is an iconic drawcard for Australia that James believes defines who we are in terms of experiential luxury.

“To celebrate the wild coast, the clean air, the wildlife, is truly Australian,” he says. “I think that's something that Australians don't necessarily understand – how special that is now and how special it's going to be in the future.”

I've come to Kangaroo Island at a time when it couldn't look any starker in contrast to the scenes splashed over the media three

years earlier. As we descend from the short 35-minute flight from Adelaide, vivid green farmland sprawls below me. After a recent deluge, rivers and dams have spilled their banks, so much so that I'm forced to take a detour due to water across one of the main roads.

The 50-minute drive to my final destination of Snelling Beach on the north coast is a meditation on the wildness I've heard about and longed for. Red dirt forges through yucca-studded paddocks as the sun begins its swan song and two eagles with Jurassic wingspans lead me on. Pulling onto North Coast Road, dromedary-like hills cloaked in soft green grass surround me and if it weren't for the gum trees and mobs of the island's native kangaroos, I could be on Ireland's wild Atlantic coast.

Winding up the gravel road to reach the gates of Wander – the \$1.7 million eco-development that's to be my home for the next two days – I'm hit with the enormity of how special this place really is. The island's coastline unravels below, hemmed by sheep-studded farmland and deep valleys intersected by snaking rivers. The only sound is the distant shushing of the Southern Ocean lapping the shore.

Checking into one of the four 'WanderPods', it's immediately apparent that nature and off-grid luxury coexist in complete harmony here. A wood-burning fireplace is pre-stacked with local wood, the soft linen on the king bed is redolent of the fanciest →



hotels, while the outdoor stone bath – with its uninterrupted views of the ocean – proves too hard to resist.

I fall into a comfortable rhythm over the next two days. Mornings spent driving dirt and gravel roads, strolls on deserted beaches and afternoon G&Ts sipped while soaking in the outdoor tub. I barely see another soul.

Over on the eastern tip of the island in St Albans, I find my next base at CABN X Kangaroo Island, which opened in May. Five prefabricated cabins have been strategically set down a slope that runs to Kona Beach and was previously off-limits to visitors.

The solar-powered cabins have all the trappings of a luxury hotel suite with private saunas, outdoor bathtubs and full-size indoor bathrooms. The South Australian tiny home operator is also working with Kool Tours and Intrepid to share previously untold stories of First Nations connection to the island.

The kangaroos that give the island its name are ever-present. They eye me curiously as I roll out the supplied GlamSwag on the front deck of my cabin, a glass of red from nearby False Cape Wines in hand. When I tuck myself into bed, I gaze up at the stars through the window above.

James Baillie is a fan of the new additions to the island, believing there's room for more of this type of sustainable tourism. "It's about treading lightly on the landscape, but also providing an experience that the modern traveller wants," he says. "So many parts of Australia still have very dated tourism offerings. There's such an opening for regeneration."

Regeneration is the modus operandi of the owners of the eco-luxe Ecopia Retreat, Yael Katz and her partner Rob Clements, who have been living here for around 20 years and quietly caring for the land. I take a purposeful exhale and find myself crossing a literal and metaphorical threshold as I cross the small causeway at the entrance to their 60-hectare wildlife conservation in Seddon, where they built Ecopia Retreat five years ago, in the centre of the island.

Winding down the windows of my rammed-earth villa, a symphony of birdlife swarms my senses and I'm enveloped by ancient yuccas and yet more mobs of kangaroos nibbling the surrounding grass. In a sea of farms, this is a native utopia.

Yael and Rob devotedly nurture this pocket of the island – planting thousands of native plants, ramming the earth walls, and simultaneously educating and spoiling guests in carefully considered luxury. Their hard work has paid off with the return of endangered glossy black cockatoos who come here to nest, and the bounty of native animal encounters their guests experience – it's almost impossible not to spy koalas, Tamar wallabies and echidnas during your stay.

They spent days gripped by panic but were lucky to escape unscathed in the fires, even though the property is only 35 minutes' drive from Flinders Chase National Park – practically next door on an island of this size.

From all accounts, the devastation in the park was confronting but regeneration is everywhere when I visit. Not only in the new growth but in a new accessible boardwalk in the national



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Enjoy a glass of wine and grazing board at False Cape Wines' cellar door; Inside one of Ecopia's rammed-earth villas; Relax among bushland and sample the native botanical creations at Kangaroo Island Spirits. OPPOSITE: The island's namesake roo is most easily spotted at dawn and dusk.



GETAWAYS | Kangaroo Island

A traveller's checklist

Getting there

Kangaroo Island is 120 kilometres south-west of Adelaide. It's accessible by passenger and vehicle ferry from Cape Jervis (45 minutes) and air from Adelaide (35 minutes) with Qantas. An electric wheelchair is available to assist wheelchair users with embarking and disembarking the ferry (manual wheelchairs can be used on board). sealink.com.au; qantas.com

Staying there

Stays at SOUTHERN OCEAN LODGE are all-inclusive of meals, open bar, in-suite bar, signature experiences and return Kangaroo Island Airport transfers. The accessible Flinders Suite features level floors and a modified bathroom. From \$3400 per night. southernoceanlodge.com.au

One-bedroom WanderPods at WANDER ON KANGAROO ISLAND start from \$449 per night. wander.com.au

CABN X KANGAROO ISLAND offers one all-ability accessible cabin, with stays from \$695 per night. cabn.life

ECOPIA RETREAT has just unveiled a new two-bedroom retreat, complementing two existing rammed-earth, adults-only villas. One of the villas is all-abilities accessible. From \$800 per night. ecopiaretreat.com.au

Eating there

Pre-order a Tastes of the Island Pantry Box for your stay at Wander. Curated by GASTRONOMO – the team behind the island's renowned ENCHANTED FIG TREE dining experience – produce is unpacked into the fridge prior to your arrival (warning: the garlic salt is addictive). gastronomodining.com.au

Stop at VIVONNE BAY GENERAL STORE for a whiting burger on your way into Flinders Chase National Park.

vivonnebaygeneralstore.com.au

Grab a just-shucked plate at THE OYSTER FARM SHOP and find out why these tasty morsels make it onto the menu at Southern Ocean Lodge. oysterfarmshop.com.au

Playing there

Sit on the deck as you taste your way through Jacques Lurton's French-style wines at THE ISLANDER ESTATE VINEYARDS, accompanied by a platter of island-produced charcuterie with a private tasting experience. iev.com.au

Book for a blend-your-own gin workshop at KANGAROO ISLAND SPIRITS, or just stop in for a tasting paddle, sitting among gardens thriving with native botanicals. kangarooislandspirits.com.au

Minimal-intervention FALSE CAPE WINES is a great spot to take the kids on the Dudley Peninsula, with resident farm animals and a playground overlooked by the rustic cellar door. falsecapewines.com.au

park leading to the glowing orange Remarkable Rocks. A new \$16 million visitor centre is also expected to be finished in early 2024. "The fact that Southern Ocean Lodge is coming back is a testament to the commitment that people make to here [Kangaroo Island] and that they understand that it's a pretty special place," says Kylie Bamfield, the general manager of Kangaroo Island Spirits, when I stop by to sample their drops – all distilled with botanicals foraged on the island.

"They could have very easily walked away but I think they really get how important the island is and what it can give to someone who comes and visits."

It's this indomitable spirit of both land and people that has helped this phoenix of the Southern Ocean to not just rise from the ashes, but shine brighter than ever. As I gaze out the aeroplane window after the best getaway I've had in recent memory, it's clear to me that Kangaroo Island isn't just bouncing back, it's leaping forward. **AT**



PHOTOGRAPHY: MEAGHAN COLES (FALSE CAPE WINES); KANGAROO ISLAND SPIRITS (OUTDOOR SEATING); JENN SIMPSON @JENNSOMEWHERE (ECOPIA VILLA); SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION (KANGAROO)

