



TREASURE ISLAND

When the flames were doused on South Australia's Kangaroo Island, locals faced another battle – the perception that all was lost. **Di Webster** visits and finds the reverse.

Photography by Josie Withers

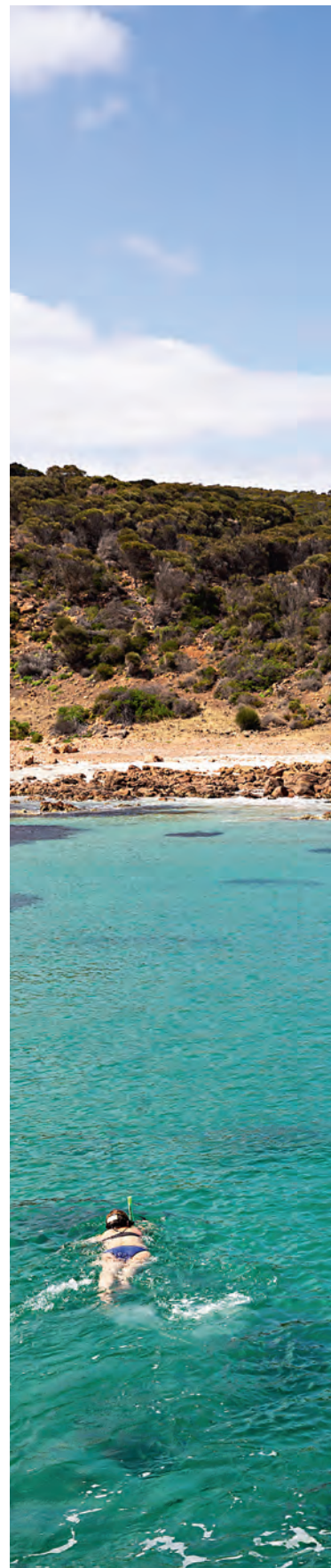
Not so long ago, Kangaroo Island's exclusive Southern Ocean Lodge ferried some guests to an isolated little beach in the island's north-east for a picnic lunch. The resort packed salads and skipper Andrew "Grot" Neighbour from Kangaroo Island Marine Adventures (kimarineadventures.com.au) undertook to provide seafood. With his passengers safely ashore, Neighbour pulled on a wetsuit and began wading into the ocean. "Are you going to cool off?" asked the lodge's bewildered host. "Nah," replied Neighbour. "I'm going to get your lunch."

Southern Ocean Lodge was tragically lost in ferocious bushfires that tore through Flinders Chase National Park and Kelly Hill Conservation Park last summer, leaving the western half of this vast island off the coast of South Australia – a natural wonderland seven times the size of Singapore – inaccessible to all but those charged with mopping up and rendering it safe again. But the east of the island, with all its treasures and the irreverent, can-do KI spirit that Neighbour exemplifies, was untouched, left waiting for the return of travellers who watched the devastation on TV and assumed, once the fires were out, that there was nothing left to see.

But if you're happy walking on kilometres of white sand, swimming in gin-clear water, being mesmerised by dozy koalas, strolling among sea lions, tasting honey produced by the world's most placid bees and watching locals shuck crisp salty oysters, distil globally acclaimed spirits and plate up delicious, locally sourced produce, I have some excellent news: Kangaroo Island is not only on its feet, its arms are open and it's ready for a hug.

To that end, I'm on Neighbour's eco-certified jet boat with 10 tourists – an adventurous young French

(From below) Kangaroo Island Spirits' tin shed tasting room; a pod of dolphins play off North Cape; The Oyster Farm Shop





family of four; a mother and her two sons from New Zealand; Sebastian and Freddie, a father and son visiting from Adelaide, and Freddie's girlfriend, Jordy. We're heading across to the shallow waters around North Cape, aka the "dolphins' lounge room" where these playful creatures hang out each morning after returning from deeper water with a belly full of fish. The water is as clear and blue as the morning sky, a window into a world of dancing sea grasses that harbour the island's famous King George whiting and part to reveal clams and razorfish.

"Woah! Look at all the squid!" cries Neighbour, a fourth-generation islander. I tell him I've never seen a live one. "Hang on," he says, stopping the boat. "I'll grab one to show you." He throws in a line with a lime-green lure attached and a squid latches on instantly, a cloud of black ink exploding in its wake. "There goes his defence mechanism," says Neighbour drily. He holds the squid gently, delivers a brief lecture then eases it back into the water. "I must confess," he says as his catch torpedoes safely out of earshot, "I probably cook the best salt and pepper squid around."

But we're really here for the dolphins and when we find them – an exuberant pod of about 50 drawn to the sympathetic acoustic pattern of the jets – the passengers are ready not simply with cameras but, in limited number and with strict instructions on appropriate behaviour, to slide gently into the water and join them (with no propellers on the boat, guests and dolphins are safe from injury). "Dad!" yells Neighbour to the French



*(Clockwise from above)
Clifford's Honey Farm's bees;
fresh oysters; Pennington Bay
on the island's south coast*

father. "There's one behind you!" "Go right!" "Go left!" "Straight ahead!" Somewhat taciturn when he enters the water, Sebastian can't contain his glee when he hauls himself out of it. "That was incredible," he says, beaming. "The best one ever." (Turns out this is his eighth dolphin swim with Neighbour since 2006). "I helped a pregnant woman onto the boat after a swim a while ago," says the skipper. "She was in tears. It changes lives."

Like dozens of visitors I'm meeting on the island after the fires, Sebastian and his family – KI regulars – are here to spend money and offer support. People buying ice-cream from Clifford's Honey Farm (cliffordshoney.com.au; operated by three generations of Cliffords), seafood from The Oyster Farm Shop (oysterfarmshop.com.au) at American River, oils from Emu Ridge Eucalyptus Oil Distillery (emuridge.com.au). That morning, Emu Ridge founder Larry Turner, a knockabout bloke who never met an expletive he didn't like, had pulled his craypot out of the briny to find three lobsters destined for the dinner table. "Yeah, we're in trouble here," he deadpans. "You have to go and find your own tucker."

Pssst... you don't. Sometimes, it even comes to you. It's lunchtime on day three of my adventure. After self-driving





Kangaroo Island Brewery (above left); one of the resident koalas

for the first two, I'm now in the capable hands of Tim Wendt from a tour company called Exceptional Kangaroo Island (exceptionalkangarooisland.com). After a morning's sightseeing, Wendt is setting up a picnic table on a lookout above Pennington Bay, one of the most dazzling stretches of beach I've ever seen. I feel a little self-conscious as he lays out salads on a white tablecloth and pours me a glass of South Australian shiraz but given he hasn't snapped on a wetsuit and waded out to fetch the protein, I quickly get over it. In fact, I tell him I'm marking him down.

Travelling solo, I haven't spotted one kangaroo or koala but the sharp eye and local knowledge that made Wendt an effective cop (his old job) changes everything. Driving along a bumpy limestone road, he suddenly stops. "There's a family," he says and, sure enough, lying in the shade of a tree are five 'roos. Turns out they're everywhere if you know where to look (including on the road between dusk and dawn, a time when it's best not to drive). We find wallabies on appropriately named Wallaby Run and big, healthy koalas clinging to eucalypts, blessed with a habitat in the island's east.

At Kangaroo Island Spirits (kispirits.com.au), a gin distillery owned by Jon and Sarah Lark, I sample O'Gin, a drop created in a tiny tin shed next to a ramshackle tasting room, which won Double Gold at the

international SIP Awards in California last year (Jon is the brother of Tasmania's "whisky king" Bill). Down the road, Kangaroo Island Brewery (kangarooislandbrewery.com.au), another tin shed – this one bigger – is furnished with comfy sofas currently housing a slim, tattooed scallywag with a black cowboy hat, a Catweazle beard and a repertoire of stories that suggest this hasn't been a quick drop-in for him. Nor was it his first encounter with Wendt (see Wendt's earlier profession). But the men chat amiably. On an island confronted with such recent horror, there's no space for anything less.

In fact, one of the most charming features of this friendly, laid-back community is a habit I haven't seen since my own rural childhood: when cars pass on the road, drivers lift their hand off the wheel to acknowledge you, a fellow human. It happens whether you're a neighbour, friend, local or tourist and regardless of what language you speak. To Kangaroo Islanders, it's a simple hello, a salute that fits the best times and the worst. For a first-time visitor to this temporarily wounded chunk of Australia, it's a gesture loaded with far deeper meaning. It speaks of a community where sincerity outshines slickness, where trust is assumed, where what's been saved is treasured as much as what's been lost is grieved.

There's another wave. I need to pull over for a second. ●



(From above) Dune House; caramel flan with pistachio crumble from Sunset Food & Wine



Kangaroo Island is waiting for you. Here's how to enjoy it.

See the sea lions

The country's most accessible colony of Australian sea lions lolls about in spectacular **Seal Bay** (environment.sa.gov.au). Watch them from the boardwalk or join a guided tour into the colony.

Stay in luxury

Hamilton & Dune (hamiltondune.com.au) are two separate, exquisite homes overlooking the white sands of Emu Bay on the north-east coast. They can be booked individually – Hamilton sleeps six, Dune five – or together.

Leave a tiny footprint

Stay off-grid at **Oceanview Eco Villas** (oceanviewkangarooisland.com.au), two fully hosted two-bedroom luxury villas set on 200 hectares above the rugged Redbanks coastline (a rescued 'roo may even come to visit).

Bee educated

Kangaroo Island is home to the last remaining pure Ligurian bees on the planet (you can't bring honey onto the island but you can take it home). Learn about their busy schedule and buy a jar at **Clifford's Honey Farm** (cliffordshoney.com.au).

Open a cellar door

Though its west-end vines were destroyed in the bushfire, **The Islander Estate Vineyards'** (iev.com.au) east-end cellar door survived. Sample its elegant French-style range with some regional produce. Nearby **Springs Road** (springsroad.com.au) also offers a fine drop.

Eat well

Take a tour of **Emu Bay Lavender** (emubaylavender.com.au) but don't leave without coffee and a delicious bite in the café. Open for breakfast and lunch, **Cactus Kangaroo Island** in Kingscote (59 Dauncey Street; 0473 311 049) is passionate about supporting local producers (try the cumin and ginger spiced lamb dumplings). **Bella Café & Pizza Bar** (bellacafekangarooisland.com.au), also in Kingscote, has a strong (and accomplished) focus on pizza and pasta. At **Sunset Food & Wine** (sunsetfoodandwine.com), grab a seat on the deck, order a local vino and take in glorious views over American Beach while you mull over the sophisticated offerings. You're on KI; it's hard to go past King George whiting.