




iNTO THE WILD

Introducing Australia's first 'super-lodge', a luxury eco-retreat on Kangaroo Island where utter isolation is its biggest drawcard. Step into another world at the exquisite Southern Ocean Lodge.

Words **Michelle Rowe** Photography **Sharyn Cairns**



Natural selection
Every guest room at Southern Ocean Lodge faces the dramatic coastal scenery of Hanson Bay.



Twenty of the 21 suites at Southern Ocean Lodge,

Australia's newest luxury retreat, are named after ships lost in the raging seas off Kangaroo Island. It's not hard to imagine why this dramatic coastline has claimed so many lives – the thunderous crash of waves against the island's south-western shoreline seems deafening in such a solitary place. Until recently, the only sign of human existence in this expanse of wilderness, between Flinders Chase National Park and Kelly Hill Conservation Park, was a clutch of tiny holiday shacks perched on the edge of secluded Hanson Bay. Now there is Southern Ocean Lodge, a high-end eco-escape setting a new benchmark for premium accommodation in Australia.

In developing the \$18 million retreat, Baillie Lodges – the same team behind the ground-breaking Capella Lodge on World Heritage-listed Lord Howe Island – aimed to create the country's first 'super-lodge' to rival the successful formula adopted by New Zealand's famous properties: an ultra-luxe retreat from city life with a window to a unique and diverse landscape.

"We see this as one of the great lodges of the world," says James Baillie, a former managing director of P&O Australia Resorts who, with wife Hayley, daughter of Australian businessman Dick Smith, heads up Baillie Lodges. "You could count on one hand the developments of this nature in this country over the past decade. This is an iconic, premium, nature-based lodge perched on a dramatic cliff 50 metres above the Southern Ocean and next to world-class national parks. It's big in anyone's language."

In choosing Kangaroo Island as the site for the lodge – Baillie first spotted its potential when he was with P&O and there was interest in building a Silky Oaks Lodge-style retreat there – Baillie Lodges has more than succeeded in its aim of providing an unparalleled eco-experience. The island, 120km off the coast of Adelaide, is perhaps Australia's last true

wilderness refuge, a place teeming with indigenous species which have not succumbed to introduced wildlife such as foxes and rabbits; where colonies of Australian sea lions and New Zealand fur seals can be found in their natural habitat just minutes away, and where a steep, cliff-lined coast offers some of the world's most dramatic ocean views.

But easily the lodge's biggest selling point is its complete and utter isolation. Spending a night in the premier suite, the Osprey Pavilion, with its 180-degree views of both ocean and never-ending wilderness through floor-to-ceiling windows is, quite simply, breathtaking. There is no noise other than the ocean, the only light the twinkling of stars overhead. It's something few people will ever experience and it makes the Osprey Pavilion's hefty \$1800 per person per night price tag seem worth every cent. The sheer vastness of the surrounds, and the feeling of being completely removed from one's everyday life, is both rejuvenating and confronting.

In creating such an experiential tourism product, the Baillies were adamant that the food on offer also reflect the unique surrounds. "It's important for us that each of our properties embraces the local ingredients and the local food vernacular, so it's a core part of the experience," says Baillie.

Local food producers appear almost exclusively on the menus, which are created by head chef Tim Bourke and sous chef Daniel Fisher, both of whom Baillie brought over from Capella Lodge. Indeed, nearly half of Southern Ocean Lodge's 22 staff were handpicked after previous lives working with Baillie who, when heading up P&O resorts, oversaw the redevelopment of such properties as the iconic Lizard, Bedarra and Heron islands after P&O took on and rejuvenated Qantas's ailing Australian resorts portfolio in the 90s. Lodge staff have worked at the likes of Wrotham Park, Lizard Island and Wilson Island, as well as Capella Lodge, and the experience bodes well for an industry in which attracting committed and competent staff is becoming ever more difficult.

Bourke's daily-changing menus feature locally sourced abalone; lobster, giant king crabs, King George whiting and king prawns; sheep's milk cheeses and yoghurts from Island Pure; honey from Island Beehive, which has the only remaining colony of pure-bred Ligurian bees; and olive oils from Kangaroo Island Olive Oil Company, among others.

"We put ads in the local papers and it was really interesting to see the great people who came out of the woodwork," says Baillie. "We had some terrific local growers knocking on the door." South Australian celebrity chef Maggie Beer has also been a "real advocate", recommending a lot of good people.

The Baillies commissioned a series of local artists and designers to produce works for the lodge. Khai Liew, brother of Adelaide-based chef Cheong, designed much of its furniture, including the striking bar table>

Window on the world
Southern Ocean Lodge (above) is positioned to capture spectacular views, and you can still enjoy the unbroken vista while relaxing at the spa (right).



The expansive view of both ocean and never-ending wilderness through floor-to-ceiling windows is, quite simply, breathtaking.



Best of the best
Owner James Baillie (top left) handpicked chefs Daniel Fisher (below left) and Tim Bourke (below right) to create dishes showcasing local produce (left).



Southern comfort
A limestone wall curves around The Great Room to encompass the dining area (right centre). The Osprey Pavilion (top and right) is the premium suite.



which stands in The Great Room and its kangaroo leather-covered bar stools, plus a series of handmade sofas and individual pendant lights. On the dining-room walls is a series of pictures by local artist Janine Mackintosh, who has collected thousands of tiny leaves from the island and stitched them in formation onto her canvases.

The lodge itself – which uses local limestone, recycled timbers and glass in its construction and features a locally made limestone wall running through its interiors – was designed by architect Max Pritchard, who the owners found as they flicked through design magazines looking for inspiration. “Max was born on Kangaroo Island, so it gave the project a real sense of place,” says Baillie.

The Great Room, with its eclectic mix of furniture and dozens of Australian books found by the Baillies on eBay or trawling second-hand bookshops, is very much the focus of the property. It is to this expansive room, with its bank of floor-to-ceiling windows offering unbroken ocean views, that newly arrived guests are ushered, offered delicate crayfish sandwiches and herbal tea, and talked through what their stay will entail. “People should treat it like their own home,” says Baillie. “We don’t push communal dining but if people would like to eat together, that’s fine.”

The lodge’s all-inclusive price tag includes a walk-in wine cellar stocking nearly entirely South Australian wines, from which guests are welcome to select a bottle when they feel like it (charges are applied to some premium reds and imported Champagnes).

When they arrive here, international visitors say, ‘At last, I feel like I’m in Australia.’

There’s also a 24-hour self-service bar with a wide range of spirits and liqueurs, and fridges full of locally made beers. Drinks and canapés kick off each evening before dinner, which can be anything from a five-course seafood tasting menu (pan-roasted snapper, artichoke and fennel barigoule is a standout of the dishes we tried) to à la carte featuring the likes of Southern Ocean squid al crudo with lemon myrtle and local olive oil, to roasted duck breast with confit leg, seared liver and sweet garlic purée. Wines can be selected from the cellar or bar by guests, or matched to the menu by restaurant staff.

Lunch menus are three-course table d’hôte, while breakfast is à la carte, and includes an excellent local crayfish omelette most days. The food at the lodge is accomplished and shows a deft handling of the excellent South Australian produce.

By night, the appearance of The Great Room changes dramatically, turning into a cosy, atmospherically lit space – the focal point of which is a fire suspended from the ceiling – perfect, over a digestif from the bar, to watch the frequent wild weather that can hit this windswept island.

From The Great Room, a single recycled-timber walkway leads to the guest suites (be warned: this



walkway is seriously long). The Osprey Pavilion is located at the very end of the walkway, hence its stunning views, while other rooms, including the entry-level Flinders Suites at \$900 per person per night, radiate off to the right, all facing the ocean and all with those dramatic full-height windows.

Each suite is sleek and stylish, with natural stone and wood interiors, and earthy colours. Complimentary mini-bars are stocked with South Australian products: BabyBert camembert from The Barossa Valley Cheese Co; chocolate koalas from Bracegirdle’s in Glenelg; a bottle of Petaluma sparkling and a Katnook Estate sauvignon blanc. There’s also a basket of local sweets and biscuits, plus a selection of teas from Adelaide’s T bar Tea Salon.

All rooms feature perhaps the most comfortable bathrobes in existence, specially commissioned from the people who do them for New York’s prestigious The Mercer Hotel, after James Baillie fell in love with them during a ‘reconnaissance’ visit.

Back in The Great Room, guests meet to take part in a series of nature-based trips offered by local tour operator Exceptional Kangaroo Island. Craig Wickham, who with wife Janet heads up EKI, is a font of all knowledge, able to identify an echidna crossing the >

Split the deck
The veranda beyond the dining area and The Great Room is ideal for immersing yourself in the great outdoors – while nibbling a crayfish sandwich, perhaps.

road at 100m and clearly still besotted by the place that's been home since he was a year old. He talks excitedly of the sea lion and fur seal colonies nearby – “you see seals every single time you visit” – as well as myriad other wildlife experiences which make the place an important destination on the country's tourism landscape.

“Nature is the number-one reason people come here. International visitors want to see wildlife – that is so much higher than any of the other motivators,” Wickham says. Kangaroo Island is often referred to as the Galapagos Islands of Australia, he says, and tamar wallabies, brushtail possums, short-beaked echidnas, southern brown bandicoots, Western and little pygmy possums, kangaroos and platypus are just a few of the species a visitor is likely to see. There are also 45 plant types found nowhere else in the world.

“A comment I frequently hear from international visitors is ‘at last I feel like I'm in Australia,’” says Wickham. “People who come here from South Australia generally are visiting friends or want beach holidays. People from interstate want wildlife and solitude. They realise they could do the south coast of NSW, say, but they can't do it with absolutely no-one else around.”

Until now, however, there just hasn't been accommodation on the island to cater for the better-heeled traveller, says Wickham. But it was the very nature of

the project – an eco-lodge situated in a fragile and vulnerable natural area – that made Southern Ocean Lodge controversial from the start.

Baillie's dream of creating a portfolio of Australia's first premium lodges offering a window into diverse eco-systems seemed sunk before it even started when strong objections were raised as soon as the project was mooted in 2005 about the effect it would have on this ecologically sensitive region. The fact that the lodge was declared a project of state significance by the South Australian Government in July 2005 was what got it over the line. Baillie is similarly battling to bring his next development, a wilderness lodge on 50 hectares of prime coast-front property near Port Arthur in Tasmania, to fruition.

Today, just a year after development began on Kangaroo Island's most talked-about project, the newly opened lodge seems a mere sliver of civilisation against a seemingly endless backdrop of bushland. The property itself takes up just one of the 102 hectares bought as private land for the development – the rest has been placed under a Heritage Agreement barring further development on the site.

Far from a concrete monolith, the lodge blends well with the undulating terrain. Indeed, until you arrive at its gates, you don't even notice it's there. A boardwalk snakes through the never-ending mallee scrub through which tamar wallabies dart, leading to an observation deck overlooking the Southern Ocean; another boardwalk leads up to the lodge's bijou Southern Spa, featuring three treatment rooms decked out in wallpaper by Florence Broadhurst, and a steam room with Japanese mosaic tiles. The spa offers a range of treatments using Li'Tya indigenous products. There's also a lounge and reference library in the main building in which nature presentations or movies can be shown, or meetings can be hosted.

Environmental-sustainability initiatives include solar-powered hot water, eco-smart fires fuelled by

green energy, chemical-free waste water, organic waste treatment and rainwater tanks supplying most of the lodge's water needs. SA tourism minister Jane Lomax-Smith is so impressed by the newcomer, she has heralded it as being “in a class of its own, offering a unique experience unparalleled in our state”, saying it will lure more visitors from Australia and overseas, benefiting the country's wider tourism industry.

“Not everybody will be able to afford to stay here,” says EKI's Wickham, “but Southern Ocean Lodge will create a much stronger awareness of the island as being a place you go to stay, not a place where you just go for a day trip. This lodge is going to create a precedent, definitely, but if this is our benchmark, then I think it's fantastic.”*

Holding on to heritage
Southern Ocean Lodge (opposite) covers less than one per cent of the private land bought by the Baillies. The remaining 101 hectares will never be developed, ensuring the views from the suites, including the bathrooms (below), will be protected.

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THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Southern Ocean Lodge is on Kangaroo Island's south-west coast, a 50-minute drive from Kingscote Airport in the island's north-east or a 90-minute drive from the island's ferry terminal. Regional Express (Rex) and Air South have daily 30-minute flights from Adelaide to Kingscote. Sealink ferries operate regular 45-minute ferry transfers between Cape Jervis on the mainland and Penneshaw on Kangaroo Island. Cape Jervis is a two-hour drive from Adelaide.

Stay

Southern Ocean Lodge Rooms from \$900 per person per night, including all meals, selected alcoholic and all non-alcoholic beverages, guided tours and experiences. Minimum two-night stay. Hanson Bay Rd, Kangaroo Island, SA, (08) 8559 7347, www.southernoceanlodge.com.au.

Do

Exceptional Kangaroo Island Small group or private tours taking in the island's highlights, such as wildlife from wallabies to fur seals, (08) 8553 9119, www.exceptionalkangarooisland.com.

