

Roos and riesling

From possums to pinot, seals to shiraz – round off a day's animal-spotting in a South Australian winery, or combine both on a dedicated trail, says **David Whitley**

At Seal Bay on Kangaroo Island, two Australian sea lion pups haul themselves along the beach. They're nosy, and they've got visitors.

The pups come remarkably close to us, their big black eyes melting hearts as they do so. Nobody wants to get quite so close to dad, though. The enormous hulking male lies disturbingly close to the path over the dunes and looks grumpy enough to make mincemeat of anyone who comes near him.

Seals aren't the only new wildlife encounters that await visitors to South Australia. In Adelaide, Dolphin Sanctuary Kayak Tours has started offering experiences kayaking with dolphins. Meanwhile, on the Yorke Peninsula, Marion Bay Ocean Safari runs new marine life cruises.

But Kangaroo Island remains South Australia's legendary nature hotspot, and that is still the case after the devastating 2019-20 bushfires. At the western end of the island, Flinders Chase National Park was the worst-hit area. But that is now where the landscape's extraordinary capacity for regrowth is best seen.

Ghostly white tree trunks still peer above the vegetation line, but fresh, green life is shooting up staggeringly fast.

Near the Remarkable Rocks, where nature has concocted what looks like a giant Cubist art installation, the pinks, purples and yellows of wildflowers burst through the scrub.

At Admirals Arch, where a fur seal colony honks and scuffles next to a rainbow-shaped

coastal rock window, there's something even more heartening in the car park. Sea Dragon Australia guide Paul Houchin says: "After the fire, there was nothing. Not a bug. Not a bee. Not a fly." But he points to a tree with a big smile on his face. There, we spot a koala, lumbering along a branch after her scarping joey. The wildlife is coming back to Flinders Chase.

KANGAROOS AND DOLPHINS

Sea Dragon Australia came under new ownership during the pandemic. It has since revamped the Sea Dragon Lodge at the island's eastern tip, where the brown, fluffy subspecies of Kangaroo Island kangaroo bounds between the stylish villas. They look out over to the more-or-less private beach at Pink Bay, where dolphins often flit in the calm water.

Along with the lodge makeover, Sea Dragon has introduced small-group nature and local produce tours, with the commissionable three-night accommodation plus touring packages costing from AU\$1,805 (£1,034) per person.

If staying elsewhere, Exceptional Kangaroo Island runs day tours with some exclusive twists. The wildlife tours head down narrow lanes to find tiny tamar wallabies hopping in the bushes and echidnas scuffling in the undergrowth. Tours venture onto a private conservation property in search of the ultra-rare Kangaroo Island glossy black cockatoo. And, for lunch, picnic hampers are cracked open on a merino ➤



Pikes Wines, on the Clare Valley wine and wilderness walking trail

PICTURE: South Australian Tourism Commission/Mike Anness

DESTINATIONS

AUSTRALASIA | SOUTH AUSTRALIA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Wirra Wirra Vineyards, McLaren Vale; Kangaroo Island; Spring Gully Conservation Park, Clare Valley; Seal Bay Conservation Park, Kangaroo Island
PICTURES: South Australian Tourism Commission/Ben Goode



sheep stud farm. Included is a glass of limited-edition Islander wine, which apparently isn't sold on the mainland.

At this moment, the two key prongs of South Australia's visitor offering – wildlife and wine – combine. And South Australia's wine tourism ventures have undergone an even bigger refresh than the wildlife wing.

In the Clare Valley, there's now a 70-mile wine and wilderness walking trail. This passes through Spring Gully Conservation Park, home to kangaroos and possums, and guests can stop off at the Jim Barry winery, where exclusive premium-range tastings are combined with platters of local foods in a new Armagh Experience.

MCLAREN VALE

It is the McLaren Vale region, a 45-minute drive south of Adelaide, that is really booming, however. Post-lockdown newcomers include tastings at the Lloyd Brothers' grand scale, Tuscan-style Barrel Hall and Aboriginal cultural experiences at Gemtree Wines.

Elsewhere, the Chalk Hill Collective brings locally made wines, gins and pizzas together in a new purpose-built centre of indulgence, while Oliver's Taranga has ambitiously expanded an 1850s workers' cottage for an old-meets-new cellar door experience.

According to Simon Burley of private luxury tour specialist Coast & Co, McLaren Vale is "one of the easiest places in the country to make wine, with a consistent climate". The region's secret weapon isn't its world-class shirazes, however – it's the variety on offer. Coast & Co's first stop isn't a winery at all – it's



JANICE KURRELLE, regional manager UK and Europe, South Australian Tourism Commission

Bed down: "Adelaide has over 200 cellar doors within an hour's drive. Handily, the city has experienced a real bed boom in the past three years. Check out new shining stars such as The Oval, EOS, Crowne Plaza, Sofitel and Hotel Indigo Adelaide Markets."

Get a guide: "Most wildlife tours and winery experiences in South Australia are run by passionate locals in the know. Book your client a local guide to immerse them in the hidden gems. For example, Exceptional Kangaroo Island and Coast & Co are both commissionable."

Wildlife: "Kangaroo Island has strong, commissionable touring and accommodation options. Package them up when you book your client on the ferry or 40-minute flight."

Onkaparinga Gorge. Here, western grey kangaroos bound near the lookout over the 650 million-year-old, glacier-cut gorge.

The selected wineries have very different characteristics. Wirra Wirra offers grandeur, story-packed history and private tasting rooms. Bekkers is defiantly small-scale, incredibly fussy about the fruit that passes the quality threshold and happy for Smudge the dog to welcome new guests. And, at d'Arenberg, tastings take place at the top of a five-level cube rammed with psychedelia, sensory experiences and cartoon character urinals.

The day finishes on Maslin Beach, a short hop from the wineries. It's a long, curving stunner, with multi-coloured cliffs at the southern end. Here, hooded plovers nest. As always in South Australia, the wildlife is never too far away from the wine. **TW**

BOOK IT

Gold Medal offers an 11-night holiday in South Australia from £2,869, based on a November 2023 departure. The price includes flights from Heathrow, car hire and ferry tickets, plus stays in Adelaide, Barossa Valley, Flinders Ranges and a luxury tent on Kangaroo Island. goldmedal.co.uk