

# The Telegraph

## First the wildfires, and now coronavirus – how will Kangaroo Island survive?



Kangaroo Island was one of the places worst hit by last year's wildfires CREDIT: ISTOCK

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Excavating rubble more vigorously than a commercial digger, a small, spiky creature is foraging for food in an area once occupied by diners at Kangaroo Island's Southern Ocean Lodge. While other guests checked out of the ill-fated luxury hotel weeks ago, Enchilada, the hotel's "resident" echidna, has remained happily at home – a symbol of hope and survival in a landscape otherwise blackened beyond belief.

At the end of last year, wildfires raged through Australia, causing damage on an unprecedented scale, and Kangaroo Island – a cherished jewel of biodiversity 100 miles off the coast of Adelaide – was one of the places worst hit. On Dec 20, uncharacteristically high 39C (103F) temperatures, fierce winds and dry lightning strikes set off a sequence of powerful, all-consuming fires, which peaked on Jan 3 and smouldered up until a few weeks ago.

But before the ashes had settled, an even greater crisis engulfed the globe. Causing more devastation than any natural disaster, coronavirus is threatening lives and crippling businesses as it spreads with the ferocity of a pyroclastic flow. Yet like the fires, it can and will be extinguished – and Kangaroo Island is a fine example of how recovery might take shape.

During my first visit, last December, only days before the blazes took hold, I watched fur seals through the jagged limestone window of Admiral's Arch and shaded beneath 500 million-year-old overhangs at Remarkable Rocks. Now, Flinders Chase National Park, where Southern Ocean Lodge was once spectacularly cradled between wave-lashed cliffs and sprawling wilderness, is unrecognisable – along with 50 per cent of the island damaged by fire.

Retracing my steps two months later, blue sky fills spaces once crowded by a tangle of treetops and those magnificent boulders are charred like coal stones in an abandoned hearth.

I originally came here to meet the pioneers and entrepreneurs who have invested in this paradise – gin-makers, artists, scientific researchers and "blow-ins" from the mainland with visions for a better life. But united by crisis and a fondness for their island, this community now has a different focus, and I've returned to find out what the future might hold. Typical of a castaway society, where horizons are infinite and time is elastic, everyone has a story to tell.

"The vegetation brought us here," says local assemblage artist Janine Mackintosh, who arrived 20 years ago with her partner, Dr Richard Glatz, an entomologist responsible for discovering Kangaroo Island's enigma moth in 2015. Despite her worldly views, she's never left Australia; a passion for microcosms means she's got more than enough to explore on her paddock in MacGillivray, a patch of land with some of the highest plant diversity on the island.

Inside her remarkably orderly studio, an antique entomology cabinet houses dozens of pressed plants and herbs from the property. A neatly arranged collection of paper cake boxes contains her working materials, each labelled with a crab claw, feather or shell to denote the contents within.

Although she wasn't "burned out" – a change of wind direction saved everyone in the eastern sector – her artwork was displayed at Southern Ocean Lodge. She's since been asked by co-owner Hayley Baillie to design pieces for a new build, using items reclaimed from the ruins. On her studio decking sit buckets of rusty nails, snaking shards of solar panels and even circular casings from air conditioning units. "I could use those for an interesting commentary on climate change," she smirks.

Although visiting Flinders Chase after the fires was a shocking experience, the inadvertent environmental campaigner admits it was also strangely beautiful.



Winding Road on Kangaroo Island (taken in 2017) CREDIT: GETTY

"One minute I'd be thinking about what a nightmare scene it is, the next I was rummaging through upholstery staples and wondering what cool things I could do with them," she confesses.

Like many islanders, Janine says it's hard to fully comprehend what has happened.

"I calm myself down by thinking, in half a billion years, how many times has Flinders Chase sat there in ash? I rationalise the timescale rather than dwelling on the fact that in my lifetime I'll never see it grow old again. People go on and things will come back; it'll just be different."

While no one can deny a feeling of sadness and loss, it's unanimously agreed the park is, in its own way, "amazing". Epicormic shoots are already appearing in scorched areas, clothing branches with protective army-green sleeves, yacca plants are fanning rays of sunshine fronds, and globules of bright fungi sprinkle the forest floor like drops of tangerine rain.

Just as surprising is the fact that, contrary to dramatic images posted on social media, Kangaroo Island has not been wiped out by Armageddon. At Seal Bay Conservation Park, Australian sea-lions bathe on pristine sand, while mobs of modelesque roos (the local subspecies has a darker pelt, longer lashes and a softer jawline) graze wild flowers on the undulating clifftops of Pelican Lagoon.



At Seal Bay Conservation Park, Australian sea-lions bathe on pristine sand CREDIT: GETTY

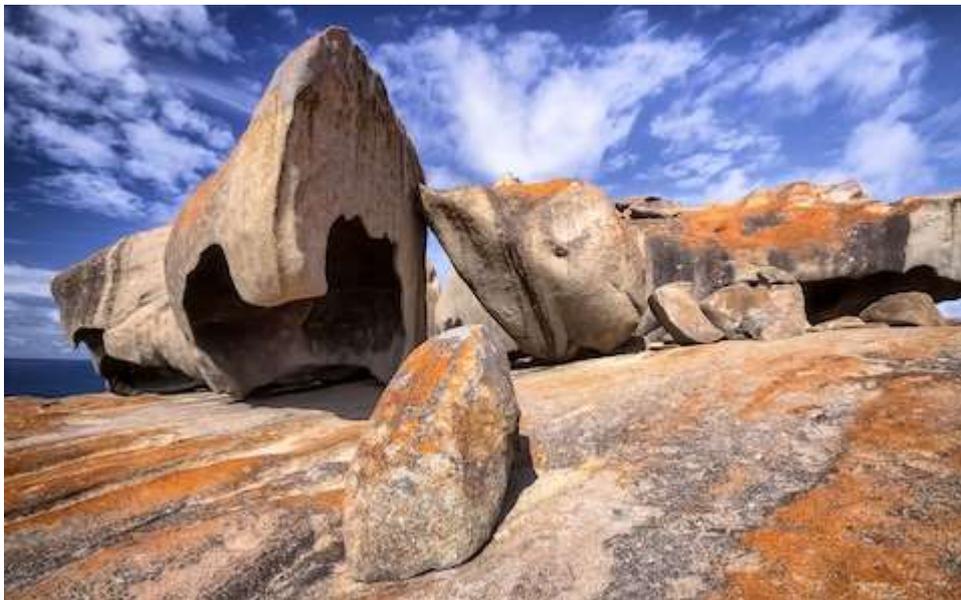
“We have granite rock formations just as impressive as Remarkable Rocks,” claims tour guide Tim Williams from Exceptional Kangaroo Island, which now offers an East End Explorer tour. “The fires have forced us to discover new areas of our island.”

But inevitable cancellations have been a blow to businesses dependent on tourism. Sarah and Jon Lark, of Kangaroo Island Spirits, who moved here from the mainland to set up Australia’s first craft gin distillery, noticed an immediate drop in visitors to their cellar door in Cygnet River. Contamination of their water supply, likely caused by ash and smoke, has also slowed down production.

Tim and Tamsin Wendt, who serve Kangaroo Island Spirits (KIS) O’Gin (awarded best contemporary gin at the International Wine and Spirits Competition last year) to guests in their two Oceanview Eco Villas, have also suffered a loss of bookings – hard going for a business in its first year.

Set on open paddocks overlooking a sparkling coastline, the property may have escaped fire damage, but flames have licked the couple’s front door throughout: Tim was an active volunteer for the County Fire Service and Tamsin’s psychology practice has been inundated with patients traumatised by recent events.

“KI is six times the size of Singapore, so we’ve still got three pristine Singapores intact,” reasons Tamsin. She remains optimistic and hopes tourists will return once the threat of coronavirus subsides.



Rock formations at Seal Bay Conservation Park CREDIT: GETTY

Providing high-end, environmentally sensitive, serviced accommodation, Oceanview is a natural fit for the temporary void left by Southern Ocean Lodge. Operating totally off-grid, villas feature deceptively wool-like carpets made from recycled fishing nets, a wormarium to break down compostable waste and clever placement of shadow-casting eaves to naturally cool the building. Attention to local detail is everything – from Ligurian bee honey served at breakfast, to bespoke-blended candles burning on the lip of cavernous bathtubs.

But aside from worthy credentials, it's the service and setting that makes this place so special. Whether watching roos bound through a quivering haze of golden grass or studying a sky studded with electrifying stars, it's a soothing introduction to quiet island life.

Most people, after all, come here to enjoy nature.

Remarkably, I've spotted more animals during my post-fires visit than previously: echidnas snuffling through the ashes of blue gum plantations void of understorey, wedge-tailed eagles locking talons in mid-air battles over carrion, and homeless glossy black cockatoos flocking to find new habitat.

Of course, there have been casualties: it's estimated that a billion wild animals were killed across Australia, and none has received more publicity than the koala.



The Australian wildfires affected many wild animals, including koalas CREDIT: GETTY

At Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park, the only local body licensed to care for these charismatic marsupials, park co-owner Dana Mitchell is surrounded by playpens filled with orphaned joeys. More than 600 animals have passed through here since the fires started. And while the flow of patients has been overwhelming, so too has the outpouring of public support – from AU\$2.5 million (£1.26 million) generated by a gofundme campaign, to donations of medical supplies and, oddly, hundreds of knitted mittens.

Bottle feeding clumsy koalas with one hand while placating a tired and tetchy toddler with the other, her balancing act is exhausting. When I ask how long the work is likely to continue, she matter-of-factly replies: “Years.”

Outside, a helicopter returns from a mission to recover koalas trapped in charred areas. The plan is to relocate them to other parts of the island with a better food source. “We were told to expect 10 per cent survival, but we’ve had about a 35 to 40 per cent success rate,” says Dana proudly. It’s testimony to the hard work she’s invested with her husband, Sam.

Prior to the fires, there were 60,000 koalas on Kangaroo Island; estimates suggest between 5,000 and 10,000 remain.

Controversially, some conservationists argue that it’s still more than the overexploited landscape can sustain. An introduced subspecies, the population started with 18 chlamydia-free individuals relocated from French Island in Victoria in the Twenties. Since then, they’ve decimated trees, stripping branches bare.

“People see koalas as icons of Australia, but we shouldn’t be promoting that for KI,” argues resident scientist Dr Peggy Rismiller, who manages the Pelican Lagoon Research Centre. “We should be championing our native animals and endemics.”

For more than 30 years, she has studied Rosenberg’s goannas (a type of monitor lizard) and short-beaked echidnas, introducing David Attenborough to the quilled digging machines when he came here to film *Life of Mammals* almost 20 years ago. He subsequently sent her a letter about a hedgehog living in his back garden in Richmond, she recalls.

“Echidnas have been around for 120 million years,” she says, praising the monotreme’s impressive survival skills, which include burrowing into the ground and allowing an inferno to pass over them. “They’ve been through fires, ice ages and greenhouse effects.”

A veteran of firescapes, she has no doubt the natural world will reset itself. “Australia was formed by fires, and every species we’re looking at now has been through them,” she says.

I’m inclined to agree. Nature is not and never has been the victim. It’s the warped corrugated roofs of houses, coils of broken fence wire and melted tractor chassis that really symbolise sadness – representing a loss of livelihoods and the fruits of decades of hard work.

What’s reassuring is the strength of community spirit, the willingness of people to donate time, tools and even spare summer houses to those who were “burned out”.

I’ve no doubt that same force of human nature will pull islanders through the dark tunnel of coronavirus, along with a willingness to accept that time doesn’t always move at our accelerated, modern pace. Whether this pandemic lasts three, six or even 12 months, it’s a fraction of our planet’s existence, a mere blip in the history of Remarkable Rocks; step back from the panic, and it’s only a fragment of our privileged lifetimes, too. Right now, we could learn a lot from *Enchilada the echidna*. Let’s be patient, hunker down, and wait for the flames to roll through.

## How to do it

Australia and the UK are currently on travel lockdown. Once tourism resumes, Audley Travel (01993 838 810; [audleytravel.com/australia](https://www.audleytravel.com/australia)) offers a 14-night trip, including two nights at Ocean View Eco Villas on Kangaroo Island and two days touring with Exceptional Kangaroo Island, from £3,825 per person (based on two sharing). The package also includes international flights into Adelaide and out of Sydney from the UK, four nights in the vineyard city of Adelaide, return flights to Kangaroo Island from Adelaide, a domestic flight from Adelaide to Sydney and five nights' accommodation in Sydney. See also [southaustralia.com](https://www.southaustralia.com)