

How Kangaroo Island hopped back into life

After being devastated by wildfires in 2020, one of this remote destination's most luxurious places to stay has reopened. Qin Xie checks in

It felt surprisingly emotional to be back at Southern Ocean Lodge, the South Australian hotel that was reduced to rubble when wildfires swept through Kangaroo Island in 2020. When I visited 16 months ago, it was still a building site surrounded by scorched vegetation. But now, after a two-year, £28.5million rebuild, the Lodge has reclaimed its cliff-top position, with every floor-to-ceiling window amplifying the sublime turquoise and ivory crescent of Hanson Bay below.



▲ A rescuer carries a koala as part of the fire recovery operation in January 2020



Essentials

Qin Xie travelled as a guest of Tourism Australia, the South Australia Tourism Commission and Southern Ocean Lodge (00 61 2 9918 4355; southernoceanlodge.com.au), which offers suites from £1,757, all inclusive, with a minimum two-night stay

Sunshine, the kangaroo sculpture by Indiana James, was back in its usual spot in the lobby, but subtle improvements were everywhere. The suites, arranged in a row downhill from the Great Room (the aptly named amphitheatre lounge), have been repositioned for a better view while maximising privacy. There is a much expanded spa with sauna and plunge pools; and the fire prevention and suppression systems have been given an upgrade, alongside sustainability initiatives such as solar panels and water conservation. Ocean Pavilion, a four-bedroom mega-suite set apart from the rest of the hotel, now caters for larger groups. New artworks have been created from objects recovered from the rubble.

For a famously remote hotel, SOL 2.0 has also become surprisingly well connected. "We have Starlink satellite, Wi-Fi and 4G," John Hird, the hotel's long-time manager, told me with the kind of enthusiasm you would expect from someone who has won the lottery. It is with good reason – after all, the new technology would allow him to control the property's sprinkler system from anywhere in the world. "So in the event of a fire, we will evacuate the whole place. There will be no one staying behind. Unlike last time."

The fire season dubbed "Black Summer" was traumatic to say the least.



A particularly hot summer meant Kangaroo Island's eucalyptus forests were kindling-dry. When lightning from electrical storms struck in December 2019, sparks exploded into an inferno so hot it created its own weather system. It was only a matter of time before the flames were licking at the rust-brown front door of Southern Ocean Lodge; the hotel was surrounded by conservation land that blended into Flinders Chase National Park, the point of origin for one of the fires.

Hird was one of six people left behind to start the sprinkler system once all the guests and most of the staff had been evacuated. The thinking was that,

should anything go wrong, four people could carry a stretcher while one person attended the injured. Fortunately there wasn't a need for that – the bunker underneath the Great Room survived the fire storms that devastated the rest of the hotel. Even Hird, who had undergone heart surgery a mere two months earlier, escaped relatively unscathed.

The rest of the island wasn't so lucky. By the time the fires finally stopped burning in February 2020 thanks to a change in wind direction, almost half of the island had been scorched and tens of thousands of animals had died. It was the most devastating blaze on record.

The Australian bush thrives on fire –

◀ Take in panoramic views from Southern Ocean Lodge

▶ Back from the brink: a kangaroo at Cape du Couedic

it depends on it for regeneration, for seeds to germinate. But even knowing this, the first fire ecologists to visit from other parts of Australia thought it would be decades before the landscape here could recover. Kangaroo Island's resilience surprised everyone.

Within days of the flames dying down, different types of fungus were already growing, altering the pH levels of the soil as they digested the ash. This almost imperceptible change in the environment meant that other organisms could start establishing themselves, eventually making way for bigger plants. In fact, scientists saw the reappearance of species that hadn't been recorded in decades, whose seeds had been waiting patiently for the exact right conditions to germinate. What probably made the biggest difference, according to the biologist and long-time resident Mike McKelvey, was the fact that Kangaroo Island didn't have any rabbits to devour new growths.

When I last visited Kangaroo Island, Craig Wickham – who had been spearheading eco-tourism through his company Exceptional Kangaroo Island – took me to areas that were completely devastated by the fires. Wildlife was everywhere, from echidnas (a quill-covered



a new ecosystem; insects used hollowed-out trees for food and shelter, while birds nested in the branches.

I revisited some of the same spots, as part of Southern Ocean Lodge's included signature experiences, and the change was even more remarkable. Patches of wildflowers on either side of the boardwalk leading to Remarkable Rocks and nearby Admiral's Arch were now meshed together into a fine carpet. At Bunker Hill Lookout, the sea of yakkas that dominated the landscape was now obscured from view by other plants; the only evidence of their existence a sign explaining that they responded to fires by "flowering profusely". Even in Flinders Chase National Park, the scorched branches have been weathered to silver, with fresh leaves crawling up their sides. In a year or two, these too will be swallowed up by the new life erupting all around them.

mammal) digging for insects on the side of the road to koalas stripping eucalyptus leaves from branches. At dawn and dusk, mobs of kangaroos emerged from their hideouts to graze on verdant hillsides and birdsong rang out from the bushes at every hour of the day.

It was only when we drove deep into Flinders Chase National Park that I started seeing blackened branches penetrating the new growth, and clearings in which the only thing left standing were the fire-resistant yakkas (Australian grass-gum trees) with their aerial-like flower spikes piercing the sky. It was eerie, with a post-apocalyptic air. But even here, life was trying to create

When you look at all that has changed, Southern Ocean Lodge's reopening is just a small part of the island's post-fire regeneration. But it is also symbolic of its rebirth; because until the hotel's original opening in 2008, few had heard of Kangaroo Island, not even South Australians. The Lodge simultaneously reimagined luxury travel in Australia and put this island on the map. Its triumphant reopening is keeping it there.

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