

TIME TO PARTY
Catch carnival season in the south of France | **C3**



life

TRAVEL JOURNAL
Mother of two recharges on her first solo trip | **C4**

A STAR IS BORN
Performers wow judges at ChildAid concert audition | **C5**



The Conscious Traveller

Adapting to a drier Down Under

Visit biodynamic wineries, spot wildlife and take part in back-to-nature experiences at these lodges changing with the climate in South Australia

Carolyn Beasley

SOUTH AUSTRALIA – The open-sided Land Cruiser vehicle creeps along the stony ridge, twin tyre tracks scratched into a precarious mountaintop and illuminated in the late afternoon rays.

Tussocks of spiky grass and grey saltbushes dot steep hillsides, and far below in the dry creek bed, mighty river red gum trees stretch their roots deep, towards underground moisture.

We stop at sunset for gin and tonics, and our guide points out the jagged Elder Range, part of South Australia's awe-inspiring Flinders Ranges.

A robust euro, a type of hill kangaroo, bounds over the rocky slope, and on the way back to our lodgings at historic Arkaba Homestead (experiencearkaba.com), an emu leads eight teenage chicks through the scrubby plains.

Many animals would not survive here. South Australia is the driest state in the driest inhabited continent, and 80 per cent of the state receives less than 250mm of rainfall a year. To put that in perspective, Singapore receives more than 2,100mm a year.

Like everywhere else on the planet, the climate here is changing, and South Australia is becoming drier, hotter and more prone to

dangerous bushfires. Tourism is just one sector that needs to adapt, and I am visiting three of the state's best-loved lodges to see how they are managing.

My first stop is the more than 24,000ha Arkaba Conservancy, a former sheep station purchased for conservation in 2009. The soil had been overgrazed to dust and compacted by hard sheep hooves, and heavy rains would cause serious erosion.

The present owner, Wild Bush Luxury, destocked all sheep by 2014, and aims to use low-volume,

high-yield tourism to pay the conservation bills. Instead of hooves, the hiking boots of visitors now tread lightly through this craggy wonderland.

The homestead offers rustic luxury, with gourmet meals and drinks, guided bushwalks and four-wheel-drive safaris included (A\$1,995 or S\$1,810 a night for two people).

Besides guides, Arkaba Conservancy employs a conservation manager, Mr Bruce Lawson.

"We've planted over 200 trees already this year, mostly around the

homestead in these badly eroded gullies," he says. He explains that planting trees will not only repair erosion and encourage water to seep into the impoverished soil, but the shade will also lower temperatures. In the near future, guests will have the option to help with planting.

Mr Lawson keeps a running total of the homestead's daily water use from the rainwater tank, seeking early warning of any faulty systems. His blackboard details other conservation measures under way, such as the removal of 780 destruc-

tive goats and five feral cats in 2024.

On a late afternoon drive, he shows me one of his camera-monitoring sites. These are motion-activated and mostly used to detect invasive feral cats and foxes.

The cameras also reveal rare beauties like the western quoll, a shy, native, cat-like animal that was locally extinct until recent reintroductions by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the neighbouring national park.

Beside a spring-fed waterhole, Mr Lawson points out positive

tracks of wading birds and tiny native rodents, plus ongoing challenges like rabbits and the neighbour's runaway sheep.

Upon his favourite peak, we gaze out at the surrounding countryside. The border of this property is evident – where the vegetation ends and the dust begins. Although nature's recovery takes time, it is clear that allowing the land to heal strengthens its resilience.

Keen to learn more, I drive four hours south to Barossa Valley, one of Australia's great wine regions, and check in to The Louise (thelouise.com), a luxury lodge with 15 suites that immerses guests in vineyards and fine-dining (from A\$1,150 a night for two people, including breakfast, degustation dinner with wine pairings and a mini-bar).

The Louise offers a variety of tours, and I have chosen two that demonstrate how winemaking can be climate-aware.

I begin my first experience by meeting Mr Marco De Martino, winemaker for Tsharke Wines and my guide for the Taste the Ethereal experience (A\$350 a person, 2½ hours).

In his four-wheel-drive, we reach a hilltop overlooking the Tsharke vines and chat about biodynamic winemaking.



Arkaba Homestead, Flinders Ranges

Arkaba Homestead in Flinders Ranges offers gourmet meals, guided bushwalks and four-wheel-drive safaris. PHOTOS: ARKABA

CONTINUED on C2

Emus are among the wildlife that inhabit South Australia's scrubby plains.



Rebuilding after damage and disaster



Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, burnt to ashes by bushfires, was rebuilt and reopened in December 2023. PHOTO: GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS

FROM C1

“You can’t just ask Mother Nature for everything and never give back,” Mr De Martino says.

Here, giving back includes enriching the soil and vines with natural biodynamic preparations, including cow manure that has been stuffed into cow horns and buried; planting nitrogen-enhancing cover crops such as clover and vetch; and managing weeds without chemicals by mowing under the vines. Biodiversity is encouraged, enhancing nature’s resilience.

“We’ve planted over 600 natives across the property,” Mr De Martino says. “We want to create more shade so kangaroos, snakes, birds can all co-exist here.”

As I sip, I learn that in response to the warming climate, Tschärke is shifting production towards the lighter and fruitier grape Grenache, away from the region’s hero, Shiraz, which is darker, more robust and peppery.

As Shiraz ripens earlier, it can require harvesting in February, when the temperature can climb to 40 deg C.

“The fruit is cooked,” Mr De Martino says. He adds that Grenache is harvested in milder conditions in late March or April.

At Alkina, billed as another regenerative and biodynamic winery, I take part in the Polygon Experience (from A\$100 a person for two hours), which includes a tour and tasting of rare wines accompanied by a cheese and charcuterie board in an impeccably restored farmhouse.

In an Australian first, Alkina is scanning its vineyard using electrical conductivity mapping, yielding fine-scale information on soil types across the property.

To demonstrate the variations in



Visit colonies of long-nosed fur seals and Australian sea lions on Kangaroo Island. PHOTO: TOURISM AUSTRALIA



Southern Ocean Lodge, Kangaroo Island

The granite cluster known as the Remarkable Rocks on Kangaroo Island. PHOTO: GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS

GETTING THERE

Fly to Adelaide on Singapore Airlines (singaporeair.com). Take a 40-minute flight to Kangaroo Island on Qantas (qantas.com) or a two-hour ferry ride with Sealink (sealink.com.au).

The Louise is around one hour from Adelaide Airport and best reached by hiring a car. Rental starts at about A\$100 a day. From the airport, it takes 4½ hours to drive to Arkaba Homestead.

geology, we venture behind the tasting room, descending steps into a soil pit, where Mr Dan Coward, director of sales and education, hands me a pick.

He encourages me to whack the walls of schist, clay and limestone, observing their differing densities and water-conducting properties.

Based on the geology, the vineyard is now split into small polygons, and single polygon wines are made in very small batches of about 800 bottles each.

“What we really love is the differences it creates in the wines,” Mr Coward says, as he pours me a sample of several single polygon wines, all Grenache to withstand the heat, but with varied tastes.

Armed with science, caring for the soil and vines as an interconnected entity will be advantageous in a changing climate.

For a different perspective, I rise early for Breakfast with the Roos (A\$200 a person for 2½ hours), a guided walk through Kaiserstuhl Conservation Park, about half an hour from The Louise.

After our picnic breakfast, we spot our first western grey kangaroo,

some with adorable babies, munching grass and lifting their heads to eye us.

I see where bushfires have passed through, and how parts of the Australian bush have recovered, where the fire was not too severe.

One place that has suffered from severe fires is the 440,000ha Kangaroo Island, located 15km off the mainland. It was catastrophically burnt in bushfires in early 2020. The fire claimed the lives of two people and an unknown number of animals.

To see the effects for myself, I board a 40-minute flight from Adelaide. The fire burnt almost half the island, including 98 per cent of the national park, although signs of recovery are showing in the form of new growth on trees.

Also making a recovery is Southern Ocean Lodge (str.sg/zict), from A\$3,060 a night for two, based on a three-night stay, including all meals, drinks, signature experiences and airport transfers).

Reduced to ashes during the fires, the off-grid lodge was rebuilt and reopened in December 2023.

As before, it serves superb local cuisine, and the self-service cellar, packed with fine South Australian wines, remains.

While the lodge occupies almost the same footprint, there are technical differences here that seek to future-proof the building, especially as the severity and frequency of fires are increasing as climate change intensifies.

Maintenance manager Steve Evans explains the logistics of running a luxury property atop a cliff on a remote island, and some newer additions that ensure the longevity of the lodge.

For instance, the property now has around 5.8 million litres of water storage capacity, and tanks are filled with desalinated groundwater and captured rainwater.

“Given the roof area of the lodge and other buildings, for every millimetre of rain that falls, we collect over 10,000 litres of water,” Mr Evans says. One million litres are reserved for firefighting, but all the tanks can be directed to firefighting if needed.

New cameras provide a 360-degree view of the surround-

ings to spot any fire that might be advancing and, importantly, the firefighting sprinkler systems can now be controlled remotely.

The building is more impervious to fire too. A concrete footing around 600mm deep prevents embers from lodging under the building.

Despite the advanced technology, the biggest design change was simply the plants.

Previously, the lodge had eucalyptus trees, rich in flammable oils, right beside the building. After the fire, a makeshift nursery was established on site and 40,000 native plants cultivated.

Most of these plants are lower ground covers, especially those with fleshy, fire-retardant leaves, providing a 20m buffer around the lodge.

Signature experiences such as The Wonders of Kangaroo Island engage guests in nature, such as the striking granite cluster known as the Remarkable Rocks, and visits to colonies of long-nosed fur seals and Australian sea lions.

But perhaps the most revealing activity is the Nocturnal Explorer

walk (A\$90 a person for 1½ hours). In a pocket of nearby bushland, we stroll by torchlight, learning about the plight of the local wildlife during the fires, and their recovery journey. As if on cue, an adult female koala climbs down a tree in front of us, waddling across the ground to find a new tree.

She is an adorable, fluffy reminder of what is at stake. Climate change is visible all around us, and tourism must do what it can to address a situation that no one can afford to ignore.

stlife@sph.com.sg

• The writer was hosted by Luxury Lodges of Australia.

• Carolyn Beasley is a freelance travel and environment writer, formerly based in Singapore and now residing in Perth, Australia.

• The Conscious Traveller is a series on responsible travel that does good for the community and environment. For more travel stories, go to str.sg/travel



The Louise, Barossa Valley

The Louise in Barossa Valley is a luxury lodge that immerses guests in vineyards and fine-dining. PHOTO: GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS



Find out about biodynamic winemaking at Tschärke Wines in Barossa Valley. PHOTO: JULIAN KINGMA



Breakfast with the Roos is a guided walk through Kaiserstuhl Conservation Park. PHOTO: JOHN MONTESI