

Wild and wonderful



ALAMY

A new trail on Kangaroo Island is a bushwalker's delight

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I'm expecting some surprises when I arrive on Kangaroo Island, but I'm not expecting my first one to be a pair of eyes staring up at me from inside a rather whiffy wheelee bin when I throw away my backpack's baggage tag.

I'm an hour's drive from Kingscote airport, at Flinders Chase National Park in the southwest corner of the surprisingly large island, 13km off South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula. The young brushtail possum snoozing on a black rubbish bag doesn't like being disturbed and gives a startled snarl. National Parks SA ranger Alison Buck observes my first encounter with the local wildlife with interest, but not surprise. "Welcome to Kangaroo Island," she says with a shrug.

It's the starting point for the South Australian government's new \$5 million Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail, a project aimed at bringing more tourism to Australia's third largest island. The trail is a 61km five-day, four-night hike along a remote stretch of coastline, unique in its biodiversity, and one that until now has been largely inaccessible to visitors. Laden with supplies, I pick my way along the track from the Flinders Chase Visitor Centre, sidling the famous platypus waterholes. Although now happily at home, the platypus isn't actually native to the island. Like many animals it was introduced in the early 20th century to supplement a struggling mainland population. Kangaroo Island in this sense functioned as a kind of ark, while its own native species evolved subtle distinctions from their mainland cousins.

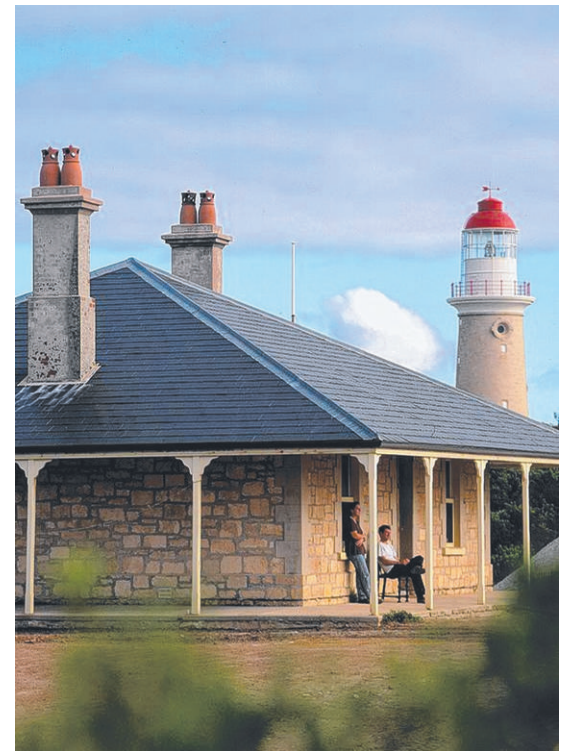


DEPARTMENT OF WATER, ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES

But today is all about the flora. It's a wildflower wonderland, a parade route of exploding colour. The island is home to 891 species of natives, including 85 wild orchids. This western region of Flinders Chase was devastated by an uncontrolled bushfire in 2007 but has regenerated well. The island has no rabbits or foxes and, combined with its rich and varied soil types plus the fact much of this area has never been farmed, it makes this remote corner a hotbed of biodiversity.

I meet up with a hiker from Darwin named Chris, and his teenage son, Ira. Chris tells me they always take their holidays in cool places, to escape the oppressive heat of the north. As if on cue a mean wind whips the trees into a demented sway, a sudden sun-shower wets the petals of the wildflowers, and we stride out a bit faster towards our first night campsite at Snake Lagoon.

Remarkable Rocks in Flinders Chase National Park, main; Cape Du Couedic lighthouse and cottage, top right; on the wilderness trail, above



Four campsites have been specially constructed for the trail, although self-guided hiking and camping is just one option. You can choose a guided tour, camping with your guide at the sites, or stay in off-park accommodation each night, with transfers back to the trail in the morning. The campsites feature impressive landscape architecture, with 24 tent platforms constructed in the bush, minimising environmental impact. Each site has its own compacted dirt path, and at busy times the campgrounds hum with atmosphere as hikers gather in the solar-powered communal kitchen and dining areas to share trail stories. But I'm happy to dine alone under the sugar gums, amid the golden whistlers, New Holland honeyeaters, shy heath wrens, grey fantails and the beautiful scarlet robins with orange breasts that flicker like torches as they dart between the branches.

Day two heads south to the coast. Not long after leaving camp I cross the pristine Rocky River (and sample a delicious gulp) and climb a small headland to my first view of the Southern Ocean. The southerly hits me flush in the face as I stride the tops, following the trail down to Maupertuis Beach. The next 15km are along the sand, with dunes to my left, nothing but wild ocean until Antarctica on my right. The sea has tossed out a considerable array of nautical debris — coiled rope, buckets, buoys, a gumboot. Out to sea a squall gathers intensity. The sky blackens and waves crash at my boots, the sea foaming at the mouth, wind scattering shells and knocking shorebirds off balance, sending them tittering along on spindly legs. Four rare hooded plovers brave the wind to forage on the sand, and a pair of sooty oystercatchers fly low, skimming the waves.

After leaving the beach I climb back on to the cliffs and my destination for the day, Cape du Couedic lighthouse, pokes up its head. It's a wild and windy hike along the tops, through hakea, banksia and weathered, lichen-coated rock. Cruelly, the lighthouse never seems to get any closer, but eventually the trail bends inland and into the sheltered haven of Hakea Campsite.

Tonight though I'm taking a break from the tent and staying in a restored lighthouse cottage at Cape du Cou-



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