

A LAND

FROM THE VERDANT GREEN VINEYARDS OF ADELAIDE TO THE ARID BUSHLAND BEACHES OF THE EYRE PENINSULA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA IS WHERE AUSTRALIANS CHOOSE TO HOLIDAY. **KAREN EDWARDS** GETS TO KNOW THE LOCAL PEOPLE MAKING SMALL-SCALE TOURISM A BIG SUCCESS.

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backdrops is impressive. Low-key and far from overwhelmed – this state is its own best kept secret.

'When you come to South Australia, especially the Eyre Peninsula (EP), you get the real Australian experience,' suggests local tour operator David Doudle. 'Essentially, the great outdoors is what we're all about but we can give people a mixed bag of experiences because we have everything here – the wildlife, the landscape, the beaches, the lifestyle.. it blows people away. You won't get this anywhere else in Australia.'

David, a former grain farmer and sheep shearer, set up Australian Coastal Safaris in 2005. It took another five years or so before he

took the plunge away from farming altogether, to work full time organising and leading tours around the EP. Now based in Port Lincoln, the peninsula's largest city, David is able to showcase the highlights of the region through bespoke itineraries.

From visiting fish farms and learning about the local agricultural land, to stopping for coffee in family-run cafés, Australian Coastal Safaris makes it a part of their programme to uplift other local businesses. 'When we started, there were no tour operators available on the Eyre Peninsula. It's taken years to work out what appeals here,' he explains. 'After some trial and error, we created three- to five-day itineraries, where

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Australian Coastal Safaris can take you to many of the secret beaches on the Eyre Peninsula.

LEFT:
Horseback riding on the beach.

BELOW:
Exploring another secret beach on the Eyre Peninsula with Australian Coastal Safaris.

RIGHT:
Finishing the day with a campfire and cookout.



The lukewarm sea is lapping at my feet as I sit, legs outstretched, in the gold sand. It's a quiet Sunday afternoon on the west coast of the Eyre Peninsula; the sun is high in the cobalt sky, and there isn't a single cloud to be seen. To my right, a man stands with a can of lager in his hand next to his teenage son, both holding fishing lines in the water. A nearby esky – or cool box – filled with ice awaits their catch. 'Got another one!' the boy bellows as he presses the rod handle against his chest to vigorously wind in his reel. 'Nice one, mate – that's tea sorted,' his dad replies, smiling.

Other than our small group of friends and this father and son, there isn't another soul on this sprawling beach. A few weeks ago, in the height of the school holidays, it would have been a different story, with local families joining friends and neighbours by the sea to cool down under the scorching summer sun. 'Only the locals really know about this spot,' my friend Lisa had said earlier as we started the descent through the bush, picnic blankets in hand. 'It's a bit of a secret.'

As an honorary resident, thanks to my husband growing up here, I've been fortunate to visit many of South Australia's 'secret' spots over the last eight years. What I've learnt is that it's the very existence of places like these that makes South Australia tick. More so, the community bond that takes place against such



we show people the best of the EP according to their interests.

'Then, at the end of the day, we light a fire and have a happy hour out in the bush, serving local beer, wine or gin and a platter of locally produced food. The crackle and scent of the fire is special because most people don't usually get to experience that. We sit back to the sound of the birds singing or, on a clear day, maybe the thump of a kangaroo tail hitting the ground as it hops around, perhaps even the odd koala grunting. It's all nature, nothing is scripted.'

Spanning from the Simpson Desert in the north to Kangaroo Island in the south, South Australia covers 203,227 square miles of south-central land. Within that vast area lies a variety of environments including the towering fossiliferous limestone cliffs of the Great Australian Bight, the temperate grasslands around the Murray River, the semi-arid cereal and sheep farms of the Yorke and Eyre Peninsulas, and the central Flinders ranges.

When the settlers arrived in December 1836 – almost 50 years after the colonisation of the east coast at Botany Bay – there was a

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM THE TOP:
Aunty Angelena and Nicola Palmer at Watervale Hotel; Nicola Palmer, chef at the Watervale Hotel, sourcing produce from the on-site gardens.

THIS PAGE FROM THE TOP:
The tasting room at Koerner Wines; The Koerner vineyard in Clare Valley.



strong desire that this province would be built on free immigration, refuting the convict history of other already-established Australian cities such as Sydney, Hobart and Brisbane. This brought a more diverse settlement to the region, with the British Government agreeing that this new colony would be a place of religious freedom and progressive civil liberties.

As was the case throughout much of Australia, however, the arrival of the European settlers brought conflict and disease to the local Indigenous population, the Kurna people, who had been living off the land around what is now Adelaide for at least 40,000 years. Over the next few decades, the Frontier Wars resulted in the death of an untold number of native Australians, with the ancient Kurna culture almost completely destroyed.

More than 200 years on, the country still struggles to fully acknowledge the devastating consequences that colonisation brought to its Aboriginal communities. However, there are local changemakers who are determined to advance the narrative. Warrick Duthy and his partner Nicola Palmer – owners of the Watervale Hotel – are two such business owners who tell me just how valuable Aboriginal know-how has been in transforming their small, local pub into a popular, sustainably run eatery. The couple work closely with Ngadjuri elder Angelena Harradine, known as Aunty Angelena, in learning about the land around them.

Much like the Kurna communities, the Ngadjuri also lived off vast expanses of land, with their traditional ground stretching from Gawler, in the south of the state, to the Flinders Ranges in the north. Watervale falls within Ngadjuri Country.

'The Ngadjuri people were seasonal migrators with an incredibly important spiritual understanding of the 'Watervale Valley,' says Warrick. 'They moved between six "food bowls" of land – between the Barossa Valley in the south to the Southern Flinders Ranges in the north – managing each of those "bowls" as a sustainable source of food and nutrition. They did this every year, for over 40,000 years. We have so much to learn from them, especially around land management.'

'The Ngadjuri talk about the "little people" in the soil. What they mean is there is life in the soil and if you don't respect that life, your

plants will get sick and people won't get fed. It's a lesson from ancient times that is an essential part of food sustainability. Everything comes down to the quality of the soil.'

With this understanding, Warrick and Nicola teamed up with biodynamic farmer Jared Murray to create a working organic farm, Penobscot, that uses permaculture growing principles. This commitment to regenerative agriculture has been the backbone of the farm-to-plate restaurant's success.

'Aboriginal people have been underrepresented despite being here since ancient times,' explains Warrick, who opened

THERE IS STILL A CALMNESS AND SERENITY WHEN YOU WALK ACROSS OUR LAND.



LEFT:
A koala among the trees.
ABOVE:
Kangaroos at Coffin Bay.



the Watervale Hotel to become a space for healing and reconciliation events between the Ngadjuri and Watervale Valley communities. 'Now it's time to start listening because there is so much to understand about sustainable living from their way of life.'

The Watervale Hotel menu offers a changing daily menu packed with fresh vegetable and fruit dishes from Penobscot farm. The meat and poultry are sourced from nearby farmers, Martindale and Greenslades, allowing for not only a local but an ethical and traceable supply chain.

Executive Chef Palmer, known as Watervale's 'low-waste, no-waste ninja', constantly looks at how produce can be used efficiently. 'If we use cauliflower heads in our dishes, we look at whether we can make kimchi out of the leaves,' Warrick tells me. 'And while we haven't bought a tomato in four years, Nicola has learnt how to dehydrate, ferment and preserve products to create tomato sauces, relishes, smoked relishes, and pickles.'

The wine, of course, mostly originates from the nearby Clare Valley, as well as

South Australia's other wine regions including McLaren Vale, Riverlands, Coonawarra, the Barossa Valley and the Adelaide Hills. More than half of Australia's wines are produced in these areas, typically on family-run estates.

Koerner Wines was started by brothers Damon and Jono who, as children, witnessed their parents running a successful grape-growing business. Curious to see what they too could achieve within the wine industry, Damon Koerner studied viticulture and oenology at Adelaide University before launching a family business that would not only grow grapes, but also lead the wine-making process.

'In 2014, we bought some fruit from local grape growers and made 180 cases of wine,' says Damon. 'Now we've just finished our tenth vintage, and we've produced nearly 300 tonnes of wine, which is over 20,000 cases.'

South Australian wines 'reflect the place from which they come', according to Damon. The Clare Valley Riesling, for example, has a 'soft, chalky character' as the grapes are mainly grown in limestone, while the Chardonnay is 'tight and lean-bodied with a denser flavour'

THE UNTOUCHED COASTLINE STRETCHES FOR MILES, SOMETIMES WITHOUT ANOTHER SOUL IN SIGHT.



in homage to the heavy clays, sandstone and ironstone of the Adelaide Hills. The reds – a Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon from Clare and a Gamay and Pinot Noir from the Hills – are light, fresh and fruity. 'We try to get our wine into the bottle with minimal interference,' Damon tells me. 'We only add a little sulphur dioxide as a preservative because we have to, but a quality product always comes from the best quality terroir.'

You can find Koerner wines at local restaurants around Adelaide and the surrounding wine regions. The Stanley Bridge Tavern is great for a bottle of local Chardonnay and a chicken schnitzel (schnitzel) burger, Damon says, while the Crayfish Hotel pairs perfectly cooked steak with a great local Pinot Noir. 'I think the Covid-19 pandemic showed us just how self-sufficient we can be as a state,' he adds. 'Even when our borders were shut, local businesses continued to do well by supporting each other.'

The brothers also run a small cellar door facility at Gullyview Vineyards on their Clare Valley family estate. Open on weekends and public holidays, it's ideal for couples and small

groups. In the Adelaide Hills, appointment-only tastings – where visitors can also take a short tour behind-the-scenes – are an intimate way of learning about this humble winemaking process.

'Our parents taught us to respect everyone involved in the process, and work together – and we do that really well,' says Damon. 'We want to make wine that will help people remember South Australia and what they have seen here.'

Further south, in the Barossa Valley, that sense of community is just as strong. This is where a 19-year-old John Howard Angas settled in 1843, establishing a 20,000-acre farm. The challenge today, says John's great, great granddaughter-in-law Jan, is in maintaining the same small-scale, family-run farm in an ever-changing, consumer-facing world.

'There is still a calmness and serenity when you walk across our land. People who come to stay with us often say it's like stepping into a past world,' she tells me, with a smile.

'We are still a mixed farm, although today we are much smaller. We grow different

ABOVE:
The endless sands at Coffin Bay.

RIGHT:
Memory Cove.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hutton Vale Farm in the Barossa Valley; The farm has different varieties of sheep, used for both meat and wool; Surveying the landscape at Hutton Vale Farm.

Photo Credits: South Australian Tourism Commission, Australian Coastal Safaris/Isaac Freeman, Watervale Hotel.



varieties of sheep for meat and wool, as well as chickens, crops, an orchard, a vegetable garden and a substantial vineyard. When our lamb goes to local restaurants, such as Harvest Kitchen and FINO Seppeltsfield, or Anchovy Bandit in Adelaide, our history and experience is shared on the menu so people can understand where their food comes from.

While it is tempting to choose just one production line to focus on, which tends to make more money, the Angas family relish farming on a smaller scale because it keeps them 'connected to what the food and landscape are about'.

Those words ring true in every aspect of South Australian life. This isn't a state

overflowing with flashy attractions and ultrachic hotels to draw in tourists. Instead, it remains faithful to its roots – inviting travellers to immerse themselves in the local culture, fully and unapologetically.

South Australia, I've learnt, is a place where the untouched coastline stretches for miles, sometimes without another soul in sight, where friends gather at the local football club on a Saturday night to celebrate the community's sporting heroes, and where wine tastings operate out of tin sheds on the side of the road.

This is a place where normality thrives – and that's more special than you can ever imagine.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, is served by domestic and international flights.

BEST TIME TO GO

The shoulder seasons of spring (late September to November) and autumn (late February to April) are recommended for daily sunshine with less scorching temperatures.

CURRENCY Australian dollar

TIME ZONE GMT+10.5

FOOD

Most menus serve freshly caught seafood, and locally sourced meat dishes such as steak and lamb, with seasonal salads and vegetables.

WHERE TO STAY

The Watervale Hotel offers stays at their one-bedroom Penobscot farmhouse; in the Barossa, Hutton Vale's cottage and camp-style accommodation is ideal for families and couples. Australian Coastal Safaris has a four-bedroom beachfront property in Port Lincoln.

HOW TO DO IT

For a full taste of South Australia's wild surroundings, spend at least two to three nights in the Barossa Valley, Adelaide Hills and Clare Valley, before exploring the vast Eyre Peninsula.

MUST-PACK ITEM

A reusable bottle – tap water is safe to drink here.

WHY GO

South Australia is the state Australians themselves love to visit, thanks to its quintessential laid-back ethos. It's the place where travellers and hosts become mates over a beer – and where small, community-run businesses are the backbone of the tourism industry, so you know your tourist dollar is going to the right place.

The Responsible Traveller by Karen Edwards is published by Summersdale and available now.