Roos of the Game

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI hops over to Australia's Kangaroo Island and contemplates a change of pace

ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE

I so want the life Tim Williams has. He drives people around Kangaroo Island, showing them local colour that comes in the shape of kangaroos and koalas, seals and sea lions. He takes off from work every Wednesday to go sailing with friends. He stops the jeep every few miles to check on his beehives and coo lovingly over his pet bees. And he owns a home by the beachfront, where he watches a parade of penguins every night. Yeah, so I want that life. And the penguins. Above all, I want a daily penguin *adda* in my backyard.

I know all this within an hour of being on Kangaroo Island. I have just gotten there after a terrifying half-hour flight from Adelaide on a wobbly 34-seater. Tim, my tour guide from Exceptional Kangaroo Island, meets me at the tiny airport. Just as we drive out, two kangaroos cross the road in front of us. They look startled for a moment—just as startled as I feel—and then scamper into the bushes. Of course, when I say scamper, I mean they go hop, hop, hop like a couple of awkward but adorable kids on pogo sticks.

I can't hope for a better welcome. And I am sold on Kangaroo Island. Or KI, as I have begun to think of it. Just like a local.

KI is Australia's third largest island, spread over 4,400sqkm, with 4,500 residents (and according to unsubstantiated reports, over 70,000 kangaroos). Tim keeps up a steady commentary as we drive along deserted roads, pointing out wallabies hiding in the bushes and koalas dozing on tops of trees, young ones tightly tucked into their pockets. We also stop for the occasional kangaroo; marsupials have right of way on these roads.

One-third of all land on KI is devoted to National and Conservation Parks. And Tim is taking me on a tour of some of them. First stop, the Lathami Conservation Park. KI is home to over 250 avian species, but they dedicate the Lathami Park towards the protection of one single subspecies: the Glossy Black Cockatoo, of which less than 250 remain. You cannot say Kangaroo Islanders don't take their birds and animals seriously. Sadly, the cockatoos are all in hiding, but

TOURISM AUSTRALIA/RICHARD POWERS

Seal watching at Seal Bay; and (facing page) hoppy residents of Kangaroo Island

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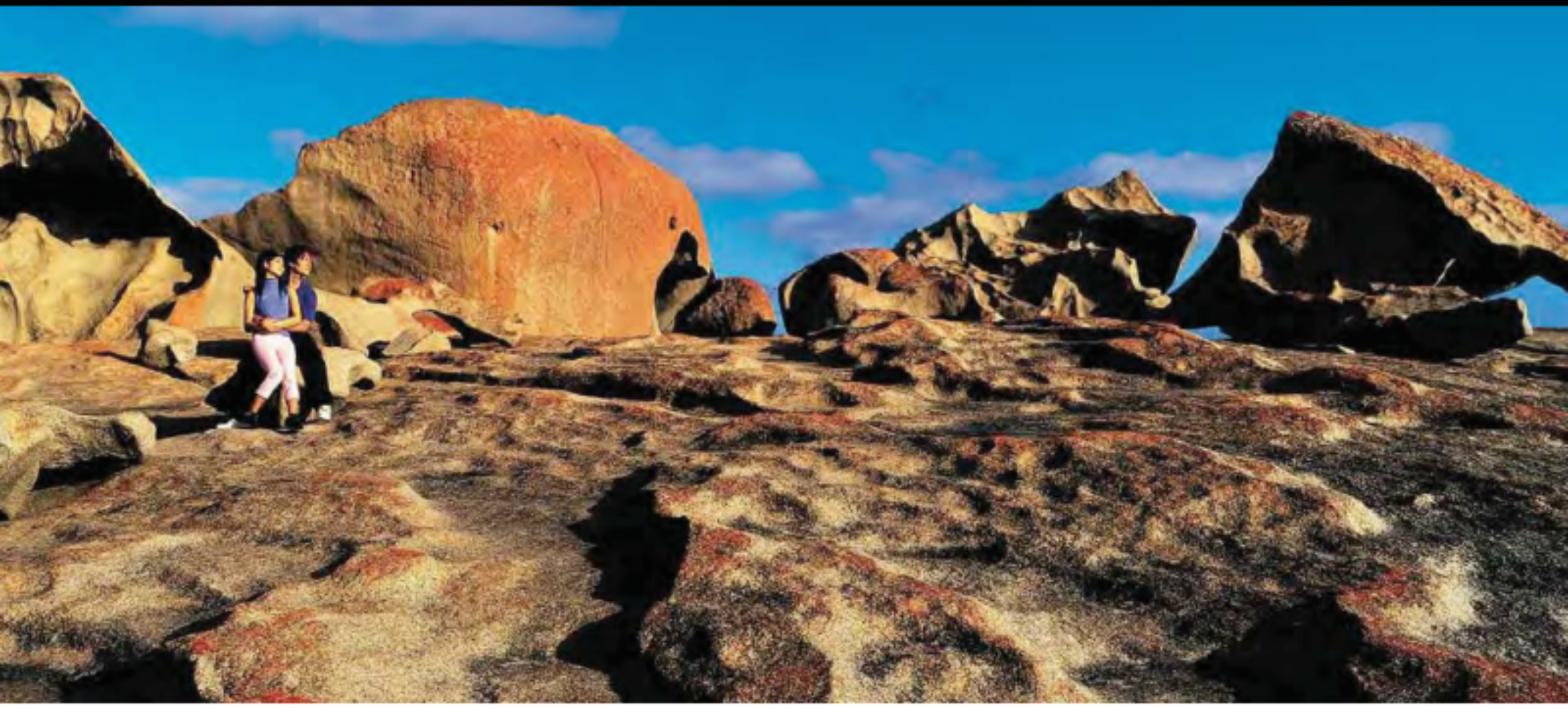
I spot my first echidna, the local "fast tongue" anteater, with its deceptively glossy blonde spines.

On to Seal Bay, where over 1,000 Australian sea lions are working on their tan on the powder white sands. The gulls keep up a steady cacophony, descending and taking off in a big flock. But nothing disturbs the siesta of this colony of sea lions. If they were nearly hunted to extinction in the 19th century, today they are protected and admired from a distance. Although Tim takes me down to the beach, visitors are usually allowed to watch only from the viewing platforms on the boardwalk. A few pups are frolicking in the water in the manner of young ones everywhere. Watching them at play,



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I find it hard to believe that sea lions can get aggressive.

Later that evening, I sit with a drink at the Great Room of the Southern Ocean Lodge looking out at the giant waves crashing below. There are plenty of lounge chairs scattered around this large circular room with floor to ceiling glass windows, directly overlooking the Southern Ocean. And an open bar. I think life cannot get better than this.

Ditto for my suite—not quite circular but think infinite sea views stretching all the way to Antarctica. And a minibar stocked with wine from local vineyards, and champagne. Like the other 20 in the Lodge, this suite is named after a shipwreck that once occurred on this highly turbulent coast. Someone with a macabre sense of humour but also a classy sense of style has been at work here: along with the sophisticated music system and luxury spa products, there are books on these shipwrecks. Not ideal bedtime reading, so I fall asleep to the sounds of the ocean.

At Cape du Couedic, Tim points to the lighthouse built over a century ago. "You can stay here at one of the keeper's cottages, but chances are, you won't see any shipwrecks"

Top: Dali-esque rock formations at Flinders Chase National Park; and (here) the Southern Ocean Lodge

TOURISMAUSTRALIA/ADAMTAYLOR

In the morning, I find it tough to drag myself out of the daybed on the terrace but Tim tells me that more roos await. And some Remarkable Rocks. These weirdly shaped enormous granite boulders are one of the main attractions at the Flinders Chase National Park. Eroded by natural forces over five hundred million years, they now look like something designed by Salvador Dali specifically for the South Australia Tourism Department.

Down the road, at Cape du Couedic, Tim points to the lighthouse built over a century ago. "You can stay here at one of the keeper's cottages, but chances are, you won't see any shipwrecks these days," he says with a straight face. However, naval disasters are not on the minds of modern-day visitors to the Cape du Couedic. They come to see the Admiral's Arch and the colony of New Zealand fur seals nestling on the rocks below. Admiral's Arch is stunning, with stalactites hanging from the roof, framing the ocean for those perfect photo-ops.

To my untrained eye, the New Zealand fur seals, also native to Australia, look similar to the sea lions at Seal Bay. Tim says their fur is much finer and thicker, which made them the target of hunters till conservationists raised the alarm. Since I am not about to stroke their necks to verify this, I take his word for it. My other learning from this seal watching session is that during the

summer months—peak breeding season—fierce territorial battles take place. But right now, there seem to be enough rocks to go around.

KI also prides itself on being the original land of milk and honey within Australia. Of the local population, most of those who are not directly engaged in the tourist trade are producers or traders of cheese, milk, honey, wine, meat and fish. At the Southern Ocean Lodge, every meal consists almost exclusively of gourmet local produce. At breakfast, I feel like I am in a scene out of a Wodehouse novel, as I tuck into "eggs laid by contented hens" à la Bertie Wooster.

I leave KI clutching a small bottle of Hooroo, a local Ligurian honey, a farewell gift from the Lodge. The accompanying note says that Hooroo! is Aussie-speak for goodbye, see you later. Oh well then, Hooroo to you too, Roo Island.

A languorous koala at Lathami Conservation Park

MARTIN ZWICK/AGE/DINODIA

THE INFORMATION

GETTNG THERE

Fly Qantas (other airlines also fly this route) to Adelaide from Mumbai or Delhi (approx ₹62,000 round trip, economy). Then connect to Kingscote KI Airport on **Regional Express** (from A$240 round trip; **rex.com.au**). There's also the cheaper 45min luxury ferry (A$47) from Cape Jarvis to Penneshaw KI (the coach drive from Adelaide to Cape Jarvis takes a couple of hours; A$26); more information at **sealink.com.au** and **tourkangarooisland.com.au**.

VISA

Tourist visas can be obtained from the Australia Visa Application Centre (**vfs-au-in.com**), managed by VFS branches at various cities (₹8,600, allow two weeks for processing).

CURRENCY

1 Australian dollar (A$)=₹57

WHERE TO STAY

The **Southern Ocean Lodge** (from A$1,050 per person per night, inclusive of all meals and beverages; **southernoceanlodge.com.au**) is undoubtedly KI's most luxurious and exclusive option. If you are looking for a unique experience, stay in one of the heritage cottages at the **Cape du Couedic Lighthouse** (from A$212; **southaustralia.com**).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

KI offers exceptional wildlife sightings and related activities, great food and wine trails, and adventure options that include quad biking and watersports.

TRINANKUR BANERJEE

Exceptional Kangaroo Island (**exceptionalkangarooisland.com**) offers a range of tours, including a food safari and a 'KI for kids' on 4WD vehicles with experienced guides.

If you are out exploring on your own, look for 'Eat Local' signs (**eatlocalsa.com.au/regions/kangaroo-island**) to enjoy the best of local food.

• CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

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