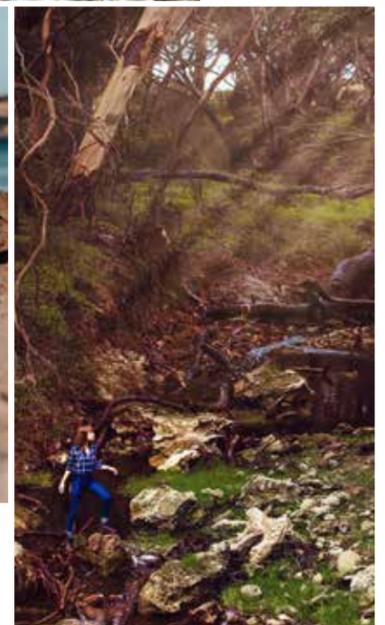




# RISING FROM THE ASHES

*Kangaroo Island is known as 'Australia's Galapagos' due to the rare sub-species of fauna and flora found there. Following the devastating fires of 2020, this spectacular destination is slowly rebuilding and reclaiming its heritage.*

WORDS BY KERRY VAN DER JAGT



**T**he bees are back. While some are waltzing between wildflowers, others are packing their saddle-bags with pollen. All are a miracle of sting and wing and flight. All are rejoicing in the flush of a floral smorgasbord that has erupted across Kangaroo Island in the wake of the 2019-2020 bushfires.

"We are seeing so many new flowers coming through," says my guide, Nikki Redman. "I feel like sitting in the middle of it all and meditating, just to feel the raw energy of it."

I'm with Redman, a senior wildlife guide of Kangaroo Island Odysseys, on their one-night, one-day 'Road to Recovery' tour. We've stopped at Vivonne Bay where the fires burnt all the way to the beach, threatening the town and destroying Vivonne Bay Lodge. Stepping amid the charred landscape, we discover a froth of white daisies clinging to the ankles of blackened boughs like lace petticoats.

Twelve months after the 'Black Summer' fires burnt almost half the 4,400-km<sup>2</sup> island, including more than 1,000 commercial beehives, the good news is that there is now enough feed for the remaining 3,000 or so hives.

"It will take six to eight years for the fire-affected trees to begin to flower again," says Redman. "But beekeepers are getting by with wildflowers, plus flowering trees from the unburnt, eastern end of the island."

**Far left:** The crystal clear waters of picturesque Vivonne Bay.

**Clockwise from top:** Epicormic growth springs from the trunks of charred trees; A glossy black-cockatoo; Willson River on the Dudley Peninsula; Playing on the beach in Penneshaw; Admirals Arch in Flinders Chase National Park; A Ligurian bee about to land on a lavender flower.

## BEE SANCTUARY

Introduced in 1884 from their home in Italy, Kangaroo Island's Ligurian bees are believed to be the species' purest strain left in the world. Mild-mannered yet industrious, their survival is critical for genetic diversity and global food security. So much so, that since 1885 the island has been a dedicated bee sanctuary.

Kangaroo Island, which lies fewer than 14km off the southern coast of South Australia, about 110 km southwest of Adelaide, is also a vital refuge for rare birds and marsupials.

Cut off from the mainland about 10,000 years ago, the remote and pristine island has earned the moniker of 'Australia's Galapagos', because of the unique species and sub-species that evolved in isolation after sea levels rose.

In recent months, 24 hatchlings of the endangered glossy black cockatoo have been found amid the torched landscape, the critically endangered

PHOTOGRAPHY: AS WE WANDER: HEIDI LEWIS; DREA CHONG; @A.SIMPLE.MEANDERING



Kangaroo Island dunnart has been detected by sensor cameras, and the re-discovery of the thumb-sized pygmy possum has made world headlines.

Yet big questions remain. Can fire-adapted plants recover when heated beyond tolerance? What have we learnt about future fire management? And what does the future hold for tourism?

**IN THE LINE OF FIRE**

January 3, 2020, is the day seared onto locals' minds forever: the day staff at the luxury Southern Ocean Lodge huddled in a bunker as a firestorm raged overhead; the day that road signs melted like in a Salvador Dali painting; the day that animals were vapourised, not merely burnt.

Unprecedented in range and ferocity, capable of jumping 24km in a single bound, the January fire burnt almost the entire western half of the island over a three-week period. "It moved like a tornado," says Redman. "It was unpredictable. Unstoppable."

The dragon wasn't spent until it had taken 100,000 head of livestock, 276 vehicles, 89 homes and, sadly, two human lives. Estimates suggest half the island's 50,000 koalas may have perished. My heart trips and falls when I hear these numbers.

Heading west, we enter a landscape of pineapple-shaped grass-trees and torched mallee trunks glowing phosphorescent green.

"After the fire, it felt like Armageddon," says Redman. "But to see the recovery is amazing. You can almost hear it growing."

Under Redman's tuition I learn that mallee trees regenerate by epicormic growth, an adaptive strategy in which dormant buds are triggered by fire. Other species such as



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NIKKI REDMAN

banksias have woody seedpods, which open after fire and release seeds into the post-fire environment.

Yet, it's not all flowers and honey in the burnt bush. In recent years mega-fires are burning hotter, with greater intensity, occurring over larger areas and starting earlier in the season. Human-induced climate change is real, and some species such as the native green carpenter bee may also be in trouble. Extinct on mainland South Australia and Victoria, this "jewel of nature" is found only in a few sites on Kangaroo

At Seal Bay, visit 1,000 sea lions in their natural habitat.

**This page, clockwise from top left:** Recovering grass trees with their green hula skirts; Sabrina Davis started Humans of Kangaroo Island; Cape du Couedic Lighthouse in Flinders Chase National Park; Waves & Wildlife Cottages in Stokes Bay; The Kangaroo Island koala population was halved by the fires.

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** Kangaroo Island Spirits in Cygnet River; Amadio Wines in Kingscote; The Oyster Farm Shop in American River.

Island, and in conservation areas around Sydney. "They nest in the dry flowering stalks of yaccas and in the trunks of old banksia trees," says Redman. I learn that while yaccas (*Xanthorrhoea*) recover relatively quickly, banksias take many years.

From a high lookout inside the Flinders Chase National Park (of which 96 per cent burned) stands of mallee catch the sun's beams, each tortured limb reflecting the light as a pewter sword.

Stripped of vegetation, the land reveals its ancient bones – all knobby dunes and generous curves – a unique anatomy that has remained hidden for years. At my feet, a mini forest of bottle-green grasses stretches to the edge of the indigo sea. "There's an artistic beauty to the regrowth," says Redman. "I think everyone should have the opportunity to see this."

**COMMUNITY EFFORT**

Just like the honeybees, the island community is working together for the common good. Local resident Sabrina Davis started Humans of Kangaroo Island, a Facebook page

dedicated to telling stories about the island's people. "The blog has helped me mentally," says Davis, who lost everything in the fires.

"Talking to others and hearing about their tough times and their happy times helps a lot."

I meet Davis in the front paddock of her father-in-law's farm near Kingscote where, a year and a pandemic later, she is still living in a shed with her young children. Out of necessity her husband has remained on their property some 100km away, living in an emergency pod as he rebuilds their farm. "A lot of families lost their homes; we aren't the only ones," she says, a stoic sentiment I hear repeated many times.

The sun is warm overhead as we chat about her fundraising project to equip volunteer farm fire units with vital personal protective equipment. Since the fires, many of the units have needed to replace jackets, goggles, boots, gloves and masks in anticipation of the new

**HOW TO GET THERE & WHERE TO STAY**

Four ferries depart daily from Cape Jarvis on the mainland for the 45-minute trip to Penneshaw on Kangaroo Island. There is also one daily flight (30 minutes' duration) from Adelaide airport to Kangaroo Island airport. Accommodation options include everything from bed & breakfasts, backpacker hostels and camping grounds, to luxury retreats. [tourkangarooisland.com.au](http://tourkangarooisland.com.au)

season. "Through Humans of Kangaroo Island we've raised enough money to equip more than 150 units," she says. When Davis talks about the support she has received, from locals as well as strangers overseas, she becomes visibly emotional. I, too, struggle to hold back tears.

"And then COVID-19 hit and we were told to stay at home," she says, so quietly I can barely catch her words. "But I don't even have a home."

I ask what we can do to help. "We need visitors to come back, to show their support. The people are still here, with their big hearts and big smiles. The beaches are still here; they haven't changed."

**REBUILDING THE ECONOMY**

The Road to Recovery tour highlights some of the island's best beach experiences, from walking amongst wild Australian sea lions at the Seal Bay Conservation Park to weaving through a labyrinth of rock tunnels at Stokes Bay.

Jo Podoliak, director of tourism and economic development at the Department of Environment and Water (DEW) and National Parks and Wildlife Service, tells me that more than 70 per cent of the Flinders Chase National Park is now open and available, including all of the park's iconic features.

The remaining 30 per cent is still in the consultation stage to allow time to decide what the park's 're-imagined' future might look like.

"The demand for nature-based tourism [in a safe and supported way] is growing," says Podoliak. "In

addition to a new visitor centre, we plan to add a bridge over Chapman River at Antechamber Bay and more campsites at Murray Lagoon."

The big news for the park is that a modified version of the Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail is now open to enable walkers to complete the trek through a series of day walks (which must be booked through a licensed operator), with \$10 from each walker going towards conservation programmes. "The autumn and spring walking season this year will be fantastic," says Podoliak.

The entire island is a hive of activity. Baillie Lodges founders James and Hayley Baillie are working on plans for the rebuild of their flagship property Southern Ocean Lodge.

"We've collectively worked hard to clear the site, so it's now in a wonderful phase of regeneration, with carpets of green shoots running through the landscape. It feels quite symbolic of good times ahead."

Other businesses are also optimistic, from the Western KI Caravan Park and Wildlife Reserve, which has rebuilt and reopened after losing its camp kitchens, office, shop and three cabins – to Islander Wines, which has already seen a 70 per cent recovery of its decimated vines.

Kangaroo Island Spirits, makers of the world's best contemporary gin (with the 2019 medal to prove it) is forging ahead with plans for a multi-million dollar upgrade, while by 2022 the island will boast a world-class, carbon-neutral 18-hole golf course – The Cliffs – to be built near Pennington Bay.

Even the stately 112-year-old Cape Du Couedic lighthouse is getting a fresh lick of paint.

Our lunch stop is a simple picnic on the grounds of the Western KI Caravan Park, where co-owner Fiona Jago joins us to talk about her experience during the fires. As my eyes water, I look up to see a young koala sitting in the fork of a tree branch, its ears tinged gold in the dappled light. "This tour is about regrowth and rebirth," says Redman. "It's the chance to watch nature set its restart button."

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Hollywood star Matthew McConaughey joined with Australian communities during the 2020 bushfires to help affected families and protect the devastated wildlife population. [mindfood.com/mcconaughey-heroes](http://mindfood.com/mcconaughey-heroes)



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