
The beautiful south

Beaches, wineries, wildlife... a magical trip down the Fleurieu Peninsula to Kangaroo Island in South Australia.

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6 MINUTE READ •  1

Mooching south through the Fleurieu between paddocks and vines, window down, summer on the breeze, I can almost taste the briny tang of the sea. Just 45 minutes from Adelaide, this holiday playground peninsula is necklaced with pretty beaches and there's a beguiling sense of ease to the place, something to do with the heady combination of sun, surf and wine.

The endlessly variable landscape stretches from the vineyards of McLaren Vale to a dramatic folded coastline further down the Peninsula and across to the popular seaside towns of Port Elliot and Victor Harbor (cue horse-drawn trams and whale watching). The quaint river port of Goolwa, near the Murray Mouth, recalls the heady days of the paddle steamer; if, like me, you're a fan of cockles (or pipis), plan lunch at Kuti Shack tucked into the dunes on Goolwa Beach. The Fleurieu's beaches have an old-fashioned family air (notwithstanding the annual Nude Beach Games at Maslins). You can drive onto the sand at Aldinga to set up a little beach bivouac, but this early in the season the southern waters are a bit chilly for a dip; lunch seems a better idea.

So we're diving into the Vale along roads lined with wild olive trees bound for Coriole Vineyards. The cellar door is hidden among lush gardens, the air heady with the scent of lavender and rosemary. Lunch is a leisurely affair, our table affording long views over the vines, as young chef Tom Tilbury fashions deceptively simple dishes using local produce (who knew carrots could be so interesting). Just as charming is the 1851 Salopian Inn, where the menu takes its lead from chef Karena Armstrong's enormous vegie garden.

You'll need a day or two for wine touring (and noshing) starting at the bottom of Old Willunga Hill, the leg-breaking finale to the annual Tour Down Under UCI World Tour cycling event. Near here we're dropping by the highly regarded Battle of Bosworth, then on to one of the newest outfits, Down the Rabbit Hole, where wine tasting takes place in an old upcycled double decker bus and a young crowd lounges languidly on picnic blankets on the lawn tucking into platters of pickled veg, local cheese and croquettes. Across the Vale, Samuel's Gorge is a different kind of cool, housed in an 1853 shed stuffed with vintage curios. Beyond the lawn there are deep and arresting views into the Onkaparinga River National Park, best contemplated with a glass of tempranillo.

From rusticity to the modernist Italian sensibility of Primo Estate for a flight of wine, accompanied by home-baked bread, in a cellar door so elegant it might be in Milan. We're now on McMurtrie Road, in the Vale's heart; from here little roads head in all directions dotted with dozens of cellar doors. Book a weekend tasting at the funky Alpha Box & Dice, where the artfully antiquated cellar door is the perfect spot for a cheese plate. Or the surrealistic d'Arenberg Cube, reminiscent of an outsize Rubik's rising above the vines.

Car boot loaded with wine, we set off down the coast road via pretty Normanville and Carrickalinga, both with long beaches and stunning views. I love this country, so eloquently depicted in filmmaker Scott Hicks' *The Boys are Back*: dramatic golden hills dropping to little sheltered beaches, wild and almost inaccessible, a rolling coastline best seen from the water.

A neat segue onto the Kangaroo Island ferry, departing from Cape Jervis at the tip of the peninsula. It's a short crossing, around 45 minutes, but it can be lumpy. The 16km-wide Backstairs Passage seems to generate its own weather; today there's mist and the island's shores emerge mysteriously.

We may not have travelled far but something curious happens when we step ashore: mainland worries melt away and time slows. Kangaroo Island (KI) has always seemed to occupy a parallel universe, this Covid year especially. Winter rains have hastened recovery from last summer's bushfires and on the unaffected eastern end of the island it's business as usual. And great coffee as usual at Millie Mae's Pantry just up the road from the ferry terminal in Penneshaw, set in a pretty garden, where sixth-generation islander Jan whips up delicious cakes and brekkies.

I'm obsessed with the idea of a French alternative history for this part of the world (the Fleurieu was named for Charles Pierre Claret de Fleurieu by French explorer Nicolas Baudin, who spent time on KI). My first stop is always Frenchman's Rock on Penneshaw Beach, where the crew sank a well and released pigs (descendants survive to this day). American sealers followed; at American River we drop by the Oyster Farm Shop, a cute little shack that might be in Brittany, for freshly shucked oysters and smoked mussels (tours and tastings available).

Even if you're self-driving I suggest you join a guided tour or two. At Penneshaw, Elijah from Kangaroo Island Ocean Safari has us out on one of those wave-jumping vessels where you straddle the seat as though it were a hobby horse. We skim by the rugged coastline to visit sunbaking seals and a resident pod of friendly dolphins.

On the island's south coast, Seal Bay Conservation Park is home to more convivial critters. On a wildly beautiful beach cuffed by bushy dunes, handsome Australian sea lions haul ashore to sleep or just hang. From the visitor centre a boardwalk crosses the dunes; be sure to look down – mums and bubs often doze in the shade of the structure, cuddled together like adorable, fat lapdogs. Accredited guides lead visitors onto the beach to quietly observe these beguiling creatures; pups frolicking in the surf, huge males lumbering up the beach like heavy machinery. The scene is so enchanting, I could linger for hours.

But we're back onto the island's ragtag roads (driving mindfully; there's wildlife galore), visiting the stunning surf beach at Pennington and the long white sand beach at beautiful Emu Bay. I've packed a picnic lunch but you might prefer the excellent Sunset Food and Wine near Penneshaw or a fish taco at the charmingly raffish Cactus in Kingscote. And this summer some of Adelaide's leading chefs will be serving lunch within the verdant, dappled "rooms" of the sprawling "Enchanted Fig Tree" in Middle River (gastronomodining.com.au).

KI has several excellent cellar doors but we might have hit our wine-tasting limit so it's a cleansing ale at Kangaroo Island Brewery, where former builder Mike Holden has fashioned a lovely tasting room from salvaged materials. He's typical of a coterie of inventive islanders. Jon and Sarah Lark founded Australia's first dedicated gin distiller, Kangaroo Island Spirits, almost 20 years ago using native island botanicals; last year they won the world's best contemporary gin at The International Wine & Spirits Competition in London. With new owners and the Larks overseeing production, a new multimillion-dollar distillery and tasting room is set to open next year. A great vote of confidence in an island busily rebuilding and as magical as ever.

GREAT STAYS

Fleurieu Peninsula

The Vineyard McLaren Vale

Six self-contained villas in a hilltop vineyard near leading cellar doors; two "cadoles" are inspired by the small winery buildings of the northern Rhône. From \$395.
thevineyardmv.com.au

Beresford House

Luxury stay in a remodelled 19th century house. At one end the romantic Reserve Suite for two; at the other the Grenache Villa for six from \$800 per night.
beresfordhouse.com.au

CABN

Off-grid pods long on style. The diminutive Georgia has vineyard views and stargazing through a glass ceiling; Matilda nestles near a forest popular with mushroom foragers. From \$209 per night. cabn.life

Kangaroo Island

Hamilton House/Dune House

Cool family-friendly beach houses above gorgeous Emu Bay. Sleeping six, Hamilton House has renovated 1960s cred; Dune House, also for six, tucks into a dune with direct beach access. From \$800 per night. hamiltondune.com.au

Oceanview Eco Villas

A pair of off-grid luxury villas above dramatic Redbanks Beach. Each fully hosted villa sleeps four in two double suites stocked with local wine and goodies. From \$850pp per night. oceanviewkangarooisland.com.au

One Kangaroo Island & Walcowrie

Absolute beachfront luxury on the north coast. Two five-bedroom retreats offering meals by a private chef. One KI from \$1150pp per night; self-catering Walcowrie from \$1500 per night. onekangarooisland.com

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