



KANGAROO ISLAND EDITORIAL (700 Words)

By Jim Healey

‘Surprising’ is one of travel’s more over-exercised adjectives. But a fact is a fact – and Kangaroo Island leaves first-time visitors genuinely surprised.

“I had no idea it was so big...”

You can fit the whole of Greater Sydney – from Bondi to Penrith – into KI, and not once, but three times. Tip to tip, the island is 155km, a changing landscape of cliffs, conservation reserves, wilderness protection areas, rivers, pastures, winelands, farms, country towns and unique features like the ‘Remarkable Rocks’ and ‘Little Sahara’ inland dunes.

This sense of vastness is underscored by two things. Firstly, by the abundant wildlife which thrives in spaces suffering few of the mainland’s perils and pressures. And secondly, by the low human population.

KI is home to just 4,400 people, or about 1 person for every square kilometre. Like island people the world over, Kangaroo Islanders are proud of their home and their heritage, and get real pleasure from hosting visitors. And like good hosts, they’ve got great stories to tell...

Not least of these is the history of their island. Archaeological evidence indicates Aboriginal people lived here some 16,000 years ago, but it was uninhabited when Matthew Flinders landed in 1802 and named it for the animals harvested by hungry sailors. After Flinders, Kangaroo Island was occupied by roguish sealers, escapees and traders, before Nepean Bay was established in 1836 – no less than the site of Australia’s first free European settlement.

Today, visitors can explore former whaling stations, historic lighthouses and maritime history (the Shipwreck Trail has some 50 wrecks). And another surprise: the pleasant town of Kingscote with its pelican feeding, night time penguin tours and laid back cafes and pubs was actually the first capital of South Australia.

As for the agricultural heritage, it's alive and well, with wine, honey, dairy, seafood and meat being among the island's largest exports. Some of the producers of Kangaroo Island also make for real attractions: wineries like Dudley and Sunset are idyllic places with stunning vistas; the Ligurian bee is unique to the island and hard at work at Clifford's Honey Farm and Island Beehive; the famous hand-made cheeses from Island Pure Dairy are derived not from the milk of cows, but sheep; and the island's earliest primary export, eucalyptus oil, is still produced at Emu Ridge Distillery.

Because Kangaroo Island has resisted the advances of wholesale commercial farming, much of the countryside is picturebook-pretty, helped considerably by the fact that islanders have conserved their bushland. This is why some visitors marvel at how 'natural' it feels, with bush-lined roadsides winding their way through most of the Island, only allowing an occasional glimpse at the farm-land behind.

Kangaroo Island continues to be famous for its animal and plant populations, still some of the 'purest' and most prolific in Australia. The carefully managed National Parks on the island – occupying almost a third of the island – enjoy relative isolation from predators, and as a result, native animals are quite literally part of the scenery.

Some animals are easy to locate, like the pelicans, penguins, seals (the huge sea-lion population at beautiful Seal Bay is one of several colonies) and the infamously-prolific koalas. Others, like the wallabies, kangaroos, echidnas and heath goannas might require a dusk walk along a country road, while the elusive platypus, Peregrine falcon, the rare Kangaroo Island dunnart or the stunning leafy sea dragon will require some specific local knowledge or a guide.

And part of the pleasure is undoubtedly heading into a remote environment and investing care and time into finding animals never seen by the great majority of Australians.

So perhaps it's this sense of space and privilege that's the real surprise, causing people to say "I really had no idea...".

With 450km of coastline, it's not difficult to find a beach where the only footprints are those left by wallabies, a place where you can lie at night in warm white sand and watch shooting stars. With 2,250 hectares of bushland, you can wander lonely trails and truly get back to nature.

Hideaways like Lifetime Private Retreats and tour operators like Exceptional Kangaroo Island can take you into places of astonishing natural beauty and let you simply be part of them. While staying in historic cottages like May's Cottage in Flinders Chase National Park or the light keepers' cottages beside 19th century lighthouses, you can sit out at sundown – just as people have done for nearly 200 years – to savour the sounds and smells and solace.

So Kangaroo Island is growing as a true destination of escape, a place where you can lose yourself and rediscover what's important. And in an increasingly busy world, it's hardly surprising...