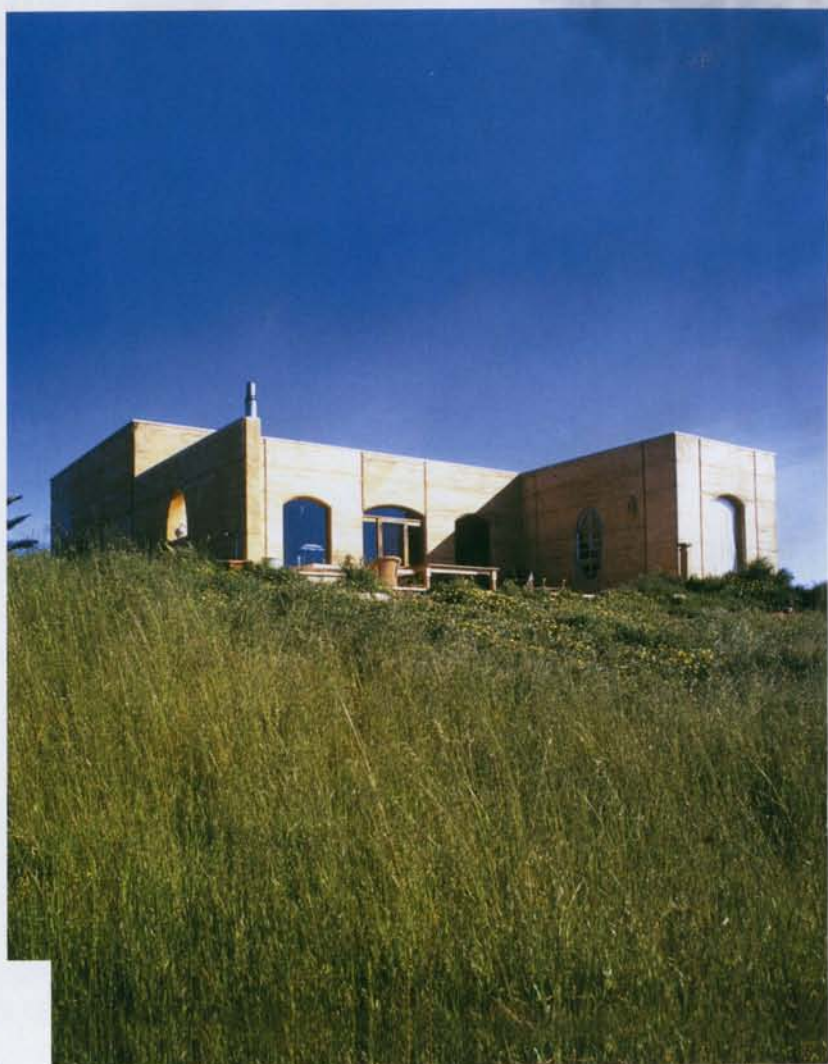


ROOM CHECK

BY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH



Larger Than Life

A stylish island retreat offers untamed Australian scenery and plenty of grown-up fun

IT'S BEEN 30 YEARS SINCE I BELIEVED IN THE ENCHANTED Forest, the Land of Oz, and the Mad Hatter. A weekend sojourn to Rachel Hannaford's Lifetime Private Retreats on Kangaroo Island in South Australia changed that. This island getaway is re-igniting grown-ups' sense of fantasy fun, and doing it with style.

Just click your heels together three times—or if that doesn't work, take the plane. Kangaroo Island itself is a half-hour flight from Adelaide. Touch down at Kingscote airport and throw your watch away. This may be the third largest island off the coast of Australia, but it's no metropolis. A third of it is dedicated national parkland and the local industry is divided neatly between farming and tourism.

Lifetime Private Retreats sits on secluded Snelling Beach on the island's northern shore, where there are no prying eyes to break the spell. There's only one neighbor, and he lives across the Middle River, more a trickling creek, that runs into the sea. The drive in is a dusty one, along winding roads of rich red earth watched over by kangaroos, possums, and wombats.

Surrounded by rolling green hills and emerald

ocean, Lifetime is the Hannaford family's personal holiday enclave, a 40-hectare estate passed down through three generations. Lady Prue Holden (of Australia's famous automobile-making family) is the matriarch who still presides over all and sundry on the occasional weekends that she makes the sojourn from Adelaide. She and her husband first set up camp here in the mid-1950s, and in time their daughter, Belinda Hannaford, brought the grandchildren, Rachel and Nicholas, to play among the wildlife. Sixty years after her family created this beachside sanctuary, Rachel Hannaford has opened its doors to the world.

Each of Lifetime's three houses has its

HIGH STYLE Top, from left: A view from the terrace at the Sky House, which is perched dramatically on a hill above Snelling Beach.

ROOM CHECK

own distinct style and is peppered with artwork created by the Hannaford family and inspired by the location. Cliff House overlooks the western end of Snelling Beach, with stone steps that tumble down to the sand. A circular turret reminiscent of a fairy-tale castle houses a round bed upstairs; below this is a lounge area with faux-fur rugs and an open fireplace.

Sky House is a kilometer up the hill, a perch that affords sweeping vistas. A romantic, Tuscan-style deck makes the most of the views, and is adorned with sundials should you wish to keep track of



ROOM WITH A VIEW The tower bedroom at the Cliff House overlooks the western end of Snelling Beach.

the time (you won't). Last in the trio is the three-bedroom Stone House, which sits behind Snelling Beach's undulating dunes. Here, corrugated iron and stone reference Australian bush-style architecture, softened by a maze of tiny courtyard gardens.

The door to Cliff House is ajar as I pull into the driveway. Candles line the entryway, leading me into a glass-walled room fronted by a broad deck. With each step I am thrown back in time by the aroma of freshly baked popcorn. When booking into Lifetime guests are given a questionnaire to fill out. The questions

seem puzzling, often quirky, but now they make sense. What is your favorite smell from childhood? Popcorn was my answer. What is your favorite music at the beach? It's the soulful jazz that's playing now throughout the house.

Like a child at Christmas I run from room to room, not sure where to go first—out onto that porch perched above the ocean, or into the sunken lounge, where a fire is already burning in the hearth? I have the place entirely to myself—like pixies, the staff have set the scene and disappeared without a trace. There's a fully stocked open bar and I pour myself a liqueur, dropping my bags inside the turret and munching on handmade chocolates on the deck. Then, as if on cue, a dolphin appears offshore.

Dinner is served in the Shearer's Shed at seven. It's no ordinary shed: enter its doorways and behold a Bedouin tent of deep burgundy, dripping candelabra, thick woven Turkish carpets, and church pews framing a banquet table set for supper. The pixies, it seems, have been here too. Lashings of ginger cocktails are served and my fellow guests from Sky House and Stone House clink glasses as we dine on seven courses of local produce cooked by Rachel Hannaford herself. Crowned by a fiery mane of red hair, her mother Belinda joins us for dinner and enlivens the party with tales of growing up on the island. In another life the Hannaford family would have been destined for the theater.

This is a winter's night; had it been summer, we would have dined inside the hollow of an enormous fig tree with the same theatrical flare. Food has a great sense of ceremony at Lifetime. There's Sunday "drunch" (a cocktail-fueled lunch of leftovers from the previous night's feast) in the beachfront boat shed that doubles as a private taverna. Croquet and afternoon tea are served on the lawn in front of the Shearer's Shed at guests' leisure. Moveable feasts ensure that bush walks end on a cliff top with a picnic laid out, baskets of food at the ready, no one to be seen.

Upon return to my turret after dinner I find evidence of the pixies again. They've left lollipops on my bed and a big, thick dusty illustrated book open at Alice's

Fact File

Kangaroo Island

WHAT TO SEE About the size of Bali and with a population of fewer than 4,500, Kangaroo Island is a mecca for nature lovers, almost as unspoiled as it was the day British navigator Matthew Flinders stepped ashore in 1802. Australian fur seals roll about on the beach at Seal Bay, while Flinders Chase National Park serves up the Remarkable Rocks, a jumble of granite boulders carved out of the cliff top by winds and rain over the eons. All this wild bushland, open fields, and azure seas has inspired a thriving gourmet-produce industry; cheese makers, honey farms, and vineyards can be found along the island's winding tracks.

GETTING THERE Rex Airlines (www.rex.com.au) flies from Adelaide to Kangaroo Island daily. Alternatively, Kangaroo Island Sealink (www.sealink.com.au) operates four daily passenger and vehicle ferries between Cape Jervis on the mainland and Penneshaw, on the island's eastern peninsula.



Adventures in Wonderland for me to read. On the questionnaire I had written "if I had more time, I would read more," and the pixies make sure I do.

There's yoga at eleven the next day where guests stretch and bend and reach for the sky. The most I reach for is the breakfast tray that arrives at my front door. The day is spent with the sand between my toes, cool surf washing away what's left of my urban blues.

Lifetime Retreats is a true oasis for stressed city folk who have lost their sense of play. I swear I saw the Tin Man and Tweedledum at my window on my last night; then again, it could have been the daiquiris at drunch. ☺

LIFETIME PRIVATE RETREATS *Middle River, Kangaroo Island, South Australia;* 61-8/8354-2368; www.life-time.com.au; US\$465 per person, all inclusive.