

KANGAROO ISLAND, SA

On the mend

HERE'S AN ADVENTURE HOLIDAY WITH HEART





Up in smoke: Kangaroo Island after the fires; Snelling's Beach

Another lifetime ago it was the place where I spent childhood holidays, fishing for dinner, bathing in the sea and reading by the light of kerosene lamps. This 19th-century approach may have added a sense of adventure, but it was not by choice: our friends' charming 100-year-old stone holiday house was missing a few essentials such as electricity, flushing toilets and hot water. If we didn't fish, there would be no dinner and if we didn't swim we wouldn't get clean. But we were never without fish and a visit to the long-drop deep in the scrub could be quite meditative, at least until a wallaby thumped past.

As bushfires tore through Kangaroo Island this past summer I feared for my childhood haven. The eastern side of the island and the old stone house were spared but much of the wilderness went up in smoke. In the aftermath, we could mourn this loss, we could reminisce – or we could do something to help.

For months, my girlfriends and I had been planning a getaway to celebrate a decade of walking adventures that had taken us to the Bay of Fires in Tasmania, the Queen Charlotte Track in New Zealand and

myriad coastal walks in Australia. One suggested that this year we go to Kangaroo Island to volunteer with BlazeAid, an organisation that helps rebuild fences and other structures destroyed in natural disasters. Although I didn't know one thing about fencing, I was reassured that the teaching happens on the job. And we are all fit women in our 50s; how could we not be useful? My brother suggested my presence was likely to result in a lot of loose sheep and cattle wandering the island. But I was up for the challenge and so were five of my friends.

A few days before joining the BlazeAid volunteers, several of us drove around the 440,500ha island, 15km off the South Australian coast, to see the extent of the devastation. The Ravine fire in January burnt more than 210,000ha at the island's western end, including most of Flinders Chase National Park, home to koalas, kangaroos, rare birds and marsupials. We'd seen the pictures but nothing prepared us for the reality: blackened tree trunks and animal bones lining the roads. The only signs of life in those dark days soon after the fires were trucks loaded with the remnants of houses and sheds.

"The fencing is really a metaphor for building bridges to people's lives," says Kevin Butler, who started BlazeAid with his wife Rhonda after Black Saturday in 2009. The farming couple lost 3km of fencing on their property at Kilmore East north of Melbourne that day. As they started rebuilding, Kevin realised the job would take them months, so he put an ad in the paper for help. About 30 volunteers answered the call and the fencing job was done in a week, with Rhonda cooking for the team. The couple offered to help their neighbours and BlazeAid was born. Since then about 15,000km of fencing has been built, with volunteer camps currently operating in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

The football oval in Pardana, at Kangaroo Island's centre, is a bustling village of volunteers' tents and campervans, with washing lines strung between sparse trees and quietly purposeful residents preparing for the day. It is the job of the camp coordinator Greg Stevens and his wife Ann to feed, care for and organise 100 volunteers, the biggest BlazeAid camp in Australia during the first three months of this year. The volunteers are divided into 14 teams of five to seven people of varying skills, each with a team leader, to go out to 14 farms.

The volunteer groups mainly consist of young international backpackers and retirees. Greg and Ann, retirees themselves, have been volunteering with BlazeAid for five years. "It is a very fulfilling job," says Greg. "The response from the farming community is amazing. The common thing we are told is that we've given them a reason to get out of bed in the morning. These people have been gutted by their experience. Once they get half a dozen people turning up on their farm, it gets them

focused on what needs to be done and starts to get them moving.”

A work day starts with the 7.30am muster. The camp coordinator runs through safety instructions, newbies are welcomed and the menu for the evening meal, cooked by volunteers, is announced. The muster wraps with a joke and in no time a procession of utes is heading out to the farms.

My team's first job is to measure out and place posts (droppers) along a proposed fence line. This I can do; hammering them in is more challenging. The droppers are 1.8m long and I am 1.5m long. After some teetering on my toes and wild waving of the hammer, I eventually make contact. Lift and repeat... it's not elegant, but it works. After the hammer comes the post driver, an unwieldy 13kg machine that is held on top of the post to drive it hard into the ground. At first “we probably all look a little prissy, on our little holiday together”, says my friend Jo Edwards, a farmer from Penola. “But actually, it turns out we are kind of useful.”

The teamwork is the best part: the young and the not so young working together, the fist-pumping when we get something right and the problem-solving when we don't. The oldest volunteer in the camp, Alf Ness, 81, is legendary for his inventiveness, devising new ways to use heavy machinery. Some of our group erect vermin-proof cyclone fencing, completing 2km in one day.

Penny Riggs' family property is 30km west of Parndana. They lost their home, much of their stock and 40km of fencing. “In those early days you have dead stock everywhere, everything is just black,” she says. “Then BlazeAid offered to come out and help us. It was fantastic just to have that support from people who genuinely cared. A young doctor from Melbourne had given up his annual leave to come and help us.”



Here to help: using a post driver; smoko; local wildlife; Hamilton and Dune resort

has been reduced to a volunteer staff of 30, with four teams going out every day. It takes about 12 people to build 1km of fencing.

After the fires, 36 BlazeAid camps were set up across Australia; about 30 are still operating. About 15,000km of fences have been built and there are several thousand kilometres left to go. Volunteers are doing about 35km of fencing a day but that is likely to double now that restrictions are being eased. Soon, more volunteers can be welcomed back. They will be asked to be tested and



It is now four months since the camp was established. Some 475km of new fencing has been erected but there remains another 1000km to do. There will be months of work ahead and it won't be limited to fencing – volunteers will help reseed burnt paddocks for ground cover to prevent wind erosion.

Covid-19, of course, has slowed the project. Under lockdown, the only volunteers permitted to stay at the Parndana camp were international backpackers and other travellers. A camp that was at full capacity of 100



to download the CovidSafe app.

Through the weeks of social isolation, memories of this unusual holiday stood as a reminder of what a strong, collective spirit can achieve. Kangaroo Island is on the mend. And yes, bro, those sheep are safe inside a damn good fence.

❗If you go: You can volunteer for a day or two, or a week or more. Sites for tents and caravans are provided for volunteers, along with toilets, hot showers, meals and PPE gear. For tourists, accommodation on KI ranges from campsites, cabins and caravans to B&Bs, hotels and luxury houses. Ecopia Retreat has luxury rammed-earth villas on 60ha of wilderness from \$495 per night twin share; Hamilton & Dune at Emu Bay sleep six and five respectively (from \$800/\$1200 per night).

❗Must do: Take your car or hire one on the island to explore its towns, beaches, national parks and conservation areas, many unaffected by fire. Flinders Chase National Park is closed to full public access to allow for regeneration but guided tours are available (parks.sa.gov.au). Go diving, fishing, kayaking, horseriding or bird-watching; take guided or self-guided hikes; graze food and wine trails, visit the sea-lion colony at Seal Bay; see Cape Willoughby Lighthouse and the Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park & Aquarium near Parndana.

❗Getting there: The Sealink ferry takes 45 minutes from Cape Jervis (about two hours' drive from Adelaide) to Penneshaw, Kangaroo Island. Check with Qantaslink for flights from Adelaide to KI.

❗Blazeaid.com.au; southaustralia.com/places-to-go/kangaroo-island; tourkangarooisland.com.au