

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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By Alexandra Carlton

“We knew it was dark out here,” says Kelly Kuhn, who runs tours into the 3200-square-kilometre River Murray International Dark Sky Reserve with her company, Juggle House Experiences (jugglehouse.com.au). “But when it was measured officially on the darkness scale of zero to 22, our sky measured 21.9.”

Getting International Dark Sky Reserve accreditation for a particular patch of starry sky is a slog and for the community around the Murray River, Lakes and Coorong region of South Australia, it took four years until they achieved it in 2019. Today it’s one of only 20 certified International Dark Sky Reserves in the world and the only one in Australia. Best of all, Kuhn’s tours begin just a 90-minute drive from Adelaide (the Mount Lofty Ranges are a natural barrier that blocks artificial light from the city), which makes the experience more accessible than other stargazing spots around the country.



Our trip into the darkness begins in the daylight. I meet Kuhn's minibus at the town of Mannum on the banks of the Murray, 84 kilometres east of Adelaide, at about 4.20pm. The sky doesn't look ideal for stargazing, filled with ominous low clouds, but Kuhn, a born-and-bred Murray River region local, is unfailingly upbeat. "Don't look!" she says on the drive to our first stop. "I promise, it can change in an instant."

That promise comes good when our group of eight reaches Maynards Lookout near the town of Walker Flat. We stop to watch the sunset over the limestone cliffs that line the banks of the smoke-green river and, as if on Kuhn's command, the clouds part. The sky is flint-blue, the cliffs turn a burnt-sugar gold and the sun's a peach. Pelicans glide silently in the wetlands below and everything else feels absolutely still (winter, according to Kuhn, is one of the best times to visit the Murray because you avoid the winds of the warmer months).

We gaze quietly at the fiery beauty before heading for a classic pub dinner (I choose a very decent schnitzel and chips) at the Swan Reach Hotel (swanreachhotel.com). "Even if we don't see stars tonight it's already been worth it," a fellow guest says.

"I love coming here at night because I see a lot of spirits. So if I stop and go a bit quiet, don't get frightened. It's just because I've seen someone standing there." That's the first thing Ivy Campbell, her face painted with the traditional white dots of the Nganguraku people, tells us when we arrive at the stratified rock shelter in Ngaut Ngaut Conservation Park at about 7.30pm. With her daughter, Sally, and husband Sam Stewart, she weaves smoke to welcome us to Country. We follow them into the bush, with the dark, cool night a shroud around us. At the towering cliffs, Campbell points out markings that have been etched into the walls for millennia – turtles, dolphins, human figures, some indicating sacred sites, waterholes and lines and dots that show how far it is to them.

"When the men came back from hunting late at night they never woke up the old people and babies," she says when explaining the Ngaut Ngaut camp's social structure. "Sign of respect. You would've had something said to you... or thrown at you."

As we go to leave we're delayed by an echidna, rolled into a fat spiky ball at the base of one of the cliffs. Stewart knows how to pick it up without getting pricked and he expertly wriggles it into his arms then passes it around so we can all have a hold.

"Is that really Saturn or have you put a photo inside the telescope?" cries a member of our group. We're back at Maynards Lookout and she's standing on a short ladder to peer through the telescope set up by astronomer Joe Grida. No, Grida confirms with a laugh, it's the real deal. I step up next and immediately see what she means: Saturn appears exactly as it does in pictures – tilted slightly but precisely spherical with a clear, sharp ring around its centre. I've never seen anything through a telescope that looked like much more than a few white dots, maybe a smudge of the Milky Way; this looks like a page out of a school textbook.

I'm no galaxy nerd (come back to me when we've found aliens) but Grida manages to make space sound as diverting as the terrestrial world with his stories and star choices: the double dots of Alpha Centauri, a rainbow-coloured mass called The Jewel Box and a globular cluster named NGC 104, which is so far away that its glow takes some 16,000 light years to reach our eyes – in other words, we're looking back at prehistory.

As the night draws to a close, I turn my gaze upwards towards the staggering celestial world above our heads and feel a twinge of profundity. I've witnessed light travelling from beyond time and space, seen ancient landscapes and evidence of thousands of years of civilisation but in the scope of the universe, my life is barely a blip. With that, I bite meditatively into the Milky Way chocolate bar Kuhn hands me and my thoughts turn to bed. ●