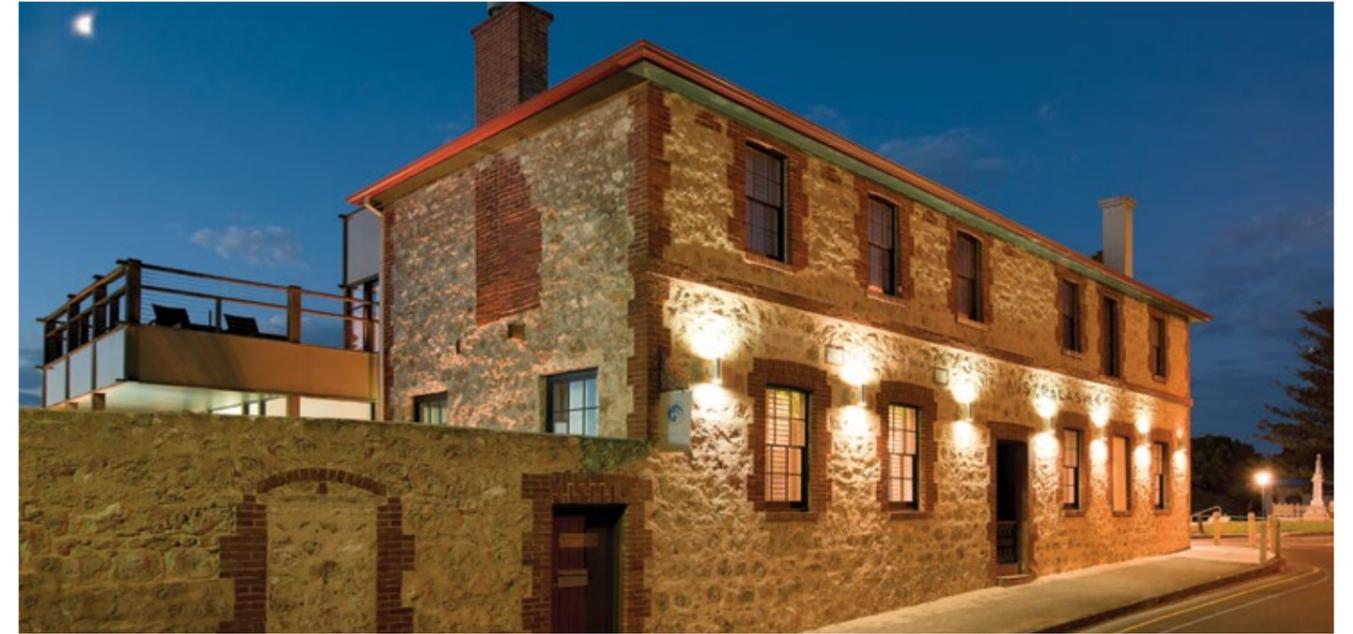


Goolwa's surprise package

Robert Godden finds a gem where the River meets the sea. Photographs by Andy Rasheed.



Winners of the 2012 SA Tourism Awards in their category, The Australasian in Goolwa's main street seems intent on turning that supposition on its head; providing an experience that is an integrated part of the adventure, not just a staging post.

Built around 1858 as a pub, and as is obvious from the 'for sale' section of the business pages, country pub ownership is a difficult gig these days. This one got in ahead of the trend – it closed as a pub in 1934 and was a private residence from 1954 until 2003. In 2003 Deborah Smalley and Juliet Michell came across it quite by accident and re-imagined it. Given that Juliet was a jewellery designer and Deb a psychiatric nurse, the journey to turn a dilapidated State Heritage-listed home into a thriving and award-winning boutique hotel was not straightforward. 'Scarcely conceivable' is more accurate.

It was back to school for the duo. Juliet trained as Chef and Pastry chef and Front of House while Deb studied Accountancy. They spent several years working out what they wanted, and then went through the torturous process of gaining planning permission, refining as they went, and working around every problem and knockback.

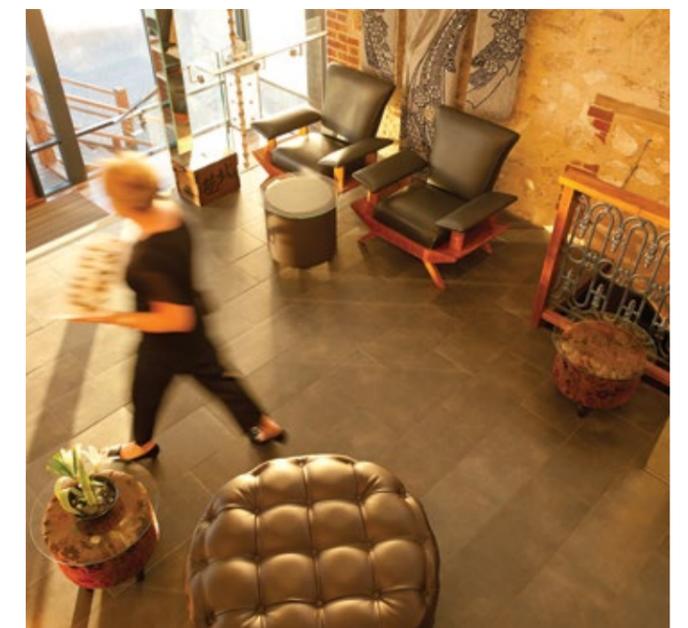
If you're going to take on the challenge of renovating a listed building at the end of a river during a decade of drought, why not do it during a Global Financial Crisis? >

Left: Even small details are carefully considered.

Top: The unassuming exterior gives only subtle clues as to the treats waiting within.

Right: A skilful blend of old and new can be appreciated in the public spaces.

Too often the accommodation we stay in when travelling is just packaging; it's the box our holiday comes in; the shrink wrap around the goods, rather than part of the surprise.





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It’s worth noting that not one of the online guest reviews – 29 of them across five sites at the time of writing – was anything less than five out of five.

It would seem that nothing fazes the pair, so from 2007 until 2009 the renovations finally took shape, and as you can see from the photographs, there is much clever detail in the result.

Even though Goolwa was the first Australian town to be awarded Cittaslow status for its relaxed way of life and a commitment to fresh, healthy living, it appears to have a ‘standard SA country’ main street. But stand back in that main street and The Australasian blends in, looking only marginally different to thousands of other double-storey 19th century Australian pubs. As you draw closer though, there are a few clues that this place is something special. The outside of the building has been meticulously restored, is faultlessly tidy and has discreet signage and modern entry way.

Then the experience becomes unique. From the foyer through to every corner of the public space – and the rooms – there is a meticulously-achieved alteration of the environs.

Deb and Juliet recast ‘Australasian’ as ‘Austral/Asian’ and there is a lovely array of touches ranging from Japanese-style minimalism and simplicity to lush, bright splashes. The cleverness of completely changing the look and feel of such a familiar environment within the restrictions of a listed building is played out here to an amazing degree. Not because the owners have skirted close to the edge of the rules, but rather because the selection of pieces and design elements bring out a different texture in those parts that have not been altered.

As an example, rather than plaster over an entire wall there’s a space where parts of the original stonework have been left. By hanging an elegant Japanese silk robe that straddles both parts, the old is seamlessly tied to the new.

Whereas much of the décor is well-scaled to suit the overall ambience, items that offer comfort, such as armchairs and baths, are generously proportioned so that style never wins over substance. This is unashamedly a couples’ retreat. There are five rooms, each with a different personality; yet all within the theme. The rooms range from the Garden Room – which has a private garden as the name suggests – through to the Quirky Room, which is on an angle.

As a guest you are free to choose a room that suits you. Or you might choose one that is radically different to your usual environs – just for the experience. With a two-night minimum stay, unwinding is pretty well mandatory.

Deb and Juliet have a deeply ingrained sense of the level of service that they wish to provide. Looking though online reviews, the service is praised in equal measure as ‘perfect’ and ‘unobtrusive’, which indicates that they are getting it right. It’s worth noting that not one of the online guest reviews – 29 of them across five sites at the time of writing – was anything less than five out of five. It’s with this sense of perfection that they approach the restaurant at the Australasian.

Every month Juliet creates a three-course set meal according to their principles of using fresh, fine-quality South Australian produce and wines. The dining room seats up to 34, depending on configuration, with dark timber tables gleaming under Danish pendant lights. The meals start at 7pm and are a local sensation: there’s a waiting list for a table for about half of these nights. Despite this, a table is always reserved for each hotel guest couple unless they instruct otherwise.

‘The restaurant now has many local regulars who will come for dinner at least eight or nine times a year to try the monthly menu’

explains Deb as she bustles around on a busy Saturday morning. Caroline Treloar is a local who is always on the lookout for a special occasion as an excuse to go to The Australasian for a meal. ‘You walk into another world once you’re inside. You feel incredibly welcome there; it’s relaxed and friendly yet sophisticated at the same time. The set menu is always appealing and interesting; the food is fantastic and plentiful’.

Carol is also of the opinion that it’s good value for three courses. She also describes the wine list as ‘well-priced and local’. Having won over locals with their culinary delights, the serious business of filling the rooms is something they work hard at. Deb explains that ‘Most of our guests are from Adelaide or elsewhere in South Australia, but we get a good proportion that have travelled from interstate, or internationally. For some, we’re an ideal two-night stopover on the way to Kangaroo Island.’ ‘We try to ensure they have a totally local experience by promoting local sites of interest from the wetlands to the Encounter Bikeway to a local micro-brewery’.

Many international visitors come by way of the exclusive boutique hotel directory, Mr & Mrs Smith Hotels, which rates The Australasian highly. The directory visits each potential location and only includes properties that meet their exacting standards. In order to provide the level of service they insist upon, The Australasian is only open Wednesday to Sunday nights. And it’s on a Saturday that FLM spoke to them. Moreover, it’s the night Deb and Juliet have been invited to a Gala Event in Hobart – The Australian Tourism Awards, where they are representing South Australia in the Luxury Accommodation category, against multi-million dollar resorts interstate.



Far left: There are five rooms, each with a different personality; yet all within the theme. And all just as luxurious as the next!
Above middle: The dining room seats up to 34, depending on configuration, with dark timber tables gleaming under Danish pendant lights.
Top right: A truly indulgent dessert.
Above: The rear boasts a fantastic deck where one can enjoy pre-dinner drinks.

They made the decision to eschew the ceremony and work as usual because of the impact it might have on that day’s accommodation and dinner guests. Despite having great staff, they insist on personal supervision of all aspects of the business. ‘There’s always something to do: something to improve’, explains Deb. Based on the way both diners and hotel guests gush on social media and on holiday site reviews, room for these improvements is extremely hard to spot. 