



{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

The run of the place

That familiar McLeod's Daughters homestead has opened as a stylish country-house hotel

CHRISTINE
McCABE

WHO would have thought Drovers Run was an easy 45-minute drive from Adelaide airport and only moments from the cellar doors of the Barossa Valley?

Those glossy-haired stars of television's popular *McLeod's Daughters*, beloved across the globe (particularly in Germany, it seems), weren't in the middle of nowhere after all.

But the illusion of TV is nothing compared to the magic woven by the new owners of Kingsford (aka Drovers Run), Stefan and Leanne Ahrens, Barossa business identities who have lavished countless hours and even more dollars on restoring one of our most recognisable homesteads.

Dating from 1856 and hewn from Edinburgh stone brought to Australia as ship's ballast, this handsome Georgian-style house, with curious gothic portico, was built by pastoralist and entrepreneur Stephen King.

His 19th-century spread has been whittled down to 90ha, hidden in golden, rolling hills above the sleepy North Para River on the western edge of the Barossa.

And the property has passed through several hands since King's pioneering day, including, most famously, the Nine Network under Kerry Packer, who used the working farm to film 224 episodes

of *McLeod's Daughters*.

The Ahrensens have long known and loved Kingsford. Their fourth-generation, family-owned engineering and construction business, now a large national concern with a mining services division, began life in a tiny farmer's shop in nearby Shea-Oak Log in 1906 and Stefan, now the company's managing director, remembers playing in the river at Kingsford as a boy.

As we approach the homestead, which opened this month as a luxury country-house hotel, along a narrow gravel track (a path trod almost every other day by German backpacking *McLeod's Daughters* fans intent on a glimpse of the house), the 21st century recedes and a palpable, lost-in-time magic takes hold.

It's almost as if this is still a film set. Suddenly we are in the back of beyond and before us is a house as elegant as it is lonely and unlikely, sat like a gentleman explorer surveying the dry hills with a linen hanky to his nose.

We are greeted at the large front door by Jas the sheepdog and our hosts Pat and Sally Kent, who recently moved to Kingsford from Arkaba Homestead in the Flinders Ranges.

They are still mopping up after

the builders, who spent three years working an incredible transformation. I don't want to talk out of school, but those McLeod gals were no domestic goddesses.

The house was in a right state when the Ahrensens took over. It was strung with old lighting cables, an upstairs room was encased in egg cartons (for sound insulation), the high ceilings and cedar trimmings unloved and ignored for decades.

Pat rustles up a glass of bubbles before we climb the impressive

cedar staircase to embark on a quick tour of the new and very glamorous Kingsford Homestead. There are six guestrooms in the main house and another in the old stonemason's cottage tucked behind the kitchen garden.

Named for previous Kingsford owners (including Kerry Packer), the suites have been stylishly kitted out in muted tones of chocolate, cream, dove grey and aubergine, and are equipped with large, super-comfy beds. The luxe en-suites are in a range of clever configurations and feature a selection of tempting tubs — clawfoot, spa and egg-shaped. There's even an alfresco option — "a bush bath", Pat and Sally call it — by the river, out of sight, and centrepiece for a signature Kingsford experience.





I am in the Mincalta Suite (the name the Wirra people gave this area), affording lovely views of the golden hills, and have the run of the house, including self-serve drinks from the well-stocked fridge in the kitchen where Danielle Stone, who trained with Michel Roux Jr at Le Gavroche in London, is whipping up dinner.

There's a comfy lounge with log fire and small library, but the veranda is the best place to sit and read. The silence here is uncanny, with only swooping swallows and careening red rump parrots to break the reverie.

Kingsford's outbuildings are as intriguing as the main house, and include Meg's Cottage (now Pat and Sally's home) and a stunning stone woolshed soon to be transformed into an entertainment space. A towering stone wall has been repaired and will shelter a heated swimming pool and day spa pavilion.

In the slate-flagged hall, a looming cedar buffet (dubbed "the coffin") conceals the entrance to a series of cellars where bush-rangers are thought to have once sought shelter. Today you'll find nothing more menacing than an outstanding collection of wine picked by Stefan's Barossa cronies.

Danielle serves dinner in these atmospheric old storerooms, honey-stoned walls flickering with candlelight, Barossa shiraz flowing like the Murray in flood. We tuck into local beetroot and goat's cheese, wild-picked mush-

rooms with truffle potato and Kingsford's signature wagyu beef daube with Barossa shiraz jus. The Ahrensens have acquired a neighbouring parcel of land and intend to reintroduce hereford cattle to the property, along with horses for devoted *McLeod's Daughters* fans (already booking in numbers).

The Kingsford team has also been busy replanting bush corridors along the river and landscaping nearer the house. For the moment there is just the sense of a garden yet to grow but the lawns are in place, cuffing tall gums and dropping peppercorn trees.

Down by the river, the soft winter sun illuminates aged river red gums; deep pools are threaded with tall reeds and artichokes grow wild. A marked walk traverses steep gullies where you're likely to encounter kangaroos, and waterbirds are here in abundance in season. There are loads of wonderful picnic spots and the kitchen is more than happy to pack a basket of local goodies. Or you could head back to the house for an in-room massage (the therapists from the Green Room in Angaston are excellent) or tutored wine tastings in the cellar.

Guided wine tours are another option. The nearest cellar door, only 10 minutes away, is Pindarie where Tony Brooks and Wendy Allan have worked yet another restoration miracle, transforming an old barn into a stylish tasting room with some of the best views

in the Barossa. Come here in winter for a locally made pie by the log fire.

Other luncheon options include Ferment Asian in Tanunda for fantastically fresh and tasty Vietnamese and South-east Asian cuisine (the herbs are grown by chef Tuoi Do's parents) or the just-opened restaurant at Hentley Farm in Seppeltsfield where acclaimed chef Lachlan Colwill is serving up inventive degustation lunches (think: Storm Bay salmon with sausage tartare, wild rice and sour sob flowers; and sweet potato ice cream) in a ravishingly restored stable.

Afterwards, if you ask nicely, Pat will collect you. The Kents are wonderful hosts and nothing is too much trouble. If you are after a glass of bubbles down by the river or a cuppa on the veranda while perusing local paper *The Bunyip*, just say the word. The McLeods may have gone but Kingsford has never looked better.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Tourism South Australia and Kingsford Homestead.

Checklist

Suites from \$790 a night (minimum two-night stay) including dinners, country breakfasts, wine and open bar. More: kingsfordhomestead.com.au.
• southaustralia.com



Members of the cast of *McLeod's Daughters* at 'Drovers Run'





Dating from 1856, Kingsford has been transformed from a run-down building to a luxury country-house hotel



Owners Leanne and Stefan Ahrens