

OVER THE RANGE AND FAR AWAY

GUIDED WALKS ON ARKABA STATION OFFER THE CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY IN THE FLINDERS RANGES, SA.

STORY AND PHOTOS MARK MULLER

LUMINOUS MUSTARD-coloured storm clouds backlit by the setting sun boil over the Elder Range's main escarpment. A quickening wind whips and whistles through the cypresses at its base, smacking fat raindrops into the earth at angles that pay only passing heed to gravity. As a squawking, jinking pair of galahs hurtle across the treetops at a speed to which they would appear unaccustomed, Kat Mee locks pale blue eyes on colleague Stuart Dann and deadpans in her Scottish burr, "I think it's the tents tonight, Stuart".

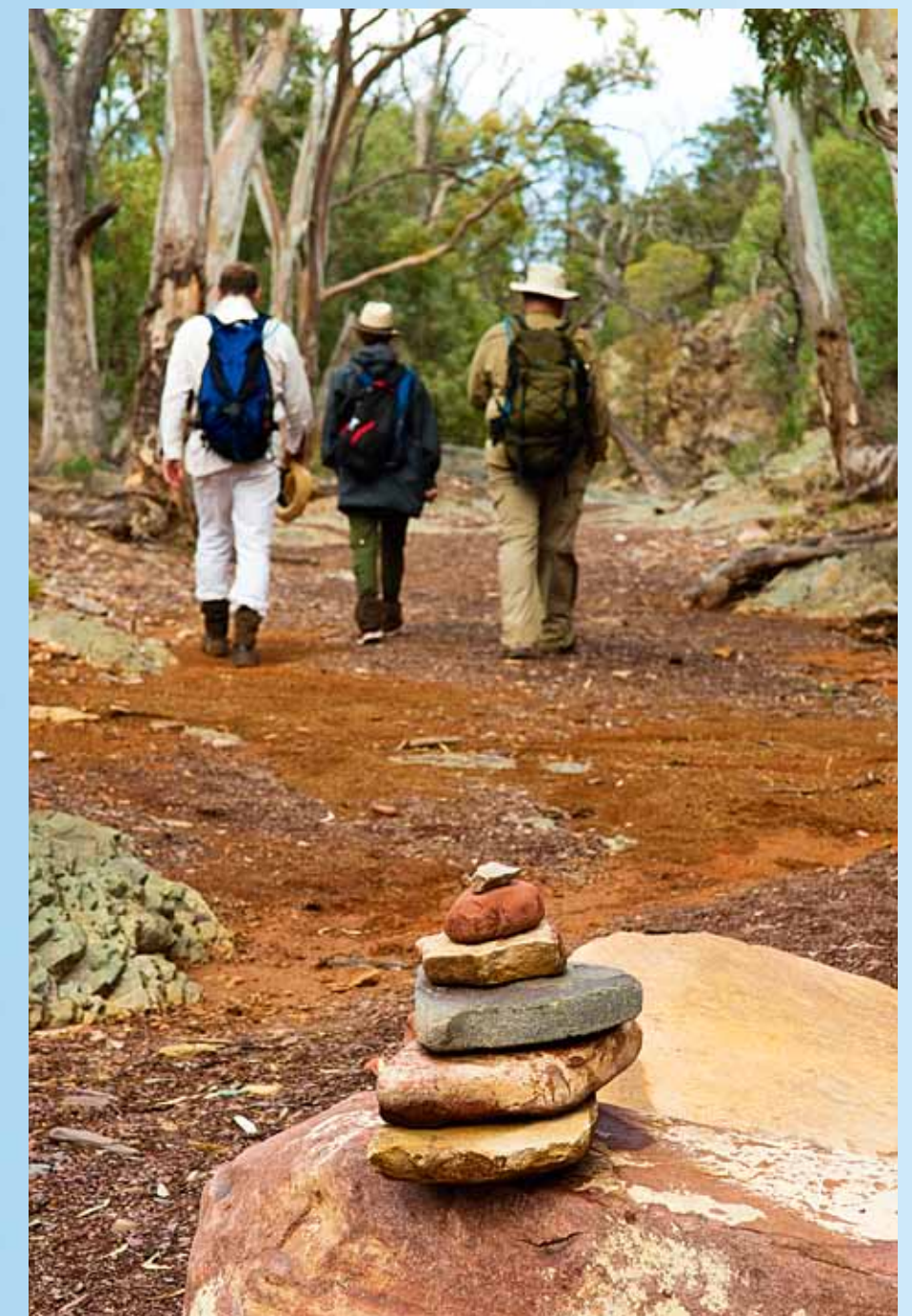
It's the second night of a four-day guided hike through Arkaba Station in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia. The late spring weather is as varied and exhilarating as the country itself, refreshed and enlivened by three good seasons following a decade of drought. Kat and Stuart act as guide and camp attendant on the walk. With a swift and practiced competence they soon have pole tents erected on the sleeping platforms of Elder Camp, platforms that in more clement weather are home to the large, luxurious swags that are a signature of the Arkaba walk.

Soon the intimate confines of buffeting canvas echo to laughter and the clinking of glasses as the small group settles in to devour thick, tender steaks, exotically seasoned

camp-oven veg and crusty bread. It's a fine meal produced by Kat and Stuart on the deep bed of coals Kat had prepared earlier while Stuart and his charges were afoot.

A similar level of support and preparation punctuate the walk. Each day, as Stuart hikes with guests – who carry light loads of water and lunch – Kat packs camp and drives back to Arkaba homestead to replenish supplies. There she is helped by property manager Brendon Bevan and chef Richard Corcoran before moving on to set up the next camp. Kat, Stuart and Brendon all take turns guiding and doing the camp set-up, while Richard focuses on feeding homestead guests.

Walkers are therefore well-met at the end of each 12-14km day. The walk starts at Wilpena Pound, which forms the northern border of Arkaba's 24,280 hectares, and traverses the western edge of the station along the foot of the Elder Range before looping back to the homestead proper. Rocky ridges, sweeping valleys, grassy hills, mallee forests, cypress groves and meandering creek beds lined with massive, gnarled red gums are all covered during the four days of walking. Some of it is steep, some of it slippery and all of it is beautiful.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The study of flora, fauna and geography are part of the experience; Robert Mills, Lucinda Marshall and guide Stuart Dann stride out along the bed of Bunbinyana Creek at the start of day two; a swag platform at Mern Merna Camp on the third night. Below: The view across Arkaba Station from the southern ridge of Wilpena Pound towards the Elder Range.



OUTDOORS



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Galahs and corellas bask in the afternoon sun above Slaty Creek; Lucinda Marshall and Rob Mills relax before dinner at Mern Merna Camp on the last night of the walk; Kat Mee keeping things in order at Blacks Gap Camp on day one.

Most of the walking is off-track – dead reckoning and the attraction of various points of interest, depending on the taste of the walkers, influencing the route. “It’s part of what I love about the walk,” Stuart says. “We know the country, and have a GPS and sat phone, but really the only limit to where we go is a broad general direction and the time we want to get into camp. With that in mind, we can poke about and look at different things.” Stuart worked as a guide for a number of years further north in the Flinders, at Arkaroola, where stargazing and geography were part of the warp and weft of his life. Arkaba offers the chance to expound on these things, and to garner and share fresh knowledge.

At the end of each day Kat is waiting, armed with nibbles, iced drinks and a table set with white cloth and good glassware. Each of the three camps has five platforms for the large swags (if your normal swag is a Kingswood, these things are Bentley Continentals), two open-faced showers positioned to make the most of the views and gravity fed by large buckets of hot water, and two composting toilets.

All of this is in keeping with the laid-back yet polished ethos of the Wild Bush Luxury company, which bought Arkaba Station from the inimitable Rasheed family in 2009, and that also has

operations on the Mary River, where Kat cut her guiding teeth, Ningaloo Reef, the Blue Mountains and the Kimberley coast.

“We want to share the amazing and beautiful places we know about with our guests, but don’t want them to have to get too roughed up experiencing it,” Wild Bush Luxury principal Charlie Carlow says. “It’s about being immersed in nature, but not foregoing comfort and luxury to do so.”

At the end of four days hiking through what amounted to four seasons, guest Lucinda Marshall casts her mind back along the track and thinks about what she enjoyed most. The beautiful scenery? Yes. The abundant birdlife and good food? Of course. The company? No doubt. But the clincher? “The storm over the Elder Range that night,” she says, smiling. “That was amazing.”

ARKABA WALKING SAFARI

The walks operate from mid-March until November 30 each year. All food, beverages, towels, bedding and the like on the four-day, three-night experience are included in the \$2000 per person cost.

www.arkabawalk.com

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