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South Australia

A NATURAL ADVENTURES SPECIAL PROMOTION

Stepping into
the unknown

FLINDERS

Sweet nothing

Empty spaces, ancient ranges and rich stories.

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Rip and tear

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Sally Webb expects to be pampered on a luxury walking safari in the Flinders Ranges. What she doesn't expect is the colourful reception.

This spring, on the stage that is the Flinders Ranges, Mother Nature is putting on quite a show. The best rain in 21 years has revitalised this ancient landscape, casting a verdant glow across mountains, hills and plains that are usually a sunburnt golden brown.

I'm in the Flinders Ranges in late September for a walking safari at Arkaba Station. This historic 24,000-hectare property, bordering Wilpena Pound and the Flinders Ranges National Park, was established in 1851. Built in 1856, the homestead is now an upmarket farm-stay owned by the Wild Bush Luxury group, offering an outback experience with fine food, a good red and high-thread-count sheets.

The guided walking safari takes the wilderness immersion a step further, with a four-day hike through the spectacular landscape, sleeping in a

swag under the stars. Reclining in the blissful comfort of my homestead guestroom, I'm not convinced it's a step I need to take. But Wild Bush Luxury is adept at stuffing creature comforts into a metaphorical rucksack for remote locations and this walk is no exception.

Our small group, with guide Kat Mee, drives to Wilpena Pound Resort. Our first day's hike, about 12 kilometres, traverses the Pound's basin before scaling its western rim and descending the rocky outcrops on its outer side.

The natural amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound is one of South Australia's most recognised landmarks but I'm surprised by its interior, a completely flat plain covered in grasses, river red gums, northern cypress pines and mallee. I expected a rocky moonscape, not such fertile-looking country. It was used extensively as a sheep run until 1968, Kat tells us, and evidence of

overgrazing remains more than 40 years later in large expanses of introduced weeds such as the vivid, purple-flowered Paterson's curse (known here as Salvation Jane).

Our first memorable wildlife sighting comes within an hour: a male emu with six playful chicks, only metres from the rough path we're following. The female lays eggs, then shoots through to find a new mate leaving dad to incubate the brood, then raise them single-handedly for 18 months.

As we traverse, Kat, a Scottish lass who guided at Bamuuru Plains in the Northern Territory before its sister property, Arkaba, opened a little more than a year ago, encourages us to look for the evidence – in tiny plants and soil at our feet – of the phenomenal regeneration from winter rains. It becomes the theme of this fascinating adventure; never before have I been so conscious

of exactly where I'm stepping or the ephemeral nature of the vegetation.

Ascending the western ridge, towards Bridle's Gap, the mallee reverts to pines and wattle, I gasp as I reach the summit and look out over a panorama of undulating hills culminating in the magnificent striated escarpments of the imposing Elder Range to the west, a glistening strip of Lake Torrens just visible to the north and Arkaba land almost as far as the eye can see.

Far below, plumes of white smoke come from our camp, which has been set up ahead of our arrival. We scramble down the rocky hillside like mountain goats before ambling through grassy hills to arrive at Black's Gap Camp.

We're in good historical company camping in these parts. In 1862, a camel team is believed to



Stepping into the unknown

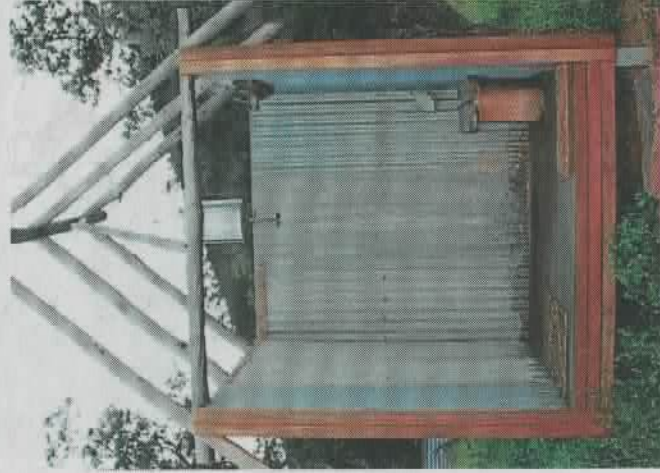
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have paused at Arkaba while returning with the remains of explorers Burke and Wills. John McDouall Stuart, who led the second expedition to traverse Australia's mainland from south to north, also stopped here.

However, those explorers didn't enjoy the camping comforts offered now: luxury swags on private decks, composting loos and warm showers with five-star views.

The temperature plummeted when the sun disappears behind the Elder Range. Dressing for dinner means donning thermals, tracksuit pants, two fleeces, thick socks and a beanie – but I'm still freezing. The campfire's ablaze thanks to camp manager Brendan Bevan, a dead ringer for the Man from Snowy River, except he sounds like Tony Greig. We move our chairs as close as possible to the fire pit without getting in it.

Dinner is marinated pork ribs and chicken casserole heated in a camp oven over hot coals. It's good but if I have one criticism it's that the food isn't as delicious as it could be and there's a lack of vegetables. Not enough is made of the theatre of camp-oven cooking – which has a proud history in these parts, including an annual



Good life on safari ... (clockwise from above) a bush shower; al fresco dining, Arkaba style; the rugged Flinders landscape; luxury swags on private



FAST FACTS

- Getting there** From Adelaide it's a 4½-hour drive to Arkaba Station. Sharp Airlines flies from Adelaide to Port Augusta.
- Staying there**
 - Arkaba Homestead accommodation, \$790 a person a night, twin share, including all meals, wine, selected spirits, soft drinks, guided activities including four-wheel-drive safaris.
 - The Arkaba Walking Safari (four days/ three nights) costs \$2000 a person, twin share, including all meals, snacks, wine, beer and soft drinks.
 - In May, a five-night Arkaba expedition, "Painting the Flinders Ranges with Leo Robba", will include two nights' accommodation at Arkaba Homestead, three nights' luxury camping, daily painting sessions alongside landscape artist Robba, a wine degustation dinner led by wine specialist Henry Dawson-Damer, all meals, select open bar and road transfers from Adelaide. \$4900 a person, twin share. see arkabastation.com

almost ready to burst. We descend into a beautiful gorge and follow a drainage line flanked by pine forest before rising slowly to the rocky ridge of Red Range and a final vertical scramble to the summit.

The descent to camp, through a sea of yaccas (grass trees) interspersed with coolabah gums, is one of the day's highlights.

Elder Camp ups the ante for swag-deck views: the eponymous range is a formidable, engrossing presence. After a barbecue dinner of saltbush lamb cutlets, sausages, potatoes and corn, washed down with more red wine, sleep comes easily.

We set off early the next day. It's our last morning - this is an abbreviated version of the regular hike - but I feel as though I'm just hitting my stride crossing shady pine forests and grasslands.

And, suddenly, the walk is over. Brendan waits with a four-wheel-drive. Driving down a steep, rough-hewn track over hillsides covered in pines, we see a cloud of white smoke hovering around a group of trees, then flash after flash of smoke bursting into the air, like Sydney's New Year's Eve fireworks. It's the pollen cones of the pines being released into the air. Mother Nature delivers her spectacular, dramatic encore.

The writer travelled courtesy of Wild Bush Luxury and the South Australian Tourism Commission.



500 million to 600 million years ago. The geology of the Flinders is a theme she returns to time and again. Evidence of long-disappeared mountain ranges, beaches, tidal flats, reefs and glacial moraines are still visible in the rocks to this day.

We enter a grassy meadow land peppered with colourful wildflowers and pretty flowering weeds, then settle into a rhythm, powering up and down undulating hills, stopping occasionally for Kat's interpretations of the flora or to spot birds. Galahs and corellas are prolific. Our twitcher's checklist includes ringneck parrots, black-faced cuckoo-shrikes, white-browed babbblers, apostle birds, honeyeaters, brown goshawks and Australian kestrels.

Nearing the summit of one of the highest hills to stop for lunch, a female western grey kangaroo with a joey in her pouch is only metres away. She sees us but is completely unperturbed. The hilltop affords a 360-degree panorama of Wilpena Pound's rim, the Red Range and Elder behind it, as two wedge-tailed eagles soar on thermals and a gutsy pair of black crows engage them in an aerial dogfight.

Today's walk, another 12 kilometres or so, is marked by distinct habitats that change within a few paces. Rolling hills soon become forests of cypress pines, the deep green of their spindly leaves offset by rusty orange-brown pollen cones



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Homestead, it's a little disappointing. Fortunately, plenty of Henschke Henry's Seven wine flows as we share stories and jokes around the campfire. Retiring to our swags reveals the true meaning of luxury camping: thick mattresses, crisp cotton sheets, fluffy continental quilts, downy-soft pillows and a hot-water bottle. Despite these comforts, I struggle to fall asleep. Perhaps it's the luminous, almost-full moon or the novelty of sleeping under a million stars.

Kat wakes us the next day with bowls of warm water but I'd actually prefer a cup of tea, so I can collect my thoughts and enjoy watching the sun cast its golden-dawn glow over the rocky escarpment in front of me. Brendan has the campfire roaring by the time we emerge and takes orders for jaffles. A tiny red-capped robin flits around the fire pit during brekkie.

Resuming our walk, we follow the picturesque course of Bumbinyunna Creek flanked by majestic river red gums with gnarled and twisted roots. It feels like walking through a Hans Heysen painting, with the reds and ambers of the artist's canvases complemented by myriad shades of green and flecks of bright colour from native plants including lilac vanilla lily and white jockey's cap.

Kat points out a rock patterned with ripples formed when it was part of the ocean floor