

Life

TRAVEL

BY CHRISTINE McCABE

ARKABA,
FLINDERS RANGES, SA

Range rovers

COMBINE A STUNNING WALK
WITH SERIOUS COMFORT

I'm stopping to smell the rosy dock, a pretty weed introduced into South Australia's semi-arid mid north by Afghan cameleers, probably as saddle stuffing. I know this because my naturalist guide Tim is a bit of a whizz on the flora and fauna of the Flinders Ranges. If you've not visited before you'll recognise these ancient mountains, Wilpena Pound and the jagged Elder Range, from the paintings of Hans Heysen and as a cinematic backdrop to countless movies.

There are few outback landscapes as photogenic or wildly beautiful and while I would like to pause to smell more flowers growing among the Precambrian rocks, Tim is urging our small group of bushwalkers up

the slippery, scree-strewn slope of the Red Range, a precipitous climb that knocks the saddle stuffing out of me but rewards with stunning views back towards the Pound.

We are tackling one of the "Great Walks of Australia" and it's pretty challenging, through the Pound and across the 24,000ha Arkaba pastoral spread, now a conservancy owned by Wild Bush Luxury. The sheep are gone, the windmills removed, and an ongoing feral eradication program is helping to heal this quintessential outback landscape populated by great mobs of red and grey kangaroos and emus.

Spring is the perfect season to visit and this year is one out of the box. There have been huge rains

across the Mid North and the Flinders' ancient river beds are awash; the enormous, fat-bottomed red gums have their toes in the water, paper daisies carpet folded hills dotted with stands of whispering white cypress and there's grass up to the roos' bellies. This poses a challenge for our intrepid group;

large sections of the route follow the normally dry watercourse but now we must make dozens of crossings and scabble along the steep walls of Madge's Gully, gushing with water. But it's a special treat to see a landscape more normally associated with saltbush and the "dead finish" acacia so flush.



Ancient: Arkaba station;
homestead views,
outside and in



Arkaba was settled by Europeans in 1851 and we are reminded of the region's chequered pastoral history (many hapless early settlers were lured north by a freakish good season like this one) as we walk by collapsed dingo fences, an abandoned flatbed truck and an old axe-grinding stone.

The four-day bushwalk includes two nights in a swag and one at the handsomely restored homestead.

While we're talking drop loos and zero connectivity, don't think for a moment we're doing it tough. After scrabbling down the Red Range and into camp, chef Luke (ex Qualia) stands by with hot towels and mulled wine; buckets of water are heating on the fire for a bush shower, a three-course gourmet dinner is being prepared in the cosy dining shed and our swags have



been unfurled on private sleeping platforms (with small shelters in case of inclement weather).

Back at the homestead, where the walk concludes with a night of serious country comfort, chef Matt whips up a braised pork shoulder pie with Frangelico jus, the open bar is fully stocked and comfy sofas are set on the terrace near the pool where you might be lucky enough to spy a little mouse-like dunnart.

Arkaba's South African-born manager, Brendon Bevan, is as excited to see this minuscule marsupial as we might be to spy an elephant. This is what the property's seven-year transformation is all about: a revitalisation that includes the return of a colony of rare yellow-footed rock wallabies.

◀ Perfect for: Bushwalkers with a good level of fitness for the four-day trek; on a homestead stay, the going is easier with guided 4WD safaris.

◀ Must do: Count stars at night, then wake at dawn to watch the Elder Range turn from inky-blue to ochre-orange. It's quite a show.

◀ Dining: Chefs Matt and Luke turn out restaurant-quality meals from the homestead and camp kitchens: saltbush pesto, lemon myrtle bread, bush tomato butter, Dorper lamb.

◀ Getting there: Five hours by road from Adelaide; scheduled flights operate to Port Augusta.

◀ Bottom line: Homestead from \$930 per person per night with all drinks, meals, 4WD safaris and guided bushwalks; the four-day Arkaba Walk operates March 23 to October 12; \$2400 per person including flight from Adelaide.

◀ arkabastation.com.au ▶

