

Movement at the station

At an 1850s homestead on a sheep station in the Flinders Ranges, Kendall Hill discovers a level of outback luxury that the early settlers could only have dreamed of.

For 160 years, men have come to the Flinders Ranges

seeking their fortunes on Arkaba Station. The 24,000-hectare property, which captures a spectacular parcel of the Flinders from the Elder Range to Wilpena Pound, started life as a sheep run in 1850 and has played host to the likes of artist Hans Heysen and explorers John McDouall Stuart and Burke and Wills. (Actually, just the earthly remains of the last two, whose bodies were being carried from Coopers Creek back to Melbourne.)

Arkaba's latest fortune seekers are Charles Carlow and Stewart Cranswick of Wild Bush Luxury, operators of the landmark Northern Territory property Bamurru Plains and Western Australia's Sal Salis. The enterprising duo, who cut their tourism teeth in Africa, have opened the stone homestead to tourism for the first time to offer outsiders an insider's perspective on the early-settler experience.

The newly renovated accommodation features five bedrooms and combines luxuries such as fine wines and food and WiFi (but no phone reception or television) with touches of outback chic, seen in the bedside tables made from branded wool bales and in the lamp stands strung with ostrich eggs. Artist and sculptor Rosemary Woodford Ganf incorporated these clever touches into the décor alongside her remarkable bedheads hand-crafted from mallee boughs and sheepskin, gumnut curtain tiebacks and a superb

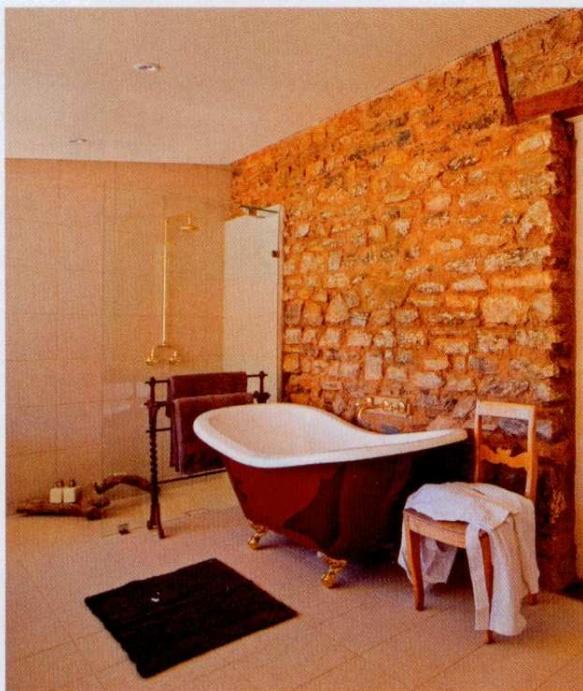
antique wool-classing table now doing service as the glass-topped dining table.

Guest verandas are furnished with stylish recliners modelled on Raj-era "Bombay fornicators", with fold-out leg rests in the frames. And sitting above the river red gum-lined creek is an inground swimming pool, the ultimate luxury in one of the driest corners of the driest state in the driest continent. It is fed by the clear creek that provides a permanent water supply to Arkaba, whose name translates as "hidden water".

This is still a working sheep station, supporting around 3000 animals on its vast pastures and mountains that extend as far as the eye can see. But Carlow is an environmentalist and he's keen to pursue the good work of his predecessors (Dean and Lizzie Rasheed, who won several awards for their pastoral management of Arkaba) in returning this land to its natural state. The Rasheeds spent hundreds of thousands of dollars eradicating goats and rabbits from their 26km-long patch, while previous owner Otto Bartholomaeus spent his life savings erecting a dingo-proof fence in 1901 to protect valuable livestock.

"I reckon this is one of the most beautiful outback properties in Australia," says Carlow, whose vision is to transform the station into a private wilderness sanctuary where people will come to immerse themselves in nature but also to learn about the local indigenous

Home on the range
Arkaba is managed by Pat and Sally Kent (top). The newly renovated stone homestead dates from 1851. Opposite: Purpose-built camps feature alfresco showers and fine dining.



history and the seminal role the property played in Australia's early settlement.

As a visitor it is difficult not to succumb to the charms of a place where the air rings with cicada and bird song and the landscape abounds with the Australian coat of arms – there are 'roos and emus everywhere. Under the guidance of station staff, particularly Scottish-born guide Kat Mee, guests experience the region's unique flora and fauna, as well as marvel at a landscape that pitches from domed hills and pine forests to ancient mountains glowing pink and purple in the waning outback light. Heysen spent a third of his painting life in this remote corner of South Australia, mesmerised by the "skies hard blue and colours dry and crumbly" and magical ranges with "the appearance of arrested waves on the verge of breaking".

Wild Bush Luxury offers a four-day walk across Arkaba, overnighting at three purpose-built camps ("glamps" would be more apt) and culminating in a dramatic arrival into Wilpena Pound. Walkers set off from the property's historic 1856 woolshed across a variety of distinctive Flinders Ranges landscapes and enjoy up-close encounters with the region's rich birdlife (magnificent wedge-tailed eagles are common as muck out this way), animals and flora. The Flinders Ranges occupy just four per cent of South Australia's total area but are home to almost half of its endemic plants.

Chef Jo Cross, who trained at Tony Percuoco's Ristorante Fellini on the Gold Coast, ensures weary hikers are remarkably well fed along the way, while managers Pat and Sally Kent ("That's Kent with an 'e,'" jokes the irrepressible Pat) attend to every need out bush or at the homestead. I spent one night sleeping under the stars and can highly recommend the experience of campfire fine dining (saltbush-fed Spear Creek lamb chops make the ultimate finger food), good South Australian wines and tremendous company. Bedding down on a plump, custom-made swag and gazing up at a million stars would have to go down as one of my shiniest memories of 2009.

"People who come here are buying an experience," says Carlow, "not just accommodation."*



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Getting there

Arkaba is a 4½-hour drive north of Adelaide or a little over an hour's flight by chartered plane. Alternatively, you can fly commercially to Port Augusta from Adelaide with Sharp Airlines. 1300 556 694, sharpairlines.com

Stay

Doubles from \$790 per person per night, including all meals, drinks, activities and transfers from Hawker or Port Augusta. Three-night walking safaris, including meals, drinks, transfers and camping gear, cost \$2000 per person. 1300 790 561, arkbastation.com

