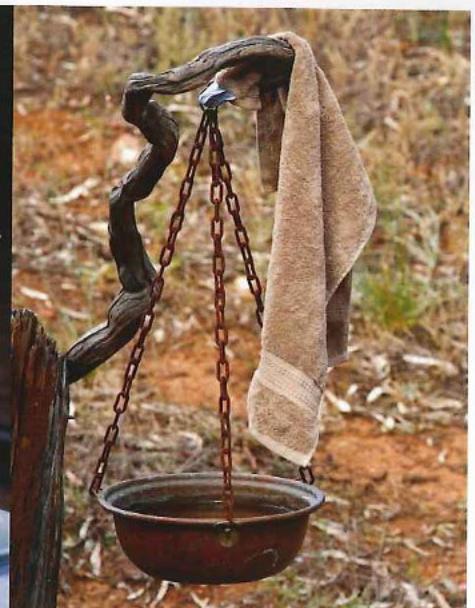


WALKABOUT

IT'S HOT WORK FOLLOWING THE FOUR-DAY
ARKABA WALK IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S FLINDERS
RANGES BUT A LITTLE COMFORT GOES A LONG WAY

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS DON FUCHS





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Exposed geology in Slaty Creek; guide Stuart Dan at the fire pit; amenities at the bush toilet; Aboriginal tool factory; open-air bed with room to move in the million-star hotel; approaching Moralana Creek with the Elder Range in the background.

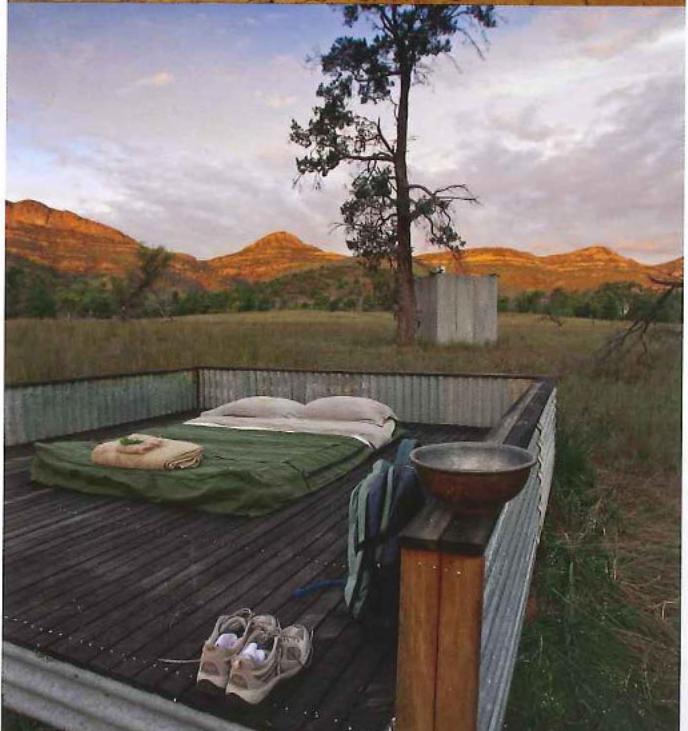
REFRESHING, GOOSEBUMP-EVOKING, REVITALIZING... who would have thought that a chilled, wet towel, wiped over a sweaty face and hot neck, could give so much pleasure? But after hours of walking in muggy heat, that ice-cold cotton cloth becomes an item of utter luxury.

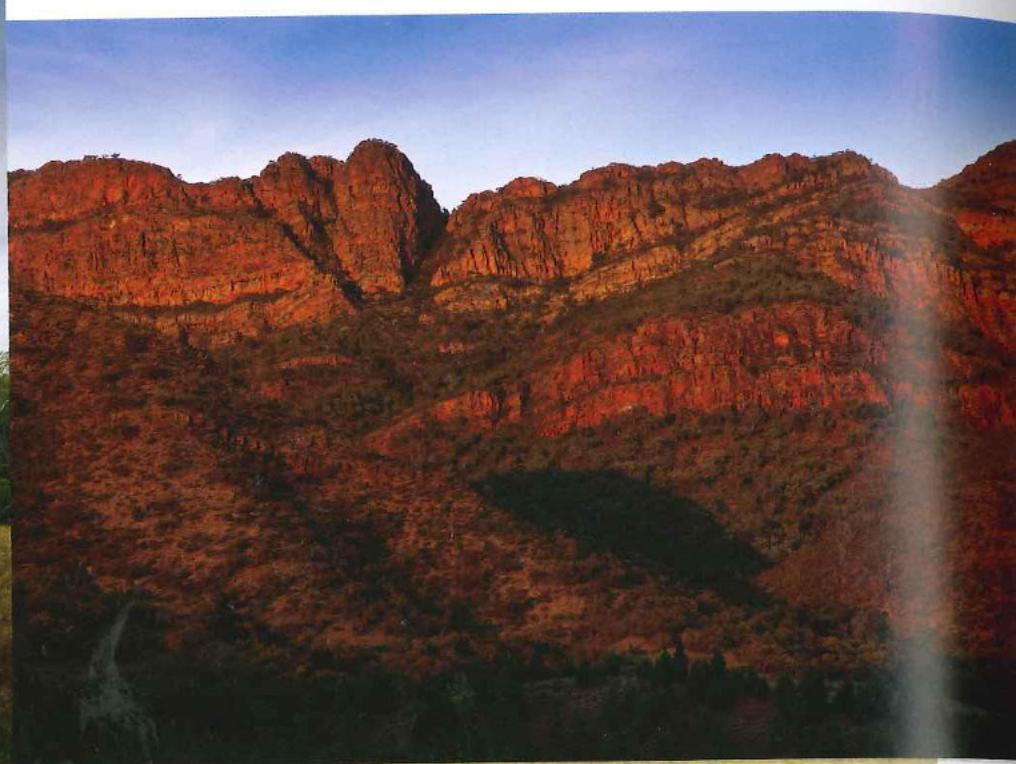
It is day three along the Arkaba Walk. A day when the temperature reaches at least 35 degrees in the sheltered sections of the dry riverbed of Slaty Creek, a typical Flinders Ranges watercourse. Lined by age-old Red River gums which have seen countless raging floods and many years of drought, the creek winds through weather-worn hills. Even the birds have stopped singing on this hot day although there are signs of life: a bobtail lizard soaking up the heat, droppings from grey kangaroos and stocky euros, a glimpse of a fleeing emu, a nest of irritated inch ants.

After we have walked for hours, the surrounding hills finally open up and the landscape starts to expand. This is where Stuart Dan, one of Arkaba's guides on camp duty, comes rushing towards us with a wooden bowl in his hands. Contained within are the wet, chilled towels.

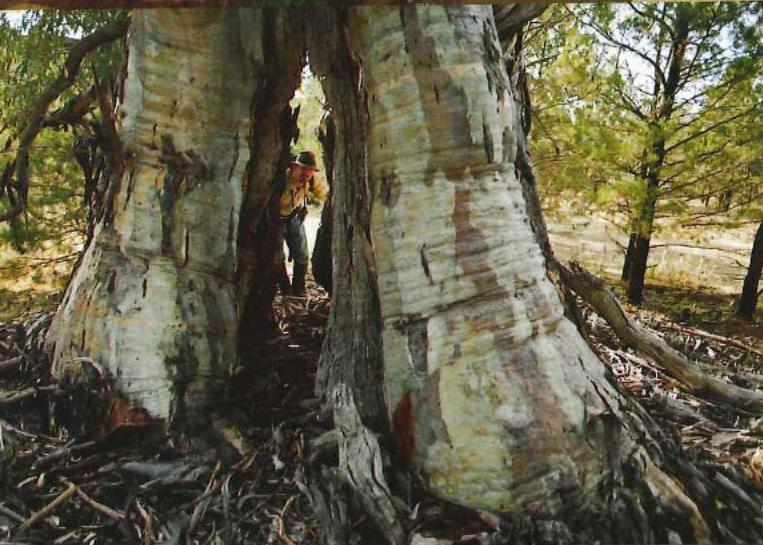
The four-day Arkaba Walk leads mostly through private land on historic Arkaba Station in the Flinders Ranges. The 24,000 hectares of sheep station, established in 1851, have undergone an astonishing transformation in the last few years. Once severely degraded by overstocking exaggerated by years of drought, the now almost-destocked land has bounced back, thanks to abundant rain during the last two years and a concerted conservation effort.

The new owners have set aside 16,000 hectares as a wilderness sanctuary. After the eradication of almost all feral animals, the rare yellow-footed rock wallaby has returned, the number of reptiles has increased dramatically and an already impressive bird list is being added to continually.





IT IS A NATURE DOCUMENTARY OF ATTENBOROUGH QUALITY AND IN 3-D, PROJECTED ONTO A GIGANTIC FLAT SCREEN



The Arkaba Walk is a fully guided and catered walk sometimes dubbed as luxurious. That over-used adjective can be misleading, however. Yes, walkers are pampered along the way but the walk still requires grit. Most of it is off-track and demands ankle-high boots; uneven terrain, loose rocks and long traverses can take their toll if you're not equipped with the right footwear.

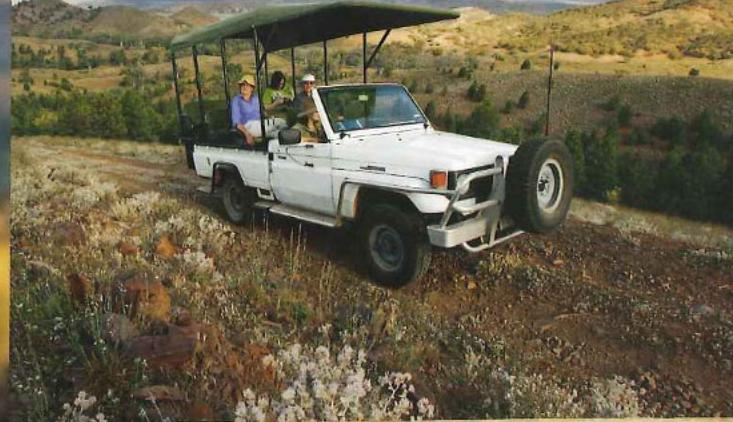
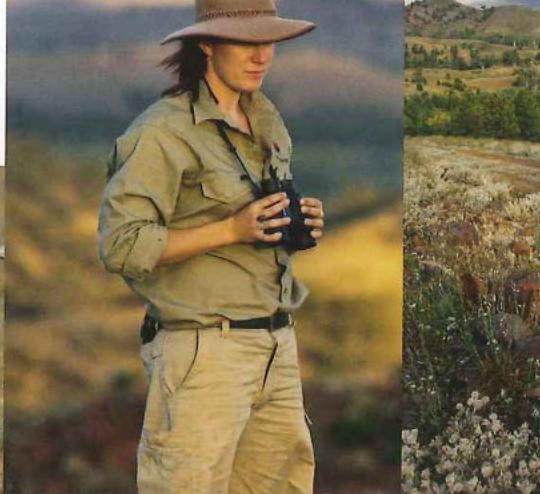
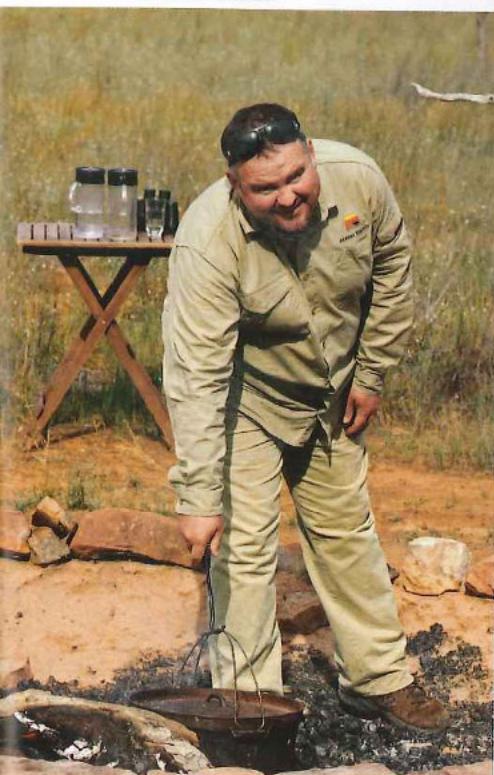
It is cool on the day we start the walk at Wilpena, the touristy epicentre of the Flinders Ranges National Park. After storms the previous afternoon, cold, moist air has moved over the ranges. The crossing of its showpiece, the Wilpena Pound with its flat, park-like interior, is a perfect warm-up. We ease ourselves away from civilization and slowly climb towards Bridal Gap, a saddle in the Wilpena Range. The view expands across undulating hills towards the rugged Elder Range, the dominating landmark of the walk from now on. Then the walk shows its teeth for the first time. The descent from the Pound's rim is steep and rocky, the track not very well defined in sections.

In the afternoon we reach Black's Gap Camp at the foot of the Bumbinyunna Range. Here we are introduced to a very different aspect of the walk. Along with the cold towels, a jug of rehydrating fluid and a tray of nibbles greet us: camembert, crackers, spinach pesto with pine nuts, semi-dried tomatoes... There are showers: rustic constructions of corrugated iron with no roofs or doors but with large bucket shower heads full of warm water to wash off sweat and dust. While we are busy recuperating, Stuart is sweating at the fire pit, creating sustenance in camp ovens. With temperatures dropping rapidly at nightfall, our private decks equipped with double swags are alluring. When I crawl into my swag I find a hot-water bottle that Stuart has sneaked in to take off the chill.

Day two is clearly the show-off day. The cold front with its grey



View more photos
of the Arkaba Walk at
nzlifeandleisure.co.nz



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Outdoor shower – privacy guaranteed; early sun on the Elder Range; ever-smiling Stuart Dan on camp duty; guide Kate Mee in twitcher mode; a bobtail lizard soaks up the heat; safari-style 4WD excursion on Arkaba Station; grass trees on top of the Red Range; an age-old Red River gum.

and a visibility possible only after rain. We are walking through an Imax-movie-like landscape in panoramic format and technicolour. Now on Arkaba Station land, we leave the marked track and go cross-country. Past the wounds of an old barite mine we climb a nameless hill, on the topographic map marked only as "rocky outcrops". Below us is Moralana Creek, lined with magnificent river gums. In the distance the banded cliffs of the Elder Range dominate, dwarfing the Red Range before it. Lunch is at a bore along Moralana Creek in the shade of an old river gum.

Then it is uphill again. We climb up onto a ridge with more sweeping views before descending into a gorge-like gap in the ranges. This section is the most scenic of the entire walk. Near the second camp an impressive hill, part of the Red Range, promises breathtaking views. The view is well worth the extra sweat. A forest of stunted grass trees flourishes on top, creating a stark landscape bordered by abruptly dropping cliffs. And just below us is Elder Camp; blue smoke curling up from the trees marks its location. There the decks with the deluxe swags are spaced out under mature cypress pines, facing the dramatic rock faces of the Elder Range.

When we arrive at the camp, Stuart is already at work at the fire pit. Tonight's dinner is marinated pork belly skewers for entrée, enormous steaks wrapped in prosciutto with vegetables and tomato salad and a most evil chocolate cake for dessert. Ultimately responsible for the culinary component of the walk is Kiwi chef Richard Corcoran from Whanganui. He describes himself as an "old-style chef", meaning that everything is made from scratch. He bakes his own bread and makes his own yoghurt, pasta and mayonnaise. A bottle of mellow red wine and the hypnotic beauty of the old bush TV – the campfire – round off the day. I fall asleep listening to the wind in the pines. Stars sparkle and every now and then an owl calls.

The next day begins with a glorious sunrise. The quartzite rampart of the Elder Range changes colour from boysenberry to maroon to burnt orange. It is a nature documentary of Attenborough quality and in 3-D, projected onto a gigantic flat screen. And we don't even have to get up for the show.

Today's route leads through low hills between the Red and Elder Ranges, covered in stands of mallee in full bloom. The scent of honey is heavy in the air. Bees are buzzing; the melodic song of the elusive rufous whistler accompanies us. The temperature rises steadily throughout the day. Eventually we descend into Slaty Creek. During the last night at Mern Merna Camp, clouds move in from the north and temperatures stay uncomfortably warm. A trough is moving in; rain threatens. But luckily for us it stays dry. Setting up tents in the middle of the night wouldn't have been much fun for our guides.

On the way to Arkaba homestead on the last day we once again scale the Red Range before descending towards Arkaba Creek with its permanent water-holes and abundant bird life. The walk crosses a shallow valley where we surprise emus, grey kangaroos, flocks of noisy galahs and corellas. It is like walking through an open-air zoo. A grove of neatly clipped bullock bush reminds us that sheep once ruled this landscape. Now native animals are claiming back lost ground. As we walk along Arkaba Creek, we spot a nankeen night heron, another new candidate for Arkaba's growing list of birds. Then, in sight of the homestead, my mind again turns to something simple but very pleasurable: a chilled, wet towel.

NOTEBOOK

How to get there: Adelaide, the closest Australian international airport to the Flinders Ranges, is serviced by Air New Zealand. From Adelaide by car to Arkaba Station is about 450km.

Where to stay: Stay in style at the historic homestead at Arkaba Station. Double approximately NZ\$2000. Price includes all meals, beverages (based on a selected open bar), round-trip transfers by road from Hawker Airstrip, complimentary use of mountain bikes (4km self-guided bush trail on the property) and scheduled daily activities.

The Walk: Wild Bush Luxury offers a choice of four days/three nights or three days/two nights plus one night at the homestead. Prices are approximately NZ\$2500 per person for both versions. Rates include transfers to/from Hawker Airstrip, guide

services, support vehicle to transport luggage between camps (walkers carry only light day-packs), all meals and a selection of wines at dinner, luxury accommodation under the stars (all sleeping equipment supplied), national park entry fee. Walks depart every Thursday between 17 March and 30 November 2012. Bird-watchers will be especially rewarded along this trek.

What to take: Walking clothing suitable for the occasional cool day, sturdy shoes, day-pack, sun protection, torch, water bottle, camera, binoculars if you are a twitcher (can also be supplied). Wild Bush Luxury supplies walkers with detailed packing lists.

Best time to go: March to November; July and August are the coolest months.

Additional information:
arkabawalk.com
arkabastation.com