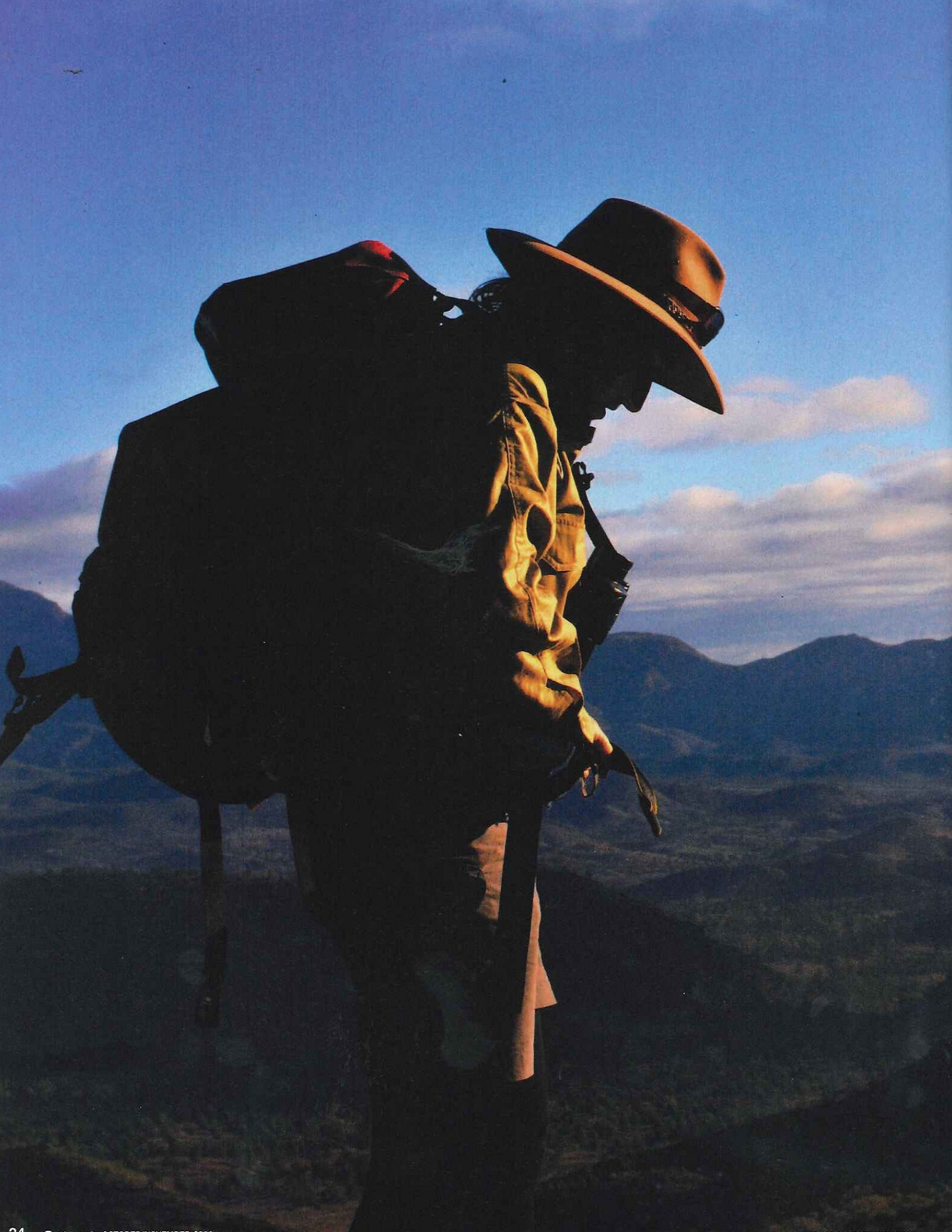


the Mighty Flinders

ONE OF THE PLANET'S OLDEST RANGES, WHERE RED RUGGED HORIZON MEETS DARK STARRY NIGHT

Perched on the rim of Wilpena Pound, we surveyed endless rolling hills, stark red ridges and open green pastures. A pair of wedge-tailed eagles soared on the breezes well overhead.

"Everything below us, as far as the eye can see, is Arkaba Station," proclaimed our guide, from beneath her quintessentially Australian bush hat. "And for the next three days, we'll be the only people in the entire place."

Located five hours north of Adelaide in South Australia's Flinders Ranges, Arkaba occupies about 60,000 acres of wilderness, just east of the town of Hawker. Originally settled as a sheep station, Arkaba's 150-year-old heritage homestead is now a retreat—really more a base—from which to explore the region's spectacular flora and fauna.

The Ranges are South Australia's highest mountains. Popular with hikers, birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts, it's easy to see why: they are spectacular! We had signed up for a three-day trek across the Outback, using Arkaba as a base. So, after changing into hiking gear and stuffing our daypacks, we set off with our guide, Kat, to tackle what locals referred to as 'The Arkaba Walk.'

Kat Mee is originally from Dundee, Scotland, and studied in South Africa before settling in Australia. When we had arrived at the homestead a little behind schedule that morning, we found her chomping at the bit and raring to hit the trails.

"You're late," were her first words of welcome, spoken in a lilting Scottish burr with a stinging bite. "Follow me to the homestead."

With that, she spun her mountain bike in a cloud of dust as we tried in vane to keep up with her. As we soon learned, it is both her energy and insatiable appetite for the outdoors that ensures her enthusiasm for all things Flinders is as intoxicating as some of Australia's famed vintages.

Wilpena Pound was once a valley in a high mountain range. But the peaks gradually eroded, leaving just the remaining walls and what some refer to as Australia's Ngorongoro Crater. Formed millions of years ago, its 30-square-kilometre floor is criss-crossed with picturesque trekking trails that teem with wildlife. We began by following the Heysen Trail—a 1,200-kilometre hiking route that magnificently spans South Australia (see "Walking with a Winemaker," this issue, page 40). The start of the trail wound through a riverine setting that was lined with River Red Gums—majestic trees with smooth, multicoloured bark that ranges from reds and blues to greys and metallic silvers.

"We've got about 12 kilometres to cover today," said Kat. "And because we started a bit late, we'll have to kick-up the pace to make it to our camp before sunset—but, we've still got time to stop for anything interesting."

With that there was a rustle in the trees. Roberto swung his camera in the direction

of the noise, hoping to spy our first kangaroo or wallaby; but as the sound grew louder only a herd of goats appeared.

"Vermin," hissed Kat. "Yet another example of feral creatures that threaten our natural species. There's your first 'roo though," she added with a smile, pointing further down the trail. "It's a grey."

The kangaroo watched us idly, while continuing to graze. Although we're all familiar with the unmistakable shape and appearance of a 'roo, there's something even more appealing about them when spotted in their natural environment, and just metres away.

"Watch," Kat added. "See how the ears move independently of each other, like radar dishes? It's how they keep tabs on any threat."

As Roberto edged forward snapping away, the kangaroo raised its head and watched warily, before finally bounding into the bush.

"Don't worry, there'll be more over the coming days....but that," said Kat, turning to our left and pointing to the tree line, "is a Big Red. And I've never seen one in the Pound before. That is special."

The red kangaroo is Australia's largest land mammal, the biggest surviving marsupial. And the one not far from me was a spectacular specimen. Lighter and rustier in colour as well as bigger in stature, its lean face was all classic, iconic Australia. As we watched we realized there were two others in the trees, watching us right back, and carefully. After posing for photos they bounded away, their mighty thighs powering graceful leaps, their tails steering like giant rudders.

"Well, that wasn't a bad start. Right, let's have a quick lunch stop."

A friend of mine claims that adventure travel is any hotel room where he has to climb out of bed to reach the remote. It's possible The Arkaba Walk would be his idea of hell—but for anyone with a minimal amount of outdoors derring-do, it's pure heaven. It's also fully supported: though participants must trek an occasionally challenging 12-15 kilometres between camps each day, that's about the extent of the hardship. The camps are semi-permanent, and have walk-in tents erected on raised wooden platforms, with 'bush' showers and trucked-in food.

From her pack Kat removed a couple of gourmet sandwiches, some granola bars and fruit. "Prepared by our chef, Richard, this morning," she explained. "But you'll be making your own lunches for the next couple of days."

With lunch finished and shadows already lengthening, we continued our trek up the edge of the Pound's 1,000-metre rim, until we were faced with a sweeping vista of the unspoiled Arkaba wilderness. Kat pointed out the route we would be taking, winding down from the Pound, circling hills, spanning creek beds and narrow gorges, and sweeping round to just under the Bunbinyana Range.

The terrain varied from classically Australian gum and acacia trees to hills of pines that resembled the American wild west—except for the presence of wallaroos. Smaller than a kangaroo, the wallaroo, or Euro as it's often called, at

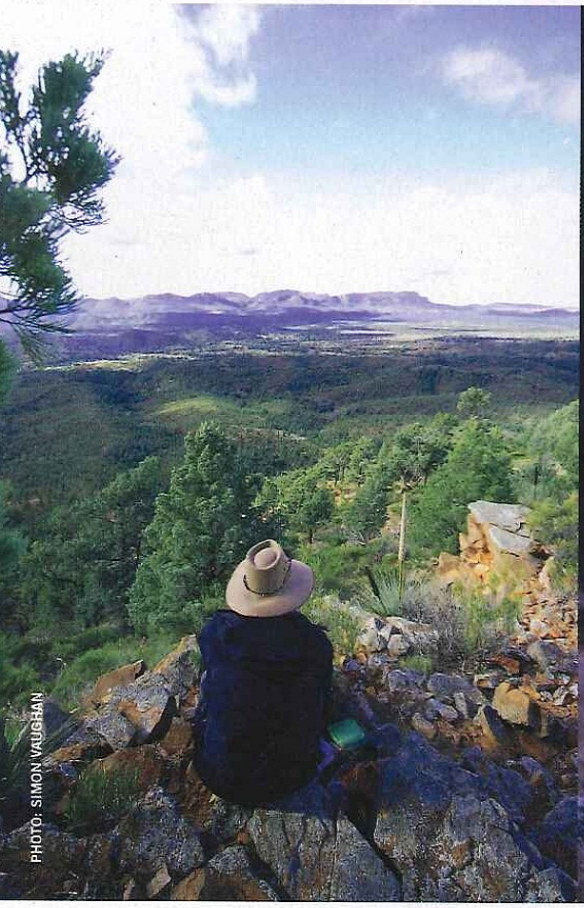
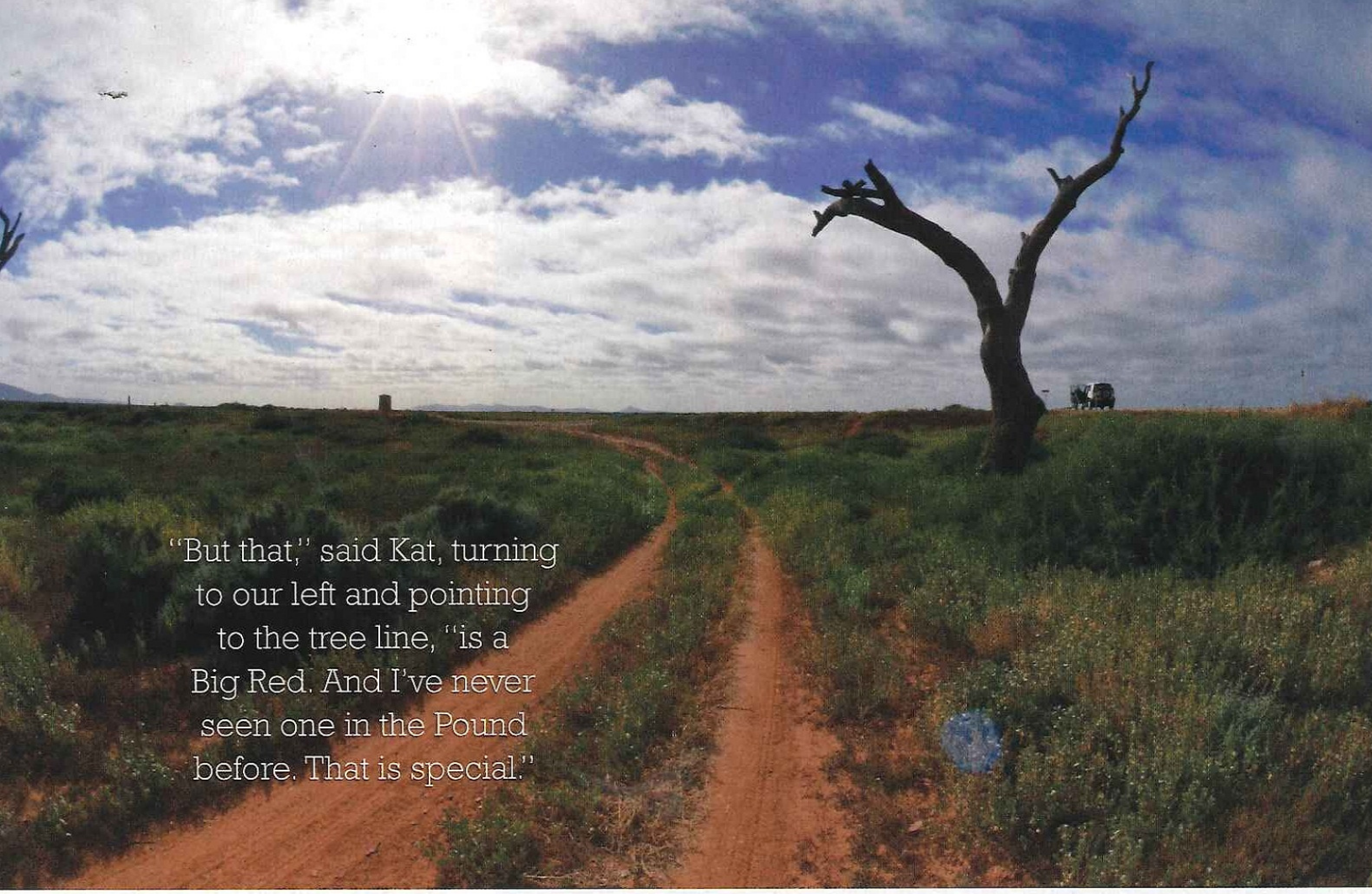


PHOTO: SIMON VAUGHAN

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Perched on a high ridge overlooking Arkaba and the Flinders Ranges.
THIS SPREAD (LEFT TO RIGHT): Kat Mee surveying Arkaba Station; Author Simon Vaughan and the Arkaba guides around a giant fire-pit after having had a sumptuous dinner; An iconically-red track winds its way through the Outback.



first seems indiscernible from its larger cousin, sharing many of the same features. But by the end of our first day of trekking, we were as deft as Kat at differentiating between them.

Just before sundown we walked into Black's Gap camp, nestled in a clearing made by a shepherd in the 1850s and still bearing the remnants of his old brick chimney. A blazing campfire crackled in a stone pit, as Stuart, the camp-master, offered us a beer or glass of wine.

"I'll warm some water so you can have a bush shower while it's still daylight," he said.

The bush shower was basically just buckets strung from trees, with three sides made of corrugated iron and a slatted wooden floor. The fourth side was open and faced the Flinders Ranges, which was turning pink in the late afternoon light as I scrubbed away the day's dirt.

"During the summer we sleep in swags outside," Stuart explained, adding that swags were the large, classically-Australian bedrolls that have been used in the outback since the first days of European settlement. "But it'll drop close to zero tonight, so we've put the swags inside the tents."

A starter of kangaroo skewers sizzled on the campfire as we stared at the Southern Cross, and Stuart guided us around the stars, satellites and constellations overhead. After a wonderful dinner with a few glasses of Shiraz, we turned in for the night. Unlike those early pioneers, my swag was lined with linen sheets, a merino wool blanket and, best of all, a sheepskin-covered hot water bottle.

Now this is roughing it.

It had been ear-hummingly silent through the night. With many of Australia's creatures—including, thankfully, most of its snakes and spiders—hibernating or largely inactive, there wasn't much to make noise; but that changed with dawn's first glow.

The cacophonous din sounded as though the world was coming to an end. There, in the tree directly above my tent, was an obstreperous Australian raven...and half a dozen large pink and grey birds.

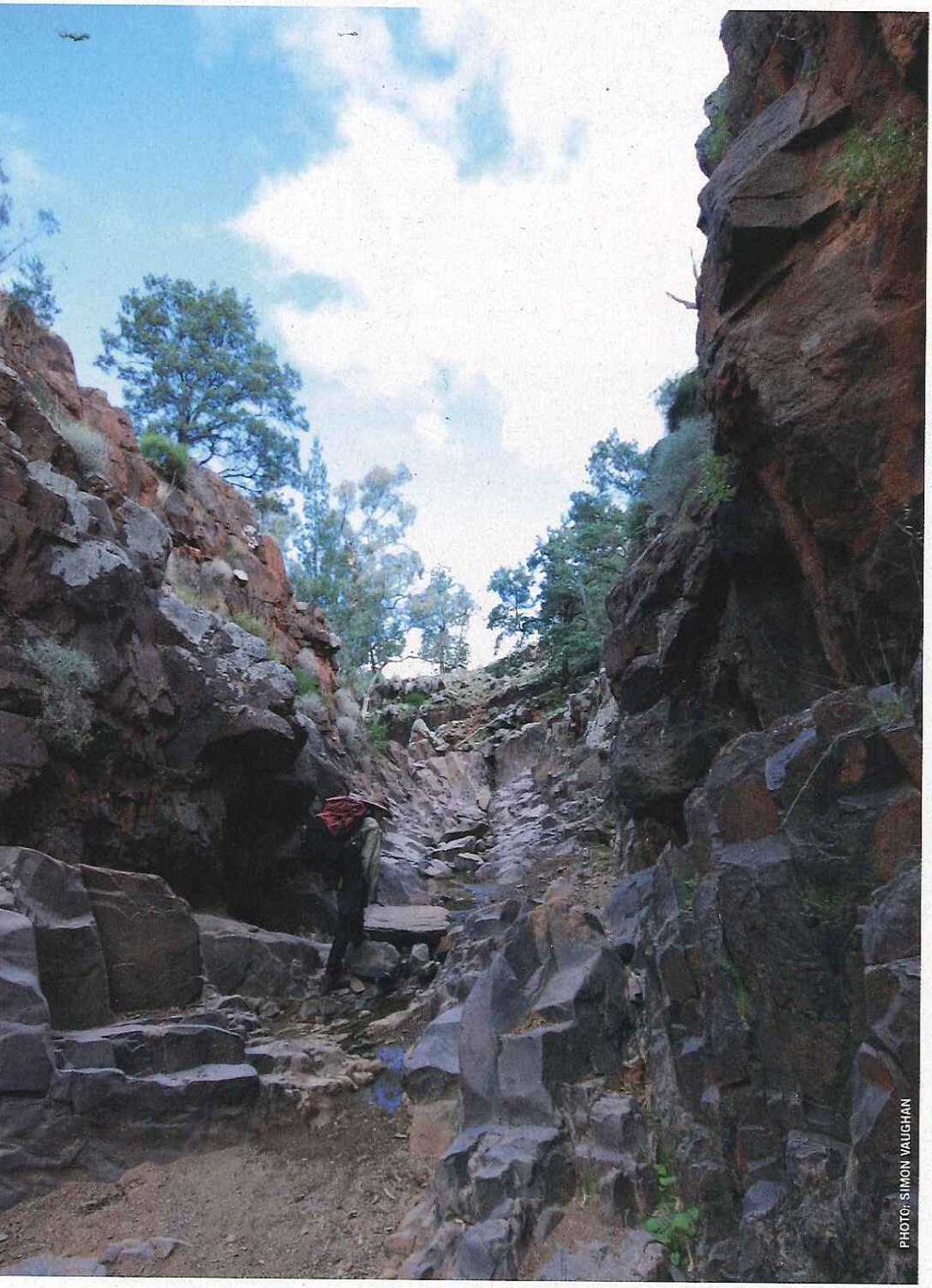
"Galahs," explained Kat. "Did they wake you?" she asked, with a mischievous smile, as I stared up maliciously.

"What on Earth's that?" I screeched, trying to sound as manly as possible, amid panic.

"That's an orb spider," she answered, inspecting something quite possibly the size of a Smart Car that was lounging in the centre of a formidable web. "It's harmless. Come on, breakfast's ready."

I am no arachnophobe but neither do I possess a death wish, and in a land of funnel webs and red-backs, (despite assurances to the contrary), I gave my neighbour a wide berth. Our second day's trek began from directly behind my tent and followed a narrow, mostly dry gorge. Evidence of a torrent of water was everywhere, with massive trees bent around rocks and water-marks ten feet or more up the steep walls; but the only water now visible were a few stagnant green pools.

"We don't get much rain here," Kat explained. "But when we do, enormous dry riverbeds can become dangerously full in little more than an hour. It's so spectacular—and so welcome—that everyone jumps in their cars to go and have a look."



TOP: Our Scottish Arkaba guide leads us through a dried-out riverbed.

The ground was level but rocky, and we had to watch our steps carefully. As the sun rose above the ridge line it soon became warm. As we chatted along the route Kat explained how it gets so hot here in the summer they only do shorter day walks, and only rarely take non-Australians out, unless they can prove they're up to the task.

"To come from a northern-hemisphere winter and start trekking in 40-degree-Celsius-plus conditions, is asking for trouble. But if I believe they're good for it, we'll do it."

After a few kilometres we turned off the Heysen Trail and forged our own way. Though we'd grown accustomed to seeing kangaroos, wallaroos and wallabies, we were far from complacent and stopped to watch every time. In the dry river beds Kat pointed out fresh emu tracks, but the giant flightless birds continued to elude us. By mid-afternoon we scrambled to the top of a precipitous ridge and gazed back at the rim of Wilpena Pound. With the exception of the odd sheep fence, and one ancient, abandoned pick-up truck, there had not been a single sign of civilization in almost two days of trekking.

Descending from our lofty perch, we strolled into Elder Camp late afternoon. Stuart was there too, and gave us a cheery welcome. Directly behind us, the Elder Range soared dramatically into the clear blue sky, which was just starting to turn red. Dinner was another three-course feast in the bush, illuminated by gas lamps and washed down with wine from the Clare Valley.

But South Australia in winter, free of flies and mosquitoes, stifling heat and blazing sun, and devoid—apparently—of deadly snakes and spiders, was a pretty special place

On our last day of trekking

I awoke with a tinge of sadness. I've always enjoyed the wilderness, and am one of those people who can literally spend hours watching grass grow. But South Australia in winter, free of flies and mosquitoes, stifling heat and blazing sun, and devoid—apparently—of deadly snakes and spiders, was a pretty special place. Especially with prepared campfire meals, superb guides, hot bush showers, and acres of pristine bush all to ourselves.

Kat and Stuart were having a jaffle contest over the fire. Despite some of the best chefs and restaurants in the world, a mainstay of honest-to-goodness Australian cuisine remains the jaffle, or toastie. Toasted cheese, tomato and ham/bacon sandwiches have been elevated to fine art here, and are available at every cafe, airport and hotel. Jaffle-irons are medieval-looking things that could be used for torture, but were actually developed for open-fire cooking. Kat and Stuart were engaged in mortal combat to produce the best. Kat's boasted a perfectly runny egg in the centre; while Stuart's were toasted to golden perfection on the outside. We diplomatically declared it a draw, and ate all their efforts; then we

rolled up the swags, made our lunches and hit the trail.

By mid-afternoon the homestead was back in sight. A one-storey, Victorian ranch house with thick stone walls and long sloping roofs, it was surrounded by lawns and gardens and even a small infinity pool. We indulged in a cold beer on the flag-stoned patio beneath a tree full of cockatoos, before heading for a hot shower, this time indoors.

That evening, we sat around a large, wooden table beside Chef Richard's open kitchen. Joining us was a couple from Queensland, who had arrived for a five-day stay, and would explore Arkaba by vehicle and day hikes. Richard prepared a feast, and the red wine flowed as the inimitable Australian humour had us collapsing in laughter.

Afterwards, we retired to the small library, where Brendon, one of the hosts, told us about how the plan for Arkaba was to remove all the remaining sheep, then reintroduce endangered Australian species to the place. Eliminating all its feral species would be almost impossible, but Arkaba's owners had made excellent progress over the previous decade.

After three days of amazing, star-gazing outback trekking, that night I slept like one of the lambs we'd seen in the pastures. The next morning Kat and the rest of the staff bade us farewell, and we were deeply sorry to go. Some part of Arkaba will always remain with me... I just hoped it isn't an orb spider hiding in my pack.

FLINDERS FAST FACTS

- **CAPTAIN MATTHEW FLINDERS** was a navigator and cartographer in the 18th and 19th centuries who mapped much of South Australia's coastline. He once sailed with the infamous Captain William Bligh, and campaigned for the name 'Australia' to be used in place of 'New Holland.' Born in England, he made much of his mark on Australia. Countless landmarks, streets and areas are named for him.
- **INTRODUCED TO THE COUNTRY BY EUROPEAN SETTLERS OR AS STOWAWAYS**, Australia has long struggled to contain feral invaders that cause havoc on its indigenous flora and fauna. Common feral species include rabbits, cane toads, foxes, cats, pigs and goats. Wildlife conservationists, farmers and landowners spend millions of dollars every year trapping and culling feral animals, as they prey on species in Australia that exist nowhere else on the planet.
- **ARKABA STATION** is not only a wilderness and conservation success story; it's entwined with Australian history. In December 1862 a camel team carrying the bodies of legendary Australian explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills camped at Arkaba. Equally legendary explorer, John McDouall Stuart, after whom the Stuart Highway was named, also camped at Arkaba.