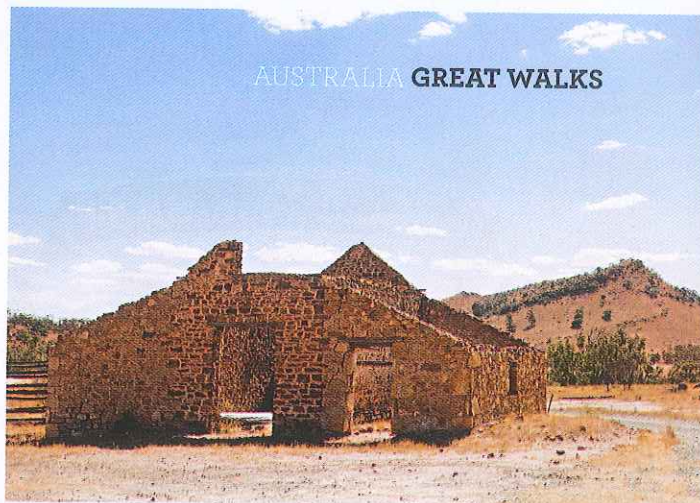




WALK

THIS WAY

The Inca Trail, the Camino de Santiago in Spain, New Zealand's Milford Track, the formidable Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea... signature walking tracks lure hiking enthusiasts in their thousands each year. Research indicates some 200,000 Australians participated in a walking holiday in the 12 months to June 30, 2013. In the past two years, six independent operators have joined forces to create The Great Walks of Australia. It's an exclusive club. To belong, an operator has to be running guided walks through pristine Australian National Park or World Heritage areas. They must have ownership or exclusive rights to eco-lodges, restored homesteads or safari-style permanent campsites; must cater for small groups (about 10 guests plus two professional guides is the norm); and offer high-end catering, with a non-walking treat such as kayaking or a luxury spa also on the menu. Since inception, the enterprise has won 30 tourism awards. Between them, the seven Great Walks of Australia offer 35 days of escorted walking over 440km of hiking trails. Here, **PAUL ROBINSON** talks the Arkaba Walk while **STEVE MEACHAM** reports on the ins and outs of a pacey portfolio.



Arkaba Walk (clockwise from top left): old water pump; near Arkaba Woolshed; curious kangaroos; inside Wilpena Pound

Bushwalking doesn't get much better than this. Only 10 minutes from the drop-off and already it feels like an arrival into The Land That Time Forgot.

The forbidding rock ramparts of Wilpena Pound, about 430km north of Adelaide, enclose one of nature's marvels. This eerily circular geological bowl forms a natural amphitheatre, its high walls enclosing a scrub- and forest-covered valley, 17km long, 8km wide. There are only two passes and the pound interior sits about 200m higher than the surrounding plains of the Flinders Ranges National Park.

The Adnyamathanha people, who have lived in the rocky ranges for more than 15,000 years, called it *ikara*, or meeting place. In Aboriginal legend, the pound walls are the petrified remains of two giant Dreamtime snakes, killed by hunters after a mighty battle.

Such is the circular perfection of Wilpena Pound, it's tempting to imagine it as the result of some long-ago meteorite strike or volcanic eruption. The geological truth is not so cataclysmic – the magnificent bluffs that soar up to 1170m are actually the stumps of ancient mountains, formed during the Palaeozoic era and eroded over 545 million years since. This spectacular prehistoric bastion marks the beginning of the Arkaba Walk, part of both the Wild Bush Luxury and Great Walks of Australia portfolios. The Arkaba is a four-day, small-group “moderate-to-challenging” hiking safari through the

foothills of the Elder Range and across the Red Range to the historic (1851) Arkaba Homestead. Formerly a sheep station, Arkaba is now a 25,000ha wildlife conservancy.

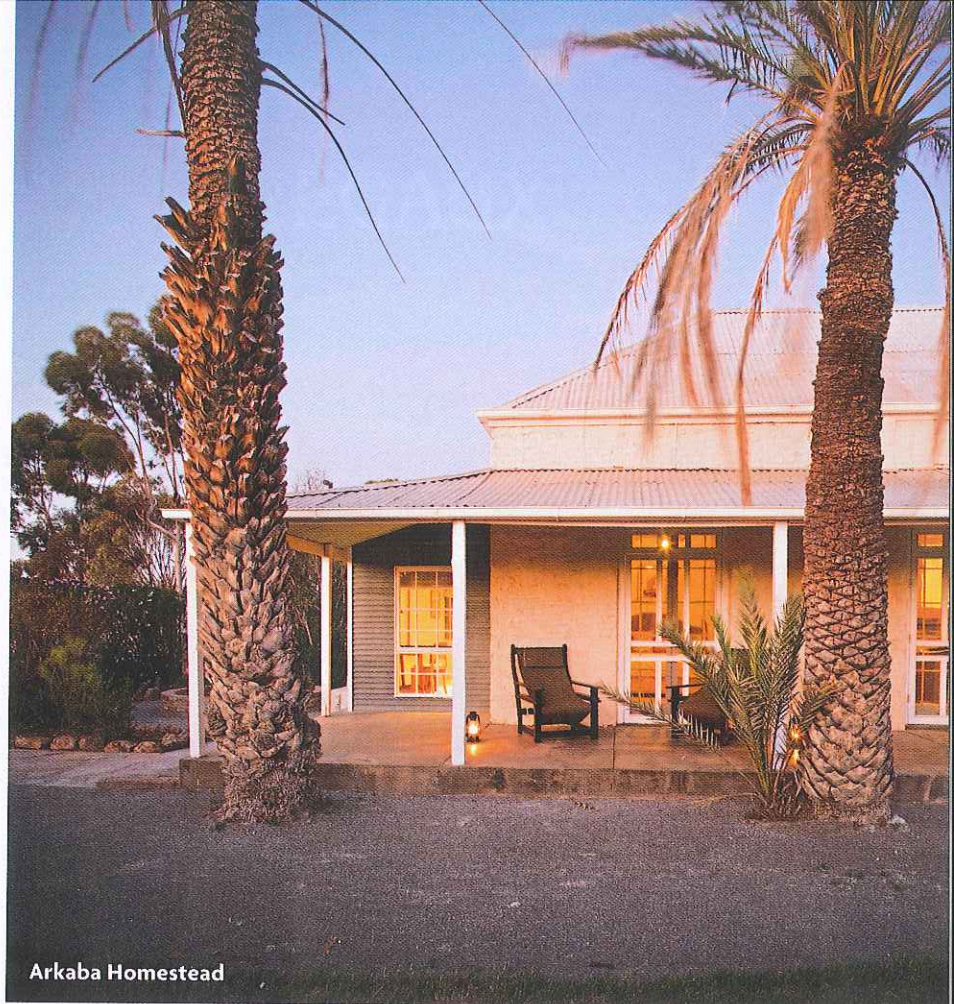
Occasionally following the famous Heysen Trail, the trek winds through mallee, acacia and cypress pine, past sandstone bluffs, through rocky gorges and dry creek beds shaded by majestic river red gums, across rolling grassland once grazed by sheep, now the preserve of emu, wallaby and kangaroo. Covering about 15km a day, the rigours of the hike are amply assuaged by the luxury – and gourmet cooking – of its permanent campsites, and the country comforts of the homestead on the final night.

Wilpena Pound is the perfect starting point. In the 1850s, it was leased out for breeding horses, its natural corral cutting overheads considerably. The pound's rainfall was also significantly higher than the surrounding region. Subsequently, in 1899, some of the land was cleared and used to grow wheat, a venture abandoned in 1914. Crossing the floor of the valley, the remains of fences, stone buildings and rusted farm equipment is evidence of the doomed enterprise.

Not much rain around now, though. It's early November and the creeks are dry, the foliage a faded green. Boots kick up the dust trudging across the stony ground. Average rainfall in these parts is around 30cm a year, extended dry periods not uncommon. There is little breeze on the valley floor, the jagged cliff walls sheltering the »



SCHOUTEN ISLAND PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA; ARKABA HOMESTEAD: RANDY LARCOMBE

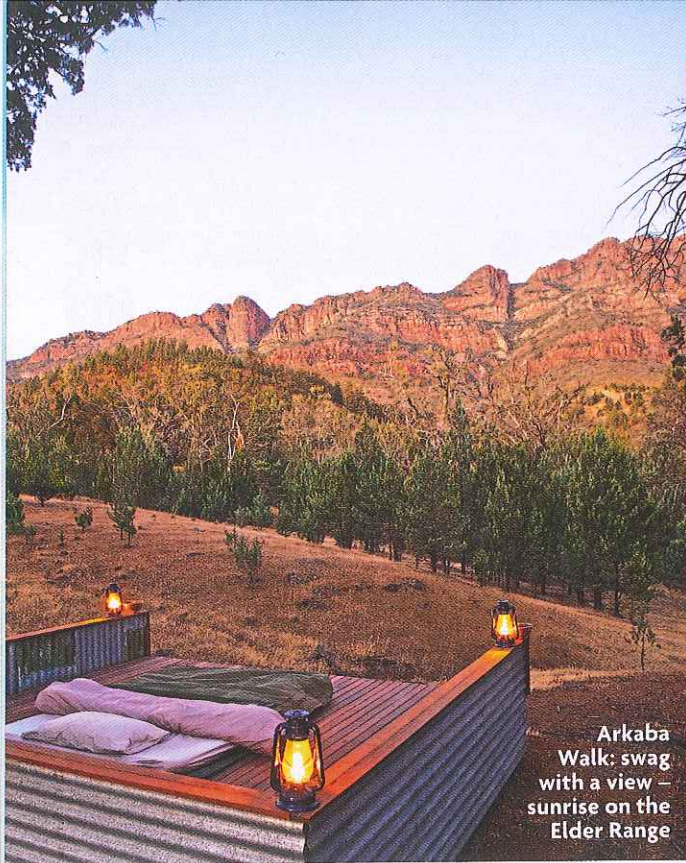


Arkaba Homestead

pound from what's happening outside. Parrots, cockatoos, corellas and galahs raucously announce human intruders. Small goannas and lizards scuttle away from the trail. Several hundred metres up a steep incline is a lookout on the rim of the pound with a panoramic view over the plains to the stark white salt pan of Lake Torrens in the distance to the west, and an overview of our Arkaba route to the east. This is big country. Guide Katherine "Kat" Bevan, a Scottish backpacker who fell in love with the outback, is a mine of information – geological, botanical, historical, animal – and the pace is steady but leisurely, with frequent pauses for thought.

Descending through the Bridal Gap pass, we strike the Heysen Trail and follow it into the Arkaba Wilderness. Lunch in a shady copse of trees includes a visit by an extended family of emus. As it's spring, there are many stripy chicks, insatiably curious and unwary enough to venture near. Wildlife is a constant – mobs of kangaroos and euros at siesta, kites and eagles riding the thermals far overhead, smaller birds flitting among the trees, the occasional wallaby rudely woken from slumber and bounding away through the scrub.

Arkaba is a land in transition from its pastoral past. Feral animal control (foxes, dogs, cats, goats, rabbits) has been ongoing since 2009 with marked success, encouraging native fauna resurgence. Stock numbers have been gradually reduced and the final sheep were removed from the property in September 2013. Invasive plant species are being eradicated, native species regenerated and soil-erosion issues addressed. Bevan retrieves infrared cameras strapped to trees near waterholes, and maps rabbit warrens on her GPS. The war against the feral foe has become way more high-tech than bait and bullets. ➤



Arkaba
Walk: swag
with a view –
sunrise on the
Elder Range

AS DUSK FALLS, we descend through grassy foothills on the other side of the pound to Black's Gap camp. Between the pound and the Bunbinyana Range, with nearby water, this was a shepherd's camp in the 1850s. Bevan's husband, Brendon, a South African who grew up on game reserves, waits with chilled towels, cold drinks and snacks. The venue for a welcome hot shower is an ingenious contraption that involves a three-sided corrugated iron stall, assorted ropes and pulleys, a bucket and a vista of evening light on the walls of the pound. A voyeuristic kangaroo observes the ritual.

The campfire is lit, although it's not that cold, premium South Australian wine is poured and dinner is a three-course, chef-prepared feast under the stars before sinking into a luxury swag on an individual timber sleeping deck. Overhead is a cosmic canopy totally free of pollution – shooting stars and satellites a bonus. Eco-awareness rules, from solar power and composting toilets to rainwater tanks, the mantra is low-impact tourism. And the campsites are designed to maximise either sunrise or sunset viewing.

After a hearty breakfast, we hit the trail, carrying only daypacks; Brendon Bevan will transport the swags to tonight's camp by 4WD. Hiking is through rolling hills, initially on the Heysen Trail through Black's Gap.

There are subtle changes in the vegetation. Walking through cypress pine forest over stony ground, it could be the south of Spain. In creek beds, shaded by river red gums, there is still life. Water is often just below the surface, as numerous animal tracks attest. Lizards bask on the rocks, kangaroos rest in the shade and in tree hollows. The perturbed cries of two eagle chicks alert us to a ramshackle nest above. The debris flung far up the banks, the polished and shattered rock, the savagely scarred bark of the red



Standley Chasm on
the Larapinta Trail,
Northern Territory

03

LARAPINTA TRAIL

❖ **Operator:** World Expeditions. worldexpeditions.com
❖ **Location:** West MacDonnell National Park, Northern Territory.
❖ **Closest airport:** Alice Springs.
❖ **Duration:** 6 days/5 nights.
❖ **Terrain:** High ridgelines, narrow canyons, spectacular gorges, relaxing waterholes.
❖ **Distance:** Up to 72km, ranging from 4-16 km per day.
❖ **Grade:** Moderate.
❖ **Sleepovers:** Purpose-built permanent camps with hot showers, comfortable lounges and heated dining shelter.

❖ **Taste:** Coolamon, damper, wraps and dips, curry; date pudding.
❖ **Drink:** BYO.
❖ **Wildlife:** Kangaroos, wallabies, dingoes.
❖ **Culture:** The people jointly known as the Anangu of West MacDonnell National Park, the land of the artist Albert Namatjira.
❖ **Instagram:** @standleychasm and @standleychasm.
❖ **Wow factor:** The views of Mount Saddleback and the Standley Chasm.
❖ **Cost:** From \$1,200 per person.

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TWELVE APOSTLES WALK

❖ **Operator:** Bothfeet. 1300 767 416. bothfeet.com

❖ **Location:** Victorian coast (last 55km of Great Ocean Walk between Castle Cove and Twelve Apostles).

❖ **Closest airport:** Melbourne.

❖ **Duration:** 4 days/3 nights.

❖ **Terrain:** Beach, cliffs, forest trails.

❖ **Distance:** 55km, 8-18km per day.

❖ **Grade:** Moderate.

❖ **Sleepovers:** All three nights at award-winning eco lodge at Johanna, twin-share or single rooms with bathrooms. Communal lounge/dining.

❖ **Taste:** Five-spice pork belly; orange, dates and fennel salad; Eton mess.

❖ **Drink:** Regional wines including Scotchman's Hill and Bay of Apostles, plus Prickly Moses beers by Otway Estate. Alcohol not included in the

price and a tab system operates.

❖ **Wildlife:** Echidnas, wallabies, koalas, wedge-tailed eagles.

❖ **Culture:** A long maritime history and many tales of shipwreck.

❖ **Instagram:** The Twelve Apostles on the last day of the walk.

❖ **Wow factor:** Optional 10-minute helicopter flight over Twelve Apostles.

❖ **Cost:** From \$1995pp.



The Twelve Apostles, Victoria

gum trunks – are all proof that when flooding occurs, these creeks become raging torrents. The rock also tells many stories. Trained eyes can find evidence of long-ago glacial moraines, tidal flats, reefs and beaches. In gorges such as Wilkawillana and Brachina, fossil remains can be seen in the rocky walls.

Birdsong is a constant companion. Flocks of budgerigars and ring-necked parrots splash colour through the trees. With the temperatures hitting mid- to high-30s, any shade or breeze is relished. Slowly healing wounds on the hillsides are evidence of rudimentary attempts to extract minerals in the early 1900s.

Animal skeletons tell of harder times. The cruel spiked jaws of a rusty dingo trap are testament to pastoralists' attempts to cope with the wild dog "plague" that literally ate into their profits. On one slope, burnt pines cluster, black and gnarled like sentinels of the underworld. Ghost gums loom spectral and forbidding in the twilight.

✦ The Arkaba Walk operates from mid-March to the first of November. Arkaba Station is about 4.5 hours' drive from Melbourne, 1.5 hours from Port Augusta. arkabawalk.com

✦ Arkaba Homestead lodge operates year-round. arkabahomestead.com.au

Next day, from the Red Range ridge top, the homestead is all downhill from here, crossing the Arkaba Creek water well into the dry season (*arkaba* means "hidden"). Following it past the 1856 woolshed, with century-old carvings carved into its Oregon pine beams. Plunging into the reward – and a glass of wine as the sun sets over the sea.

Despite its undoubted pleasures – resident chef, guestrooms with ensuites, library, self-service bar, the homestead feels almost mundane after the cleverly hidden campsites and under-the-stars, *en-sawg* sleeping. In the morning you actually have to get out of bed to eat.

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