



Walkers approaching the aptly-named morning tea hill.
Picture: Wild Bush Luxury

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Next to Wilpena Pound, a former sheep station hosts one of the Great Walks of Australia that includes a section of the Heysen Trail

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When Australia was riding the sheep's back to prosperity, the Flinders Ranges were dotted with farms run by rugged men and women who battled the land in an attempt to make a living. Some are still doing it that way, but at Arkaba they're taking a different approach.

After Wild Bush Luxury acquired the 25,900 ha property in 2009, they set about turning it into a wildlife conservancy. It wasn't until four years ago that the last of the 8000 sheep were removed, but the change since then has been remarkable – a trip to the fence line with an adjoining station shows a stark contrast between properties.

Ground cover is already creeping back to paddocks that used to be overgrazed and small shrubs carpet the hillsides. Further

afield, indicator species like kangaroo grass are returning after a long absence.

On the other side of the property, Arkaba is bounded by Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park, where I'm headed to begin a three-day luxury bushwalk. The stunning centrepiece of the National Park is Wilpena Pound, known to the traditional Adnyamathanha owners as Ikara. The name means "meeting place", and it's an appropriate spot to learn more about my fellow walkers. Joining me are two families – a clan of avid trampers from Queensland and first-time hikers from New York – with five teenagers between them.

There's plenty of excited chatter as they compare trends and slang (fidget spinners are popular everywhere, it seems), but the most talkative member of the party is our guide Darlene. As we walk through the Pound, emus scatter at our approach and she explains that most of them are unlikely to

breed this year. It's the male's job to incubate the eggs, a period of almost eight weeks during which they don't eat at all. Last year's unusually wet winter meant that almost all of the males successfully mated and used up their fat reserves, and they simply haven't gained enough weight to do it again.

Far above the ungainly birds, a crown of jagged peaks defines this stunning natural enclosure. Over more than half a billion years, erosion has exposed layers of vibrant red, pink and brown quartzite and sandstone, colours that are mirrored in the rocks underfoot as we make our way up to a lookout. From here we can survey the entire Pound, with Lake Torrens' shimmering surface visible in the distance past the towering rock walls of the Elder Range, towards which we are headed.

First, though, we have to cross the bowl of the Pound and head towards Bridle Gap. >



FLINDERS RANGES

Getting there Arkaba is 410km from Adelaide via Port Augusta, and the drive takes just over five hours. Wild Bush Luxury also offers one-way air transfers to Whyalla with a pick-up service and return transfer via the Clare Valley.

When to walk Arkaba Homestead offers accommodation year round, and the Arkaba Walk runs from mid-March to mid-October. Winter maximum temperatures average 15°C, while in autumn and spring they rise up to 25°C.

How much The Arkaba Walk costs \$2200 per person, twin share arkabawalk.com

The writer was a guest of Wild Bush Luxury



Clockwise from above: Bridle Gap is a steep, rocky path to amazing views of Wilpena Pound on one side and Arkaba property on the other. Picture: Graham Michael Freeman/Great Walks of Australia; What bird is that? Picture: Arkaba/Randy Larcombe; Dinner is a luxurious affair with views of Elder Range. Picture: Adam Bruzzone/SATC; Arkaba Homestead marks the end of the walk. Picture: Randy Larcombe/Wild Bush Walks; Emu chicks with their dad in the Flinders Ranges. Picture: Adam Bruzzone/SATC



It is so named because it was apparently the only place through which a horse could climb out of the Pound. It's hard to believe any horse would willingly walk up the steep, rocky path and I fall silent as I focus on putting one foot in front of the other and slowly make my way up to the rim.

Once on top, the stunning view helps me find my voice again. On one side the floor of the Pound is carpeted by thick mallee forest and on the other the Arkaba property stretches almost as far as the eye can see.

Groves of cypress pines are nestled between rolling hills of red dirt covered in silver mulla mulla bushes that shine in the afternoon light. In the foreground our camp is spread out above a creek bed lined with ancient gum trees and I descend towards it with newfound energy. Soon our support guide Meg is coming out to greet us with warm towels, just

a hint of the luxury that awaits. After a well-deserved shower, I join the others by the fire where a warming glass of mulled wine awaits me as the guides prepare dinner. Damper with saltbush pesto and Persian feta is followed by deliciously rich slow-cooked beef cheeks in red wine. I can't think of a better way to follow the quandong and apple pie than a nice glass of South Australian red, but the rest of the table seems more excited about the ice cold bottles of Bundaberg ginger beer.

Fully sated and pleasantly weary from the day's walk, it's time to head to bed where one more surprise awaits, a hot water bottle nestled cosily in my swag. As I drag it out to sleep under the stars, I fall asleep under the Milky Way and listen to the teenagers experimenting with ever more inventive ways to toast marshmallows.

The next day, we begin to encounter signs

of the property's past use. Denuded hillsides mark former copper mining sites, while Darlene tells us that the hundreds of kilometres of fencing on the property will be ripped up later this year. This is part of the extensive rehabilitation program implemented by manager Brendon Bevan since 2010. Other measures have included planting important native species, the removal of more than 14,000 feral goats and the closure of all but one bore on the property.

When not guiding walking groups, the staff also lay baits for foxes and check cat traps, along with cameras that monitor the presence of both introduced and native species.

Already yellow-footed rock wallabies have returned to the property, and they've been joined by western quolls and brushtail possums that have come over from Ikara since being reintroduced in the National Park.

There's every chance they followed the same route we did, and we get a chance to look back towards Bridle Gap as we crest a rounded peak christened "morning tea hill". As we approach the summit Darlene points out a perfectly placed ruby red saltbush. The bright pink fruit is uncannily similar to pomegranate seeds in both look and flavour, and I pick a couple to chew on as I catch my breath and admire the view.

Later in the day, we find clumps of aromatic lemon grass which can be made into tea and Darlene shows us how to rub our fingers up the spike of a yakka and collect its nectar. It's surprisingly sweet with a pleasantly smoky flavour, and I find myself repeating the process as I contemplate the layers of history visible in the striated rock of the Elder Range looming over our second evening's camp.

Each sleeping area is angled towards the Range to catch a view of the sunrise hitting the rock, and at dinner our guides take orders for hot drinks so that we don't even need to leave the comfort of our swags in the morning.

Sadly, the next day is overcast but when the sun breaks through for a minute we get an idea of the effect. Part of the rock face turns an intense red, glowing like an ember among ashes and it's tempting to ask if we can have a rest day here to repeat the experience.

Instead, we tuck into a hearty breakfast before tackling part of the Heysen trail, an epic 1200km walk that stretches south all the way to the tip of the Fleurieu Peninsula. We duck under massive golden orb webs stretched out between cypress pines before descending into creek beds lined with purple-red mudstone and crumbling, yellow sandstone. Gnarled branches of ancient river red gums reach up to the sky, their bark covered in a pale white coating that protects them from the sun and it's easy to imagine ourselves in the watercolour world of Hans Heysen, for whom the trail is named.

And then before we know it, we're clambering up a gully and on to a ridgeline where we see our final destination, Arkaba Homestead. It's with mixed emotions that we see Meg approaching us with warm towels, as this marks the end of our walk.

Travelling through this ancient landscape, the modern world seems a long way away and I'm constantly reminded that humans are a recent addition to this environment.

Seeing the work that Arkaba is doing to return the land to its former state is a timely reminder that we have an important part to play in its future. ●