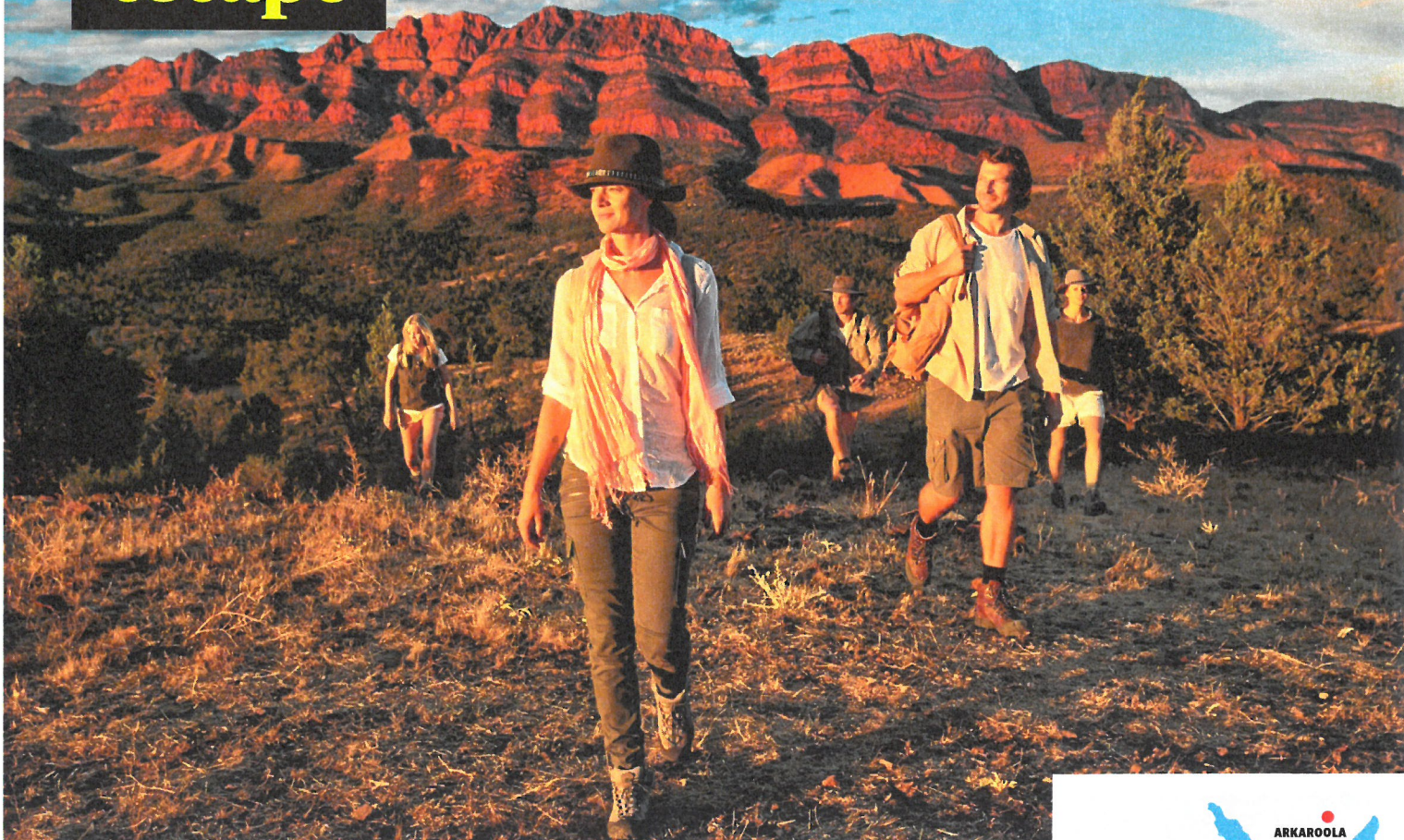


GET OUT OF TOWN
escape



The locale of today's destination shouldn't be unfamiliar to you if you call yourself a South Aussie. If you've called this great state home for a while and/or grown up here, the Flinders Ranges is our backyard!

An historical geographical wonder that stretches more than 430km between Port Pirie and Lake Callabonna, a traditional land the Adnyamathanha people roamed for years, and some still do.

I remember the odd family camping trip around these parts from when I was a kid. Those memories are some of the best, despite being inseparable from nightmarish recollections of candy-pink fleece tracksuits, teamed with the desert boots my mother thought ideal to truss me up in for the occasion – as well as trips to the “bush toilet” behind trees with a roll of toilet paper and express instructions to make it a clean squat.

While those beloved days of rudimentary family camping trips are long gone, there was something nagging me about this part of the outback – I'd never seen Wilpena Pound. I'm sure, as per the Flinders, this unique landmark won't need too much explanation, but in the case you're reading this early and the brain cogs are in need of a little grease, the Pound is a huge natural amphitheatre, a spectacular visual phenomena that sits in the heart of the Flinders at the northernmost point, right between the tiny towns of Blinman and Hawker.

It's the stuff of outback Aussie dreams – nowhere else in this sunburnt country comes close for the bushwalker on a knowledge mission. This place is impressive enough with its sweeping 360 degree views from mountain tops and sunsets dropping over the face of

valleys to bathe them in colour. But it also was home to the oldest-known animal life (the fossils told us so), from some 650 million years ago. All this knowledge was something I gained from joining a crew of six and a guide for a three day trek right through the centre of the Pound. While this might sound very brave and adventurous of me, let me disclose that this was a “glamping” trip of the highest order.

I set out from the luxury homestead of Arkaba Station, a property founded under pastoral lease in 1851 that now houses its visitors in (a beautifully updated and refurbished version of) the original homestead.

Arkaba Station is now 24,000 hectares of land being painstakingly but surely brought back to life with the conservation efforts of its current

owners Wild Bush Luxury and, in particular, manager and “chief wildlife warrior” Brendon Bevon. While Wilpena and surrounds was mercilessly farmed for years since first settlement, the focus now is removal of stock and subsequent revegetation – with the hopeful aim of restoring the land completely. That and, of course, helping build tourism as the main money spinner of the land, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in what Brendon calls the “ancient landscape”, while sending the dollars like a boomerang back into conservation.

It's a gargantuan task, as my merry band of intrepid bushwalkers witnessed over the next few days. While traversing the lip of what I came to call the “bloody basin” – aka Wilpena Pound (by day three of hill scrambles my potty mouth

TIME ON THE RANGES

The vast expanses of the Flinders Ranges make for awe-inspiring scenery - and glamour camping adds a city element

WORDS KATE BOWDEN



Getting there

Arkaba Station is roughly five hours' drive from Adelaide, a private chartered helicopter from Adelaide or Kangaroo Island can get you there in as little as 65 minutes.

Activity

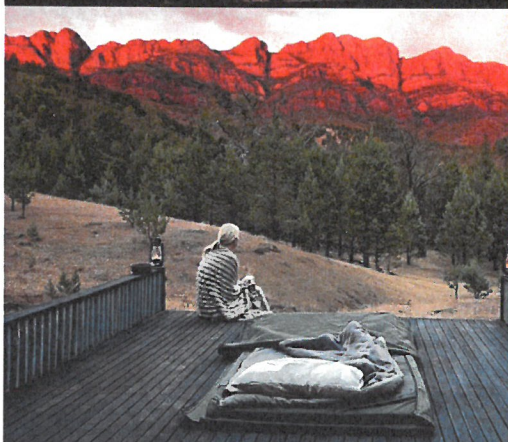
Walks through the property, Wilpena Pound and the Elder Range run from March to October each year, with tours departing each Thursday. The Arkaba Walk costs \$2150 per person – this includes four nights' accommodation and all food.

Accommodation

You can also choose to stay on the property and make day tours to see the surrounds.

arkabastation.com 1300 790 561

Glamping in the Flinders Ranges, heading out from a base at Arkaba Station



was in full effect) we saw the first of many rabbit warrens entrenched in the area, and extensive herds of goats, all of which need to be removed if native fauna and flora are to flourish again.

However, none of these introduced issues could take over the majesty of this land. To describe it as jaw-dropping doesn't seem to do it the justice it deserves.

A band of travellers who'd just met, and were from very different walks (and stages) of life began to visibly relax as the opening day walk continued into late afternoon. Our mission gave way to an amble as a lazy sun set in the distance, highlighting surrounding overhanging cliffs and later cloaking them in hazy hues as we all rolled into the first night's camp.

You see, the Arkaba bushwalker has the luxury of carrying only a daypack with him or her – no crazy heavy lifting happens here, folks. Your essentials (in my case a giant suitcase, as I don't travel light – and it was one degree below zero at night, requiring a few layers of thermals) are transported between camps by an Arkaba team member. This angel of mercy also doubles as your chef for the night and morning; we arrive to a welcome of chilled lavender-scented washcloths and a refreshing citrus aperitif, followed closely by the delights of some swiftly devoured local cheeses and olives, and a few glasses of South Aussie wine while we settle in.

While dinner was being prepared, I decided to

make the most of the "bush shower" I'd heard so much about, even though the temperature was dropping as fast as the sun and the idea of wearing only my birthday suit for even a minute or two was quickly becoming somewhat unappealing. The bush shower rolls as such: a huge tin bucket of water is heated on the wood burner stove inside the cavernous shed used as the cooking/dining centre of the camp. It's then hauled by your Arkaba guide over to a makeshift structure up on stilts – three sides of corrugated iron with one side open-air, oriented toward the great outdoors. That's right: it's just you, naked as a jaybird, looking upon some of the most spectacular vistas nature could ever dish out.

The water goes into a billy with a showerhead jutting out and pulled via a rope line until it reaches a height that's perfect for you. You're then left to your own devices and warned that you have around four minutes. Short but sweet, it's a refreshing end to a day in the bush.

Dinner both nights is a scorching gourmet affair, showcasing the produce of the local area, the sterling menu devised by Arkaba's in-house chef and the cooking skills of the Arkaba camp staff who brings it all together in a camp setting. A warming soup sets the tone before the group gorges on melt-in-the-mouth steaks and endless streams of veggies before ending with some decadent dessert that most protested they

simply couldn't do, before going right ahead and conquering. All washed down with more of the good southern red, of course.

Your sleeping quarters for the night are also open air and you're actively encouraged to drag your supersized swag out from under the corrugated iron structures that ensure your privacy when needed. The swag is parked directly under an uninterrupted night sky, which sparkles with what looks like a million diamonds suspended overhead.

And if waking at the crack of dawn is a big ask, the sacrifice is made more than worth it with a hot cup of Joe or tea dropped to your bedside by the Arkaba camp helpers and a morning view unto the stunning view of the Elder Range seemingly afire with vibrant orange reds gifted by the sunrise.

It's up and at 'em for day two and it's a long day – don't be fooled that this is an altogether easy task – you don't need an extreme level of fitness but you certainly will be tackling some mighty inclines at times.

However, these moments of challenge lie sporadically alongside gentle walks through creek beds so still and quiet the only sound is a host of bird calls, whose owners will be identified and pointed out by your guide (trip tip: look out for a wedge-tailed eagle or two).

By the time the third day rolls around, you may begin to feel like a bit of an Aussie bush

aficionado – listing off species of trees and shrubs, like it's nothing unusual.

Just when your lingo is gaining momentum around phrases like "land restoration" and "euro kangaroo" (one of the two types you can see out there), you'll realise you're on the home stretch and suddenly being greeted at the gate with a celebratory gin cocktail.

Call it a glamping achievement certificate, if you will.

The final night of the stay was punctuated by a jovial atmosphere all around, with the knowledge that anything challenging was well and truly done.

Coming full circle, literally, the night was spent once again at the homestead, in luxury, complete with a long soak in a claw foot tub, wines around a campfire in the backyard and one last gluttonous dinner, full of all the joys we could fit in our mouths before retiring to a Kingsize bed.

Heading back to the city in the morning, refreshed, accomplished, and still a little full, I couldn't help but think there was some other niggling feeling that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then I caught sight of the Ranges in my rearview mirror and knew instantly what it was. I was honoured. Not only to have finally been witness to this sacred corner of the globe, but to know I was born of it, too. ●

The writer stayed as a guest of Arkaba Station