

Leaving no footprints

February 23, 2013

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Euros and other kangaroos are a common sight.

Louise Southerden is a conservationist as well as a trekker as she traverses harsh beauty in the Flinders Ranges.

It's not every day you get to shower under an outback blue sky while watching a goanna eat a rabbit. One minute, I'm standing in a three-sided corrugated stall washing off biodegradable soap and looking up at river red gums dancing in the breeze. The next I'm wrapped in a towel engrossed in a real-life nature documentary unfolding before me: like one of David Attenborough's orcas lunging for a seal pup on a pebbly beach, a Gould's goanna surges out of the long grass to tackle a rabbit, which squeals for its life until it can't - because the goanna is swallowing it, head first.

It's impressive enough seeing nature do its thing, oblivious to humankind. What makes this goanna-eats-rabbit vignette even more compelling is that it's part of an ongoing drama that has been playing itself out for more than 200 years across our wide, brown land: natives versus newcomers.

Native species have had a hard time of it, in general, but there are against-the-odds survival stories, too. Good news stories, even. On Arkaba Station in South Australia's Flinders Ranges, for instance, native species are making a comeback - thanks to Wild Bush Luxury, which owns the 24,000-hectare property and runs three-day guided walks across it.

"A year and a half ago, you'd hardly have seen a reptile, let alone a monitor lizard, let alone a monitor lizard on a kill," says Brendon Bevan, a South African safari guide who manages Arkaba, and takes turns leading the walking trips, with his Scottish fiancee, Kat Mee.

When the Arkaba Walk opened in April 2011, it became Australia's newest luxury guided walk. In October 2012, it joined more-established operators - including Maria Island Walk and Cradle Mountain Huts, which offers treks on the Overland Track and in the Bay of Fires - to form Great Walks of Australia, a collection of seven independently owned walking trips.

Arkaba certainly ticks all the Great Walks boxes. Small groups of walkers (there are only five of us on my walk) roam remote country, carrying no more than a day pack, between campsites purpose-built to bring a few creature comforts into the great outdoors. We're given chilled hand towels on arriving hot and dusty at camp each afternoon. We sleep in luxury swags made up with EcoDownUnder sheets, doonas and fluffy pillows. Every dinner is a three-course, chef-prepared feast at tables spread with white linen, glassware and bottles of South Australian wines, under lanterns hung in the trees.

It's also supremely eco-conscious - from its waterless composting toilets and timber sleeping decks (made from Australian plantation hardwood), to its new solar panels and rainwater tanks installed at the camps this year.

But to describe the Arkaba Walk as a low-impact tourism product is getting it backwards. It's actually a tourism-funded conservation project, thanks to the vision of Charlie Carlow, the chief executive of



Rugged and ready ... the Arkaba Walk is set among striking landscape. Photo: Louise Southerden

Wild Bush Luxury, which also runs Sal Salis Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia and Bamurru Plains in the Top End.

"We really modelled Arkaba on Africa's private wildlife parks - where people come to immerse themselves in the bush landscape and end up becoming part of the conservation story," he says.

You might come to Arkaba for the wild, open spaciousness of the outback, the sense of being far away from everything, the chance to sleep under the stars. But your presence here is not just about you. It's helping to fund a transformation that Wild Bush Luxury has been working on since buying Arkaba Station in 2009: returning the land to its natural state, and turning a 150-year-old sheep station into a private wildlife reserve.

Former owners Dean and Lizzie Rasheed made a start by destroying rabbit warrens and removing 10,000 feral goats in the 25 years they owned Arkaba (which means "land of abundance" and "place of hidden water" in Adnyamathanha, the language of the area's traditional owners).

Wild Bush Luxury has built on these beginnings, in partnership with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and South Australia's Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources. "Arkaba is perfectly suited to conservation," Carlow says.

"It's rugged range country, which means that much of the property has been less suitable for grazing and hasn't been as degraded as other parts of the Flinders. The sheer majesty of the landscape lends itself to inspirational bush experiences, which enable us to operate the walks that fund our work.

"And we can be masters of our own destiny [because we own the property], more than we can at Bamurru Plains, which is on a privately owned buffalo station, or even at Sal Salis, which is a highly ecologically sensitive operation but is on national park land, where the government is ultimately responsible for the conservation projects."

So far, so good. In the past three years, sheep have been removed from two-thirds of the property, to allow the regeneration of native grasses and wildflowers and increase Arkaba's capacity for native animals; and feral-species management programs have so far eradicated almost 1000 goats, about 300 foxes and 68 feral cats. (Goats and rabbits destroy vegetation, cause erosion and compete with native animals for feed and water, while foxes and cats kill large numbers of native animals.) Two colonies of rare yellow-footed rock wallabies are now thriving and 10 new bird species have been recorded on the property in the past 12 months - including Nankeen night herons, straw-necked ibises, peregrine falcons, owlet nightjars, zebra finches and welcome swallows.

"Arkaba's landscape is in visibly much better condition than many other properties in the surrounding areas," Carlow says.

"It's been a big undertaking, by successive guardians of the land, but it's wonderfully gratifying to see such dramatic results."

We see some of these results every day on the walk. Kangaroos aplenty: euros, western greys and reds. Birds galore: little eagles and pardalotes, ring-necked parrots and black-eared cuckoos, flocks of budgerigars and stripy emu chicks. I'm repeatedly amazed at the number of different landscapes you can walk through in just three days - native cypress forests and mallee woodland, steep-sided canyons and exposed peaks. And how big this country is, particularly when we find ourselves standing at the southern rim of Wilpena Pound - where we leave Flinders Ranges National Park and enter Arkaba Station halfway through our first day - surveying the unpopulated vastness. Arkaba even has a couple of mountain ranges within its fences.

Early in the morning on day three, we wake up to one of them. Kat wanders from one timber deck to another, rousing us from sleep like an usher in a theatre: the light show is about to begin. Could there be a more peaceful way to greet the day than this - sipping English Breakfast tea, still in your PJs, while the sun's first rays shine on the red-rock face of the Elder Range, seemingly just beyond the foot of your swag?

One of the joys of walking is that there are constant surprises great and small, and time to notice them: a tiny red-barred dragon endemic to the Flinders Ranges sunning itself on a log, fragrant curry bushes that really do smell like an Indian dinner, splodges of green "emu art" on the ground, great wedge-tailed eagles on the wing and on their massive stick nests. Even Kat, who has been living and working on Arkaba for three years, never knows what we'll see, from one moment to the next. "Every hour spent walking through this country feels different," she says. "It's the kind of place where you simply can't wait to wake up in the mornings, to see what's waiting for you out here."

With all this life, it's tempting to think that Australia's native species are out of the woods, so to speak - until you see a fox dart across a grassy hill and remember that Australia has the highest mammal extinction record in the world. According to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy - which acquires land to establish wildlife refuges and currently has 23 sanctuaries covering 3 million hectares across Australia - 27 mammal species have become extinct in the past 200 years and more than 1500 mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants are listed as threatened with extinction.

So the work continues, and the Arkaba Walk lets you see it in action. We see Kat recording the locations of rabbit warrens on her hand-held GPS unit. We wander past white-painted sticks marking buried fox baits. One afternoon, we stop at a small pool so that Kat can retrieve a small infrared camera she'd strapped to a nearby tree the previous week - one of seven (soon to be 20) cameras on the property set up to make unobtrusive observations of animals, whether rock wallabies in inaccessible places or nocturnal predators such as feral cats, to inform Arkaba's conservation efforts. (This camera took hundreds of pictures of, among other things, two groups of goats, which were later culled.)

There's no forgetting you're in the outback, however. It's so dry your imagination has to add water to "creeks" that are mere ribbons of sand, "cascades" that are sun-baked slabs of rock, "springs" that are still, algae-covered ponds.

On our last day, we come to Arkaba Creek. One of the only water courses on the property to flow year-round, it's alive with birds: white-faced herons, ducks and, in the air, hundreds of galahs and noisy corellas that settle en masse in a long-dead tree. Even here, intruders abound: as we dawdle back to the homestead, where our walk will end, Kat uses her GPS to mark the spread of boxthorn, an invasive weed, adding its removal to Arkaba's ever-growing to-do list.

For conservation is a never-ending story and, as Kat and Brendon well know, there is always more to be done - goat control, fox-baiting, rabbit-warren destruction, perhaps the development of volunteer projects to sample water quality or monitor frog species. Walking trips might take a break, but for this newly engaged couple passionate about the environment they now call home, the long, hot summer of conservation work has just begun.

Louise Southerden travelled courtesy of Wild Bush Luxury and the South Australia Tourism Commission.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Arkaba Station is 425 kilometres north of Adelaide. Virgin Australia flies from Sydney to Adelaide (1hr 40min) from \$250 return including taxes. Sharp Airlines has scheduled flights twice a day Monday to Friday between Port Augusta and Adelaide (1hr) from \$300 return including taxes. See sharpairlines.com.au.

Walking there

The Arkaba Walk is a three-night experience that runs from mid-March to November with departures every Thursday (and every Saturday during September and October). The cost is \$2150 a person (maximum eight guests) and includes all meals, drinks, a naturalist guide, two nights of camping in deluxe swags, one night at the 1850s Arkaba Homestead, a support vehicle for transporting your luggage between camps, national park entry fees, and a \$10 conservation levy to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. See arkabawalk.com, wildbushluxury.com.

Staying there

The five-bedroom Arkaba Homestead on Arkaba Station operates as a lodge year-round with rates from \$790 an adult (minimum two nights) including all meals, drinks, use of mountain bikes, daily activities (such as four-wheel-drive safaris and birdwatching) and a \$10 a person a night donation to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. See arkabastation.com.

More information

southernaustralia.com

FIVE OTHER LUXURY GUIDED WALKS IN AUSTRALIA

Maria Island Walk Four days of exploring this untouched island off Tasmania's east coast, with two nights in canvas ecocamps and the last night in a heritage-listed cottage. See [maraislandwalk.com](http://mariaislandwalk.com).

Great Ocean Walk Four or seven days of coast-hugging splendour in western Victoria, arriving at the Twelve Apostles on the last day, staying each night in an exclusive, purpose-built ecolodge near Johanna Beach. See bothfeet.com.au.

Cradle Mountain Huts Walk Six days walking an Australian classic, staying in private huts in Tasmania's World Heritage-listed Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park. See cradlemountainhuts.com.au.

Kosciuszko Alpine Guided Walks Two-day walks in Kosciuszko National Park with the option of catered camping at the top of Australia or accommodation at Lake Crackenback Resort & Spa. See lakecrackenback.com.au.

Bay of Fires Lodge Walk A four-day coastal wilderness experience in north-east Tasmania (including a non-walking day for kayaking, fishing or just relaxing) with one night at a tented beach camp and two nights at the award-winning Bay of Fires Lodge. See bayoffires.com.au.

More information

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