

{ DESTINATION AUSTRALIA }

All about the bush

A new venture in the Flinders Ranges offers camping for softies or a chic homestead stay

CHRISTINE
McCABE

THERE have been spring rains in the South Australian Flinders Ranges and the enormous river red gums straddling the broad but dry Arkaba Creek are buttressed with 2m to 3m of jumbled debris.

The notion of wild, dirt-red waters swirling through this ancient landscape seems unimaginable for, as we traipse through the pebble-strewn river bed, the sun beating on our backs, pink galahs riding overhead, there's not a puddle to be seen.

But some of these sentinel trees may be 1000 years old. They can endure a long time between drinks, rather longer than a motley crew of city-slickers wearing designer hiking boots. Kat, our sure-footed guide, knows a thing or two about divining water and after leading us up rock-strewn hills, over tumbledown fences, through groves of black-stemmed bullock bush (clipped so neatly by aesthetically minded sheep they



A station hand checks stock on Arkaba's sprawling 24,000ha, covering the ground fast by motorcycle

aesthetically minded sheep they would not look out of place in a Provencal garden), we arrive at last at a quiet, tea-brown water-hole overhung with rock.

Near this enchanting oasis (old photos show water so deep, the station owner's children were leaping from the rocks, Kat says), a section of the creek still runs, cool and clear. A sacred kingfisher sweeps by; an enormous wedge-tailed eagle rises, right before us, as we scramble up the ridge.

Forget the *Australia* movie's Faraway Downs. If ever there were a property that fulfilled every Australian's romantic notion of station life it is the hauntingly beautiful Arkaba.

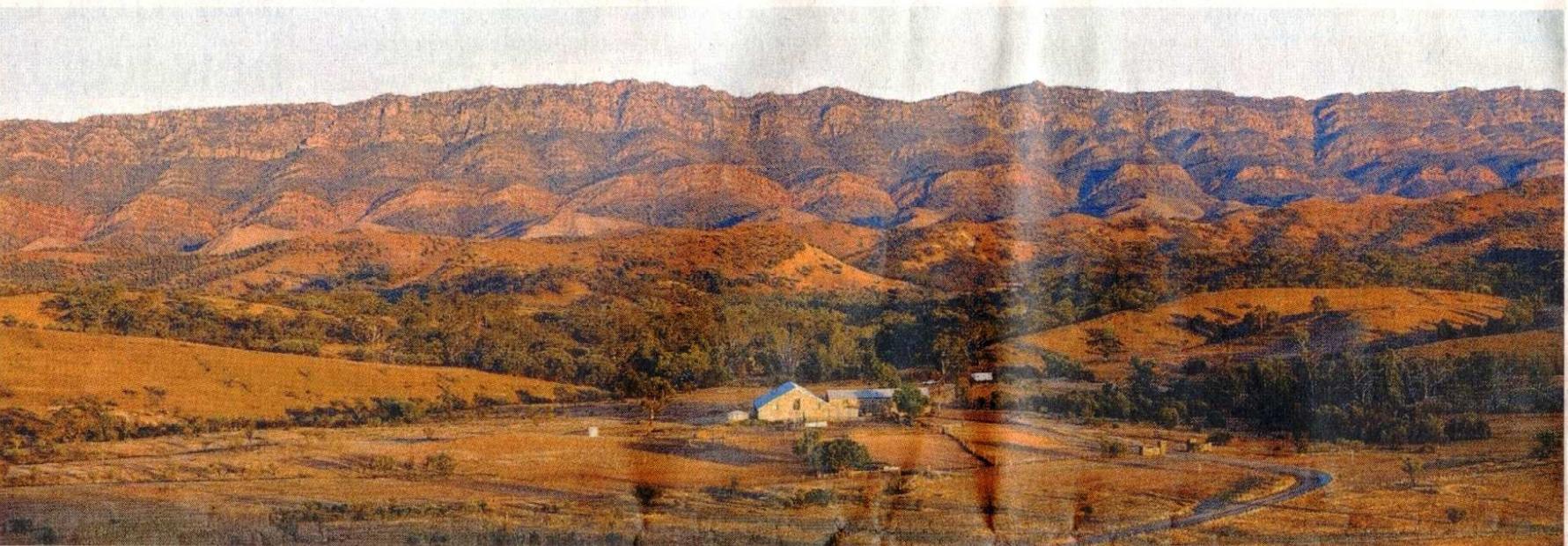
Sprawling across 24,000ha near Wilpena Pound, and scaling the heights of the rugged Elder Range (painted so poetically by Hans Heysen), Arkaba exerts a special magic.

Charles Carlow, savvy proprietor of Wild Bush Luxury (the company behind Bamurru Plains in the Northern Territory and Western Australia's Sal Salis), is only the fourth family owner of this iconic property, a place he first encountered in his gap year, camping with mates.

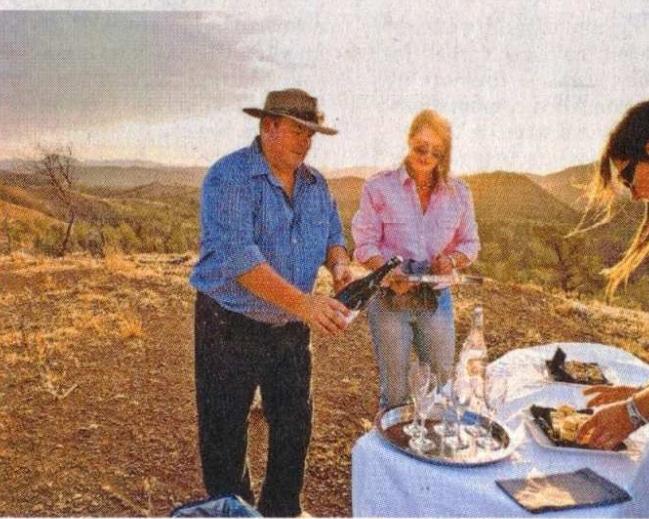
In the months since purchase he has renovated the homestead and constructed a series of quirky camps that serve as stopovers on a new three or four-day guided walking safari.

Kat, recently arrived from Bamurru Plains, has fallen under the Flinders spell, a landscape far removed from the tropical Top End. She's relishing the change and with bird book in hand we sally forth from the handsome Arkaba woolshed where 19th-century shearers' names are etched into the beams and the floor is cobbled with stones from the creek bed.

Carrying light packs stuffed with water (for it is a hot day), we set course for the southwest corner of the property. The pace is easygoing but there's a little climbing and scrabbling required to negotiate the at times rugged terrain. The scenery is incredibly



Arkaba Station homestead, near Wilpena Pound, nestles into the ancient landscape of South Australia's Flinders Ranges



Sundowners are served to Arkaba guests

The Elder Range, folded and wrinkled, proves utterly mesmerising and we pause often just to gaze at the changing colours of the high escarpment. Even more alluring, under lengthening shadows, is the sight of camp, where genial host Sally Kent greets us with chilled towels and

broad creek bed near the base of the Elder Range and, while facilities may appear rudimentary, all creature comforts have been addressed in typical Wild Bush Luxury style.

Forget tents. It's luxe swags, complete with sheets, a thick mattress, pillows and duvet, each set

Australian wines. Sundowners are enjoyed around the campfire, quaffing Croser while gnawing on delicious Spear Creek Dorper lamb chops (a Flinders speciality; the lambs graze on saltbush and native grasses).

Over dinner, tall tales are fuelled by a fine Mountadam pinot gris, and Jo, a bit of a whiz with campfire cuisine, turns out a brilliant three-course meal.

After a wee post-prandial tipple, we don miners' lamps to locate our swags and no sooner does my head hit the soft pillow than the velvet sky fills with stars, so apparently near I could reach out and touch them. The silence is absolute (there's not even a snore from my fellow campers) but we are not alone, for in the morning we spy dingos or wild dog tracks.

Day two of the safari (which eventually culminates in the Pound proper) follows the Elder Range to a particularly magical camp set among the native pines. The route follows the old dog fence, now mostly collapsed, but built at considerable expense by the property's second owner, a Mr

Turner that is most arresting. The South Australian Museum calls Wilpena Pound the cradle of animal life. Here, the curious, soft-bodied marine creatures of the Ediacaran period, dating back more than 540 million years, are fossilised. (David Attenborough visited recently to film a new documentary, *The First Animals*.)

Acclaimed wildlife artist Rosie Woodford Ganf has taken to a spot of fossicking herself in overseeing the Arkaba homestead's transformation (my next port of call as I am cutting the walk early).

Station chic, perhaps we should call it, with modified wool bales as side tables, bedheads fashioned from local pine and sheepskin, and feral goatskin rugs on the polished floors.

Life is lived around a fantastic old wool classers' table (found by Rosie on the Eyre Peninsula) on the terrace overlooking the ranges. There's a small wet-edge swimming pool perched above the creek and guests help themselves to an open bar.

With corrugated-iron ceilings and thick stone walls, the 1851

turns out bread, biscuits and three inventive meals a day (think warm, peppered kangaroo salad with figs and pistachio), add to the homestead's relaxed charm.

So much so the temptation is to stay close to home drinking pots of tea and dozing on the veranda.

But for active types there are opportunities aplenty, including wildlife viewing, mountain biking and four-wheel-driving.

Thus we find Kat behind the wheel, chauffeuring us along the precipitous ridge top of the big dipper-like Red Range to arrive at McLeod Hill, from where we can see over the timeworn mountains to the plains and where, as if by magic, Pat appears with bubbles and hors-d'oeuvres.

I am betting any fossils Attenborough finds here in the future will be those of soft-bodied, overfed, happy campers, too comfortable to leave this captivating corner of the outback.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Arkaba Station.

the creek bed.

Carrying light packs stuffed with water (for it is a hot day), we set course for the southwest corner of the property. The pace is easygoing but there's a little climbing and scrabbling required to negotiate the at times rugged terrain. The scenery is incredibly varied from stoic old-man red gums to forests of native cypress pine whispering in the breeze.

Emus jog nonchalantly by, feathers bouncing like bustles; grey kangaroos and stocky euros (common wallaroo) pause to observe our passing.

And the birdlife is wonderful, from the iridescent rainbow bee-eater to the dainty red cap robin.

The Elder Range, folded and wrinkled, proves utterly mesmerising and we pause often just to gaze at the changing colours of the high escarpment. Even more alluring, under lengthening shadows, is the sight of camp, where genial host Sally Kent greets us with chilled towels and cold drinks; her husband Pat heats buckets of water on the campfire and chef Jo, armed with welder's gloves and skillet, grills lamb chops over the searing coals. Camping for dummies, I'm pleased to discover, with nothing for me to do except ease off my dusty boots.

Our remote bivouac is charmingly positioned overlooking a

broad creek bed near the base of the Elder Range and, while facilities may appear rudimentary, all creature comforts have been addressed in typical Wild Bush Luxury style.

Forget tents. It's luxe swags, complete with sheets, a thick mattress, pillows and duvet, each set on a discreetly located wooden sleeping platform lit by hurricane lanterns. There are bucket showers with hot water (thanks, Pat) located in quirky corrugated-iron sheds equipped with fluffy towels and toiletries, and composting loos with creek views.

A long dinner table is set with white linen; the makeshift bar is stocked with chilled South Aus-

Day two of the safari (which eventually culminates in the Pound proper) follows the Elder Range to a particularly magical camp set among the native pines. The route follows the old dog fence, now mostly collapsed, but built at considerable expense by the property's second owner, a Mr Bartholomaeus, who imported the materials from England.

The pastoral history of this property is as interesting as the region's natural and indigenous attractions. Arkaba and neighbouring stations are dotted with the ruins of old cattle rustlers' yards, shepherds' huts and mining shafts. But for many visitors it is the geological history of the Flin-

old wool classers' table (found by Rosie on the Eyre Peninsula) on the terrace overlooking the ranges. There's a small wet-edge swimming pool perched above the creek and guests help themselves to an open bar.

With corrugated-iron ceilings and thick stone walls, the 1851 homestead sits in a protected position among the hills.

Four airconditioned bedrooms with ensuites (mine has a deep free-standing tub overlooking the garden) and super comfy king beds open on to the veranda, and there's another bedroom in the old coachman's cottage.

A cosy library with open fire and cheery kitchen, where Jo

will be those of soft-bodied, overfed, happy campers, too comfortable to leave this captivating corner of the outback.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Arkaba Station.

Checklist

All-inclusive four-day walking safari (with transfers from Hawker or Port Augusta airports) is \$2000 a person twin-share; walks operate September to May. Homestead accommodation, including all meals, beverages, transfers and activities, from \$790 a person, twin-share. More: arkabastation.com.