

GREAT
WILDERNESS
WALKS
.....
ARKABA WALK,
SA

FOOTSTEPS THROUGH THE FLINDERS

A bushwalk through the ancient Ikara-Flinders Ranges reveals scars from the past and a healing future.

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WORDS AND PHOTOS **MARIE BARBIERI**



Above: Reaching Arkaba Homestead.
The sinuous folds of Arkaba Conservancy.

REWIND 150 years to when hooves trampled the plains bare and where tongues drank streams dry. Native plants took temporary leave and native wildlife became locally extinct. That was until this patch of South Australia's sun-seared outback was taken under a conservationist's wing, and given a new lease of life.

I recently completed a sensory three-day hike across the ancient bones of the Ikara-Flinders Ranges NP and Arkaba Conservancy. This year marks the 10th anniversary of The Arkaba Walk, run by Wild Bush Luxury. Its founder, Charles Carlow, turned this ex sheep station into a 60,000-acre wildlife refuge. His quest: to reverse the effects of grazing stock, to eradicate feral animals, to restore eroded topsoils and to re-vegetate native wildlife habitat. It's a work-in-progress, but the venture is already blossoming.

The first of its kind in Australia, the walk offers bushwalkers an insight into the area's 600-million-year-old geological history, the successes and failures of 19th-century pastoralists forging a living in a semi-arid land, and now, the reintroduction of Australian native flora and fauna.

Armed with daypacks itching for adventure, we double-knotted our laces at Wilpena Pound. Guide, Tori, led me and another couple along Wilpena Creek towards old Hills Homestead, where a farming family of 11 battled flood and drought during the early 1900s. It's hard to imagine how they grew wheat within Wilpena Pound, but a quick breathy climb to Wangarra lookout captured panoramic vistas towards where they did just that. In its place, before us, a pastel-

hued rainbow sipped from a low trough of cloud, while the pinched perimeter of the cake tin that is Wilpena Pound's ramparts tried its hardest to pierce the fog.

Back to nature

Walking through Adnyamathanha country, western grey kangaroos soon replaced humans. We too transitioned with the land, relearning how to feel humble amid the ancient ranges dwarfing us. Hiking in sync along a section of the Heysen Trail, we heard only the crunch of our boots and the call of corellas warbling on the breeze.

Sturdy river red gums staked the trail. Some stooped, gouged by lightning. Others offered lofty hollows for eagles, while wallaroos bounded between them. And yellow-collared Australian ringneck parrots revealed their blues and greens between the pink and grey flashes of acrobatic galahs.

Timber boxes also perched in the pound's trees, providing sanctuary to the reintroduced common brushtail possum. Across 12 months, 148 possums were released into the park. In March 2019, a wildlife-monitoring camera caught sight of the marsupial. It was classed as locally extinct since the 1940s.

Prior to grazing animal eradication programs and wildlife reintroduction programs being put in place, the western quoll had been extinct in South Australia for 100 years. In 2017, one was found outside the pound on Arkaba Conservancy property. These sightings are a gift to all, but are particularly significant for the traditional owners of the land.

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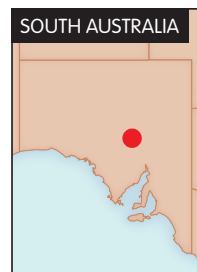
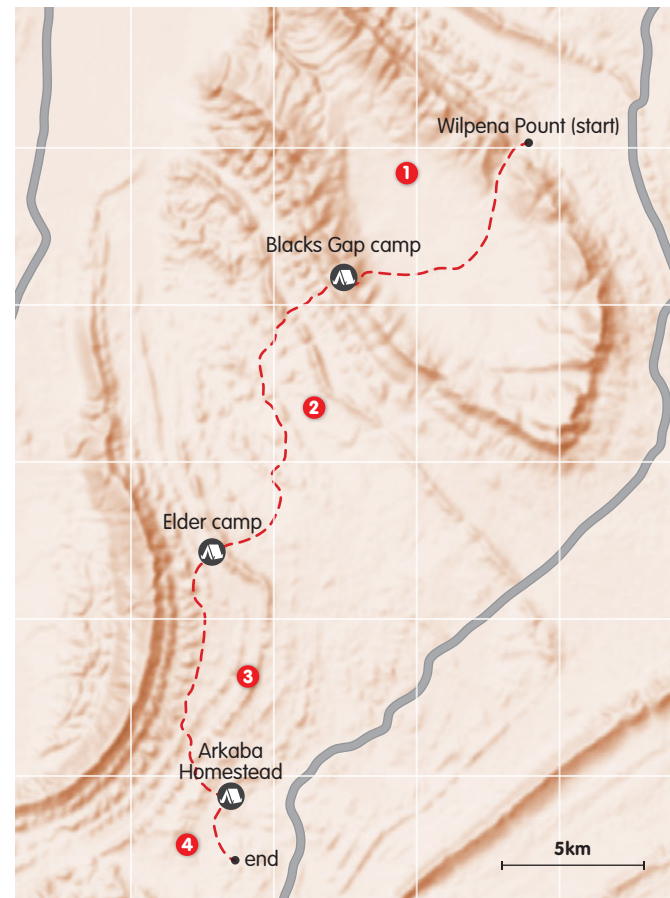
Right: Heading towards Black's Gap Camp.

Below: Arkaba's signature swag decks.



WALK NOTES | ARKABA WALK, SA

Time: 4 days | **Distance:** 44km | **Grade:** moderate-challenging



Day 1: Wilpena Pound Visitor Centre to Black's Gap Camp. 14km/5-6hr/easy until ascending/descending the saddle

Day 2: Black's Gap Camp to Elder Camp. 15km/7hr/moderate/challenging

Day 3: Elder Camp to Arkaba Homestead. 15km/6-7hr/moderate

Day 4: Checkout after a well-earned sleep at Arkaba Homestead

The landscape morphed into a forest of native white cypress pines. Naturally termite resistant, they were the farmer's favourite fencepost. The trail switched between intermittent tracts of scrub, to open clearings, before mallee trees crocheted the landscape back into shade, occasionally lit by the clammy daisy bush. Tiny pink petals from the Early Nancy flower waved to us in the increasing wind, while pungent curry bush spiced the air.

Tracking through a stretch of mallee trees, a 200m climb led to Bridle Gap – one of Wilpena Pound's most handsome bastions. With the national park behind us, and Arkaba's wilderness before us, we breathed in views of Red Range, and the layers of time striating Elder Range beyond.

Beginning our 1000-metre descent towards Black's Gap, we planted our poles along the lip of the pound. Across the tumbling terrain, we followed a red scree-like ribbon of path. Grass trees appeared between the odd casuarina as we scythed our way through dense foliage, until meeting a lonely stone chimney – the only surviving evidence of a shepherd's camp dating back to the 1850s.

Arriving at a handful of corrugated iron huts meant home for the night. A figure wearing a bush hat and holding a bowl of warmed hand towels appeared, seemingly from nowhere. Mel welcomed us warmly, pointing to a table of canapés (yes, in the middle of the outback!), quickly sweeping us undercover before a furious weather front unleashed horizontal squalls.

Within the dining room (a tin shed), a potbelly fire heated rainwater for our bush showers. Carrying the sacred bucket to an open-sided shack, it was winched up and unplugged,

disgorging my precious hot shower — three brisk minutes of it. Even more impressive, from this isolated outpost, was the three-course meal Mel cooked to near perfection on a humble barbecue. Beef brisket and green beans were never masticated so mindfully!

Bed came in the form of a hot water bottle-heated swag laid within a three-sided corrugated iron shelter, magically housing our main luggage (delivered earlier). Extending beyond the roof, the timber deck would have been perfect for starlit snoozing (alas, for dryer, warmer nights).

Living sculptures

Pelting rain at cock-shout didn't dampen our adventure-hungry spirits. After fuelling up with poached eggs on toast, we rejoined the Heysen Trail bound for broken country. Breaching the sea of polished stones in the dry creek was upturned ripple rock in varying shades of deep purple. Imposing 1000-year-old river red gums – the dominant subject of Sir Hans Heysen's famous landscapes – stood like living sculptures. Their trunks came in shimmering whites having stripped themselves of bark, and a palette of reds bloodied with wet and dried sap.

Yellow hill everlasting daisies emerged from a rock face, above a somewhat displaced *citrullus colocynthis* fruit (bitter apple), lying on the ground. It must have escaped the clutch of a passing bird. Most sad were the 11 sun-bleached emu eggs waiting aimlessly beneath a tree. "The female laid them in a pretty dud spot here," said Tori. "The male probably abandoned the nest during the drought."



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“THE TRAIL LED THROUGH A MOONSCAPE OF QUARTZITE AND SANDSTONE.”



Nature's cruel beauty means that life ends for some but continues for others. Up in the hollow of a mighty gum stood a stalwart nankeen kestrel, thrilling Tori. A self-confessed bird freak, she squealed unashamedly. And a hole in freshly excavated soil told us that a roo had recently sipped from the underground water table.

Reaching a shelter in Madge's Gully, we feasted on a ploughman's lunch of smoked ham, chicken and cheese, with piccalilli and quandong chutney. But it was the smoked cauliflower soup that truly warmed our cockles.

Scrambling through hill country, we ascended and descended rocky spurs and grassy hills on no particular path at all (Tori led like a tracker). "That's my favourite tree," she said, pointing at a solitary acacia within a monoculture of pines. "It's budding and about to flower!"

My most treasured moment came after a steep 1000-metre scramble up to the misty summit of Red Range, where the wind near knocked us off our feet. The climb levelled off to a precipitous ridge bursting with young grass trees. We spent time here, embracing the fog and the rain. It's where the hike felt at its most challenging and rewarding. Next stop was Elder Camp, where we bedded down through a night of more wild 'n' woolly weather.

Home on the range

Waking to the rose-tinged foothills of Elder Range, a break in the showers allowed us to view its clumpy rusty cheeks. It is now being recolonised by the rare yellow-footed rock-wallaby since goat control on Arkaba began. The end to stock grazing has also led to the recovery of the leafless cherry bush, narrow-leaved emu bush and bitter saltbush. Already, 3,381 goats, 372 feral cats and 364 foxes have been removed from the property.

After breakfast, it was a trek into hill country via the Enchanted Forest (nicknamed

so by an Arkaba guide). Indeed, it was pretty, with cypress pines pinned into the ground as if by design. The trail led through a moonscape of quartzite and sandstone. The metalloid, iridium anomaly (believed to have arrived from the Acraman meteor strike 590 million years ago), was also identified here.

At what Tori called the Zen Garden, she stopped at a patch of moss. "That overnight rain turned this moss from grey to green," she said. "And see how the slope over there is covered in grasses, but here, it's pure shale? Weird, huh?" Past rains bisected the two landscapes.

Tracking through Slaty Creek, we identified the boobialla water bush, which sprouts within two metres of the water table. Reaching a lofty spur on Red Range, a white-browed babbler drowned out the call of a butcherbird, twitching the ears of kangaroos hiding behind red and white mallee trees. Reaching the crest of an exposed diapir, with Chase Range beyond, we spotted where our journey was about to end.

Descending into Arkaba Creek, the 1851-built Arkaba Homestead came into view — yet another step back in time. Exuding Aussie country charm, it came dressed with the touches of outback artist, Rosie Woodford Ganf, with wool bales for bedside tables and sheepskin-covered fence posts forming the bedheads. The property and the walk harked back to a time long gone, but not forgotten. 🌿

Great Walks was a guest of Wild Bush Luxury

NEED TO KNOW

Arkaba Conservancy is located 430km north of Adelaide. The Wild Bush Luxury Arkaba Conservancy Walk includes: a private charter flight to Hawker, a scenic five-hour drive back to Adelaide, and lunch at a Clare Valley winery. arkabawalk.com

Left: Mel appears with hot towels.

Above: Conquering the summit of Red Range.



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