

Retreating to the ranges

A traipse through South Australia’s Flinders Ranges proves to be as cathartic as is it stunning.

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As featured in
The CEO Magazine
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FLINDERS RANGES, AUSTRALIA

Population: 1,784 (Flinders Ranges Council)
Length: 430 km (north–south)
Highest point: St Mary Peak (1,171 m)
Climate: Semi-arid with hot, dry summers and cool winters
Discovered: 1802 (European settlers)

My sister makes a vegetarian lasagne that has rightfully developed a reputation to write home about. Eating it is as much a visual experience as it is a gustatory one: blistery red capsicum interspersed between layers of roasted eggplant, basil pesto, sheets of pasta, and rich, velvety béchamel sauce. Its cross-section is an engineering feat: row upon row of varying colours and textures. This lasagne is what comes to mind as I stare in wonder at the rugged formations that comprise the Flinders Ranges, their sedimentary layers clearly delineated by contrasting hues.

The largest mountain range in South Australia, the Flinders Ranges starts roughly 200 kilometres north of Adelaide. However, Arkaba Homestead—where my journey begins—is slightly further afield, about a five-hour drive from the ‘city of churches’. >>

Fast fact
The 2009 Australian drama *Beautiful Kate* was filmed on location in the Flinders Ranges.



Making my way there, I'm awed by the craggy peaks protruding from the otherwise flat horizon, and can't help thinking that each layer of sediment tells a different tale about the history of our land.

A black kite struggles in the breeze up ahead—a dark speck against an ashen sky—and all at once I feel very small. “This country talks to you; it's amazing,” says Brendon Bevan, Property Manager of Arkaba. I smile in agreement and silently wonder what it is saying.

The homestead emerges from behind a plume of red dust: a sprawling, one-storey building that is 1850s charm incarnate. However, walking through the glass doors of the newly finished conservatory entrance sunroom, it becomes apparent that modern-day luxuries are just as entrenched as the building's heritage. Crisp, white throw rugs are strategically placed atop light-blue and white plaid couches, and a sleek cow pelt decorates the room's timber floorboards.

I walk through the library, which could be mistaken for a high-end gentleman's club—

think black leather sofas, top-shelf liquor, and a stone fireplace—and into the kitchen-cum-dining room, the heart and soul of the homestead. Here I meet my fellow hikers who are just finishing up a delectable breakfast prepared by chef Matthew Collins. They've been treated to caramelised bacon with sautéed spinach and mushrooms, tomato relish, and poached eggs on homemade toast. One of them jokes that they are carbohydrate loading in preparation for the day ahead, but in reality the food is simply too good to skimp on. I'm secretly a little miffed that I've missed out; however, I needn't worry, as there is no shortage of exceptional food in the days to come.

After a briefing with our guide, Meghan Garthy, we gather our daypacks and wave goodbye to the comforts of the homestead. For the next two nights and three days, we will be hiking among the burgundy slate, red gums, and grevilleas that make up the Flinders Ranges.

Setting off into Wilpena Pound, the aridity of the region is already evident. A composite of dried leaves and ancient sediment—oxidised



red silt, pebbles, and slate—crackle beneath my feet somewhat satisfactorily. “For a long time, they thought the Pound was an asteroid site,” says Meghan as we crunch along. She is, of course, referring to the range's hollowed-out structure, which forms a natural amphitheatre. “But today we believe its flat shape is a result of tectonic plates shifting.” Without solid evidence one way or the other, I can't help but entertain the idea that I'm walking through an asteroid ditch.

Bordered by Wilpena Pound Resort on the east and Rawnsley Park Station on the west, the Pound is quite a popular destination among tourists. However, by the time we've found the rhythm in our stride just a few hours in, it feels as though we're the only humans in existence. All I can hear is the gravelly sounds made by our feet and the trilling of some ringneck parrots, whose vibrant aqua feathers make them virtually indiscernible from the leaves of the river red gum among which they sit. Watching them play, it dawns on me that I'm a visitor to this landscape. It's a humbling realisation.

“Just ahead, you'll see quite a distinctive change in the ecology,” explains Meghan. “The mallee scrub we're walking through at the moment will stop and the cypress pines will

emerge almost in a row.” On cue, the quintessentially Australian landscape morphs, and it seems that I've stepped through the back of the wardrobe and into Narnia. Although native, cypress pines are reminiscent of Christmas trees and have a distinctly European feel to them.

We ascend the lip of the Pound next to a peak dubbed Dick's Nob—a source of endless amusement for myself and my equally mature walking buddies—and make our way towards Bridle Gap, the demarcation point that indicates our transition onto Arkaba land.

Privately owned by Wild Bush Luxury, the property spans a mammoth 64,000 acres, which, since it was purchased from the previous landowners—the Rasheeds—has been subjected to significant conservation efforts. For instance, the Arkaba team have removed sheep—whose hooves were destroying the land's delicate topsoil—from their property, and they track and cull foxes and wild cats. “It might sound cruel to people who don't understand,” explains Meghan, “but they are introduced pests, and they threaten the native ecology. Since wildlife conservation >>



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This page Arkaba hikers against the 'lasagne' ranges. **Opposite page, clockwise** The majestic Flinders Ranges; a black kite; 4WD safari tour.



has been a big focus at Arkaba, we have seen a huge increase in the number of native animals.”

While I can’t vouch for what the land was like prior to Wild Bush Luxury’s focus on conservation, I can tell you that I’ve seen an abundance of animals. Red and grey kangaroos and euros are so prolific that I grow accustomed to their pricked up ears and inquisitive twitching noses. Wedge-tailed eagles glide confidently across the skyline, and galahs titter and squawk so raucously I can’t help but feel like they’re laughing at me.

Yet, standing at the top of Bridle Gap, it’s almost reverently silent. Layers of orange, red, plum, and green extend across my entire periphery, giving the expansiveness of the Flinders Ranges some context. We watch in stillness and every so often exchange knowing glances.

However, it’s on arrival at our campsite that we truly get our just desserts. We are greeted by Clair Wilson, our support person, who is brandishing a bowl of steaming-hot face towels; the vigour with which we grab them and remove the caked-on layer of sweat, sun cream, and earth from our faces would have anyone thinking we’d been bush

Fast fact
Arkaba means place of hidden water, or place of plenty.

bashing for weeks, not merely a day. Thankfully—despite having no electricity supply—the camp is equipped with hot shower facilities, the likes of which have one side open to the elements and the panoramic views of the Pound.

Meanwhile, we’re treated to a plate of antipasti and a selection of locally sourced beer and wine. Holding a glass of Taylors Estate Shiraz in one hand and a cracker smeared in hummus and roast zucchini in the other, one of my newfound companions says, “This is the Las Vegas of camping. I could get used to this.”

Clair, of course, has already transported our luggage into our ‘star beds’—corrugated iron domes built atop timber foundations—which each have a unique view over the landscape. Comfortably fitting two swags, the star beds provide a bit of privacy in an otherwise open landscape, but are primarily utilised for sleeping and stargazing.

As dusk sets in, I wander over to the communal mess shed where the dining table has seemingly been set for a fine-dining restaurant. Perhaps sensing that I’m a little sceptical as to whether the food will match the décor, Clair looks at me, smiles, and says, “It’s amazing what you can do on a barbeque.”

Three courses of deliciousness prove that I should never have doubted her. The steak comes with a rich, red wine jus; the roast vegetables are cooked to perfection; and to top things off, my sweet tooth is satiated by a dense chocolate brownie served with chocolate ganache and strawberries.

Stepping out of the mess shed, the cool night air slaps me in the face, and the distinctive smoky smell of a bonfire infiltrates my nostrils. The blue and pink flames flicker mesmerisingly as the light crackle of burning wood plays out as a soundscape. Tired from walking, however, I decide to turn in early.



While the roofed segment of the ‘bedroom’ provides shelter from the elements, it’s a clear night, so I pull my swag out into the open and sleep under the stars. Tucked up in my swag with a sheepskin-covered hot-water bottle keeping my toes toasty warm, Mother Nature’s gifts seem all the more remarkable. Her stars dazzle with intense clarity, starkly contrasting against her rich, black sky. The stars in the outback are somehow different to the ones I’ve grown accustomed to in the city, and I’d be content to stay here and stare at them forever.

I wake up to the rising of the sun—without the shrill interjection of an alarm clock—and the slowly increasing hum of wildlife stirring.

Lying there, I recall Brendan forewarning me, “After a four-day, three-night stay, whether you know it or not, you’ll come out a different person.” At the time, I couldn’t appreciate what he meant, but already it makes sense to me. I feel like time has slowed, and that the stress of daily life has taken a back seat to enjoyment and wonder.

Of course, while the constantly evolving landscape is striking, and the hospitality warm and personal, this is the ultimate magic of Arkaba—it is transformative. ■

The journalist travelled as a guest of Wild Bush Luxury.

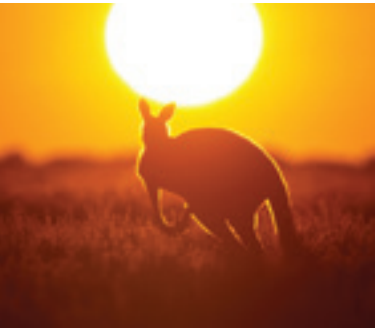
FACT FILE

Get there Arkaba Homestead is a five-hour drive from Adelaide, or a 75-minute drive from Port Augusta. Sharp Airlines operates flights between Adelaide and Port Augusta from Monday to Thursday. sharpairlines.com.au

The homestead is also a 65-minute flight by private charter aircraft from Adelaide or Kangaroo Island.

Stay Arkaba Homestead. arkabastation.com/homestead

Things to do The Arkaba Walk departs every Thursday, and the four-day Flinders Ranges Long Weekender package is available for walks departing between May and August 2016. The package includes all meals, drinks, two nights camping, one night in the Arkaba Homestead, and transfers from Adelaide. arkabawalk.com/special-offers/flinders-ranges-long-weekender



“After a four-day, three-night stay, whether you know it or not, you’ll come out a different person.”
- Brendan Bevan

Opposite page Arkaba Homestead’s dining table with a view. **Above, left** Heat emanating from a bonfire. **Above, right** A native kangaroo silhouetted against the red sky.