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Flinders Ranges, South Australia

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Home on the range
Its dramatic landscape – red-rock forms that overwhelm a deep blue sky – is the staggeringly beautiful attraction of the Flinders Ranges. But a luxury homestead stay is now also part of this unique outback experience, discovers Tony Maniaty.

Oncoming vehicles, of which there are few, shimmer off the highway like mirages. The radio, idle chatter, the dull roar of tyres on the blacktop – one by one they're erased from our consciousness, replaced by awareness of the looming peaks and a deepening silence. We're a few hours north of Adelaide, yet even as we draw closer, the ranges seem distant, layered across the horizon, each layer projecting its own shade of mauve, blue, olive, pink – the dusted colours of the heart.

Twenty-seven years ago I came up this route in the wake of 19th-century explorers and pastoralists who attempted to conquer a vast continent. Now I'm returning, wiser, too, about the Aborigines and their struggle to survive and how this great mass of earth itself came to be. Time has passed yet the journey remains the same.

Soon enough, the geology of the Flinders is brutally exposed – low peaks devoid of flesh or dressing, their red-rock insides spilling out, staggeringly beautiful forms that overwhelm a deep blue sky. Eight hundred million years ago, the earth's crust here stretched to create a deep hollow, allowing the sea to flood in and deposit massive rocks and debris. The world's oldest known vertebrate fossil, dated at 560 million years and resembling a tadpole, was discovered nearby in 1999. Today the ranges have stabilised, more or less: a few kilometres underground, geothermal energy bubbles away off hot rocks, and earth tremors occasionally shake and rattle the crockery.

The first European to see these peaks, in 1802, was Matthew Flinders, the great navigator of Australia's past, who called them a "ridge of high, rocky and barren mountains". They were named in his honour. Forty years later, Edward John Eyre passed by on his doomed attempt to reach Australia's mythical inland sea. "In the midst of these barren, miserable plains," he wrote, "I met with four natives, as impoverished and wretched looking as the country they inhabited." These were the Adnyamathanha who'd occupied the hills for maybe 10,000 years, creating their Dreamtime, and whose descendants survive today.

The early Europeans, eager for new pastures, brought their families and strange animals – not only horses but Afghan camels to beat the waterless distances, and rabbits that would eventually rip their paddocks apart. The rain will follow the plough, they swore, and for a while it did. Every few kilometres, we pass another abandoned pile of stones, an isolated chimney, frustrated oaths to progress that map

THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

From Adelaide, it's 305km to Port Augusta, 410km to Hawker in the southern Flinders Ranges, and 500km to Parachilna in the northern Flinders. **Sharp Airlines** operates regular flights between Adelaide and Port Augusta. 1300 556 694

STAY

Arkaba Station

Adult twin share, all-inclusive, \$790 per person. 1300 790 561

Angorichina Station

Adult twin share, all-inclusive, \$695 per person. (08) 8354 4405

Rawnsley Park Station

Eco-villa accommodation for two adults, \$350-\$390. (08) 8648 0030

Prairie Hotel

Rooms \$160-\$420. Parachilna, (08) 8648 4844

DO

Walking safaris

Arkaba Station hosts four-day, three-night five-star walking safaris for \$2000 per person including all meals, drinks and camping gear. 1300 790 561

Iga Warta Aboriginal Community

The community operates indigenous cultural tours around the Flinders Ranges. (08) 8648 3737

Central Air Services

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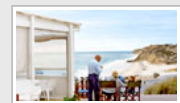
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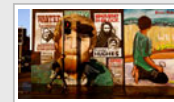
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FURTHER INFORMATION

South Australian Tourism Commission and ninemsn Travel's [guide to the Flinders Ranges](#).

the broken hopes of dreamers who bared their souls to the winds of opportunity. On a scrub-dotted plain is the grave of Harriet Anna Salmon – died 30 October 1885, aged 28 years – with its humble script: "Weep not for me, my children dear, I am not alone but sleeping here. My debt is paid, my grave you see, so all prepare to follow me." The sun beats down fiercely on a lonely life and a lonely death.

By lunch we reach Quorn, born in 1878 and once the thriving junction of the Sydney-Perth and Adelaide-Alice Springs rail systems. In 1888, reported the Register, the town was "often subjected to an influx of strangers of diverse nationality, languages and tongues; and, of course, some with morals as mixed..." Today a warning notice says,

almost wistfully, "Look out for trains". The Ghan changed route in 1980, the ornate station is deserted, and stockyards once filled with bleating sheep and barking kelpies are scattered with rusty wagons and wheat growing from seed spilled long ago.

Survival here takes a tenacity of spirit and hard work, but also luck; when that runs out, all the persistence in the world isn't enough. On a rise north of Quorn we spot a deserted farmhouse; the gates are locked, the windmill broken, the well dry, the track up to the residence erased by nature. Stranded like a shipwreck, its Victorian-era rooms are now the grand home of stray sheep – with frayed curtains, electric lamps dangling without power, wasp nests on its doorways. A ghost house surrounded by a thousand empty hectares. Thriving communities just a few generations ago, broken estates like these stand as noble and tragic as any ancient monuments, while surviving properties have found a new life catering to worldly travellers.

Even before we park at Arkaba homestead, on the southern tip of Flinders National Park, Pat Kent bounds out to greet us, a champion of "down to earth" luxury tourism in the region. With his partner Sally, and New Zealand-born chef Scott Hannan, he's turned an iconic Flinders property into a haven for well-heeled guests, its four-bedroom homestead and one-bedroom coachman's cottage now a resort overlooking the sun-drenched Elder Range.

Overseas visitors come from the United States, Britain and Germany. Italian honeymooners love the space; they're not likely to bump into relatives. "Or any Vespas," Kent quips. "People always talk about places being unspoiled, like they were years ago. But this place is unspoiled since the beginning of time. The dinosaurs walked out of town 65 million years ago. You can pour yourself a Coopers, sit back and stare at the ranges, and 600 million years of Earth's existence stares right back at you."

The property's name comes from the Aboriginal "akapa" ("underground water"). The swimming pool overlooks a creek where sunlight filters through giant river red gums. Recent rains have brightened the leaves. How old are these behemoths? "Up to a thousand years," says our guide, Kat Mee, "but it's difficult to tell. They grow when it's damp and don't when it's dry." The struggle with the elements never ends.

We spot two western grey kangaroos, resting in the heat, conserving energy. High from the gum branches comes the screeching of corellas. "Smaller of the white cockatoos," Mee explains. She points to an Elegant Wattle, its seeds ground by Aborigines for bush damper, and the Spiky Acacia, its other name filled with grim humour. "They call it Dead Finish – if your sheep are eating this in the drought, you know you're finished." Kestrels float on air currents, along with a whistling kite, its long wings tipped in black; the birds circle over porcupine spinifex, spotting for reptiles, rodents and small marsupials.

Deeper into the gorges we drive, on rutted "two-tracks" bordered with the intense yellow of native daisies, shaded by black oaks and casuarinas, the earth here a powdery white, the gully walls rich with red ochre. The ochre – prized as body paint by Aborigines, the mica it contains dancing in firelight – was traded across different language groups as far away as Queensland. Above, the sky suddenly swarms with pink and grey cockatoos, flapping to perch on the long spindly branches of river red gums.

That night we relax outdoors and enjoy Arkaba's cuisine: saltbush lamb loin with goat's cheese gnocchi, sautéed chanterelles, truffles and pea purée. "Sitting around this table," says Kent, "I get a front-row seat into people's lives. Most of our guests are successful people who've had a crack at life and made something big happen. The locals understand that attitude. It takes a special kind of person to make it here – courage and grit, drive and determination. People are used to toughing it out. The only things bigger than people's hats in the Flinders is the size of their hearts."

The next morning we drive north, avoiding emus bouncing their strange hard feathers beneath curious eyes. Up the highway a little is the Blinman Hotel, where I stood decades earlier. Nothing has changed, except there's a new licensee, Italian-born Tony Cutri. He's been wiping the bar here for the past 25 years, surrounded by stone walls and mementoes that stretch back to 1869 when copper mining put Blinman on the map. Back then it was a far rougher place; now, says Cutri, "Any trouble I sort out myself." What's the current population? "Twenty-five." (Later, I tell a local farmer this. "Thought it was eighteen," he says dryly. "Must have grown.")

A short drive away is Angorichina Station. Spread over 520 square kilometres, it's been in the Fargher family for four generations. Guests arrive on an aircraft piloted by Ian Fargher, who took over the property with his wife Di in 1981 when wool was still the backbone of Australia's bush economy. Twenty years ago, they turned to tourist accommodation. The 1860s stone homestead is classic outback vernacular – the place grew, says Fargher, as necessity dictated and wealth allowed.

With piercing green eyes and leathery skin, Ian Fargher sums up the character of the Flinders in a single word – resilience. "Not too many families have walked off the land, despite the drought. We're still here. Even as a kid, I never thought about a life away from this property." His mate Grant "Pud" Reschke grew up here too. "It's where we want to be."

On his bike, Pud rumbles along as Diesel rounds up twenty strays with a canny understanding of sheep

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psychology. "Nothing beats a well-trained dog," says Pud, explaining why a good pup fetches up to \$4000. "Worth every cent," he adds, as Diesel leaps on the bike with acrobatic precision. Once the property carried 10,000 sheep; today it's down to 3000. "Most people are in the same boat," says Fargher. "Nobody's fully stocked. And shearers are hard to get."

By mid-afternoon, the shearing shed throbs with activity. Built in the 1850s of native pine ("much cooler than iron"), it's one of the oldest operating in Australia, and retains its original galvanised roofing, shipped from England as ballast on the clippers that returned with Australian merino wool. The shearers are still a tough lot, keeping largely to themselves, men whose tattoos do most of the talking. Over the din of electric shears they play rock music to take their minds off the monotony and pain of backbreaking work, their muscled forearms sweeping the combs expertly under the fleece. The burly contractor Neville Clarke lifts his battered hat and counts as the animals emerge in near-naked shock. How many are they shearing? "We'll know when we stop."

As the sun settles, Fargher drives us to John's Hill, 800m above sea level, commanding a 360-degree panorama of the entire ranges. Buffeted by winds that suspend wedge-tailed eagles high above, we steady ourselves while Fargher explains the cycle of mountain upheavals and endless erosion that slowly created this pastel-hued vista of immense curves and shadows. "How slowly?" He takes his notepad and feels the thickness of a sheet of paper. "That's how much the Flinders are worn down in a single year. To create this has taken 800 million years."

Later, over the gourmet dinner she's prepared, Di Fargher describes her Flinders vision built on high-end tourism and technology. "Before, we were isolated. Six local farms relied on a party phone line until the 1980s. Now we're hooked to the world via the Internet." And the young women of the Flinders are returning, she says, armed with university degrees and looking for bush husbands. "Must have country interests," she laughs. "The next generation of daughters will run the Flinders, you'll see. Check out the Prairie tomorrow..."

Straight out of a Russell Drysdale canvas, the Prairie Hotel at Parachilna confronts a main street that seems to go nowhere and, beyond that, the wide, dead-flat emptiness of the outback. Inside, it's a lively jumble of traditional hotel rooms and newer suites where some big names have stayed while shooting movies, including Holy Smoke stars Kate Winslet and Harvey Keitel. The Prairie's culinary reputation rests on its "feral food" – kangaroo and emu, yabbies, quandong, native limes and bush tomatoes. Gelato of wild berry and rosella flower rounds out a unique meal. "We've only got one bar," says licensee Jane Fargher, "so station hands and truckies drink with Parisians." On cue, a busload of French tourists rolls in. "It's all pretty amazing."

After lunch we head along the rough and recently flooded Brachina Gorge Geological Trail into Wilpena Pound, the giant natural amphitheatre that's the hub of the Flinders Ranges National Park. At its southern edge sits Rawnley Park Station, transformed by Tony Smith and his wife Julieanne into an eco-tourism centre. "I grew up here as a farmer," Tony reflects, "but the glory days of sheep and cattle grazing are gone forever."

Rawnley Park boasts eight villas designed by Adelaide architects Ecopolis, featuring recycled timbers, natural ventilation systems, and concrete floors to maximise thermal mass. Each villa has a tiny glass panel in the living room wall showing the rendered straw-bale construction, and bedroom skylights for star-gazing.

On our last evening, we turn off the highway and bounce down a 12km track. Tourism has come far in the Flinders since the early 1980s, but in the place where I camped all those years ago, nothing has changed for eternities. We walk between high boulders along a tree-lined creek bed and into Sacred Canyon, one of the few Aboriginal sites open to travellers. On the canyon walls are age-old engravings, or petroglyphs: circles and other symbols that represent springs, camp sites, animal tracks and human figures. From these markings are drawn legends of the Dreamtime.

As the sun drops, I make out the faintest stars, beginning their transit across what will soon be darkness. The sense of infinity here has always been profound, for the original inhabitants and those who came later – and for those still to come. In a timeless land, a suitable place for dreaming.

PHOTOGRAPHY **JULIAN KINGMA**

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