

STORY BY
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Shadow play

Australia's most accessible piece of significant landscape is now a luxury destination



The handsomely appointed heritage homestead of Arkaba Station is perfectly sited in the lee of the Elder Range.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WILD BUSH LUXURY, RAWNSLEY PARK STATION AND MICHAEL GEBIČKI

On the vast alluvial Willochra Plain, the southern approach to the Flinders Ranges for those arriving through Adelaide or Port Pirie, the visual drama is building to the north as a series of weird saw-tooth peaks begins to populate the distant horizon.

We are travelling along the bed of an ancient sea that crept northwards into the heart of the continent 300 million years ago through a trough-like depression that cradled the Mt Lofty and Flinders ranges. Continental pressures on the eroded debris deposited in

the depression caused it to buckle and fold into long runs of ranges, hills and mountains that are the crumpled, broken and upturned edges of resistant sandstone laid down millions of years ago.

There is a saying that if you don't get the geology of the Flinders, you don't get the place at all and, to a point, that is true. While the antiquity of the landscape is deeply affecting – some 500 million years in places – the aesthetic response to these varied and striking formations is one of ecstatic wonderment.

And, once your eyes have grown accustomed to the clear, bright light, it is the play of colour on these rocky outcrops that quickens that response.

Hans Mincham, the first chronicler of the region, captured this aspect in the following passage: "Here, in a land of almost continual sunlight, visibility extends over great distances, and far-off mountainous masses and peaks of brick-red rock are magically transformed by luminous miles into exquisite purples and blues that intensify and deepen with the changing play of sun and shadow." (*The Story of the Flinders Ranges*, Rigby, 1964).

And here's the painter Hans Heysen on his first visit to the ranges in 1926: "It needed a different blue altogether ... something like a Prussian blue, and iron blue; something more powerful than cobalt altogether." He noted red and yellow ochres and bronzes. "Burnt sienna is important here," he wrote.

I read those passages in the library of Arkaba Station after a splendid dinner and ahead of a morning exploring just a corner of the 243-square-kilometre property, which is now part of Charlie Carlow's Wild Bush Luxury (WBL) portfolio. With nearby Rawnsley Park Station's luxury eco-villas and Arkapena homestead, and Ian and Di Fargher's Angorichina Station to the north, Arkaba is a premium tourism offering in a place once the sole preserve of campers and trekkers.

These three upmarket facilities offer differently nuanced perspectives on the Flinders and represent the most concentrated opportunity for the sophisticated traveller to experience iconic Australian landscape on the doorstep of the outback.

Most of Angorichina and Arkaba's international guests come via Kangaroo Island (where Baillie Lodges' Southern Ocean Lodge is attracting a discerning following), and "most have been to Africa", says Ian Fargher, in a reference to that country's long-established expertise in high-end eco-tourism.

Carlow's family had extensive tourism interests in Africa and his ventures in this country include two exclusive bush camps in Western Australia and the top end, and safaris to the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. Cushioned comfort, attentive service and a commitment to excellence in nature guiding are WBL's signature features. All are on display at Arkaba Station.

The beautifully appointed heritage homestead is superbly sited in the lee of the imposing Elder Range – a stepped series of rises from low foothills through a variety of coloured formations representing different geological eras that rise to a towering ridge of quartzite rock. Front-on, this graduated series of rises appears to concertina together but, on closer inspection, are found to be separated by little valleys that provide some of the magnificent walking tracks on the property.

Kat Mee, our guide on Arkaba, says it takes a full five days to explore all the property, and that's before venturing beyond to the Flinders' best known attraction, Wilpena Pound, or the stunning gorges further to the north.

Nonetheless, during our short stay, we

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managed to take in a variety of aspects of Arkaba, climbing to heights or walking dry creek beds lined with massive old river gums, which gave us ample opportunity to view the fund of wildlife on the station – red and grey kangaroos, euros, yellow-footed rock wallabies and the resplendent array of bird life, from wood ducks, corellas and galahs to the magnificent raptors that wheel about in the high reaches of the ranges.

Rains this year have turned the often stark Flinders a fine shade of grey-green and, in Mee's very informed company, we drove or strolled through copses of bullock bush (looking like old olive groves), a variety of acacias and mallees, over uplands dotted with the little stunted native pine, across open ground thick with senna, hop bush, salt bush and ham-and-eggs daisies.

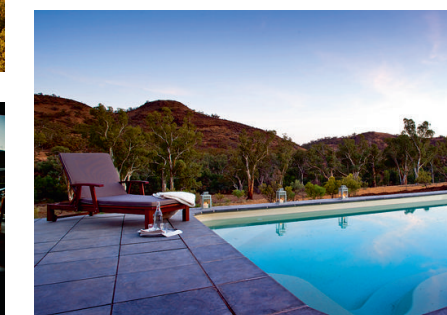
There are surprises here: a glorious walk along a creek bed of pastel river stones, in lilacs, pinks and shades of claret with grey-green shards and an apple-green lichen on the irregular chiselled rocks rising at the sides, leads suddenly and deceptively to a striking narrow gorge hidden around a bend. Nothing in the landscape had prepared us for it and neither had Mee, a spry little Scot whose passion for this country is palpable.

As our safari wagon pulls back into the homestead on a chill, clear winter's day, Sally Kent, who with husband Pat hosts Arkaba, greets us with warm face towels and hot chocolate in a nod to the service standards that obtain here. Dinner, accompanied by wines from a first-rate cellar, is a modern play on station food: veal backstrap with truffle mash and mustard leeks or milk-fed lamb with artichokes. Self-sufficiency is part of station life and chef prepares everything from fine breads to the tomato chutney with your saltbush lamb pie for lunch. An open-bar policy includes premium whiskies and fine cognac in the library after dinner (www.arkabastation.com).

The Fargher's fine homestead on Angorichina echoes the thick stone walls and shaded verandahs of Arkaba, but its setting is strikingly different. This is high, open country



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Eco-villa on Rawnsley Park Station abutting Wilpena Pound; the pool, homestead and outdoor dining on Arkaba Station.



with hills and outcrops flung to the wide edges of the property; the homestead appears to be cradled in the middle of a wide depression.

Angorichina has long hosted visitors to the Flinders, initially in its many fine 19th-century outbuildings, such as the historic shearers' quarters. About a decade ago, the Farghers were approached to open their very gracious home to travellers, principally international visitors looking for an authentic experience of outback Australia.

Along with the well-appointed guest rooms and Di Fargher's generously laden table of top quality produce expertly cooked, the principal pleasure here is tapping into Ian's deep knowledge of the country his family has worked for four generations. Activities include



HIGH, WIDE AND HANDSOME: Scenic flights offer an illuminating perspective on the dramatic geological formations of the Flinders Ranges.

those associated with a 554-square-kilometre working sheep station and this seasoned pilot with a squad of light planes offers scenic flights as well as rugged four-wheel-drive and walking tours of the ancient landscape.

Sundowners on the ridges are followed by Di's good dinners and even a nocturnal visit to Brachina Gorge to check out fossils by torch light. Angorichina also provides an opportunity to get an aboriginal perspective on this country with ranger Arthur Coulthard, a member of the local Adnyamathanha people, for whom the Flinders has deep significance.

Back down on the edge of the mighty dimple that is Wilpena Pound, where local tourism began in the 1960s, present-day owners of Rawnsley Park Tony and Julieanne Smith have added stylish eco-villas to their range of accommodation.

Perched on stilts, with balconies sited to take in views of the Elder Range, the villas have every amenity, including a retractable roof that allows you to sleep in comfort under a canopy of stars. Activities take in every thrilling vantage point of the pound, whose peaks Heysen described as having "the appearance of arrested waves on the verge of breaking" – an image that just about captures the drama and power of the Flinders Ranges, now coming to you with bags of style.

Marguerite Winter travelled with the assistance of South Australian Tourism.