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For a taste of South Australia's extreme wilderness in extreme comfort, **HELEN ANDERSON** dovetails hikes into the Flinders Ranges and along the sea cliffs of Kangaroo Island.

Photography **JAMES GEER**

South



At the end of the summer of 1932 Hans Heysen hooked up a makeshift trailer-caravan to his Model A Ford Roadster, packed his paints and camping gear, and drove north. It was hot as hell and bone dry after years of drought, yet the artist had been drawn, moth-like, to the Flinders Ranges for years, catching trains and mail trucks, staying at station huts and country hotels and, finally, in his little caravan. “It is a fascinating part of our country distinct from anything in Australia, and it is crying out to be painted,” he wrote in 1927, soon after his first trip from his home in the Adelaide Hills. “No one that I know of has attempted it.” Though Heysen was well established as an artist, his study of this monumental landscape challenged him to rethink scale, mass and saturation of colour, inspiring some of his best-loved works.

I think of Heysen often out here. All my notions of the Flinders Ranges are drawn from his work, so vividly and faithfully rendered I have an odd sensation of familiarity as I walk along dry creek beds and copper-hued escarpments, though it’s my first time here. I can see the artist’s challenge. It’s not gentle country; it’s dry and rough, the light dazzling in its harshness, the scale so vast it’s difficult to frame any view. “Everything looks so old that it belongs to a different world,” Heysen wrote. “Fine big simple forms against clear transparent skies – and a sense of spaciousness everywhere.”

This is a hiking trip to two different worlds just a couple of hours apart – a classic vision of the Australian outback in the Flinders Ranges, and a wild coastline of sea cliffs and lonely beaches on Kangaroo Island – linked by light-plane flights and packaged with stays at two of the nation’s finest wilderness lodges. It’s a study in geographic extremes in extreme comfort.

It begins with an early-morning flight in an eight-seater from Adelaide to the Flinders Ranges, 75 minutes above dry cropland and, further north, parched sheep country. We’ve crossed the invisible Goyder’s Line, which was drawn 150 years ago by a surveyor-general to indicate where the state’s arable land ends (it’s moving south, scientists believe, as the climate changes). The rock star of the Flinders Ranges



is the ancient crater of Wilpena Pound, 800 million years old, like a gigantic worn molar framed by the incisors of the Elder and Chase ranges. The country glows an antique copper red in soft morning light as we fly a double loop across the Pound.

Sitting just outside the crater, the 26,000-hectare Arkaba station appears at this height as a khaki tile in a mosaic of arid sheep properties. Charles Carlow bought the heavily grazed property in 2009 with pioneering intentions quite unlike those of the tough-as-nails pioneers before him. Born and based in Sydney, educated in Edinburgh and scion of a long line of Irish aristocrats, Carlow is the founder of the wilderness experience company Wild Bush Luxury.

Inspired by best-practice conservation tourism in Africa, he bought Arkaba with the twin ambitions of turning it into a private wilderness conservancy and using tourism as the means to fund the huge rehabilitation effort. It’s the first such venture in Australia. “Conservation is behind everything we do, and the experience we offer travellers is what makes that possible,” says Carlow as we leave his 1850s homestead with day packs and head towards the Pound. “We know we can use the bookings to make a difference within our relatively small area, and that’s an important realisation for our guests, too.”

We’re hiking a shortened version of the four-day Arkaba Walk, a sometimes challenging 35-kilometre route through spectacular country punctuated by stays at two luxe bush camps. There’s no phone signal, no wi-fi. The isolation and the presence of an expert guide ensures swift immersion in the fascinating ecology and human history of the ranges. ▶

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A hiker on the Arkaba Walk faces the Elder Range. Clockwise from above: Wilpena Pound; Arkaba’s Charles Carlow; Arkaba homestead; South Australian cheeses, bush tomato chutney and saltbush-smoked kangaroo served on an Arkaba safari drive.





The final night of the walk is spent at the homestead. Five bedrooms with ensembles are furnished with wool-bale tables, cowhide rugs, antiques and wildlife studies by artist Rosemary Woodford Ganf, and open onto a deep veranda. Guests share meals of South Australian produce prepared by chef Luke Dale-Smith in a big eat-in kitchen or at a repurposed wool-sorting table with views of the red ranges.

Over dinner – Spencer Gulf calamari, saltbush lamb, desert-lime cheesecake – station manager and born storyteller Brendon Bevan talks about the challenges of overseeing Arkaba’s recovery. Born in South Africa, and with a distinguished career as a field guide and researcher across southern Africa, Bevan moved to the remote South Australian station seven years ago. “That first sunrise was enough,” he recalls. “I just fell head over heels for this place. It’s some of the best walking country I’ve ever enjoyed.”

Cyanobacteria, lerps, feral-cat behaviour, salinity, the politics of dingo control and goat culling – Bevan’s ability to describe the dizzyingly complex rhythms of

nature and the domino effects of human intervention is compelling, his passion for Arkaba’s rehab infectious. After dinner he’ll head out to set feral-cat traps or analyse survey data. “We’re on page 10 of chapter one of a book that doesn’t end,” he says cheerfully, undaunted by the magnitude of the challenge.

Carlow, too, has his eye on the long game. “Our livelihood as a tourism business is inextricably linked with the health of our environment,” he says. “We have a fundamental responsibility to look after the country both for its own good and for our business.” After renovating the homestead and setting up the walk and bush camps in the first year, Carlow and Bevan rolled up their sleeves. They removed 8,000 sheep in stages, shut down the windmills, established extensive surveys and monitoring of soil, water, flora and fauna, and started the difficult, ugly work of eradicating ferals: rabbits, foxes, goats and cats.

The results, says Bevan, are “truly phenomenal”, among them sightings of 12 species of birds not seen in generations, pioneer vegetation well established in parts, the return of bats, a new species of toadlet identified and two communities of slender bell-fruit saplings discovered, one of the rarest species in the ranges. “It took me three years to see an echidna,” he says. “In last year’s walking season we saw 67 in seven months.” Dunnarts, striated grass frogs, spiny-tailed skinks, owl-nightjars, a colony of 37 rare yellow-footed rock wallabies – all seldom seen, now present and, in some cases, thriving. “We’re over the moon,” Bevan says. “I couldn’t have dreamed we’d be seeing these kinds of changes so soon. And the changes we know about are the tip of the iceberg – I’m sure there’s millions of little things we may never know are going on, or not for 20 years or more.”

The river red gums rendered so memorably by Heysen have survived, lining dry creek beds and dominating every view: majestic, battered and burnt, some so tortured you can walk through gaps in their trunks. “We see these giants, some of them 2,000 years old, but find me a little red gum,” says Bevan. “Riparian veg has taken such a hammering from grazing, the next generation doesn’t exist.” This is why he’s boyishly excited by frequent sightings of the nondescript *Acacia victoriae*, a prickly, swift-growing pioneer species that protects slower-growing, more palatable plants. “I’ve gone out with guests and they’re scratching their heads wondering why we’re stopping to see a prickly little bush,” he chuckles. “But just to see *Acacia victoriae* regenerate...” He shakes his head as though he’s just seen a miracle.

Bevan grew up helping his parents run ecotourism ventures on former cattle properties in South Africa. He describes the business model as “bloody beautiful”. “You’re employing many more people than you would have running livestock on marginal land. As a guest, you’re actually participating not spectating – you’re ▶

Below: the terrace at Southern Ocean Lodge. Opposite, clockwise from top left: McLeod Hill lookout in the Flinders Ranges; Kangaroo Island marron and abalone with native bush fruits and coastal herbs served at Southern Ocean Lodge, and the waiting area of the Southern Spa.



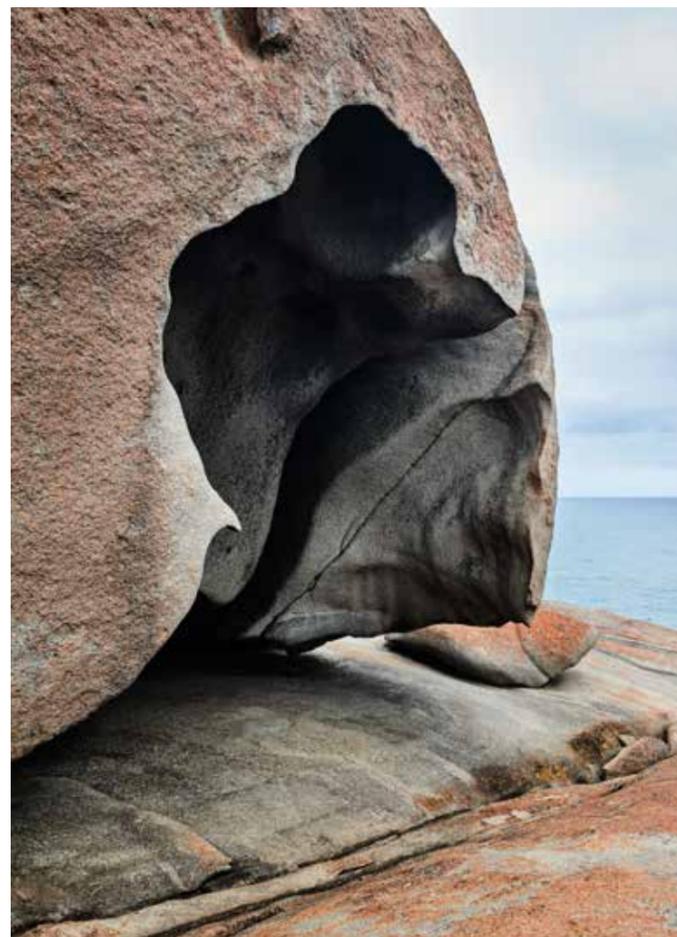
making a real contribution to what we're doing. And that transformation becomes part of the story."

The exertion of walking and watching is meditative as we climb the Pound wall on our first afternoon and slip through Bridle Gap. The sun has softened by the time we descend a tricky scree-slippery slope into camp at Black's Gap. Never had a beer in the shower? I can recommend it. There I stand in a little open-fronted corrugated-iron shack beneath a big tin bucket of hot water, beer in hand, facing the Pound set ablaze by the setting sun. Then it's drinks and three hearty courses conjured over a barbecue by Dale-Smith, and another glass of wine and fireside ghost stories as the moonless night presses in. Overhead the constellations hang low. I watch the sky for a long time that chilly night, warm inside a soft swag atop an open platform for two. There's a corrugated-iron shelter at one end of the deck, but we pull the swags into the open: a thrilling, grown-up version of camping out.

Connected by a 90-minute charter flight, the Arkaba experience – the red-rock majesty of the Flinders Ranges, "star beds" and a genteel outback homestead – is a dream contrast with hikes along the sea cliffs of Kangaroo Island and downtime at the fabulously stylish Southern Ocean Lodge. About a third of the island is protected and pristine; the only feral critters here are koalas. The 18 koalas introduced in the 1920s have multiplied to some 30,000, making Kangaroo Island prime territory to spot them, along with a Noah's ark of other Australian mascots: Kangaroo Island kangaroos (of course), wallabies, echidnas, pygmy possums, bandicoots, sea lions, fur seals. And the hiking is superb, crowned by the new Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail. Opened in October last year, the five-day, 61-kilometre trail traverses coastal heath, eucalypt forest and magnificent stands of grass trees, skirting sea cliffs and overlooking basking seals on white beaches, with well-equipped camping sites along the way.

Fortuitously, the trail passes behind Southern Ocean Lodge, multiplying the hiking options already accessible to its guests and redefining the notion of wilderness trekking to include soaks in deep tubs, therapeutic massages, an impressive open cellar and refined dishes of local fare.

The quality of the island's produce is evident from the break of day when a pre-walk breakfast might include local free-range eggs, smoked bacon, goat's curd, Ligurian honey and muntrie jam. A swell that originated in Antarctica weeks ago is visible this morning from the lodge's split-level dining room and lounge with its photogenic suspended fireplace, and from 21 suites tucked under a ridgeline cresting Hanson Bay. The surf far below is a muffled doof-doof soundtrack.



It's not so muffled at Remarkable Rocks, prime among the island's dramatic rock formations and the start of our day's hike. We've followed a convoy of seven motorhomes along the road into Flinders Chase National Park, and later we find the inhabitants draped over the Remarkables' granite boulders, posing with designer scarves billowing in the wind. (Okay, I take a selfie here, too.)

The air is cold, pure, bracing. As we head east on foot, high above a sculpted shoreline, our guide, Michael Caspar, tells stories of French expeditions, shipwrecks (at least 85 of them) and the secret lives of long-nosed fur seals. Soon, though, we're walking in companionable silence, concentrating on each footfall along a narrow track that, although level, is pitted with limestone potholes. Every pause delivers an eyeful of wild coastline. We stop for lunch at a deserted beach where fossilised tree trunks are exposed among the dunes. Four dolphins come surfing in on cue.

It's a longish afternoon's walk, nearly 14 kilometres, and by Cape Youngusband I'm slowed by an old ankle sprain. I limp into the lodge. There's Boston Bay mussels, American River oysters and sweet Kangaroo Island flathead on the menu tonight. Guests are gathered on the terrace with Barossa shiraz and Clare Valley riesling. There's time, however, to draw a hot bath and wallow for a while, watching those Antarctic swells roll in. ●

Above: the surf off the south-west coast of Kangaroo Island. Opposite: Remarkable Rocks; Southern Ocean Lodge.



The Arkaba Walk and homestead

The four-day Arkaba Walk operates from the end of March to mid-October, with departures from Adelaide on Thursdays, plus more on Fridays during April, May, August and October. Walks operate with a minimum of two guests and a maximum of 10. The package costs from \$2,400 per person twin share, which includes two nights' camping in deluxe swags on Arkaba's "star beds", one night in the homestead, all meals and drinks, expert guiding and luggage transfers between camps. Also included is a one-way flight from Adelaide to Whyalla and return by scenic drive through Clare Valley with lunch en route. Arkaba homestead is open year round for stays, with safari drives and activities. 1300 790 561, arkabawalk.com

Southern Ocean Lodge On the south-west coast of Kangaroo Island Southern Ocean Lodge has 21 suites from \$1,200 per person per night (two-night minimum stay). This includes all meals, open bar, signature experiences and airport transfers on the island. The new Kangaroo Island Wilderness Trail passes the lodge, and a range of self-guided and guided hikes are easily accessible. (02) 9918 4355, southernoceanlodge.com.au

Getting around

To dovetail stays at Southern Ocean Lodge and Arkaba, Chinta Air operates charter flights from Adelaide to Hawker in the Flinders Ranges, close to Arkaba homestead, and from Hawker to Kangaroo Island's airport at Kingscote (chintaair.com.au). Rex operates frequent scheduled flights from Adelaide to Kingscote, and to Whyalla, about two hours' drive from Arkaba. Qantas launches thrice-weekly direct flights to Kangaroo Island from Adelaide on 4 December, and from Melbourne on 17 December until 28 January, 2018. southaustralia.com