

ROMANCE WAS BORN

From a luxury walk in South Australia to indulgent weekends away in pretty country towns, here are *H&G's* latest and greatest Valentine's Day destinations.

Flinders Ranges, South Australia

A breeze sets the leaves of the river red gums murmuring. We drop our packs at the base of a tree and take in the peacefulness of the creek bed.

My partner Shaun and I are on a four-day, 42km walk from Wilpena Pound, in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia, to Arkaba homestead, jewel in the crown of the privately owned outback station.

We rest in the shade and remark on the quiet, which is broken only by birdsong. As the parents of two young children – who are at home, hundreds of kilometres away, with their grandparents – we revel in the notion that we can amble along and chat at our leisure, without fear of interruption. It's been a while.

The Arkaba Walk is billed as a luxury camping experience. We get to enjoy the

best bits of the outdoors without any of the not-so-great parts, like hitting your thumb rather than the tent peg, or discovering your blow-up mattress has deflated in the night. Instead, we have hot showers at the end of a day's walk and delicious meals served up to us.

We also have the company of a guide who possesses an almost encyclopedic knowledge of our surrounds. Passing her binoculars at every opportunity, Kat alerts us to the native budgies and red-capped robins darting overhead, the geological oddities we're crunching over and the abundance of wildflowers.

On our first morning – a beautiful 24°C October day – we're driven to Wilpena Pound and dropped off by Arkaba staff. We traverse the entire Pound on foot along

a well-worn track. The walking is easy, meditative. As one foot follows another, our thoughts head off on a wander too. The landscape changes from stands of cypress to mallee then rocky outcrops; kestrels zip and swoop above us while a procession of male emus with their chicks at foot barely look up.

We have notched up 12km when we reach the first camp. A fire flickers invitingly and, after a hot shower, we settle in to watch the sun set over the Bunbinyana Range, a glass of South Australian red in hand. Sleep comes easily and at dawn we unzip our tent to a sunrise that transforms the rockface from purple to apricot and rich ochre.

We cover 14km on the second day. Before us stretch scenes that would have

had the painter Hans Heysen clamouring for his brushes. Shaun ribs me about all the photos I take of artfully gnarled gum trees. We laugh a lot and I can't help thinking that there's no one I'd rather be discovering this place with than him.

After lunch in the cool of a canyon with red-rock walls we spot – atop a ridge – a nest and in it a little eagle chick. We climb higher and come within metres of the chick's mother in a nearby tree. She sits there as we gasp at the detail we can pick up through our binoculars. It is an unforgettable scene and we are exhilarated by our good fortune.

On our third day, we've truly relaxed and the 16km trek is very manageable. After a clear day, our final night is spent al fresco; as we stir through the night we

see the moon arc its way across the sky. At the base of our swag we have sheepskin-covered hotwater bottles (the temperature dips to about 9°C) – the ultimate symbol of the luxury-camping experience.

Our walk has been filled with surprises – from albino emus to native hopping mice – but the biggest revelation is the diversity of the landscape. I'd expected the red rock synonymous with the Ranges but not the boulder-strewn moonscapes, peaks covered in grass trees and ravines cut out of splintered purple shale.

On the final morning of our walk, Shaun hands me a bunch of wildflowers. I hadn't expected that either. Spending these days walking together we've experienced the true luxury of falling back in step with one other. >

Text by Sarah Pickette. Sarah travelled courtesy of Arkaba Station. Photography by Wild Bush Luxury.

Walk this way

- ♥ The three-night, four-day Arkaba Walk costs \$2000 per person, including transfers to/from Hawker airstrip.
- ♥ The walk departs on Thursdays from March 17-November 30, for a minimum of two and a maximum of eight walkers or 10 on a private walk.
- ♥ You'll probably need to spend one night pre-walk at Arkaba Station, as the walk departs at 10am. Accommodation at Arkaba homestead is \$395 per person, twin share, including meals. Staff drive walkers to the Visitor Centre at Wilpena Pound, which is where the Arkaba Walk begins.

For more information go to www.arkabawalk.com.



LEFT Outdoor dining for two, Arkaba-Walk style. ABOVE Gorgeous rooms at Arkaba homestead.