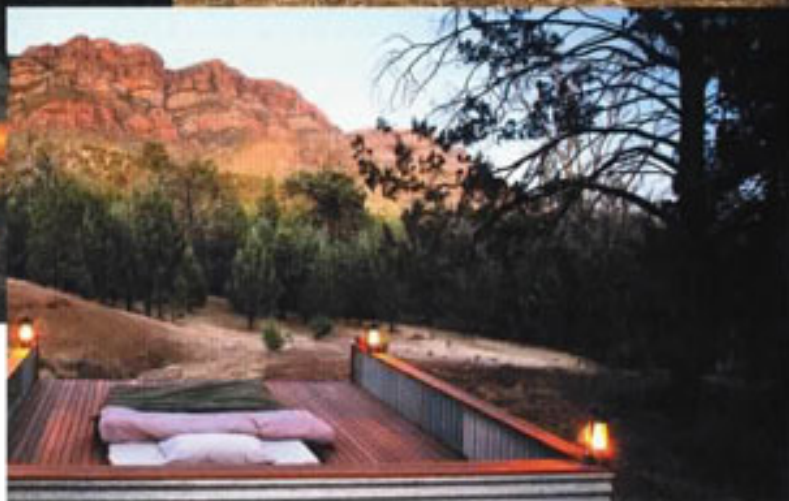




NOT QUITE THE SHOW
of the best hotels,
luxury can be in the
of the beholder, espe
when on a

NEAR TO NATURE
(above, clockwise, both pages)
view across the gardens;
snacking in the bush;
Arkaba exterior; lounging area;
emus; camp at a walking
safari; dinner on safari





OUTBACK at Arkaba

A refurbished homestead,
Arkaba Station brings bush luxury to
the South Australia outback

Easing off my rugged walking boots, caked with the ochre earth of the outback, I sink back into the soft cosiness of my favourite oversized armchair on the porch, the perfect place to enjoy the sunset silhouette of the nearby hills: one sharp peak that downward swoops into sensual, undulating curves, the orange rim bleeding into a cool night sky.

As the Willie Wagtails and Ringneck parrots twitter and squawk, my host, Pat Kent, suggests we share a 2009 rosé from Rockford, one of the Barossa's more intriguing boutique wineries. "It's a ripper of a drop, so sing out when you're ready," says Pat, who could charm the Carella cockatoos from the trees with his quintessential larrikin, blokey charm. "Alicante Bouchet is the only grape that squeezes out pink." It's typical Arkaba bliss, where conviviality, a fêted local wine culture and the spiritual uplift of natural grandeur all coalesce beautifully.

Arkaba Station's homestead – built in 1851 – is Australia's newest example of the trend to refurbish and upgrade existing, isolated properties, tapping into the high-end market's new desire for boutique luxury that combines feather down and high thread count with authentic experiences and a real sense of place. The working sheep station's 63,000-acre, semi-arid setting is certainly spectacular enough for the job – an iconic Australian dreamscape of desert plains, Callitris pine-dotted hills and wide creek beds lined with the awe-inspiring Red River gums that artist Han Heyesen famously devoted his life to capturing.

As custodians of this Aussie Eden, Arkaba's new owners, Charles Carlow and Stewart Cranswick of Wild Bush Luxury, wanted to realise the homestead's five-star potential, rendering it worthy of the region's magical ranges, valleys and gorges. They opened up the original building's interior space, creating four bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, ➤



(From left) Guest room; breakfast area; Arkaba hosts, Pat and Sally Kent

“People love the surprise element. ‘Just feed me good local food!’”

along with an upgrade of the nearby stone coachhouse into a stand-alone suite.

The pair wisely decided to enhance the building's existing heritage charm, rather than drown it out. From the moment I arrived on the crunchy country road and spotted the unmistakable pioneer design vernacular of wide verandahs trailing with vine and sloping corrugated roof, I succumbed to the historic homestead's spell. The updated interior, under the 'design eye' of respected wildlife artist Rosie Woodford Ganf, also conjures the ambience of a private home, helping guests play genteel early settler. Her choice of soft furnishings add cheery warmth, from the gingham armchairs in the library to handcrafted cloud-light wool on the bedheads and distinctive wool bale bedsides, stamped with the Arkaba sheep logo.

Ganf's beautifully executed, elegant wildlife paintings hang on the walls throughout (her speciality is marsupials and macropods), and the soothing décor palette of neutral creams and mushrooms is heavenly to retreat to after the rugged textures of the bush. These handcrafted touches imbue Arkaba with her witty artistry: shampoos and conditioners perch in recesses that Graf has grounded into sculptural, hand-sanded pieces of dead wood. "Rosie is so stylish, always in her moleskin jacket," affirms Pat, "but she's got every power tool in the shed."

The loungey outdoor porch is the communal soul of Arkaba, where guests dine under gables at a massive old wool-clearing table, its slats covered in glossy glass that reflects the late afternoon sky. Organic materials like Callitris pine pole supports, western red gum stairs and a raw, gnarled banister add personality; the cosy lounge setting eggs you on to linger after meals, raid the fridge for a Coopers Ale, then pull up a front row seat for an irrepressibly starry sky. Guests benefit from young chef Jo Cross's love affair with South Australian ingredients, as she showcases superb produce from the Flinders or SA region whenever possible. "I want our visitors to discover our fantastic prawns from Spencer Gulf, pork loin from the Murray River or Eyre Peninsula kangaroo fillet – a beautiful meat that's not eaten enough – which I serve in a fresh fig salad, grilled rare."

Unless requested, there are no formal menus, just three artfully presented, modern Australian courses, making meal times seem more familial. "People love the surprise element. 'Just feed me good local food!'" I enjoyed sipping a mug of tea at the big country breakfast table while watching Jo work in the open kitchen,

spooning fall-off-the-bone Spear Creek lamb (from Southern Flinders) into oil and red wine to stew, ready to be served in a pie for lunch a few days later.

The homestead's creature comforts are meant to be a haven from the real prize, the magic of the area, both the rural atmosphere of "big hat, big hearts", as Pat puts it, where mateship prevails and people of the land feel more bonded across huge spaces, and the towering presence of the Flinders Ranges' natural star: Wilpena Pound. The gigantic, 17-km long geological amphitheatre at the station's north-south border "looks just like a footy," laughs Pat.

Under the new regime, Arkaba's public camping areas have been closed, leaving its remarkable 63,000 acres (which includes its own magnificently craggy, red sandstone mountain Range, the Elder) as the exclusive province of guests. There is every encouragement to explore: Pat's "first-night fizz": Croser champagne on the Red Range's summit; solo exploration along the creek beds amongst the pastoral idyll of free, galloping sheep and Big Red kangaroos; guided drives between the jagged, skyscraper-high walls of neighbouring Brachina Gorge.

"The Flinders is inspiring. If you think that dinosaurs headed out the door 65 million years ago and these rocks are over 650 million years old, it's mind boggling," asserts Pat proudly. He sees the 'gentle provocation' of the Ranges as the songlines underpinning the Arkaba experience: "getting up at 4.30 to see the sun rise over ancient rock formations while wallabies go by."

For experienced trekkers there is the baptism of fire: a four-day trail with a private field guide, with ready made camps at day's end where guests swag, pioneer style. I found it fascinating to experience the terrain I was just beginning to know by foot, aerially, by taking one of Arkaba's scenic Cessna flights; hovering over the serpentine curve of Arkaba's Elder Range brought the indigenous Adnyamathanha tribe's nickname, the 'kangaroo spine', to life for me.

More than just a getaway, a stay at Arkaba feels like tapping into a rustic idyll, where the clutter of urban life ceases to hold much importance. That's the real invitation. Pat is a ringmaster for luxury that doesn't stint on communing with wilderness, and the mythic heartland appeal of the outback. "If the homestead and the landscape feels like yours while you're here, even for 10 seconds, it's an amazing bit of escapism."

Cleo Glyde