

GOING WILD

Arkaba adventure

Rimmed by spectacular ochre-coloured cliffs and wending its way past ancient red gums and through wildflower-studded grasslands, this four-day Flinders Ranges walk is a captivating must-do.

Story and photography by **Justin Walker**

On top of the Red Range at golden hour, you can look out past the grass trees, across Wilpena Pound towards the Elder Range.



Nobody would dispute the fact that South Australia's Flinders Ranges are spectacular.

This region's rugged terrain, rolling hills, deep valleys and ancient waterways offer a sense of true remoteness. Wilpena Pound and neighbouring Arkaba Conservancy are two of the ranges' most popular destinations – particularly for bushwalkers – with a variety of short, long and very long tracks to follow, allowing experienced walkers the chance to really immerse themselves in this region of Australia. But that doesn't mean those with less time, fitness or walking experience can't enjoy exploring these areas. In fact, joining a guided walking adventure here can lead to a richer experience...which is exactly what I discovered on the Arkaba Walk.

STEP INTO GREATNESS

Crossing some of Australia's most spectacular and varied terrain, the fully guided and supported Arkaba Walk takes four days and three nights, staying at historic shepherd and station camps. It winds its way from the beautiful natural amphitheatre surrounded by mountains known as Wilpena Pound, and heads across the forested interior of the Pound itself, before traversing the private Arkaba Conservancy wilderness (see page 110) and finishing at the restored Arkaba Homestead.

Arkaba, located on a property that used to be a 24,000ha working sheep station, is just less than five hours drive from Adelaide. If you're flying into Adelaide, take a connecting private charter flight to Hawker air-strip, from where you will be transferred via shuttle bus to Wilpena Pound and the start of the Arkaba Walk.

With knowledgeable guides who relate the area's history and describe the native fauna and flora in detail, you'll finish the walk with a heightened appreciation for why the Flinders Ranges is so highly regarded by adventurers and nature lovers.

The fact you only carry light daypacks while the rest of your gear is transported between camps, and indulge in three-course meals, hot showers and luxury swag accommodation at the end of each day's walking all goes to enhance the experience.

Part of the Arkaba Walk's route follows sections of the long-distance (1200km) Heysen Trail. But mostly ▶





A midday pause for lunch atop a rocky rise, looking across to the immense ramparts of the Red Range, with native cypress trees clustering at its base.



Getting there

Qantas and Virgin fly direct to Adelaide from most cities. See qantas.com and virginaustralia.com. If you opt for the Arkaba Walk ex Adelaide, you'll fly private transfer to Hawker, and then be transported to Wilpena Pound. You'll return to Adelaide by private bus, touring the beautiful Clare Valley wine region along the way.

Cost

The Arkaba Walk, ex Adelaide, costs \$2500 per person, and that includes the flight from Adelaide to the Flinders Ranges and lunch in the Clare Valley on the final day. Also included are all meals and drinks, as well as accommodation for the three nights of the walk experience.

The walk

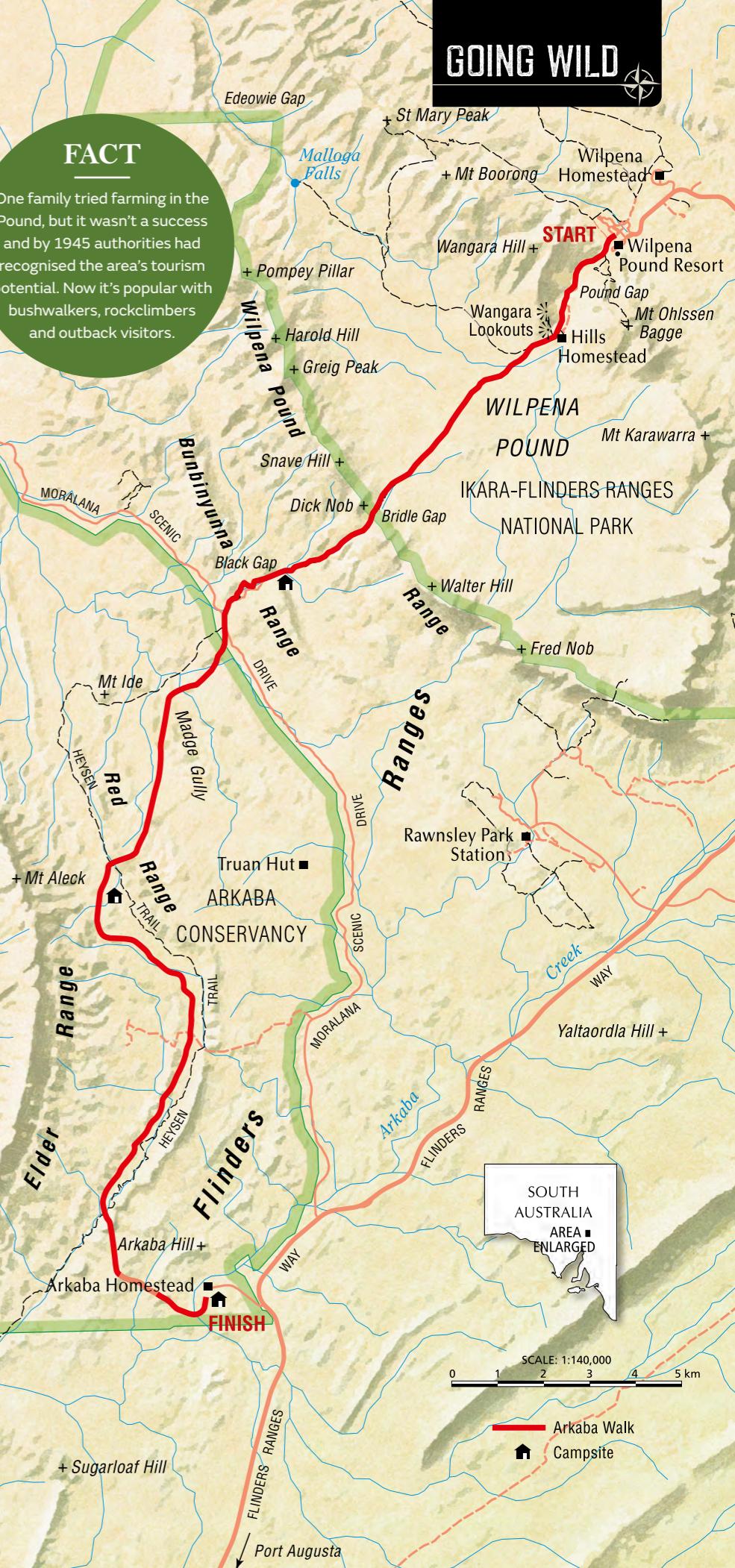
The Arkaba Walk is a three-night/four-day experience that departs Thursday or Friday through March to October. For three days, you'll walk between 13 and 16km, over undulating and sometimes rough terrain. It is part of the Great Walks of Australia (greatwalksofaustralia.com.au), a collection of 13 walks located at different destinations around the country.

Fitness

The walk is graded intermediate and we'd recommend a decent level of hiking fitness to maximise enjoyment. For extensive info on the walk and recommended gear, see arkabawalk.com

FACT

One family tried farming in the Pound, but it wasn't a success and by 1945 authorities had recognised the area's tourism potential. Now it's popular with bushwalkers, rockclimbers and outback visitors.



it goes its own way, taking you through terrain that ranges from dry creek beds, rocky ridge lines and wide grasslands, to rolling hills and native cypress pine forests, all while passing numerous ancient river red gums that are ubiquitous in the area.

For a region synonymous with dry, red-rock landscapes and rugged ranges, the beginning of the Arkaba Walk does a great job of throwing such preconceptions out the window. During my visit, the arrival at Wilpena Pound, after a 45-minute road transfer from Hawker airstrip, saw our small group (there are never more than 10 walkers on any trip) confronted by a landscape surprisingly green, due to a late and very prolific rainy season.

So be ready for the totally unexpected, which in my experience made for an unforgettable sight. You will, of course, still see plenty of the area's iconic red rock throughout the four full days of the walk – in the form of the red ribbon of dirt that you follow and the always looming ranges. But you may get lucky and have this glowing red pathway to the never-never surrounded by vibrant green vegetation.

THE EARLY DAYS

The first camp is a day's walk away, at the 'other end' of Wilpena Pound, just below its western rim. Thankfully, there's no rush and your guide will fill you in on some of the surrounding ecological marvels, a commentary that recurs throughout the trip. The guides truly are incredible fonts of knowledge of both fauna and flora along the entire walk.

Then it was time to throw on the daypacks and start hoofing it. The magic began instantly as we made our way through a gap in the Pound's eastern rim. The rugged landscape was still just that – there were plenty

of large rocks poking their heads out from beneath the grass, and twisted, gnarled trees surrounding the track itself. Abundant birdlife supplied many and varied songs as a tuneful accompaniment to our walk. The track itself was well graded and its undulating, winding route soon took us through Pound Gap and into the bowl of the Pound itself.

For those Europeans who arrived in this region more than a century ago, the landscape must have been daunting. It's hard to have anything but admiration for their stoic approach to eking out a living in this tough land. This view is reinforced not more than an hour or so into the walk when you follow a sidetrack to the site where the Hill family of Hawker built a small cottage in 1905 as part of their wheat-growing lease over the Pound itself.

Even allowing for how green it was when I was there (and noting the creek below the cottage), it's jarring to read the SA Parks' info board and learn that the Hills gave up on this place in 1914 due to flooding and not the lengthy droughts usually synonymous with these harsh outback areas.

The restored cottage is excellent, as is the climb up to Wangara Lookout. The track upwards starts beside the cottage and is a must-do because the expansive views from the lookout across the Pound's floor are fantastic. Plus, the lookout is perfect for morning tea. ▶



◀ **The sheltered swag**
accommodation each night is
a highlight of the Arkaba Walk.
Or you can get even closer to
nature by sleeping out in a swag
under the stars.



The Arkaba Walk guides are
fonts of information regarding
the landscape and the work
done by Arkaba Conservancy.



▼ **Traversing rocky country** on
the descent off the lip of Wilpena
Pound to Black Gap Camp. The
site was once occupied by a
shepherd, whose ruined stone
chimney still remains.



The landscape changes
continually throughout the walk,
with rolling hills and rugged red
cliffs giving way to dry and still-
running creeks that cut through
the ancient landscape.

ANOTHER WORLD

Leaving the Hills' site, you return to the main track and start the long walk across Wilpena Pound's floor. The landscape here alternates between scrub and open areas that reveal the extent of clearing by early colonisers. Impressively, the native flora has bounced back, with the stately river red gums looking like tall beacons in a sea of tea-tree and cypress pine as walkers move steadily upwards toward the crossing point of Bridle Gap.

Here, the terrain becomes very rocky with a few steep pinches. The pace is kept leisurely by our guide: rest stops are common, ensuring you actually look at the gobsmacking landscape you're travelling through. You don't come to these magical places to power through them at race speed. To do so would mean you miss the subtle changes in topography and vegetation.

Topping out at the rocky ledges of Bridle Gap, you will cop your first view of the Bunbinyunna and Red ranges and, in the distance but still clearly visible owing to its incredible size, the Elder Range. After five hours and about 10–12km of walking, it's the perfect reward for effort, and only matched by the reassuring glimpse of your campsite. Appearing from above the steep descent of Bridle Gap's western cliffside and the rolling hills beyond is the glint of metal in the sun that signals the large shed/dining area at Black Gap Camp.

It's upon arriving at this first camp that you'll experience the difference a guided luxury walk affords – in

You don't come to these magical places to power through them at race speed.

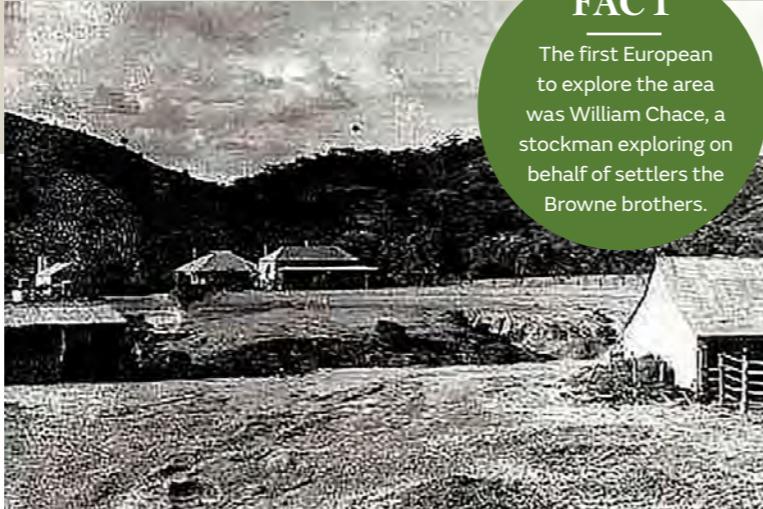
both the figurative and monetary senses. Any unpleasant memories you may have of lugging your own food and cooking over a compact hiking stove will be erased as you indulge in a three-course meal and beverages (all transported to camp via four-wheel-drive). Yes, I still call it camping, even though the campsite has showers – hot, via heated water fed into a shower bucket above you and enough for a nice five-minute wash – elevated eco-toilets and, to top it all off, warm comfy swags to ensure you get a great night's sleep.

These aren't the swags most outback travellers would be used to roughing it in. They're housed within corrugated iron shelters that each contain two separate swags. And they offer a star-filled night on the open lower timber deck – yes, the shelter is split-level – if you so desire. Or you can choose the added protection of a roof on the upper deck in case of rain – and you can still see the stars.

Oh, and just in case you aren't quite comfortable enough, the swag contains a heated water bottle. You'll never question the term 'luxury walk' again. ▶

Conservation success story

TOURIST OPERATOR Wild Bush Luxury bought Arkaba Station in 2009 with the aim of creating a unique wilderness experience: Arkaba Conservancy. As part of this, conservation programs have helped return the old sheep station (sheep had been run on the property from 1851) to its former, natural state wherever possible. So far, conservation programs have focused on feral animal eradication and reversing the impact of decades of grazing. All sheep were removed by 2013 and both feral predators (such as foxes) and herbivores (sheep) have also been reduced in number or eliminated from the property. This has brought a huge increase in native birdlife. For more extensive information on Arkaba's conservation work, see arkabaconservancy.com/conversation-at-arkaba



FACT

The first European to explore the area was William Chace, a stockman exploring on behalf of settlers the Browne brothers.

THE TRACK GOES EVER ON

The Arkaba Walk is not about rushing through the countryside, and our second day heralds another dramatic change in topography and vegetation. You will start moving through a series of dry or still-running creeks, shadowed by immense river red gums, as you continue south-west, initially following a section of the long-distance Heysen Trail, before making a left turn and heading through Madge Gully.

It is another 12km day of varied terrain explored at a leisurely speed, allowing us to enjoy the surrounds while listening to the guide's talks on particular plants, animals or the region itself, not to mention discussion of the vital rehabilitation work being done here by the Arkaba Conservancy.

A morning of winding through creek beds is followed by a gradual climb over grass-covered hills to another lookout that does duty as a meal stop and offers closer views of the craggy red cliffs of the Elder Range.

This night's camp is nestled at the foot of the range, and is still a further few hours away from this impressive vantage point. The immense size of the range's big cliffs becomes more and more apparent as you get closer to camp and a repeat of the previous night's indulgences.

Nothing beats an outback sunrise, so make sure you set your alarm early and psych yourself up to quickly leave the comfort and



PHOTO CREDIT TOP CHRISSEY GOLDRICK, BOTTOM RIGHT: WARREN FIELD/AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC

warmth of your swag to watch the rising sun paint the ochre cliffs of the Elder Range. It really is a sight to behold. A wonderland, indeed, and on this last full day you face another striking combination of contrasting terrain as you weave your way through the cypress pine forest, with its underbelly of lush green grass, and head out and down through mallee country, with plenty of rock and open space.

Arkaba Conservancy's efforts are paying off here, evidenced by the expansion of native vegetation into this area that was previously overrun with noxious introduced plants.

For this last day you also rejoin part of the Heysen Trail, which has a creekside section highlight with dense cypress pines and long green grass making it feel as if you're walking in a totally different part of the world.

The landscape changes again towards the end of our day as we move through and then up and out of a valley section that includes a walk along the dry Dorothy Creek. Then we climb up a far drier hill (with contrasting green-clad ranges behind us) and finally spot the end goal: Arkaba Homestead.

A FAIR DEAL

The final hour of the walk is a descent over rocky, sparsely vegetated terrain, before a pleasant wander along Arkaba Creek's green-clad banks and then up a small rise to the homestead itself.

Here, you are met by staff with a welcome warm face-washer, before the sight of the homestead's drinks fridge invariably sees walkers undertake a quite dignified fast shuffle to grab celebratory beverages.

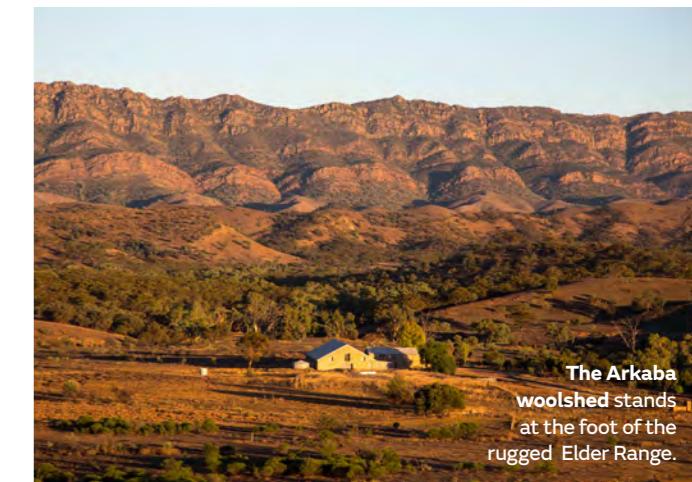
For those who might regard a luxury walk as all gloss and no grunt, the Arkaba Walk defies that view. Yes, this outdoor experience is more expensive than an independent hike, but the added benefits are many.

Transport, food and logistics are all taken care of and you get to experience an otherwise inaccessible part of this country – plus witness how those who own and manage it have succeeded in restoring it to its natural state, after decades of farming and invasive plant and animal species.

And then, of course, there's the informed commentary and insightful expert appraisal of the surrounding natural environment.

When you consider that the money you spend on this walk is mostly reinvested into the continued conservation work you see, the Arkaba Walk doesn't seem quite so 'expensive' after all.

It's what most of us would consider a sound investment, both in terms of achieving conservation goals, and the fact that the walk itself is an absolute cracker, taking you on a memorable journey through one of Australia's most magical landscapes.



The Arkaba woolshed stands at the foot of the rugged Elder Range.

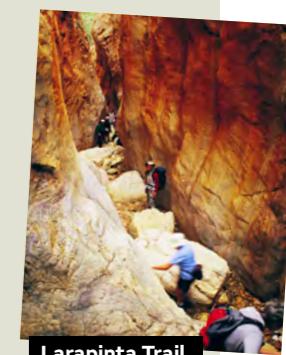
More multi-day hikes

Fraser Island Great Walk, QLD: 90km

Enjoy the world's largest sand island on this easy-rated walk that takes 6–8 days to complete. **More info:** npsr.qld.gov.au/parks/great-walks-fraser-island

Larapinta Trail, NT: 223km

Running along the West MacDonnell Ranges, this walk takes between 12 and 21 days. **More info:** nt.gov.au/leisure/recreation/bushwalking-hiking/larapinta-trail



Larapinta Trail.

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Credit: Allan Honor