



IN THE
shadow
OF THE
Elders

FAR FROM SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S CITY LIGHTS IS AN EXCLUSIVE OUTBACK EXPERIENCE WHERE WILDLIFE RULES AS **ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS** RECENTLY DISCOVERED.

Lunch looks exquisite. Juicy prawns sautéed with fresh tomatoes hide beneath fluffy clouds of freshly made gnocchi. The purplish mass of the Elder Ranges looms in the background, beyond Arkaba Homestead's garden of head-high old-man saltbush and emu bush. There's no question we're in the outback, but I can't shake the nagging feeling that something is missing. Then it hits me. There are no flies. Arkaba Lodge manager Charlie Eager tells me it's because there's no stock on the former working station, which was once home to up to 8000 sheep on nearly 26,000 hectares. Where they once churned up the soil and ate every available bit of greenery, new ground cover and small shrubs are recolonising the property and providing a vital haven for native wildlife. It's just one of the ways the former sheep station has changed in the past decade, and right now it means that instead of conducting a carefully choreographed routine shielding my food with one hand and swatting away tenacious insects with the other – I can relax and enjoy my meal, along with the magnificent views.

HELPING HANDS

When I arrive, one of the first things Eager hands me is a wildlife checklist. This small booklet lists hundreds of birds, mammals, reptiles, frogs and plants found on the property. It's not exhaustive, but Eager happily informs me they're adding to it regularly and, after recently returning to the property, the delightfully named chestnut-crowned babbler will be included in the next edition. Like all the guides on the property, Eager regularly helps to monitor wildlife populations, pull out fences and keep destructive introduced species in check. These efforts are all directly funded by guests who stay at the lodge – and they are also encouraged to join the staff on their rounds. Eager lives up to his name with constant invitations to visit different parts of the property, and as we check the cameras that monitor wildlife movement he points out some of the changes he has seen since arriving six years earlier.

"It's really exciting to see ground cover creep into areas that only three or four years ago were completely bare," he says, as he marvels at the effects of recent rains.



Green shoots have appeared in every available space, between clumps of spinifex and native grasses that are slowly re-establishing themselves. And rather than slowing down this process, the recent dry period has helped native plants outcompete less hardy introduced species. Everywhere we look there are success stories. A ruby saltbush is festooned with bright magenta berries, and it's no surprise that the cooks at the homestead use them as a garnish for drinks and desserts. More importantly, it's a favourite of fruit-eating species like emus who help to spread the seeds of the plant, along with others like the pale orange native apricot. Even the bright-red harlequin mistletoe, a native parasite that can strangle trees, is important as a food source for the brush-tailed possums that have recently been reintroduced into the neighbouring Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park. Along with reintroduced quolls, they've followed the same path as guests on the four-day Arkaba Walk. Starting in the imposing natural amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound, the walkers climb through a small gap between the serrated teeth of the Pound's rim. The route

GREEN RIBBONS OF LIFE COURSE THROUGH THE EARTHIER COLOURS OF THIS SEMI-ARID LANDSCAPE.

then passes through open woodlands of cone-shaped cypress pines and along broad creek beds lined with river gums. These green ribbons of life course through the earthier colours of this semi-arid landscape; Eager tells me the property's name comes from the Adnyamathanha language and means either 'hidden water' or 'land of abundance'. As he points out the profusion of useful plants around us, both meanings seem apt. Further up, the folds in the copper-rich hills lead to ridges of dark purple siltstone that rise in jagged waves to heavily weathered crests. Arkaba sits between the craggy bluffs of the Chace and Elder ranges, and even from a distance the broad stripes of these sedimentary mountains stand out clearly. When the harsh sun softens into a reddish glow at dawn and dusk, they hold that light, turning the deep, rich red colour of lingering embers as the wildlife emerges to feed. It's a marvellous end to my first day.

Left: Flying into the Flinders Ranges gives a good perspective of its vast scale. Above: Sunsets are nothing short of spectacular in the outback. Photo: Richard Field.



Photos: Randy Larcombe and Richard Field.

ON SAFARI

The next day Eager leads a ridge-top safari drive. As we pile in, he points out that only 10 people can stay at the lodge at any one time — not quite enough to fill a single modified LandCruiser — but we’re far from alone. Ears swivel and heads look up from the grass at our approach and I quickly lose count of the well-fed kangaroos that bound away from us. Even more endearing are the shaggy euros, a type of wallaroo whose long grey hair turns into a golden halo when the sun is behind them.

Flocks of dusky pink galahs screech overhead (Eager thinks they’re “Australia’s most underrated

bird”) while crested pigeons dart around the undergrowth. In the trees, magpies compete with the high-pitched squeal of magnificently coloured green and yellow ringneck parrots.

As we climb, the view expands and the vegetation thins until the hills are bare except for pincushions of spinifex and small bushes. When we reach the top, Eager pulls out a well-stocked cooler for sundowners. It’s the perfect excuse to linger as the steep ridges, narrow valleys and broad plains of the Flinders Ranges fade to a dusty ochre. My phone has no signal out here and there’s no reason to check the clock. The daily schedule at Arkaba is governed by the natural patterns of sunrise and sunset and adopting this pace has a therapeutic effect.

Above: Safari guides help identify the hundreds of species on the property. Right: Every room at the homestead has a private verandah.



There are no plans that can’t be changed, and I have a feeling of complete freedom as I roam the property. Back at the homestead, the bedheads are made of lambskin stretched between old fence posts and wool bales double as side tables. Prints of native wildlife by Rosemary Woodford Ganf adorn the walls and although the original bluestone blocks of the homestead have been added to over time there’s a pleasing solidity to the building, which has an emphasis on understated natural textures. Thanks to those additions, each room has a private outdoor area under the wraparound verandah, but the communal firepit is even more inviting and soon I’ve joined the other guests under a jewelled night sky.

I haven’t seen any emus on the property, so Eager points out the dark emu in the Milky Way that’s such an important constellation all around the country. And when he asks if

anyone wants to get up early for a sunrise walk, all of us say yes immediately. Clearly his enthusiasm has rubbed off, and it’s easy to agree when he suggests the real luxury here is the wide-open space around us.

GETTING THERE

Fly to Adelaide then transfer to a one-hour charter flight to Hawker, 20 minutes’ drive from Arkaba. Commercial flights also connect to Port Augusta, 75 minutes’ drive away.

STAY

Arkaba Conservancy. Rates are around A\$1070 a night for a twin-share, including all meals and activities, with a minimum two-night stay. arkabaconservancy.com