

# Flinders Ranges, South Australia: an amazing spot to explore

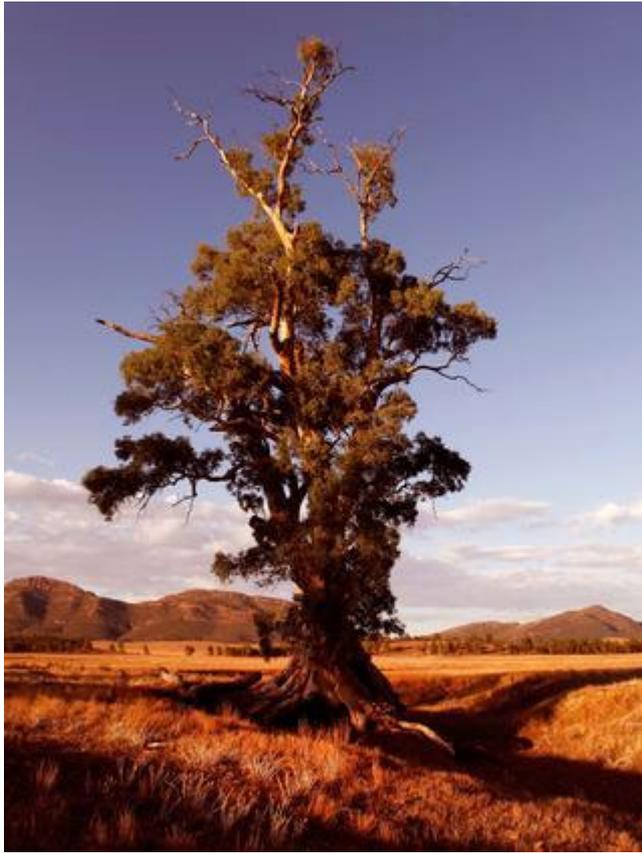


Sunrise at Bunyeroo, Flinders Ranges. Picture: Getty Images

- By **CHRISTINE MCCABE**
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Artist Hans Heysen described South Australia's evocative Flinders Ranges as the bones of the earth laid bare. I'm visiting in early winter and those bones, or jagged peaks, have vanished beneath a blanket of low cloud. An eerie atmosphere prevails as red dirt plains freckled with salt bush disappear into the gloaming.

We're setting out from Rawnsley Park Station with self-confessed geology nerd and guide Phil to explore the rugged gorges around Wilpena Pound – Bunyeroo, Brachina, Parachilna – on a day-long, off-road tour that will take us to a remote pub for a lunch of camel sausage and “emu mignon” and later a little Adnyamathanha gallery tucked into bush near the old copper mining settlement of Blinman.



The Cazneaux Tree. Picture: Julian Kingma/SA Tourism Commission

Comparatively few Australians have visited this stunning landscape, where Wilpena Pound rises from the plains like a prehistoric Colosseum; rugged gorges carved deep by shifting tectonic plates and ancient oceans are stitched together with colossal centuries-old river red gums. Most famous of these is a solitary giant photographed in 1937 by Harold Cazneaux (Dick Smith's grandfather), who came here to see the landscapes painted by Heysen. Cazneaux called the time-worn tree looming over an unforgiving, semi-arid landscape *The Spirit of Endurance*. If he were here today that photo would be very different. The mountain backdrop is swallowed by cloud, the plains smudged green by recent rains. Overhead the muffled wing beat of a nankeen kestrel stirs the enfolding fog.



Wilpena Pound. Picture: SA Tourism Commission

I've visited the Flinders many times, through drought and after heavy rains, but this mist and drizzle is something new and magical. Through the Bunyeroo Gorge in the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park the usual panoramic views of the Pound and St Mary Peak (Ngarri Mudlanha) are obscured, but other ancient denizens emerge. On a hilltop a sculptural grass tree, as old as St Peter's Basilica, grows out of sheer rock; First Nations people used the resin to glue axe heads, and early European settlers burnt the sticky substance as incense in churches.

Everywhere rain is transforming the landscape; this is boom or bust territory (mostly bust, farmers will say). Tiny red gums poke through trickling waters in creek beds, and despite the cold wildflowers flourish. Our tough LandCruiser bounces into the stunning Brachina Gorge, where only recently wild waters raged like the Colorado, mounding great boulders and tree trunks against the stoic red gums standing sentry. We are on the lookout for yellow-footed rock-wallabies. Along with the wedge-tailed eagle this charismatic marsupial is an unofficial mascot in these parts: little statues of the fluffy creature adorn the entrance to many of the region's towns.

The wallabies were on the brink of extinction in the Flinders three decades ago but a determined program of feral eradication (foxes and goats) has seen their numbers bounce back. While Phil unpacks tea and biscuits, I'm observing more than a dozen creatures on their home-base cliff face, sheltering from the rain in little hollows or leaping daintily from rock to rock, draping their tiger-striped tails over the precipice.

The wallabies are relative newcomers to Brachina. The gorge has been described as a “corridor through time”, rocks dating back 650 million years preserving evidence of the first complex multicellular life on Earth. Strange soft-bodied creatures that lived on the floor of an ancient sea are preserved as impressions in stone, faint traces of the first geological period named in more than a century, and the only one in the Southern Hemisphere: the Ediacaran. These fossil imprints were discovered in the 1940s by Reginald Sprigg at the old Ediacara mine in the Flinders. More than 60 years later, David Attenborough visited to film his series *First Life*.



Ediacaran fossil. Picture: South Australian Museum

I’d never have found these intriguing fossils without the help of a guide. Phil points out sponge-like creatures preserved in incredible shapes and colours, rose pink and sapphire blue, the rippling sands of an ocean floor set in stone, even layers of dust from a meteorite that crashed 580 million years ago.

Easier to discover is the slab of fossil-pocked rock next to the letter box outside the Prairie Hotel, Parachilna. Famous for its feral fare (camel, goat, roo, emu), the pub had a swish makeover last year and now sits like a smart wine bar in the middle of nowhere, a magnet for hungry travellers relieved to find they can stop for a G&T (yes, there is a gin distillery in the Flinders) and plate of saltbush pakoras.

In Parachilna Gorge the weather has become positively Scottish; I wouldn't be surprised to spy a monarch in the red dirt glen. Instead, emus jog out of the mist, their feathers bouncing like bustled skirts, and great mobs of red kangaroos fan into the hills. Kites twirl on high and in a dead gum tree, a great wedge-tailed eagle observes our passing with a gimlet eye.

We stop at the enchanting Wadna Gallery, where Adnyamathanha man Kristian Coulthard carves wonderful sculptures in local timber (and leads tours to ancient petroglyph and painting sites). His wife Gaby runs the tiny gallery stocked with work by family and friends. Last stop is the delightfully ungentrified North Blinman pub for a piping hot quandong pie before bouncing back to Rawnsley Park Station for a hot bath in my lovely eco villa and dinner by the woolshed log fire, the farm lamb cooked to perfection.



Arkaba Luxury Lodge. Picture: SA Tourism Commission

Off-roading provides a brilliant snapshot of the Flinders Ranges but to really understand this landscape you'll need to strap on some sturdy walking boots – myriad trails are spread across the National Park. At Arkaba Conservancy, south of the park, Wild Bush Luxury has transformed walking into an art form, each day bookended by hearty cooked breakfasts, fine dinners and a cosy bed in the old homestead. Long considered one of Australia's most beautiful outback spreads, Arkaba unfurls like a theatrical film set framed by the fire red walls of the Elder Range and the imposing ramparts of Wilpena Pound.

The 24,000ha property's walking trails range from moderate to more challenging; there are steep climbs rewarded by stunning views, and boulder-strewn plains

where one needs to be as nimble as a feral goat. Crisscrossing rocky riverbeds beneath those epic red gums, we pause to search for fossils and admire the fauna and flora – bright blue and red spiders, a butterfly spotted like a leopard, wildflowers and the salty sweet fruit of the ruby saltbush. As we walk, guide Shane provides history and geology lessons and promises an exam over dinner.

Morning tea is taken in the old shearing shed, a colonial set piece with thick stone walls, great oregon beams and wool grease-coated yards fashioned from local white cypress. The once 40-stand shed is quiet now, Arkaba's sheep long gone. Today this private conservancy is rehabilitating endangered and threatened species. The yellow-footed rock-wallaby is back, and little dunnarts can be spied by the pool.

A maximum 10 guests are housed in the smart 1850s homestead where wool bales have been transformed into bedside tables, lamps are made from emu eggs and bedheads from cypress and sheep skin. Life revolves around the roaring log fire in the library or the old wool classing table on the veranda. Chef Michael dishes up impressive food in the conservatory dining room, where the promised exam is as lively as a pub quiz.

The Flinders is one of our most captivating landscapes and visitors return here again and again. To explore ghost towns and remote pubs. To ride the Pichi Richi steam train from Quorn, a town so wonderfully preserved it has starred in countless movies. To mountain-bike in Melrose or camp in lonely gorges where the inky, star-filled skies feel just an arm's length away. To view ancient art with First Nations guides. To discover there's plenty of life yet in these old bones.



In the pool at Rawnsley Park Station. Picture: Jacqui Way

## Where to stay

### Rawnsley Park Station

In the shadow of Wilpena Pound, this Flinders tourism pioneer offers camping, cabins, upscale eco-villas and an onsite restaurant along with guided walks, 4WD tours and heli-camping. Eco-villas from \$470pn. [rawnsleypark.com.au](http://rawnsleypark.com.au)

### Arkaba Conservancy

A member of Luxury Lodges of Australia, Arkaba has upscale safari-style accommodation; packages include all meals, wine and tours such as guided walks and open-top safari drives. From \$1125 per person per night (min two nights). Four-day walks (10-15km per day) from \$3095. [arkabaconservancy.com](http://arkabaconservancy.com)

### Prairie Hotel & Outback Lodge, Parachilna

This legendary outback pub owned by fourth-generation Flinders pastoralists has 12 comfy guest suites, recently renovated dining rooms, a new brewhouse and that famous feral grazing platter. Two-night packages from \$535 per person including breakfast and dinner. [prariehotel.com.au](http://prariehotel.com.au)

## Wilpena Pound Resort

First Nations owned and operated, this resort with camping and glamping tents is undergoing a multi-million-dollar upgrade including luxury Stargazing Safari tents. Glamping tents from \$270. [wilpenapound.com.au](http://wilpenapound.com.au)