

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN Travel + LUXURY

May 25-26, 2024 / theaustralian.com.au/travel

OLD SCHOOL, NEW COOL

London takes tradition to hipster heights

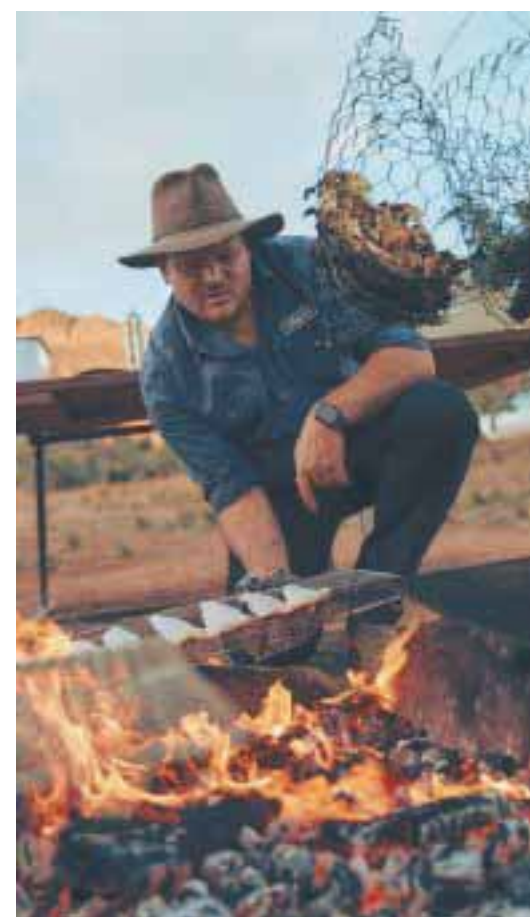
GO WILD

Cruise destinations where
creatures steal the show

DRIVING FORCE

Off the beaten track
in the Flinders Ranges





Country roads

Experience luxe in the dust on a 4WD outing in the Flinders Ranges

DAVID ROSS

It seems incongruous to be nibbling fresh ceviche at the base of the Flinders Ranges, five hours by dry and dusty road from Adelaide. The drive north took me past salt pans on the city outskirts and into the Clare Valley, one of South Australia's great wine regions, then on to the farming town of Orroroo, with its crossed-grid streets, bluestone pub and war memorial bearing a tragically long list of names. From there, the trees gave way to scrub, which gave way to almost nothing as the grass grew shorter and the ground transitioned from baked brown to orange.

My delicate fish appetiser is served amid the plush interiors of historic Arkaba Homestead, an 1850s dwelling on the edge of Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park. It is, as it turns out, not the least likely place to be dining on seafood. We are not so far from the ocean; the Spencer Gulf city of Port Augusta is just an hour away. And this whole rolling rocky place was once at the bottom of the ocean, and at one point the edge of a vast inland sea that covered much of Australia.

The craggy landscape is where Jaguar Land Rover, the car company behind a slew of off-road vehicles,

SUVs, sleek sedans and sports cars, has chosen to conduct its latest foray into hospitality while showing off its new models. It has trucked in almost 20 Land Rover Defenders to Arkaba so four-wheel driving enthusiasts can put them to the test.

JLR, as it prefers to be known, is increasingly presenting its customers with more than just a car; it's offering a fully immersive travel experience. Last December, paying guests spent three days at SOMA Byron in NSW, driving its 4WDs around the Byron Bay coast and hinterland. The brand is among a clutch of luxury labels exploring new terrain in the travel and hospitality sphere.

It feels fitting that JLR has picked Arkaba, a member of the Luxury Lodges of Australia portfolio, as the place to showcase its refined but rugged goods, serving up this harsh landscape on a platter of luxury with Champagne in hand. Luxury means different things to different people, and sometimes low-tech simplicity is part of the picture. Sure, the JLR expedition offers fine wine, private dining and super-smart cars, but it combines them with sleeping under the stars in a swag, (hot) outdoor showers, and little to no mobile phone reception.

Arkaba holds many surprises. For a place that enjoys just 30cm of rain a year, roads hint at sudden floods with marker poles metres high in bone-dry creek crossings. Once a sheep station of more than 400,000ha before being reduced to a more manageable 26,000ha, it is now one of Australia's great nature reserves, having been destocked and converted to a private conservancy in 2012.

Across four days, we grind our two tonnes of steel and Slovakian engineering up slopes and down into gullies flanked by river red gums with twisted bellies so wide the cars could comfortably fit inside. Our first outing takes us almost to the highest point on the station to gaze out at a sunset that threatens to set the hills on fire. Back at our comfortable base, we're spoiled with the culinary talents of Calvin Von Niebel, the former executive chef of Yotam Ottolenghi's London dining empire. Von Niebel is among a cast of many at Arkaba. They include John O'Shea, who recently returned to run the property's outback camp years after setting it up

Arkaba Woolshed, main; driving in the Defender Experience at Arkaba, above left; the homestead, above; chef James Viles at Camp Defender, right

IN THE KNOW

Arkaba Homestead has five ensuite guestrooms; off-peak room rates from \$1995 a night, twin-share, inclusive of meals, open bar and twice daily safari experiences.

experiencearkaba.com

The next four-day Land Rover Defender experiences will take place from March 30-April 10 next year at Arkaba Homestead and the Flinders Ranges.

Prices are yet to be announced but guests can register their interest online.

landrover.com.au

almost a decade ago, and Bruce Lawson, a former ranger in South Africa's Kruger National Park and resident jack of all trades.

On the second day, we push into the hills through the cypress pines that have sprouted in huge numbers since the sheep were removed. We swing around to Black Gap, sitting in the shadow of a huge wall of rock forced up by some ancient force. On a clear day, looking out from the highest ridges, you can see the white smear of salty Lake Frome to the northeast.

At almost 600m above sea level, Arkaba can be brutally hot during summer but temperatures take a dive as

MORE TO THE STORY

How luxury brands are venturing into tourism and hospitality.

LVMH: In December last year, Louis Vuitton collaborated with bespoke tour operator Elite Voyage for a four-day Paris experience. It included shopping trips to the brand's flagship shop and the Bon Marche and Samaritaine department stores, fine dining and a private visit to the Louis Vuitton Foundation, staying at LVMH hotel Cheval Blanc Paris. The group also owns the extensive Belmond hotel and luxury train portfolio.
elitevoyage.com

Fendi: The Italian brand unveiled its first pop-up beach club at the Puente Romano Beach Resort in Marbella, Spain, last northern summer. Daybeds and umbrellas were decked out in Fendi textiles and designs, with a store also operating on site.
fendi.com

Giorgio Armani: In conjunction with private-jet company Vista Jet, the Italian fashion house is hosting a two-day Mare Experience on May 29-30, focusing on its swimwear, beachwear and accessories. It takes place in the beautiful

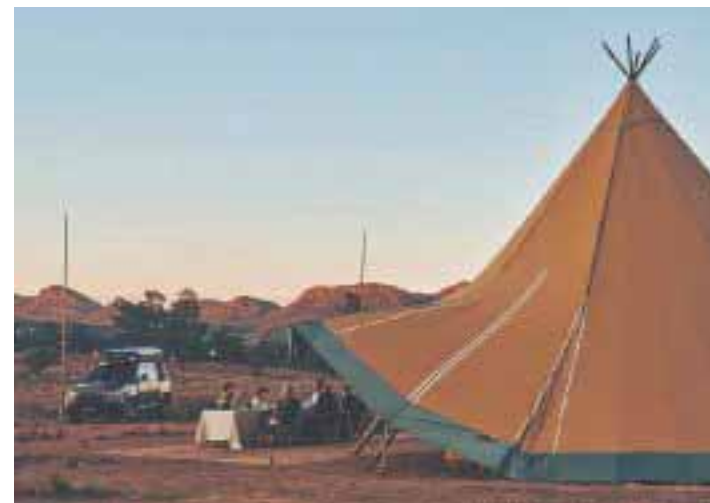
southern port town of Trani and includes a bike tour, cocktail party and beach day.
vistajet.com

Veve Clicquot: The French Champagne house raised its profile in Australia with its takeover of boutique properties in Byron Bay, NSW, and Noosa, QLD, in the summers of 2021-23. It enlisted the talents of celebrity chefs and plied guests with bubbles in interiors awash with its signature tangerine hue.
vevecliquot.com

Audemars Piguet: The Swiss watch brand purchased a rundown hotel in Switzerland's Vallee de Joux in 2003 and has since turned it into a 50-room eco resort featuring Michelin-star dining and indulgent spa therapies.
hoteldeshorlogers.com

Christian Louboutin: Opened in 2023, the rarefied, 13-room Vermelho Hotel in Melides, Portugal, showcases the shoe maker's eccentric aesthetic – and favourite shade of red. Rumour has it a second property is in the works.
vermelhohotel.com

The Macallan: The revered Scottish whisky brand has teamed up with Bentley Motors to offer tailored one-day outings in Speyside, touring the countryside, sipping drams of single malt and dining at the brasserie at the striking architect-designed distillery.
themacallan.com



terrain so far, pushing up steep inclines beside sheer, white-knuckle drops and easing carefully around tight turns. Finally, in the late afternoon, we engage the handbrakes at Defender Camp, with one final hurrah from Von Niebel. Here, Lawson shows his city slicker guests how to navigate by the stars. With almost seer-like skills, he points out north and south under the gaze of the Southern Cross. Then, like an enigma, he wanders off into the darkness to locate his car and return to the homestead. Kangaroos swarm across Arkaba, and driving at night poses considerable risk to human and roo. Lawson would prefer to traverse the property on foot rather than dodge the macropod multitudes in a vehicle – even a sturdy Defender.

Tonight is our chance to test-drive the rooftop tents. These cosy canvas cocoons keep us a comfortable distance from wildlife, and in the morning deliver a memorable Flinders farewell. Through the mesh window at the foot of my bed I watch dawn break, the gentle rays of sunlight turning the tips of the ranges pink.

David Ross was a guest of Jaguar Land Rover.

winter approaches. It's unseasonably cool during my March visit and it's a relief to reach the old shepherd's fireplace at Elder Camp to find a barbecue in full flight and renowned chef James Viles manning the tools. Drinks and snacks are served on arrival, with a feast to follow.

We retire to the warmth of our swags, sleeping under the heavens and watching for shooting stars as a herd of goats clomp and bray among the rocks of the creek bed

below. The next morning, we set out early to catch the sunrise as it hits the massive amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound. Various ambitious farmers tried to make a fist of cropping and raising livestock in and around the pound through the 19th and early 20th century, but were ultimately defeated by drought or flood. The remains of their dwellings can still be visited in the national park and on Arkaba itself.

We spend a few hours tackling the most challenging

Communal teepee at Camp Defender, top



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