

# Ravine deep, rampart high

FROM ABORIGINAL CARVINGS AND EMBEDDED FOSSILS TO SALT-ENCRUSTED LAKES, SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S FLINDERS RANGES OFFER A SENSORY SMORGASBORD OF CULTURE AND EXPLORATION...

WORDS: Marie Barbieri

**M**y breath is languid as my lungs go into low-power mode. The heat haze shimmies on the road between Quorn and Hawker, giving the ranges an appearance of molten lava. Sweat wets and dries. The 44 degrees Celsius temperature bakes life to a halt.

Cattle once grazed beyond this dust-filled creek, where kitchens fired and chimneys respired. But today, the osteoporotic bones of Kanyaka Homestead are the only relics of lives once lived at this parched site, since stripped bare by the ravages of drought.

British pioneer farmer, Hugh Proby, sustained lives by employing dozens of families at his station. Yet with cruel irony, in 1852, he drowned in Willochra Creek while mustering stampeding stock during a flash flood. He was 24 years old.

Arriving at Ikara (Wilpena Pound), I learn that being an early settler in the Flinders Ranges was about survival. Old Wilpena Station, which ran for 137 years, had 2,000 square kilometres of land >>

## “OUR FLINDERS ADVENTURE”

*Evelyn McLaughlan* recently returned from the Outback Tracks tour with Sacred Earth Safaris, travelling along the Oodnadatta, Birdsville and Strzelecki Tracks...

“This is the third trip that I have had with Sacred Earth Safaris and I would highly recommend them. Their small group tours are friendly, well planned and the meals and accommodation are excellent. Travelling in the vehicle feels comfortable and safe, even on the gravel outback roads.



“On this trip we experienced the Australian desert, visited salt lakes, such as Lake Eyre, stayed in outback settlements, such as Birdsville and Maree, experienced the opal mining town of Coober Pedy, enjoyed the natural attractions of the Flinders Ranges, including the rugged beauty of Arkaroola, following in the footsteps of famous Australian explorers such as John McDouall Stuart and Burke and Wills.”

■ **Owner operated Sacred Earth Safaris offer small group four-wheel drive tours through the Flinders Ranges and Outback South Australia. Tours are accommodated in wilderness resorts, cattle stations, outback pubs and motels. Meals are included, as well as activities and entry fees. Web : [www.sacredearthsafaris.com.au](http://www.sacredearthsafaris.com.au)**



A kangaroo standoff



Doug and Marie go searching for yabbies



Brachina Gorge's age-defying wrinkles

with grazing cattle and sheep. It too succumbed to drought and flood.

Alive and kicking are the emus that stare at me, regal and aloof. The male of this ancient species incubates the eggs and raises the chicks. Bounding alongside them are handsome red kangaroos.

To conserve energy at speed they don't actively breathe, as their hopping motion autonomously compresses and relaxes their diaphragm. And they can cleverly choose the sex of their offspring, and control their family's birth rate by adapting to the boom and bust climate variations of outback Australia.

I meet local ranger, Nick, who loads me into his four-wheel drive to learn about why geologists describe this region as 'the mountains of memory'.

### ROCKY CHAPTERS

The diagonal striations of Brachina Gorge's cliffs are like pages in a two billion year-old story. At Enorama Creek, Nick points out pebble-rocks embedded within boulders of tillite, denoting the planet's extreme freezing event.

We then locate the Golden Spike, a brass plaque marking evidence of global defrosting 630 million years ago, enabling life to develop. Opposite, is ripple rock – evidence of an ancient sea.

Brachina Gorge is home to soft-bodied creatures organisms from 550-575 million years ago: the existence of which, was proven by Reg Sprigg's discovery of Ediacara fossils in 1946. This was the beginning of complex life on earth.

Above us, we spot three yellow-footed rock-wallabies. “They change their fur colour for camouflage, seasonally,” says Nick, “so are lighter when white lichen covers the rocks, and redder after it's

baked off.” A wedge-tailed eagle shadows one. Driving through the book of time, we reach the Cambrian chapter, marked by deposits of worms and sponge reefs. Nick pours water onto a grey, non-descript boulder. My eyes widen when the geometric contours of fossilised sponges jump out, patterned with purples, mustards and browns.

Tea and cake magically appear from the

Adnyamathanha people of the northern Flinders Ranges. Strolling through Sacred Canyon via Wilpena Creek, Mick says: “The Adnyamathanha language is the only Aboriginal language with a ‘v.’” Indigenous trivia. Love it.

“Gum tree is: 'wirra'. Engravings is: 'yura marlka'. History is 'mura', and dreamtime is 'jukurrpa'. And it's 'wardana' today”, adds Mick, looking at

## “MY EYES WIDEN WHEN THE GEOMETRIC CONTOURS OF FOSSILISED SPONGES JUMP OUT”

boot in Bunyeroo Valley, before we capture views of the ABC Range from Razorback Lookout.

Evening gifts us with a cracking Sunset Spectacular Tour at Stokes Hill Lookout. An encroaching storm-front prompts Nick to say: “This should be interesting!” He couldn't be more understated.

As the sun trickles over Wilpena Pound like a cracked egg yolk before us, a double rainbow brushes its spectrum across a curtain of orange rain behind us, drawing pec-flexed red kangaroos into the open, prospecting for a drink and relief from the day's heat.

As Nick pops the bubbly to a timely clap of thunder, we think to the water-coloured firmament while enjoying a fine platter of cheeses, crackers and fresh berries. This is surely the bar with the world's best view, tonight!

### SACRED WALLS

Post sunrise, I meet indigenous guides, Mick and Jimmy, traditional

me. “Oh, what is wardana?” I ask.

“Bloody hot!”

The playful glint in his eye requires no translation.

Mick chews the resin of an acacia as we tread upstream, showing us ancient circular petroglyphs on narrowing sandstone banks. One depicts an emu footprint and a circle reveals a meeting place and cooking site. Others reveal kangaroo paws.

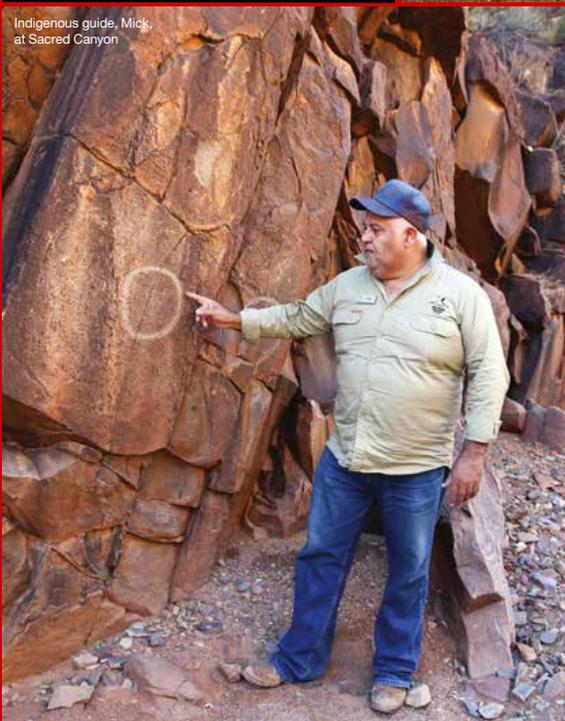
“This one represents akurra, the giant serpent that travelled from Arkaroola, creating the Flinders Ranges and Wilpena Pound,” says Mick. “Every landscape is a document!”

Jimmy proudly shares his mother's achievements. Lily Neville, wrote a dictionary of the Ngawarla language. And she's now writing songs to immortalise the vocabulary through lyrics.

Five scenery-filled hours driving north lead me through isolated hamlets. At the old copper-mining town of Blinman, I visit the cemetery. I find the



Indigenous guide, Mick, at Sacred Canyon



A sunset-soaked curtain of rain



Cycling around Mount Remarkable

headstone for explorer, William Kekwick, who was John McDouall Stuart's second-in-command during cross-continental expeditions.

Later, I pass Parachilna's Prairie Hotel, famous for its feral mixed grill (alas, it's closed). Open, is the sometimes closed by flood, red and rocky Parachilna Gorge, where towering river red gums shade hardy campers.

Late afternoon, kangaroos and emus break the endless horizon. Remarkable clouds – dense cotton balls with defined borders – hang static in the searing atmosphere.

Eventually, the landscape begins to dramatize with deep claret ramparts flanking gorge-bordered dirt tracks. A

drive Ridgetop Track wheezing up to Sillers Lookout – reaching for our wingtip. The permanent waterholes of Mitcham Creek flirt their reflections at the windows before Arkaroola's highest peak flashes its 3,120 feet crown. Over the Mawson Plateau, quartzite gives way to granite – so uranium rich, it naturally emits intense heat.

The jagged terrain then turns to desert. The world's longest dog fence at 5,400 kilometres, protecting South Australian livestock from dingo attacks, divides the window. The outback then changes again, when a world of 360 degree glistening white casts a sensational light.

Lake Frome, a 100 kilometre by 40 kilometre salt lake, is a gleaming

## “THE RUGGEDLY BEAUTIFUL CREVASSED LANDSCAPE REVEALS A TAPESTRY OF TEXTURED HILLS”

sign eventually welcomes me to The Vulkathunha–Gammon Ranges National Park in the northern Flinders Ranges.

### WILD BEAUTY

I table at iconic Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary in the oldest part of the Flinders Ranges, where granite terrain dates back 1,580 million years. The entrance is lined with displayed boulders (including silerete, dolomite and basalt), humorously signposted: 'Ark-Henge'.

I meet a mine of knowledge and inspiration: 61-year old Doug Sprigg, who continues the scientific legacy left by his illustrious father: Reg Sprigg. Doug himself also managed to leave a mark on history, successfully resisting uranium mining in the Arkaroola Range. He belts me into his plane for an aerial view of his ecotourism wilderness sanctuary.

As the Cessna Skywagon 207 leaves the dust to settle on the crumbled runway, I see immediately why wildlife-lovers, four-wheel drive thrill-seekers and amateur and professional geologists have bucket-listed Arkaroola as a travel dream. Sir Douglas Mawson described the area as one of world's greatest outdoor museums.

The ruggedly beautiful crevasSED landscape reveals a tapestry of textured hills, 1860s copper mines, precipitous hiking trails and that famous four-wheel

spectacle. We drop to 500 feet to see its salt-pan pocked with 20 metre-high sand dunes. It hasn't filled since European settlement, so exposes ancient, crystallised salt preserving a band of fossilised locusts.

Back on outback tracks, Doug drives me into the ranges to view the native orange tree: edible and in flower. Native pines flourish, as does the *acacia victoria* wattle with its canary yellow flowers. Mulga trees and native plums are in bloom – a sign of copper-rich soil. Doug points out *solanum ellipticum* (potato bush) and *eremophila alternifolia* (emu bush) with its gorgeously pink flower. “Mick Jagger's lips, we call this!” Doug quips, as he whistles to, and gets a reply from, a tiny grey strike-thrush.

We return through Barraranna Gorge, where a 300 feet cliff overlooks 800 million year-old ripple rock. In the waterhole are yabbies, which survive here (as in Lake Eyre) by laying eggs that only hatch when new water arrives. The red *litoria rubella* (desert tree frog) also thrives (Doug's daughter even discovered three new frog species in Mawson Plateau!). And high on ledges are several yellow-footed rock-wallabies. Their slender, angled features are stunning, with a hand-painted-like coat and ringed tail.

Rain has moistened Arkaroola, so I don't get to sit in a star-chair on one >>

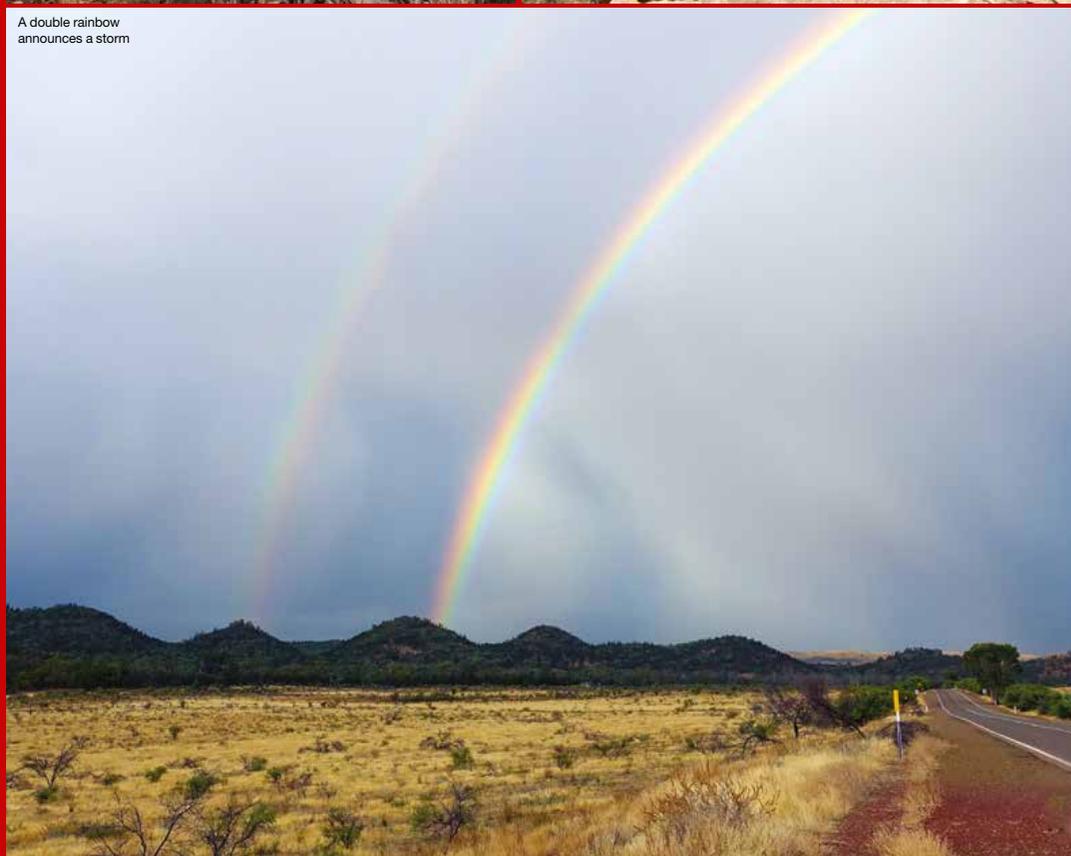


Entering Enorama Creek



Conquering the 480 metre Black Range Lookout climb

A double rainbow announces a storm



## DON'T MISS THE LOOKOUTS AND GORGES!

Alligator Gorge's orange face



Wangarra Lookout, frenzied with skinks and aromatic with native pines and curry bush, absorbs Wilpena Pound's vast amphitheatre from two balconies. Visit in spring to gaze down upon its cradle of wildflowers.

Black Range Lookout in Mount Remarkable National Park rises steeply from Mambrey Creek, offering expansive 480 metre-high views towards Spencer Gulf.

Chambers Gorge, northeast of Blinman, walks you along a creek lined by strikingly striped river red gums. Find the extensive cliff-carved Aboriginal petroglyphs and translate their meanings using the interpretive signboard.

Alligator Gorge at Mount Remarkable National Park, descends via a dizzying 250 steps, passing countless *xanthorrhoea* (grass trees). Incandescent orange cliffs lead to The Terraces, where ripple rock preserves underfoot. And at The Narrows, trees explode from the sheer rock-face. Can you touch each side of Alligator Gorge with outstretched arms?

# AD PAGE

of Doug's astronomical observatory tours. At 400 metres high, Arkaroola's elevation reduces visual wavelength interference.

"Ours is one of the best spots in the world from which to stargaze," Doug says. Chairs are fitted with telescopes connected to a computerised system that holds the live positioning of over 22,000 objects in space. Once one is selected, the chair automatically rotates to the exact spot and lets the viewer peer through its telescope. There are 10 star-chairs in the world: Doug owns three of them.

## FLINDERS' FINDS

I end my journey in the southern section of the Flinders Ranges tracing the footsteps of British explorer, Matthew Flinders. Entering the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden just north of Port Augusta, I meander through woodland habitat, sand dunes and saltbush-clumped plains dotted with inconspicuous bird hides concealing enthusiastic zoom lenses.

The plains unexpectedly stop at red cliffs to a sight of magnificent natural beauty. The head of the Spencer Gulf is layered with shorebird-filled mudflats, grey mangrove habitat, turquoise waters and an impenetrably blue sky resting upon the rusted shoulders of the ancient Flinders Ranges. It's at this spot in 1802 that Flinders stood and named the site during his 'voyage of discovery', and from where his botanist collected plant samples, now named: The Matthew Flinders Red Cliff Lookout.

The gardens also feature manicured floral landscapes from multiple desert environments alongside beautifully tended paths with informative signage and inventive sculptures.

Particularly impressive is the *eremophila* (emu bush) collection, of which dozens of varieties are on ornamental display. And the AridSmart garden is a marvellous floral collection sourced from hardy desert environments, indicating which plants survive unaided in various settings such as: coastal, desert, mountain etc.

The Bush Foods collection whets my appetite. So I reward my week hiking at the gardens' Bluebush Café, with a homemade, wild bush-strawberry cheesecake. I shouldn't reveal that it'll be followed by a native quandong and wild lime ice-cream, so keep that to yourself, please. What happens in the desert... 🇺🇲

Beside some outback announcements



The pink flower of the emu bush



Crossing dry creeks at Parachilna Gorge



Above, Xanthorrhoea at the Arid Lands Botanic Garden

Nick pops the bubbly





# Need to know... **Flinders Ranges**

## GETTING THERE

 Qantas ([www.qantas.com](http://www.qantas.com)) flies from London to Adelaide via Melbourne or Sydney from £795 to £1,010, depending on the time of year.

## GETTING AROUND

 The Flinders Ranges is remote desert country, requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle in many parts. Hire a car from Adelaide Airport. You can also view its website ([www.adelaideairport.com.au](http://www.adelaideairport.com.au)) to explore other transport options.

## CLIMATE

 The northern Flinders Ranges experience hot summer days in the high 30s with occasional monsoonal rains. The southern section enjoys slightly cooler summer temperatures, receiving rain mainly during winter when nights can be chilly. April to October is best for hiking, with sunscreen, hat and water, essential year-round..

## FURTHER INFO

 Visit [www.flindersranges.com](http://www.flindersranges.com) for more information about the Flinders Ranges.



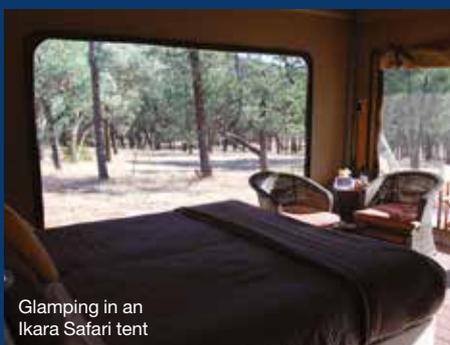
An Ikara Safari Camp tent



Lake Eyre in flood



Emily's Bistro in Quorn



Glamping in an Ikara Safari tent

31°C	31°C	27°C	23°C	17°C	13°C	12°C	14°C	19°C	23°C	26°C	26°C
JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC

## globetrotter

**SLEEP** Mount Remarkable Hotel in Melrose ([www.mtremarkablehotel.com](http://www.mtremarkablehotel.com)) offers cosy, recently-renovated rooms, with air-conditioning, TV, fridge and ensuite bathrooms. From A\$90 (£44) per night.

**EAT** Emily's Bistro and Bakery in Quorn (0061 8 8648 6940) is housed within the old Great Northern Emporium, which sold everything from hosiery to Marmite. The homemade quandong pie is the must-order for afternoon tea.

**DO** Hire a mountain bike from Over the Edge in Melrose ([www.otesports.com/locations/melrose](http://www.otesports.com/locations/melrose)), home to the June Fat Tyre Festival. Cycle 100 kilometres of tracks around Mount Remarkable at the heart of the Mawson Trail.

## family

**SLEEP** The three-bedroom Wallaby Cottage at Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary ([www.arkaroola.com.au](http://www.arkaroola.com.au)) is super-spacious with a fully-equipped kitchen. Grounds feature an outdoor pool, hiking trails and wild rock-wallabies! From A\$175 (£86) per night.

**EAT** Captain Starlight Restaurant ([www.wilpenapound.com.au](http://www.wilpenapound.com.au)) at Wilpena Pound Resort offers bush food starter plates for the brave (croc, 'roo and emu), and staple favourites for those in training.

**DO** Travel through the Tunnel of Time at the Wadlata Outback Centre in Port Augusta ([www.wadlata.sa.gov.au](http://www.wadlata.sa.gov.au)). This museum features fossils, pioneer stories, bush-tucker displays, Ghan memorabilia and Royal Flying Doctors equipment. Entry is A\$20.50 (£10).

## indulgence

**SLEEP** Ikara Safari Camp's ([www.ikarasafaricamp.com.au](http://www.ikarasafaricamp.com.au)) stylish tents look onto Wilpena Pound. Features include a king-size bed, ensuite bathroom and air-conditioning. Openable fly-screened walls offer stargazing by night, and wildlife-watching come sunrise. From A\$298 (£146) per night (including breakfast).

**EAT** The Native Pine Restaurant at Arkaroola ([www.arkaroola.com.au](http://www.arkaroola.com.au)) is filled with authentic pioneer décor: dingo traps, gas lamps, stirrups and branding rods. Try the slow-roasted lamb shoulder!

**DO** Air Wilpena ([www.airwilpena.com.au](http://www.airwilpena.com.au)) run spectacular six-hour air safaris to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. From A\$1,025 (£502), including lunch at William Creek Hotel.