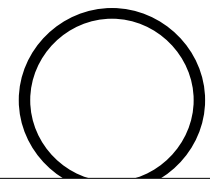


By Trent Dalton

# WHERE EAGLES SOAR

A heli-hike to the peak of an ancient mountain range

Photography Justine Walpole



ne big blue dot in the sky above the Flinders Ranges and two small brown dots pulling away from it. The blue dot is us in the helicopter flying over Wilpena Pound, that

awe-inspiring love triangle formed by western and eastern quartzite ranges meeting a southern bluff knockout in the middle to create the only natural wonder on this continent that could challenge that famous red rock further north in a staring contest. Earth's belly button. An outie and an innie all at once. A 17km-long, 8km-wide holy bowl. Crater-shaped and alien, deeper than reason, bigger than your own imagination. "Place of bent fingers," said the walkers who got here 60,000 years ago. They saw a cupped hand in these glorious ranges. They saw giving and receiving. Breathe it in. Receive this place. The whole wild lot of it.

The brown dots are two wedge-tailed eagles, the owners of this sky, the stars of this show. They should be given names because they're so vital to this story. Margot and Robbie, soaring toward the Elder Range, Wilpena's mighty neighbour that lies across this mystical part of red earth South Australia like a giant chameleon that's been dead for 600 million years but can still somehow change its colour – fire-red, fire-yellow, orange, mauve, purple, pink – according to the height of the sun. "That's where we'll land," says Joe the pilot, pointing to a flat and circular red outcrop of earth the size of a putting green, 800m up the craggy wall of the Elder.

No door on my left side of the helicopter. Better for photographs, Joe says. In this place of bent fingers, my own, sweaty and stiff, grip the passenger seat as the helicopter takes a sharp diving arc left towards the Elder Range because we're going for a walk. A heli-hike. Be back in a jiffy. Don't put the kettle on. We might never come back.

Joe sticks the landing and we scamper beyond the reach of the spinning rotor blades. The helicopter rises back up, pushing red dust across our day packs filled mostly with water. Then the silence. Six hundred million years of no man's land quiet. Our guide, a ginger-haired recreationalist, naturalist and botanist named Charlie Eager, looks up to the top of



**Wonder:** guide Charlie Eager looks across Wilpena Pound

the Elder Range, left, right, across the face of a rock wall that climbs 200m vertically to a summit we can't yet see. I figure he's searching for our trail. A gentle upward walking path, a staircase even, hard to see from the sky, that must meander gradually to our prized summit. Wait, something's not right.

"There are no trails?" I ask.

"No," Charlie says. "The bushes are completely untouched." Trails defeat the purpose. This is not human territory. This is the domain of eagles and black kites and rock wallabies. This is cloud territory. Here's how you walk it. Find a rock, a big grey chunk of quartzite. Assess the rock's stability. Step up onto that rock then find another of similar stability and proceed with care. Repeat 2000 times.

"Just take your time," Charlie says. "Observe your footings. No rush." The colours of the rock will change as you ascend. "We're gonna leave this bonny sandstone layer and start walking up on this Rawnsley quartzite," Charlie says, light in his eyes. "There's 10 million years of time difference as we're about to cross just these few metres."

Time built all this. Time plus pressure plus heat. Great oceans rose and fell and rose again and fell again. Each sedimentary layer left along the way brought a new miracle of colour and then, because the heavens must have also needed to see all this magic at play, time pushed all that rock one kilometre into the sky and into the realms of dreaming.

It was here, in these epic ranges, that scientists discovered fossils of the earliest known multi-cellular animal life on Earth. "A golden spike," Charlie says. That's the term for a new rung in the ladder of geological time. "A different time band in the history of life and the world," he says. "That spike was laid here in the Flinders Ranges."

Deep time animals – deep time life – crawling through the microbial sludge in that old sea floor. So it's good to feel all these rocks. It's good to haul yourself up and across them to your destination. The wonder of it all only comes from walking it. You feel the bands of time you're crossing and you suddenly see how young an ancient tree can seem in a story that's 635 million years old. And then the wind – even older than the rocks – blows against the sweat on your back and you can't be sure if the chill down your spine is coming from the outside or the inside.

When we find a brief animal path, we take it; follow a thousand rock wallabies that have come before us through scrub that has grown in the

damp cracks and deep holes between the rocks and the ever-towering range wall.

Follow your nose. Follow the person in front. If you hear a loud "roooooocck!", that means a boulder has come unstuck and is most likely rolling toward you so assume the brace position or scamper for your life, whatever works. It's all about adaptation. This whole fragile range exists on opportunism. Native birds and bees and wattles and hopbushes all surviving on brief opportune moments of sunshine and water; minuscule finds of food. This is a landscape so badass that the local marsupials evolved to turn their urea into saliva.

Slowly, the human walker adapts to it all, too. No phones. No tall buildings for about 455km. Just rock, plant, sky and the range wall that never ends. You soon realise there are natural handrails to be found all the way up. Perfectly flat rock holds that jut out like vinyl records loosened from their sleeves; grass trees that stand like frozen emus with grass shoots so strong you can grab a handful in your fist and pull yourself up another tricky rock face. And then you have your moment, your brief opportune moment where you receive everything you need. "There they are," says Charlie, tilting his head to the sun. Margot and Robbie, dear glorious wedgies.

"Are they following us?"

"Maybe," he says. They're playing, wings outstretched, floating in a sweetspot thermal, an updraft of warm air that allows the eagles to soar effortlessly in sweeping, triumphant circles; less a show of territorial ownership than a brag about their own genius.

One more push to the summit, a 30m vertical climb through a crack in the range wall. "If anyone needs it, I do have a little rope," Charlie says. Heads shake. We've got this. "I'll go up first," Charlie says. "Just give each other a good bit of space, mainly because there's some decent size loose rocks. Wait until the person in front is at the top before anyone comes around the bottom, in case we do kick anything off."

Heave, haul, reach, lift, shuffle left, tip-toe right, scale, climb, climb, climb. And breathe. Summit air so pure and high it makes ideas explode in your brain. New thinking. New feeling. Same ol' inadequate wording.

"Whoa!"

A view that makes you dizzy because you keep spinning around to drink all 360 degrees of it in. Wilpena Pound in all its majesty; the Chase Range to our right; a glowing pure white beam of



**Vast:** scenes around Arkaba; homestead; red-capped robin



light behind us in the distance – the endless and arid wastelands of South Australia's great salt lakes. Creek lines and plateaus. Deep valleys of casuarina and cypress pine. And Margot and Robbie circling above it all.

"Just over that hill way down there," Charlie says. "The homestead."

**Pure luxury in the deep outback. A former** sheep farming homestead set in 24,000ha of fragile earth. A swimming pool. A library and a fireplace and a selection of fine books and finer whisky. Arkaba Homestead is where we've been returning each night from our epic walks. Built in 1851, room for 10 guests and one bottomless fridge of South Australian wine. We've been here for three days, returning home from sunset field walks spotting the 300 bird species that exist in the region to be greeted by unfailingly polite staff members holding warm refresher towels and metal trays of gin and tonics infused with bush lemons. We've been waking to sunrise safari tours, spotting kangaroos and emus and shingleback lizards, and returning to cooked gourmet breakfasts of house-smoked streaky bacon and fresh pancakes. We've been drinking Clare Valley shiraz and staring at Venus in the night sky, glowing like the glazed muntries (native cranberries) scattered across our twice-cooked Berkshire pork belly and port wine braised radicchio. Mussels and salad for lunch. Garfish for lunch. Beef cheeks for dinner. Roasted spatchcock for dinner.

It was 2009 when the Wild Bush Luxury travel group bought Arkaba. It was, then, a desolate landscape choking on 150 years of hoof-footed animal farming that was completely at odds with the land's ancient fragility. Feral animals and invasive weeds had turned parts of it to barren wasteland. Some 24 of the 58 known native mammals in the region have become locally extinct. One of the saddest days of Arkaba guide Charlie Eager's life was when he cut open a feral cat to find a full-grown brown snake inside. Now a decade of relentless sheep removal and native vegetation rehabilitation programs have brought life back to the land. Foxes are down and the recovered leafless cherry bushes are up. The plants came back and the robins and finches and frogs and a million opportune moments came back with them.

I woke last night to a lightning storm. I switched on my bedroom lamp, opened the old homestead doors to the veranda, folded my arms

across my chest and walked briefly into the arid outback flatland at 2am in my pyjamas as the total darkness of the surrounding ranges was lit up in electric silver and purple with every violent flash of thunder and lightning. Just a moment, an unforgettable moment in the middle of nowhere and everywhere.

And here's another moment now. Charlie Eager looks at his watch. "We've made good time," he says, turning his head to the real range summit to our right, a towering quartzite peak shaped like the bow of the *Titanic* emerging from the Atlantic on an upward incline.

"You think we can climb that?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Charlie, with not a hint of doubt. "Us?" I check again. "Up... there?"

"Sure," Charlie says.

And that's the thing about this Arkaba walk. It takes you to places beyond your thinking. On the Australian Walking Track Grading System – which ranks trails from Grade 1 ("no experience required, suitable for assisted wheelchair users") to Grade 5 ("very rough, very steep and unmarked") – this Elder Range heli-hike would be a solid five. But it's achievable for anyone with a decent pair of walking boots, an average-to-good level of fitness and a healthy thirst for adventure.

Assess a rock's stability. Climb onto that rock. Repeat 2000 times. When you come to a thick wall of mallee trees, you gently beat a path through it. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot. You do this so many times that it becomes hypnotic, transcendent even. Your hearing sharpens, your smell sharpens, your sight focuses on the native bees, on the thorns in the bushes, on the sap running from trees that the indigenous people used to fix barbs to their spears.

And then you come to the sloping rock face shaped like the bow of the *Titanic* that takes you to the peak of the range and you scurry up that face triumphantly and quickly because you want to see what it all looks like from up so high and what you see are the eagles. You see Margot and Robbie, circling in those thermal updrafts. Except this time, you're up so high that it is you looking down on those birds. In this one little opportune moment, the sky belongs to you. ●

Helicopter safari package, including four nights at Arkaba Homestead, \$5275 per person twin-share, minimum two people. Safaris run Mar-Oct; [arkabaconservancy.com](http://arkabaconservancy.com)