

Fabulous FLINDERS RANGES

DATES: 30 AUG – 15 SEPT, 2015



Recently the Duffy's joined Taylor's Terrific Tours for a trip to the Flinders Ranges. We had an excellent time and the weather and wildflowers were perfect as the South Australian north had had a very wet winter and there was lots of green grass and wildflowers blooming.

We covered many ruined and abandoned settlements (Farina township), Aboriginal ochre pits (part of a great trading network), Arkaroola Mt Painter Wildlife Sanctuary, the villages of Blinman and Parachilna, several sites of Aboriginal rock carvings and paintings, and of course, Wilpena Pound.

What do you need to get the most out of a Flinders Ranges trip?

First of all, a bit more time - we spent two weeks. There will always be more bushwalks, and other places to visit that you just don't have time for. Along the way pick up brochures, maps as well as guides for walks and tours. Also, have a look at the SA Department of State Development website. They have geological guides to the Flinders Ranges at reasonable prices (\$15-\$30).

It's the Flinders Ranges - aesthetically rugged and beautiful, but be prepared to take an interest in geology. These are some of the most ancient mountains on earth and contain Ediacaran fossil beds. Unfortunately there is no entry the actual fossil beds, but there are sample displays in some places. These are the fossils of the first known animal life forms. There are also many exposed rocks of even older mountains. The Brachina Gorge

Aboriginal initiation engraving



Copper smelter - Arkaroola



has an excellent tour with marked stops and explanatory boards of different rock formations of almost all the ages of the earth. There is also a nice attractive camping ground, (with toilets) for self-sufficient campers.

In the 19th century, governments and graziers ignored the advice of the then Surveyor General Goyder on environmental sustainability. Feral goats, rabbits, foxes and cats were introduced causing a widespread environmental disaster. Operation Bounceback, a cooperative scheme involving the National Parks and land owners, is aimed at controlling these pests, restoring vegetation and native animal habitat and seems to be having some success. For example, 200,000 goats have been removed in the last 10 years.

Getting Around

All the roads are very good with bitumen road to Blinman going north. All the roads that were gravel were well made and maintained and easy to drive along, including for caravans. The Birdsville Track is a bit rough in places but is essentially a road now. Fuel was also readily available.

Accommodation

We took our caravans. The caravan parks went from OK to very good (Wilpena Pound). We also used a couple of campgrounds (Parachilna village – pretty poor, Parachilna Gorge (quite nice – no toilets) and Brachina Gorge (Trezina Campground – very nice).

But there are many, many camping and visiting places in the Flinders Ranges. A number of stations provide camping facilities and four wheel drive opportunities. Google "station stays flinders ranges" or try www.stationstayssa.com.au. Also, the SA National Parks sells a camping pass/national parks pass online which is excellent value for money. We stayed at Merna Mora Station, on the west side of the Ranges for two nights. A number of people we spoke to recommended Rawnsley Park Station as being excellent.

If you are going in September and October you should probably book ahead. We couldn't get into Willow Springs Station campground, but we were lucky enough to get 4 nights at Wilpena, which was close to full the nights we were there. And this was NOT school holidays.

August, September and October are probably the best time to go. It's spring, with a bit of luck you'll get to see wildflowers, the weather is milder but not yet hot.

Four Wheel Driving

There are no real 4WD tracks open to the public in the National Parks. There are private 4WD tracks on station properties, for which you pay a fee. The HEMA Flinders Ranges map shows some of them, but not all by any means.

We picked two, the Willow Springs Skytrek (east side of the Ranges) and one on Merna Mora Station (west side of the ranges). Both were run on the same format. The track goes around the remote area of the property, and includes a significant portion of rugged driving. You will need a high clearance, low range 4WD, but the level of skill from the TLCC Basic 4WD course is adequate. You are provided with a mud map and a set of notes, and gate keys. There are markers at points of interest along the track and the notes have an explanatory paragraph on

the item. These two were both well done and made for nice, fun days out. The Duffy's liked Skytrek best, but I think the Taylor's preferred the Merna Mora track.

Arkaroola

Arkaroola was established in the late 1960's and was one of the first eco tourism resorts in Australia. It is a very interesting place geologically and has extremely ancient rocks. Ranges 12km long display the sedimentary layers and folds that were once 12 km deep. This part of Australia was once connected to Canada & USA.

You need to take the Ridgetop Tour. This is a very uncomfortable ride on longways bench seats on the back of a Toyota ute, but the track is "closed to public vehicles" so this is the only way you can do it. You are rewarded with a good commentary by the driver, fantastic views of the mountains and at the end, from the very high Sillers Lookout, views eastwards over Lake Frome and the plains.

Ken and Sue took a scenic flight. This was great. The pilot was Doug Sprigg, co-owner of the resort, and extremely knowledgeable geologist and local historian. Doug also gives everyone a free and very interesting morning lecture on the geology of Arkaroola.

There are also a number of self-drive trips and bush walks for which the resort provides "mudmaps" and notes, as well as drop off and/or pick up for some of the walks. We did the Acacia Ridge walk which was a bit rugged, but great views. We were nearly blown off the ridge by a fierce gale. It was so windy, when we got back to our caravans, we found most other guests had packed up and left while campers were decamping to the motel.

You can stay in the caravan park (non-powered and powered and watered sites), amenities block (OK showers) and motel



Bushwalk in Wilpena Pound



The 4WD track at Merna Morna



On top of Skytrek

Sunset view of the Ranges



Water crossing Parachilna Gorge



Stockman's hut on Skytreck

accommodation. There is also a restaurant – not able to comment on its quality.

I think you should stay several days.

Parachilna and the Prairie Hotel – The Feral Feast (camel, emu and kangaroo) at the hotel restaurant is yummy and a great fun night, but book ahead as they are often busy. The old school yard is the “campground”. Tolerable for one night so you don't have to drive anywhere after dining at the pub. Otherwise, other places are better.

Blinman is worth a stop to take the tour of the old copper mine. This is also popular, so ring ahead and check availability. It was very good, but don't go if you are claustrophobic.

Flinders Ranges National Park, including Brachina Gorge & Wilpena Pound

Excellent walking tracks of varying lengths and difficulties, a shuttle bus (limited service) takes you some of the way on the first part of the Wilpena Pound walks. Note, you can only see the inside of Wilpena Pound by walking in or taking scenic flights. There are no drives or lookouts that can be reached by driving. The 18km Bridle Gap walk across the floor of the Pound then up the steep side gave a fantastic view of the next range of mountains. Excellent!

Accommodation – Brachina Gorge, attractive campgrounds with drop toilets for self-sufficient campers. Wilpena Pound, lovely caravan park and campground with full amenities block as well as a motel and restaurant.

Food – Fresh food restocking is very limited. From the south, stock up as much as you can at the IGA at Quorn (not Hawker), from the north use the supermarket at Leigh Creek. Other places have extremely limited to no supplies of any fresh produce but some supplies of frozen bread, meat and very small range of grocery. You won't starve, but it's very limited.

Aboriginal Art Sites

We visited three rock carving sites. The Chambers Gorge site was down a long side track but was still easily managed with our caravans with a longish (1hr?) walk from the end of the track. Even if you aren't interested in Aboriginal rock art, it is still a nice walk, along an attractive gorge. The Sacred Canyon walk was short, involved a bit of a rock scramble, but we couldn't find a lot of the art work. Arkaroo Rock is a mid length walk on a clear well marked track, about 2 hours all up with fantastic views and a fantastic rock art wall. Some rock carvings are pristine, while others are suffer from graffiti. The ochre pits near Lyndhurst are spectacular. The Arabunna Aboriginal Museum in Marree is also interesting.

Summary

The Flinders Ranges is a great and interesting place to spend a holiday. It has intellectual education of very ancient earth formations, environmental problems and solutions, spectacular scenery, has lots of remnants of human occupation of historical interest and a big variety of accommodation, from motels to campgrounds and caravan parks, as well as fun 4WD tracks.

Sue Duffy