

SUMMARY OF THE FLINDERS RANGES – OUTBACK TOUR

28 October – 3 November 2025

Organised by the RGSSA Head of Travel, Joc Schmiechen, the seven-day tour of the Flinders Ranges and Outback was a packed, well organised, and stimulating tour. It was a credit to Joc's attention to detail and his vast range of contacts throughout the area.

We travelled on a 4WD coach from Australian Pacific Touring (APT) with an excellent, experienced and well-informed driver, Kym Norris, who shared the commentary with Joc. There were 24 on the tour including one from our Queensland sister organisation.

Day 1

We travelled from the Franklin Street bus depot up to Rawnsley Park Station, south of Wilpena Pound, stopping at Clare and then at the Craddock Hotel for lunch. Arriving in the Flinders we were struck by the flies, but Joc had warned us! Before dinner we travelled to the nearby Pugilist Hill (named after a fight that occurred between two station hands) and had champers and canapés while watching the sunset. A magical scene. A full on two course dinner followed at the Woolshed Restaurant at Rawnsley Park.



Ancient wagon at Rawnsley Park



Cameras lined up for sunset at Pugilist Hill



Wilpena Pound from Pugilist Hill



Chase Range at sunset from Pugilist Hill

Day 2

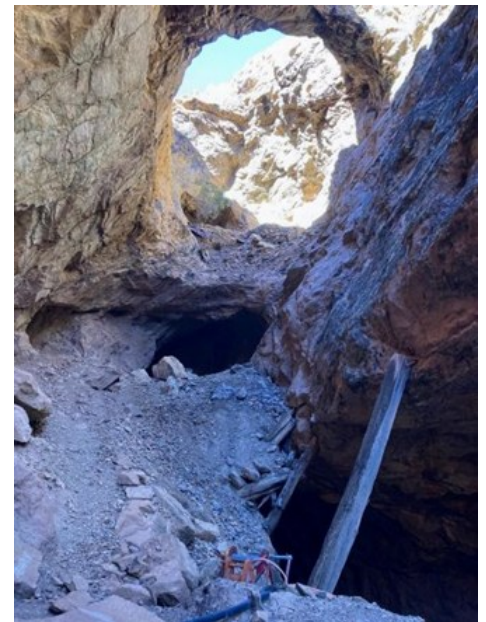
We had to leave Rawnsley Park early to reach Blinman by 9 am to take tours of the mines there. On the way we stopped at Hucks Lookout with its excellent views back over the Wilpena ramparts. Joc explained the Adnyamathanha creation story of the pound by two giant Arkaroo serpents whose bodies formed the ramparts of the pound wall, with the female serpent head being St Marys Peak.

At Blinman we split into two parties to view part of the worked-out Blinman Mines which operated from 1862 to 1907, after extracting 10,000 tonnes of copper from 200,000 tonnes of ore. The conditions in which the miners worked would give a modern day OHS officer the horrors. Despite the arduous underground conditions only 12 lives were lost because the Welsh miners only worked in close knit family groups, very carefully looking after each member. The main shaft dropped 165 metres with seven horizontal tunnels which followed copper outcrops. Large cavities were created in the mine where all the orebody was removed.

Our underground guide, Rehanna Coulthard, an Adnyamathanha woman, was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide. Appropriately Adnyamathanha means “rock people”.



St Marys Peak and Wilpena Pound from Hucks Lookout



Blinman Mine – the entire orebody was mined

Following lunch at the Blinman Hotel, we headed west through the Parachilna Gorge cutting through the Heysen Range and onto the Lake Torrens plain to arrive at Nilpena Station with the world-famous Ediacara fossil beds. These were some of the earliest multicellular life forms dating back 540 to 635 million years ago. They were discovered by the geologist, Reg Sprigg in 1946 who later became the owner of Arkaroola Station. David Attenborough filmed the site and has described it as one of his favourite places on Earth. The area is part of the World Heritage bid for the Flinders Ranges. It has now been acknowledged as a distinct geological period, the Ediacaran Period. The visitor centre has a very sophisticated dynamic display of the history of the fossils. The short walk to the actual exposed fossil sheets in cool conditions was expertly interpreted by our guides Kym Geue and Declan and it is a world class experience.



Group viewing the fossil bed



Diagram of the fossils

From Ediacara we drove a short way to the town of Leigh Creek, now just a shadow of what it had been when its population of 3,000 worked in the open-cut brown coal mines which closed in 2015. The population of the town is now only 70.

Day 3

We drove through to Arkaroola, stopping en route at Copley to collect quandong pies and then on to the Aboriginal tourism complex at Iga Warta. This was established by the Coulthard brothers Vince, Cliff and Terry and their families in the 1980s. From here we visited an ancient rock painting site at Malki, in a cave overlooking a gorge, with Vincent our Adnyamathanha guide.



Group in front of the Malki cave with paintings



Welcome to Iga Warta – native orange



Maddie explaining native foods to the group

This was followed by an excellent BBQ lunch with the homemade damper bread and kangaroo ragout a stand out. Terry Coulthard who is the mainstay now running Iga Warta was unable to meet us, having to go to Pt Augusta for medical appointments. The lack of succession from the younger family members is a perennial issue for small family tourism enterprises and often more acute in Aboriginal communities. At Iga Warta a travelling family Kylie, Josh and daughter Maddie had spent the last 7 months there helping out and caretaking the operation. Maddie, a 12 year, took us on a tour of the native food garden and told us about the plants, both the botanical and cultural details. She had been well taught by elder Terry and did an outstanding interpretation. Leaving Iga Warta, we then drove through Italowie Gorge and past the Gammon Ranges Vulkathunha National Park to Arkaroola where we stayed two nights. In the evening, many in the group watched the Cosmos night sky show on a large screen with Doug Sprigg, the owner of the Arkaroola and a keen astronomer, working the computer connecting to his four large telescopes located strategically around the resort.

Day 4

At 8 am we piled into three Toyota 4WD troop carriers taking us on the famous Ridge Top Tour, a very rugged trip of steep tracks with sheer drops on the sides amid spectacular landscapes. It didn't pay to look down. We had several photo stops en route and finally arrived at the top of Sillers Lookout from where we viewed the Yudnamutana Gorge and the Lake Frome plains beyond. Around us was Mount Painter, Mount Gee and to the north, the Freeling Heights. Tracks had been bulldozed over the ranges in the late 1960s by Exoil in search of uranium but because uranium is soluble, much of it ended up in deposits under the plains at Beverley where it has been extracted using in-situ leaching. Only a mining exploration project could provide the resources to bulldoze these tracks along hairline ridge crests. Three bulldozers were lost in the process, and a drilling rig was mounted on the body of a Centurion Tank to get to some of the most difficult locations. There is no equivalent to this as a tourism experience in Australia and it was rated by most as one of the tour highlights. We arrived back at Arkaroola for lunch and had a relaxing afternoon. Watching the Yellow Tail Rock Wallabies at dusk feeding was an excellent pre-dinner prelude.



Steep tracks for the troop carrier



Group on top of Sillers Lookout, Arkaroola



The country with bulldozed tracks



One of Doug Sprigg's four telescopes at Arkaroola

Day 5

We left Arkaroola and drove back past the Gammons Vulkathunha National Park and Iga Warta to Copley and then visited the Lyndhurst Ochre Pits which were a very important source of ochre, traded far and wide for ceremonial use between First Nations groups. The natural erosion of the mineralised cliffs had created a spectacular backdrop for the various coloured ochres gathered from here.

On to Farina, an outback ghost town abandoned in the early 1970s with many remnant stone ruins. In recent years volunteer groups have stabilised many of the building ruins and provided extensive interpretive signage. One of these, the town bakery, now operates for several months a year with volunteer bakers coming from all over Australia, making this a highlight stopover for travellers heading north and south. We wandered around the town which is well sign-posted with information about the buildings and history.



Lyndhurst Ochre Pits



Farina vehicle in need of restoration!

We then drove on to Maree, staying at the hotel, and in the afternoon, visiting the Arabana Peoples Centre in the town with an elder, Reg Dodd, talking about the artefacts and local history. Reg now in his eighties has also been a consummate country and western musician and he treated a number of the group to an impromptu performance.

Day 6

Half the group went for an early morning flight over the flooded Lake Eyre and after breakfast, we headed west to Lake Eyre South viewpoint along the Oodnadatta Track. The much heralded floods had not reached Lake Eyre South and may not make it. Originally, we were to go down the Borefield Road to Roxby Downs and Andamooka but because of rain the previous week, it was closed to vehicles over 3 tonnes. We therefore returned to Maree for lunch and then went south to Hawker for the night. It rained most of the way.



Lake Eyre in flood



Marree Man



Day 7

We left Hawker and drove south visiting the Kanyaka ruins and graveyard. In its heyday this was the largest sheep run in the north, established in 1852 by Hugh Proby, son of the Earl of Crayford in Scotland. Tragically some four months later he was drowned in the flooded Willochra Creek. The manager, John Phillips, working for the subsequent owners proceeded to build the array of impressive stone buildings and woolshed that housed 70 families. A series of severe droughts brought the enterprise to ruin and it was abandoned in the 1880s. Today its impressive ruins are a stark testament to the 'boom and bust' cycles of the outback that cruelled many a farming and grazing venture.



Kanyaka ruins



Graves at Kanyaka

On then to Quorn for the all-important coffee, and then to Port Augusta and the Arid Lands Botanic Garden for lunch amid drizzle. Despite the inclement weather this did not deter most from doing a guided tour of the native plants with local volunteer guides. Following lunch, we then drove south to Adelaide with squalls of rain most of the way and spectacular cloud formations, rainbows and shafts of light to entertain us, arriving at Franklin Street around 6 pm after a hectic but satisfying tour.



Arid Lands Botanic Garden guide Marion



Some of the group in the Arid Lands Botanic Garden.



Red Cliffs at the head of Spencer Gulf. Matthew Flinders climbed these cliffs in 1802 to view the Flinders Ranges



Flinders Ranges from the head of Spencer Gulf

Summary prepared by Andrew Lothian and Joc Schmiechen. Photos by Andrew Lothian, Joc Schmiechen, Rob Fowler and Jane Linn.