

Respecting your Elders

Robert Lamp describes a two- or three-day walk exploring the ancient Elder Range while climbing Mt Aleck in South Australia's Flinders Ranges

WALKING THROUGH SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S FLINDERS RANGES YOU ARE always aware of being in an ancient land. Formed from the compressed sediments of a vanished seabed, the rock strata of the ranges were thrust skyward over millennia by the drift of the earth's crust, then eroded by the sun and the outback wind.

This is an old place even within the limited span of humanity. At the cave site of Yourambulla, half an hour's drive south of the start of this walk, the Andnyamartha left cave paintings at a point commanding sweeping views of the land—images of prey, animals, initiation circles, hand prints and abstract patterns cover the overhanging walls. If you sit quietly, listening to the wind through the surrounding pines, and watch the cloud shadows pass over the empty hills, it is easy to feel a connection with the people who made these images. Their choice of this place suggests an appreciation of beauty very close to our own, separated by 40 000 years.

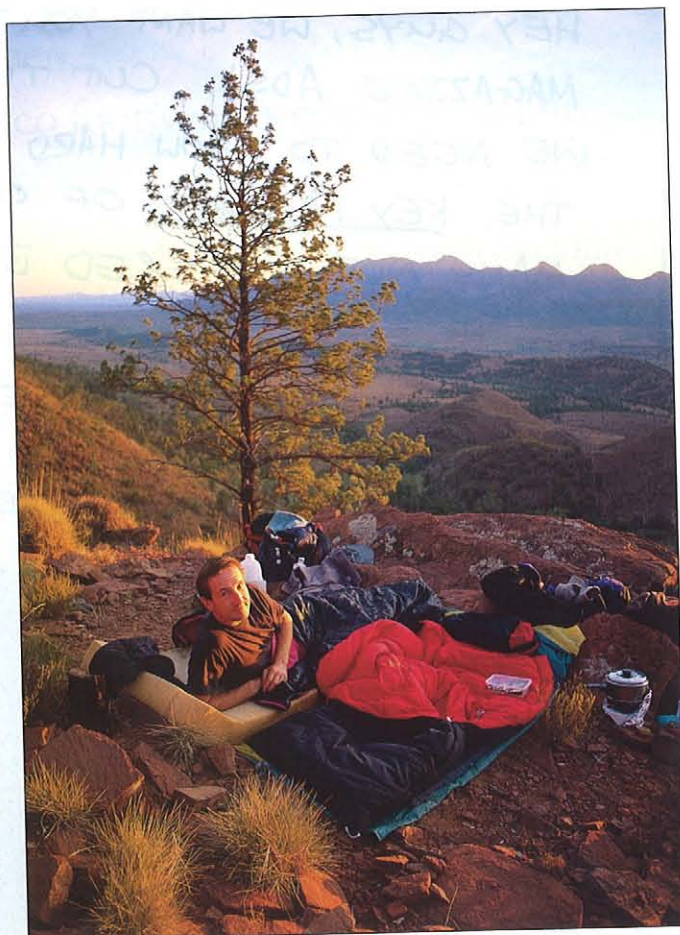
We may share a common sensibility with the Andnyamartha, but we don't see the same landscape. Despite its evident age this is a fragile place; in only a century, overgrazing across the north-west pastoral district has left little but stubble, saltbush and bare, rounded hills. In contrast to the grazing country, the original vegetation has been preserved in the ranges, where eucalyptus scrub, acacia, casuarina and pine thrive on slopes too steep and remote for sheep and cattle. Twisted red gums flourish in the major creeks, interspersed with the tall, elegant forms of pale sugar gums. The dry, open faces of the hillsides are dotted with two of the hardiest plants in nature: needle-pointed spinifex and the droughtproof, fire-resistant, long-lived yacca. Either of these two tough customers would be a suitable emblem for this unforgiving country.

When to go

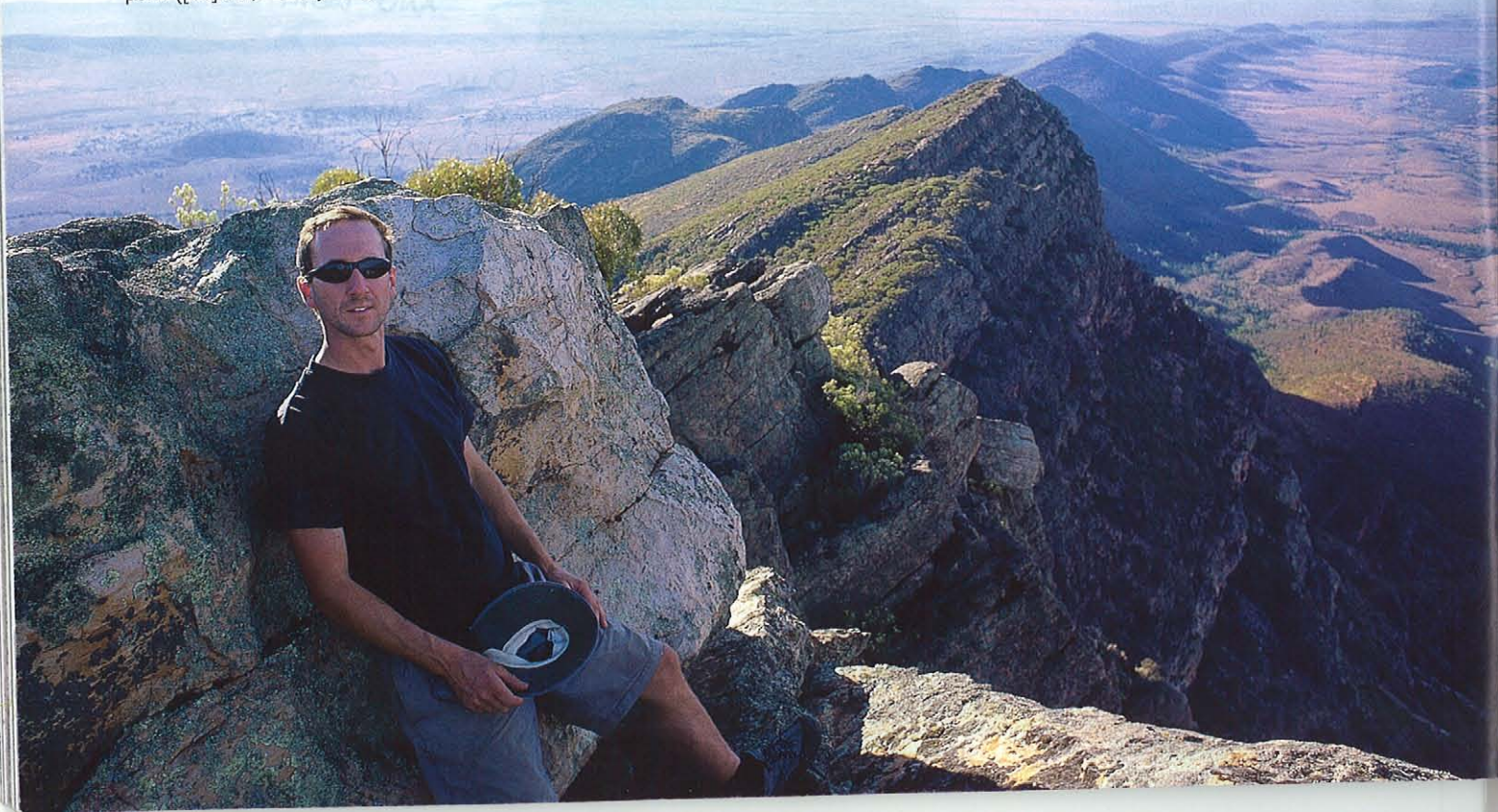
From May to October the daytime temperature is usually comfortably below 30°C; at night it is close to 0°C. The Heysen Trail, which provides the access route for this walk, is closed from 1 November to 30 April every year because of fire risk.

Safety

Water is the key consideration. Even in winter you cannot rely on local water supplies, so consult the National Parks & Wildlife Service at Wilpena ([08] 8648 4244) for general information. You should call Arkaba



A panoramic setting for a camp: waking to the sunrise over Moralana valley. Below, Phil Tindale on the summit ridge of the Elder Range. Both photos by the author



Station ([08] 8648 4195) to get permission to camp along the section of the Heysen Trail which runs through their property at the base of the Elder Range. The climb of Mt Aleck itself is very tough in places. Under no circumstances should you walk alone, or with inadequate water, food or sun protection.

Map

The SA Department of Lands *Moralana* 1:50 000 sheet covers the Elder Range and the area traversed by the Heysen Trail in this region.

Further reading

Terry Lavender's lovingly written *The Heysen Trail—A Walker's Guide* (Bookends, Adelaide, 2000) covers the access track for the walk.

The walk at a glance

Grade	Hard
Length	Two to three days
Distance	45–50 kilometres
Type	Semi-arid mountain terrain, no established tracks on the climb
Region	Flinders Ranges, South Australia
Nearest town	Hawker
Start, finish	Moralana Scenic Drive
Best time	May to August
Special points	You must be able to navigate and have the experience to plan and safely complete a difficult walk through remote, arid country. Fire restrictions apply from 1 December to 1 March

Access

The Flinders Ranges are five hours north of Adelaide on Highway 32. At Quorn, take the right-hand fork towards Hawker. Heading north on this stretch of bitumen, the jagged blue line of the Elder Range will rise on the horizon, with the southern wall of Wilpena Pound just behind. The Yourambulla turn-off is signposted on the left along this section of road. At Hawker, take the Wilpena road for 29 kilometres until you cross Eating House Creek. The Moralana Scenic Drive (the vestige of a nineteenth-century cattle drive) is signposted on your left. Look for a red track marker 15 kilometres from the turn-off, where the Heysen Trail intersects Moralana Drive.

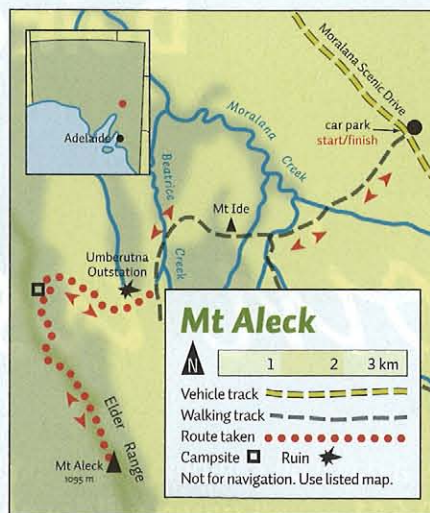
The walk

From the roadside the Elder Range is laid out to the west, a daunting mountain wall rising

high above the intervening hills. Mt Aleck is the central high point on the razor-back summit ridge.

Follow the Heysen Trail from the roadside car park over a stile and through sparse thickets of kangaroo thorn. The track joins a station track that crosses Moralana Creek, skirts south of conical Mt Ide, and passes a stockyard and bore. The track curves first north, then west, before turning south to a second fence and another stile. Follow the markers through scattered native pines to Umberutna Outstation. The old stockman's quarters have fallen into ruin: two piles of stone beside the banks of a dry creek are all that remains.

Leave the Heysen Trail and head south-west from Umberutna across the open rolling ground towards the southern end of a long hummock (GR 598981) that runs parallel with the Elder Range, a kilometre further west. The trace of an old four-wheel-drive track cuts over another creek-bed. Follow the track, keeping the unmistakable double saddle of the northern ridge of the Elders directly ahead. The track drops into a washaway (GR 595979) and climbs to an old cattle fence that skirts the eastern foot of the range. Eight hundred metres north-west a gap opens in the foothills (GR 590983), easily recognisable by the radial lines of animal tracks converging there. From the gap you get the first view of the Moralana valley and the western ramparts of Wilpena Pound.



Immediately west is a catchment filled with gums and pines and surrounded by steep slopes covered in spinifex. Ascend the left arm of the creek, which rises in a cascade of boulders that have tumbled from the mountainside above. On the left is a rising series of rocky outcrops topped by flat ledges just wide enough to pitch a tent on. At around 200 metres above the valley floor, getting here is a tough climb with a pack full of food and water, but the ledges offer panoramic settings for a camp.

Day two

Leave the bulk of your gear at the campsite and carry a day pack with supplies for an eight-hour round trip to the summit. Strike south-west across the face of the hillside, holding your elevation. The ground here is covered with spinifex so if you have gaiters, wear them. The going is steeper but more pleasant once you gain a rocky, pine-clad area at GR 584976. Prop your pack against one of the gnarled trees and enjoy some precious shade, taking in the expanding view to the north and east. Immediately below, the long, narrow valley enclosed by the adjacent Red Range opens out into a wide plain where Beatrice and Moralana Creeks join, draining the faces of two great mountain systems of the Flinders region—the Elder Range at your back and the south face of Wilpena Pound extending before you. The drama of this country lies not in its altitude (at little more than 1000 metres) but in the abrupt rise of the ranges from the vast surrounding plains. From here, zigzag upwards to the south saddle of the ridge (GR 583973), where panoramic views look out toward the distant salt crust of Lake Torrens—a white line spanning 30 degrees of the horizon.

The ridge, the crest of the old sedimentary strata sheared away from an ancient bed, drops sheer for several hundred metres on its eastern face. The opposite slopes are relatively gentle, descending in long folds to the plains. Following the ridgeline is a lot easier than negotiating the gum and acacia scrub on the western side—not only is the view inspiring, but in hot weather you will benefit from cooling breezes. Keep an eye open for a trio of wedge-tailed eagles that regularly ride the thermals overhead. Euros and yellow-footed rock wallabies can also be spotted on the surrounding hillsides.

Head south-south-east along the ridge, dropping and climbing over a series of minor saddles, each scored by a deep ravine that looks like a giant knife cut in the mountain wall. Pockets of tangled scrub will slow your progress, and each rise ahead looks tantalisingly like your goal. The summit cairn is perched on the cliff-edge at GR 594955, complete with a visitors' book in an aluminium box. Roughly 100 people have signed it since 1985, a statistic that says something about your achievement in getting here.

Reverse your route along the ridge to the saddle and your camp. The climb and descent on day two takes five to seven hours. You could pack up and push on down on the same day, but a better option is to take the time to enjoy the warm glow of the late afternoon sun on Wilpena Pound and spend another night under the clear outback skies. 🏕️

Robert Lamp is a writer and photographer based in Adelaide. He loves wild and solitary places, and has walked extensively in southern Australia, the Himalayas and South-east Asia.