



◀ The Arkaba Conservancy, a lodge and wildlife reserve in Australia's Flinders Range.

▲ A tour of ediacaran-period fossils in Nilpena Ediacara National Park, in the Flinders Range.

LIFE FINDS A WAY

A new national park in the Australian outback is shining a light on the planet's oldest records, as well as the culture of the land's traditional guardians. **By Chloe Berge**

THE RUGGED, LONELY landscape of the Flinders Ranges, five hours north of Adelaide, in South Australia, feels prehistoric—and it is. The region is home to both the oldest Aboriginal culture and some of the planet's earliest geologic and biological records—including fossils of the ediacaran biota, multicellular organisms from 550 million years ago.

That depth of history recently earned the region a nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status, and led Australia to designate part of the range as **Nilpena Ediacara National Park**. New walking trails and an interactive visitors' center were unveiled last spring. "Here, we have the dawn of animal life, and it's one of the

best fossil records in the world," says Mary Droser, a paleobiologist at the University of California, Riverside, who has been working in the region since 2001.

Long before geologists traveled to the Flinders to study, the Aboriginal Adnyamathanha people developed their own way of understanding the land. In their creation story, two serpents thrust up through the earth to create the Flinders mountains, and the snakes' bodies formed the walls of a 22,000-acre natural rock amphitheater called Wilpena Pound, or Ikara, which means "meeting place."

Travelers can gain insight into Adnyamathanha culture with Kristian

Coulthard, the founder of **Wadna**, an Aboriginal art gallery and tour company. "It's important that we look at Flinders not just for its geological history but also for its cultural history," Coulthard says. He leads tours of the area's petroglyph sites, including Dingley Dell, where engravings date back 40,000 years.

One of the area's best places to stay is the Arkaba Conservancy, an ambitious rewilding project that spans 63,000 acres. Its five-bedroom **Arkaba Homestead** (*doubles from \$1,568, all-inclusive*) puts visitors in the middle of the project, which aims to restore biodiversity to a land depleted by overgrazing and invasive species—and to protect threatened animals like the yellow-footed rock wallaby. Guests can get hands-on with conservation activities, such as setting up motion-activated wildlife cameras. Adventurous travelers can also book the three-day Arkaba Walk, a roughly 28-mile trail that traverses the basin of Wilpena Pound.

Tightly Woven

In Laos, a group of women are preserving a form of artistic expression that dates back centuries—and inviting others to see it in the making. **By Carrie Back**



◀ A silk-weaving class at Ock Pop Tok, a women's cooperative in Luang Prabang, Laos.

THE HUM OF LOOMS mixes with the sound of lapping water at **Ock Pop Tok**, a women's weaving cooperative on the banks of the Mekong River in Luang Prabang. In Laos, the tradition of weaving as storytelling goes back 1,200 years. Important messages are conveyed through clothing: the patterns on the *sinh*, a long skirt, can indicate a woman's age, marital status, and ethnic community (Laos has 50 state-recognized groups). Among the Tai Lue community, for example, color patches on a skirt signify that a woman is single,

while stripes along the waistband mean that she is married. Ock Pop Tok works with more than 300 women artisans in 15 provinces. At its center in Luang Prabang, travelers can take classes in weaving, dyeing, and embroidery, as well as purchase apparel, bags, rugs, and decorative wall pieces. Ock Pop Tok also operates the five-room **Mekong Villa** (*doubles from \$50*) and a restaurant, **Silk Road Café** (*entrées \$2–\$4*). Last month, the cooperative began offering pottery and paper-making workshops in the nearby villages of Ban Chan and Ban Xang Kong.

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