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The Heat Is On

ALTERED

THERE'S A ROAD THAT RUNS RIGHT UP THE MIDDLE OF AUSTRALIA LIKE A

STATES

ZIPPER. MAX ANDERSON TAKES IT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG

AUSTRALIANS VENERATE John McDouall Stuart as the nation's greatest explorer. Hard-bitten and hard-drinking, he took six attempts to make the journey from his sponsor's mansion in Adelaide to a crocodile-infested coast 3,400km to the north. In 2015, 200 years after his birth, there's still only one road up the middle of this vast island continent. It's the Stuart Highway or it's no way.

I'm cutting through, from bottom to top, steered by Stuart's achievement and inspired to make a few tracks of my own. It's a long, dirty trip, but if it gets too dirty, well, I'll just sit and watch the olours shifting around me – the Tuscan tones of sea and vine, the blood-and-ochre palette of the desert, the tree-frog greens of the tropical north.

I have some qualms. But at least I have a Toyota Land Cruiser with a fridge. Stuart had a horse called Polly. When he finally reached Point Stuart in July 1862, he fell silent before the Timor Sea. Perhaps overcome at having made it, he was certainly overcome by the time he got back to Adelaide. His expedition party was lauded after the 11-month trek, but the taciturn leader, crippled by scurvy, stomach ulceration and a smashed hand, was a shell of a man, incapable of speaking before a crowd. He quickly faded from view, and the South Australian governor declared him unfit for a knighthood, owing to his 'intemperance'. Four years after his crossing, Stuart died in London, aged 50. Seven people attended his funeral.

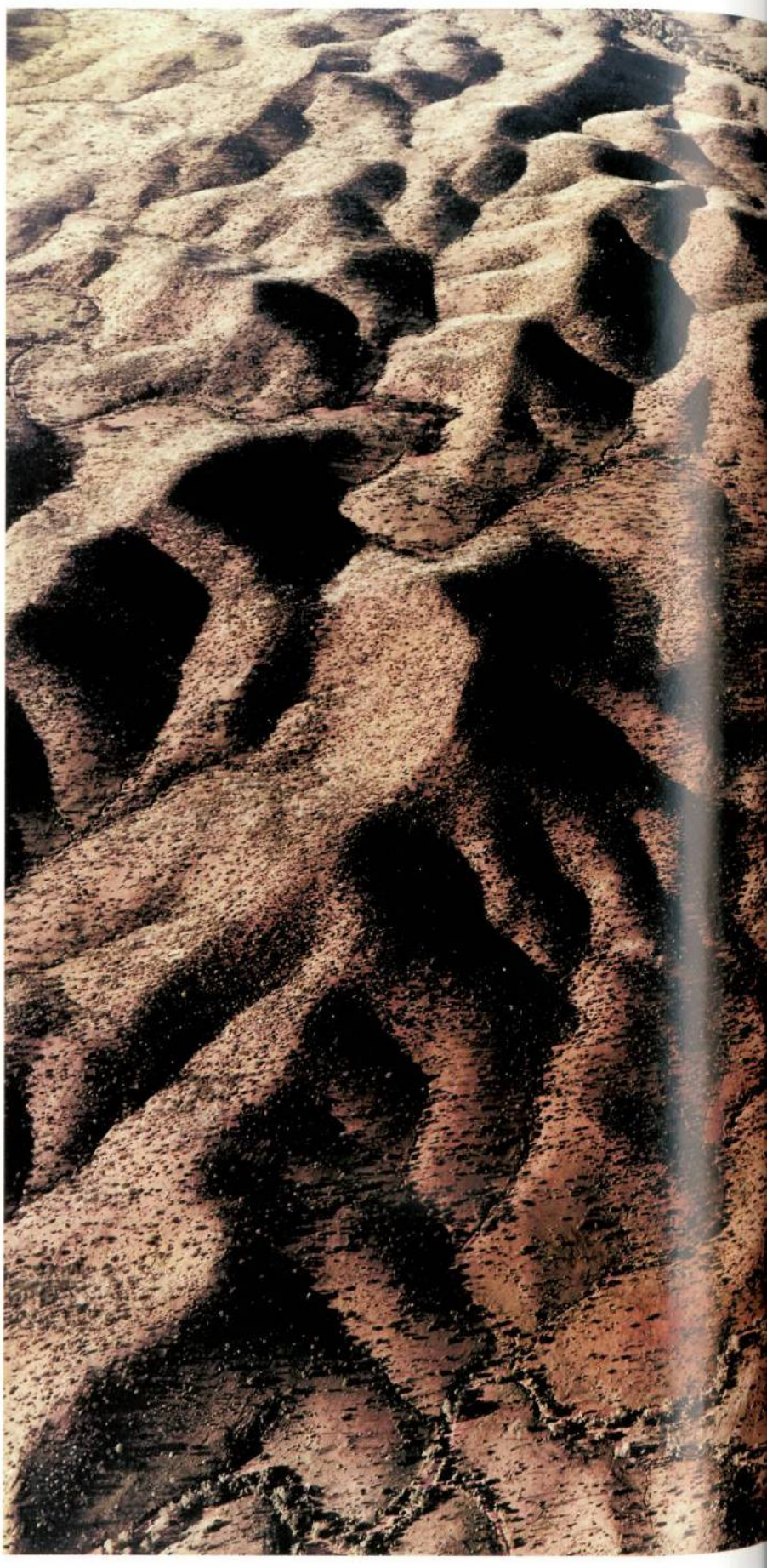
0 KM

Dawn rises on the beatific Gulf St Vincent beside Adelaide's beach suburb of Glenelg. 'Gonna be 40 today,' says the barista in the hipster breakfast bar. She's right. Where I'm going, it'll be 40 degrees every day for two weeks.

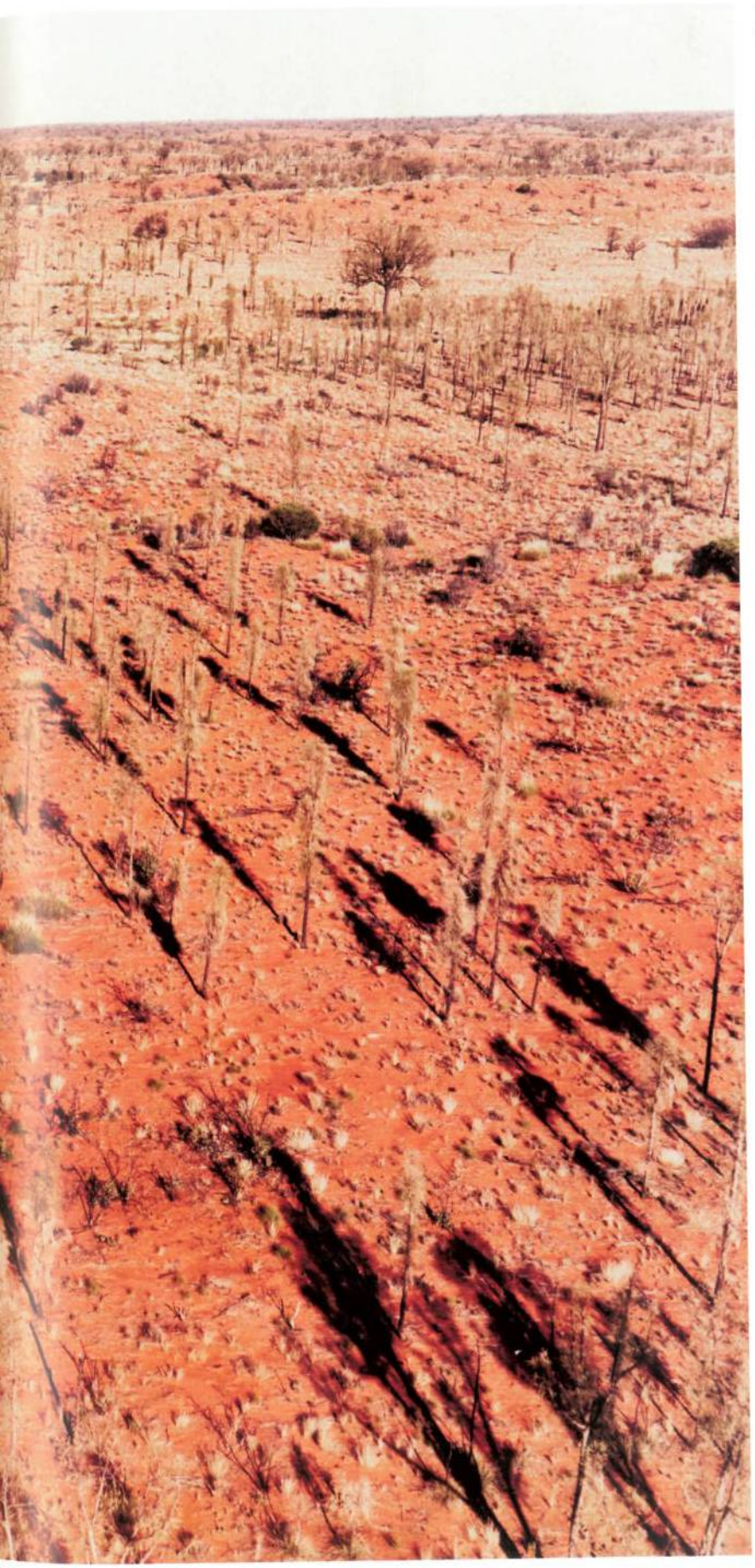
When my odometer moves off zero, the beachfront belongs to joggers, but the sands will soon dot with people seeking Saturday sea breezes – a pointillist portrait of prosperity, egalitarianism and cool.

South Australia, unlike other Australian states, wasn't a dumping ground for criminals. It was a business proposition: sell land then use the money to ship out willing émigrés. And it worked. After 100km I'm in the Clare Valley, a pastoral region born of Old World skills and New World determination – pretty stone hamlets in vales of eucalyptus, golden paddocks of wheat, blankets of grape.

In the town of Auburn I take a break at a little timber railway station that has been converted into a tasting room for Mount Horrocks winery. 'Would



AERIAL VIEW OF THE FLINDERS RANGES, MOUNTAINS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA . *OPENING*



you like to try the Riesling?' asks the bartender. 'I know it's early in the morning, but, hey…'

'Sure,' I say. Stuart, at least, would approve.

525KM

The Flinders Ranges are mountains made weary over 800 million years. They rise in late-afternoon sunshine, red as a carcass – ribs, scapulas, a great sternum of quartzite called Wilpena Pound.

Arkaba Homestead is a mote of whitewashed stone at the foot of the range. In 1858 Stuart arrived here so depleted by his first expedition that 'his voice was all that was left of him'. Now a luxury lodge and conservancy, Arkaba is working to undo Stuart's legacy.

'We removed the last sheep in 2013,' says guide Kat Mee as we tour creek lines on the 63,000-acre property. Evening light falls across mobs of kangaroos grazing beneath 500-year-old gums. 'I was shocked how quickly native plants returned. In two months we could see the difference.'

Early settler-pastoralists fenced out the dingos and pumped water. Grateful rabbits, foxes and cats flourished, eating everything in sight. Over a dinner lit by candles and stars, I'm told Australia loses 65 million native animals to feral cats *a night*.

Native animals weren't the only victims here. Adnyamathanha, Pirlatap, Yardliyawarra, Ngadjuri, Nukunu, Pankarla, Kuyani: these were the Aboriginal peoples of the Flinders Ranges before wire fences, Christian missionaries, whitefella food and disease put paid to their connections with land, ancestors and each other.

834KM

In the desolate railhead of Marree, Max Dadleh props up the bar of the Great Northern Hotel. He's 76 and has a lazy-lizard Aussie drawl, but there's no Anglo and little Saxon in his colouring. 'My grandfather was a cameleer,' he says. 'He came from Baluchistan, which is now Pakistan. People called them Afghans, but the cameleers were from all over. My father was the last of them.'

Camels, better suited to desert conditions than horses or bullocks, worked the outback well into the 20th century. As a boy Max watched his father piling them with supplies before leading them into the wilderness on 500km deliveries. Marree was home to Australia's first mosque, built in 1861 – a crude thatch on tree stumps facing Mecca.

'Did your father retain much of his culture?' I ask.

'Some of it. But he'd finished with the prayin'.' He pauses. 'I'd have prayed. Specially out in the desert with temperatures around 50 degrees.'

1,011KM

I exit the highway and take the Oodnadatta Track, 600km of dirt road. Dragging a flume of dust, I cleave 'gibber' plains – scaly, scrubby expanses

broken by escarpments coloured like peaches and cream. I cross creeks lined with gum trees and awash only with sand.

At the edge of Kati Thanda, or Lake Eyre, I wince at the heat, flies and 10,000 square kilometres of salt crust. 'All who have travelled there have felt this haunting sense of desolation and death,' wrote explorer and geologist Cecil Madigan in 1939.

And yet.

At Coward Springs, off the lake's southern tip, I sink into a crude timber bath in wetlands alive with birds. The waters emanate from the Great Artesian Basin, the planet's largest and deepest such aquifer. Out in the gibber I stand atop 'mound springs', bizarre house-sized blisters that weep water. Elated by their crown of lush grasses, I throw caution to the hot wind and swallow a mouthful of water, a sweet two-million-year-old vintage.

This land corridor with its secret waters opened a passage north through the salt lakes. Aboriginal people had used it for millennia, bringing sacred ochre from the Flinders Ranges – the oldest trade route on earth.

Stuart relied on the waters. So did cattle drovers, hard on his heels. There was water for desert repeater stations. In 1871 lonely telegraphers began relaying messages via 36,000 wire-strung poles to Port Darwin, thence to London. And there was water for steam trains. In the 1880s and 90s the Europeans laid tracks through the ochre route to make railheads at Marree and Oodnadatta. The rail line, however, constantly crippled by heat and flash floods, was finally relocated in the 1970s. Today both towns use old rolling stock as civic monuments, attempts that are as noble as they are forlorn.

1,230KM

It's nearly dark when I check into the empty Transcontinental Hotel in Oodnadatta. The manager shows me to a room, lifting the skirts of a tired divan to peer beneath. 'Just checkin',' he says. 'Had a couple of eastern browns in here earlier.'

Putting aside fears of the world's second-most-venomous snake, I ask when the kitchen closes.

'We don't really have a kitchen. But I've just cooked my dinner – it's pretty basic but y'welcome to half of that?'

He won't take money for the pork chops, so we sit eating while he points out bullet holes in the bar-room.

'One of 'em's quite recent,' he says brightly.

1,875KM

'In all of Stuart's expeditions, not a single life was lost,' reads a panel at the South Australia-Northern Territory border. Scored beneath it by hand: 'Unless you count the Aboriginal people he and his men killed at Attack Creek.'

I break west of Stuart's trail on a 750km detour to visit two very different rocks in the bruised heart of Australia.

Curtin Springs is a million-acre cattle station with well-manicured accommodation, campsites and meals served after a triangle is struck. In a bar papered with

FROM LEFT: THE SALTY SHORELINE OF KATI THANDA–LAKE EYRE; THE BIODIVERSE KAKADU NATIONAL PARK, EAST OF DARWIN.

us-against-the-world humour, I find a tiny old man holding court, delighting a group of Canadians with his brazen politics and off-colour jokes. Selfies are taken.

'Are you,' I ask, shocked, having thought the cattle-station owner dead, 'Peter Severin?'

'I am,' he says, meeting me with one good eye and a grip of iron. 'And who might you be?'

Severin is 87. He talks, I listen. Bitter polemics sweetened with punchlines. After developing the station in the 1950s he began helping tourists visit what was then called Ayers Rock. In 1963 he hammered pickets into its back, linked by 800 metres of chain so people could climb it.

In the 1990s the local Anangu people began asking tourists not to climb. Half of Australia still respects this, half says to hell with them. 'Your chain divides the nation,' I dare to venture.

'Yes, it does,' says Severin. 'But only the whites.'

His 61-year-old son Ashley is just as steely, forged by an Outback cattleman's demons: drought, bushfire, fluctuating commodity prices, governments taking sides. He shows me Mount Conner, a spectacular drum-shaped tor on the property. 'When life gets too much, I bring my swag here,' he says. 'And I feel this big.' He proffers his thumb and forefinger before the 300-metre edifice to show a millimetre-wide gap. There are no known Aboriginal stories about Mount Conner, but there are Severin stories. Ash's son is buried there.

1,963KM

Just 150km away – next door – is that other rock, Uluru.

'We have a very fine Barossa Shiraz to go with the beef backstrap. The Tasmanian Pinot is also excellent.'

After a week of hard driving and pit-stop rudiments, this sounds like a foreign language. White tablecloths, uniformed staff, potpourris of bush herbs and polished timber. So willingly do I surrender to the ministrations at tented-camp Longitude 131° that I end up completely pissed by 3pm.

Here, precocious engineering has reimagined the tent so guests can recline on a dune of pillows and watch Uluru change colour under the sun's fearsome transit. The rock is beautiful but also raw, even unnerving. Its ferrous skin and mouth-like rents have me thinking of Francis Bacon's work.

Its 10km perimeter, however, is a benign path of shady havens, cool waterholes and caves of Anangu art. I stand, swaying slightly, while a sweet young ranger does her damnedest to help visitors penetrate concepts that are complex, mostly secret and increasingly lost. Perhaps it's the Shiraz, but I think I get it. The rock, the local Anangu people, the ranger and even Longitude 131° – they're an optic through which non-Aboriginal people can glimpse a continent before Captain Cook, a continent where more than 250 separate nations lived and hunted and traded.

OVERLEAF: THE ROCKY KNUCKLES OF ULURU'S NEAR NEIGHBOUR KATA TJUTA, ALSO KNOWN AS THE OLGAS

I THROW CAUTION TO THE HOT WIND AND SWALLOW A

MOUTHFUL OF WATER, A SWEET TWO-MILLION-YEAR-OLD VINTAGE

2,315KM

The 500km Mereenie Loop follows the base of the Western MacDonnells on a ribbon of excoriated earth. I am thoroughly alone except for these low ranges. I stop at a valley and climb to sit looking over a vista that is lime-coloured and sensual, and the truth is I don't quite know what to do with myself, so isolated am I. Then something strange happens. The earth breathes a fragrant sigh as rain begins to fall in warm sobs.

2,490KM

Glen Helen Station charges me about £15 for a room comprising a fan, a bunk-bed and a tin of insect repellent. At 6am I walk 100 metres to swim in a gorge of pyjama-striped rock. The water is as glossy as a sheet of onyx that reflects clouds and keening eagles. This is the Finke River. When it flows, it follows a 100-million-year-old watercourse, the world's oldest.

2,907KM

Barrow Creek, population 11. A man emerges from the shack-like pub. He's bigger in the waist and coarser in the face, but there's no mistaking him.

'Les!' I exclaim.

He's as surprised as I am, but doesn't remember that I interviewed him 15 years ago. Les Hiddins was an army major when he lost his hearing in a rugby game. Fearful of ending up behind a desk, he went bush to compile an inventory of survival food. The ABC television network discovered him, called him *The Bush Tucker Man* and created a TV phenomenon.

'Barrow Creek,' laughs the publican. 'Didn't you know it's the centre of the universe?'

3,163KM

Threeways Roadhouse. Tired truck drivers. Sour waitresses. One guy's Kenilworth rig is loaded with four wagons of copper ore weighing 200 tonnes.

'Did a short run today,' he tells me.

'How short is short?'

'Aww, 650km. I usually do eleven hundred.'

3,389KM

At Elliott, beyond the Tropic of Capricorn, the humidity is ferocious. I engage four-wheel drive, and leave the highway to reach a lake that had Stuart's party rejoicing. 'The track's wet,' says a local, 'but you'll be OK.'

I ford a series of deep red pools within a narrow track of mush, but after 8km the Land Cruiser's wheels sound the inevitable note. Frantically digging at mud and tearing grasses to make traction mats, I become aware that I smell unusually bad. It's the stink of panic.

LEFT, KAKADU NATIONAL PARK. ACCORDING TO ABORIGINAL STORIES, ITS LANDSCAPE WAS CREATED BY AN EARTH MOTHER WHO

3,740KM

The thermal pools in Mataranka are surrounded by great whorls of rainforest, strung overhead with industrial-sized webs of Golden Orb spiders. When the heavens release a torpid drench, the pale pool puckers and the webs shake, and I have a sick feeling in my stomach.

Point Stuart is, I am aware, at the end of a deep and difficult bush track that cuts through dangerous wetlands. No question, it's going to be flooded. 'Not enough rain,' I mutter into my beer bottle. 'Too much rain.'

4,329KM

Bamurru Plains is a luxury lodge beside Kakadu National Park, east of Darwin. It sits on a 74,000-acre farm called Swim Creek – possibly named in irony, given the farmer routinely loses half-tonne buffaloes to three-quarter-tonne crocodiles. At its northern tip is the place where Stuart, on 24 July 1862, fell speechless at the sight of ocean.

As feared, the road is flooded, so lodge manager John Cooper – no mean bushman – tries to skim me over the wetlands to Point Stuart in an airboat. This raucous beast of a thing usually scuds well-heeled guests out to see sunken paperbark forests, muddy lairs of big crocs and lily fields fished by statuesque jabiru storks.

We fly at breathtaking speed – until we're pulled up hard by mud. John kills the engine. Semi-submerged buffaloes watch suspiciously through veils of mosquitoes.

'There,' says John. 'Point Stuart.' A seam of mangrove marks where Australia meets the Timor Sea.

'How far?' I ask as a bulging thunderhead leaks a little lightning.

'About three kilometres.'

I force a laugh. 'I've driven 4,300km to get here and I'm going to fall short by three kilometres?'

The floodplain is flooded, but not flooded enough. So we sit in silence and watch the clouds dropping silver bolts on the emerald horizon. It's been 150 years since Stuart used superhuman fortitude to breach inhuman distance, but this continent is still far from being tamed.

'Australia's said no, right?'

John smiles. 'Australia's said no.'

OUTBACK AND BEYOND

Scott Dunn (+44 20 8682 5060; www.scottdunn.com) offers eight-day trips from Adelaide to the Top End from £9,450 per person, including flights, private transfers, excursions and stays at Arkaba or Rawnsley Park Station, Longitude 131° and Bamurru Plains. Scott Dunn can also arrange bespoke trips, with prices from £5,800 per person, including international flights, transfers, experiences, the services of professional guides from SEIT Outback Australia and scenic flights with Chinta Air Tours. For more information on South Australia and the Northern Territory, visit www.southaustralia.com and www.australiasouthback.co.uk.

N RESTED AND TURNED HERSELF INTO A LARGE ROCK. *ABOVE*, HILLSIDE CONTOURS IN THE SPRAWLING FLINDERS RANGES