



Gabriela and Graeme Clarke bring lunch to the hikers at Lake Hattah: a fine way to see the wilderness.

STARLIGHT SILVERED the surface of Lake Hattah, the fondue pots bubbled on the candlelit table at the water's edge, and a meteor arced across the sky to oohs from the dinner guests.

Half-an-hour later, as we started on the rota grutza, a raspberry sago desert, a satellite slowly curved from across the sky above the lake.

"You can't get that in a restaurant," said host Graeme Clarke with pride, as if he had personally turned on the celestial cabaret.

Mr Clarke and his wife, Gabriela, organise walking tours of desert, alps and coast in the south-eastern corner of Australia — with gourmet meals.

There is something quite luxurious about camping out, canoeing along shaded creeks, or wading in alpine streams, and, at the end of the day, sipping cool wine by the fire, knowing that you will neither have to prepare the delicious meal that is to come, nor wash the dishes after it.

Graeme Clarke met Gabriela Huckle seven years ago when they were both on a Bill King tour in Central Australia. After they married, they decided that the ideal career for them was their favorite hobby, travel.

They have been operating for two seasons, taking people on three-day treks to the Great Ocean Road, the Grampians and Wilson's Promontory (about \$225 a head); four-day walks in the Croajingolong, Hattah-Kulkyne or Wonnangatta national parks (about \$295); a nine-day coast-to-Kosciusko trek (\$595), an 11-day tour of national parks and vineyards in South Australia (that one is \$795) and, each winter, a 12-day walk in parts of France, Germany and Switzerland (\$845 after you pay to get to and from Frankfurt). The Clarkes say they limit the number of

Hike fit for a gourmet

By John Kiely

people on each tour to 10 so they can concentrate on the quality of the food.

A group of us went with them to Hattah-Kulkyne in the far north-west of Victoria, a 50,000-hectare park of red dirt and mallee scrub surrounding a shimmering necklace of 20 lakes linked by stillwater creeks. We arrived at sunset, put up our tents at the edge of a lake, and watched the stars as the Clarkes prepared a dinner of parsnip and orange curried soup, veal casserole with boiled potatoes and coleslaw, and a rich Italian dessert, tirami su, made of sponge fingers and yoghurt, laced with cognac.

Hattah-Kulkyne is one of the 200 biosphere reserves around the world, selected to form a network of samples of major types of ecosystem. They are for research, education, training and monitoring. Victoria's other two such reserves are Croajingolong and Wilson's Promontory.

At Hattah-Kulkyne, if you are too young, too old or too fat to go walking,

you can drive through the national park, seeing red kangaroos, pelicans, sundry breeds of duck, large goannas and the odd tortoise, and the vehicle track appears to do little damage.

When we set out next morning on foot, each of us had a day pack, with a bottle of lemon drink of a recipe devised by Gabriela's grandmother, one muesli bar and one apple. "That," I thought, "will not be a stunning lunch." But, at midday, out of their larger packs, the Clarkes produced a delicious light meal of fleisch salat, cold curried chicken, saffron rice and wholemeal bread.

The meals of the ensuing two days included beef and chicken fondues, with a selection of four dips, including mango; there were hors d'oeuvres of edam, tomato and basil leaf; mushroom terrine, with almonds, cheese, egg and cream; quiches; cheese and bacon pie; meatloaf and crisp salads.

It was hot but there were few mosquitoes and few flies. Baffling. And although there were about 40 people camped beside Lake Hattah while we were there, there was not a cigarette packet or sweet wrapper to be seen. Inexplicable.

Kookaburras and other cacophonous creatures did insist on blasting us out of our bunks at dawn, but by the third day we began to find them appealing.

These tours are for healthy, active people of all ages who are reasonably fit, say the Clarkes. But even fat, ageing journalists can wheeze their way through them without too much pain. Bring your own sleeping bag, torch, sun hat, bathers, parka and pillow.

John Kiely was a guest of Graeme and Gabriela Clarke, Walkabout Adventure Tours, PO Box 298, Heidelberg, 3084. Telephone, 459 2501.