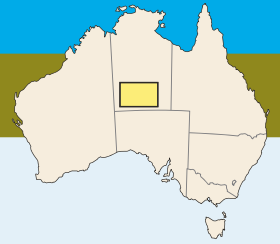


# Your great Australian journey starts here

## RED CENTRE WAY



Length: 4–7 days Fly/drive option: Alice Springs

Discover the healthy beat of Australia's red heart as you tour west from Alice Springs, trailing along at the foot of the west MacDonnell Ranges, the ancient mountains sliced by gorges with refreshingly cold waterholes. Pass Gosse Bluff, a ripple of peaks created by a meteor strike, and head south to the stunning rock architecture of Central Australia's deepest canyon, Kings Canyon, then Uluru/Ayers Rock and Kata Tjuta/Mount Olga, the famous red rocks that seemingly pin Australia to the earth.

### Travel tip

The Mereenie Loop is progressively being sealed. If travelling in a 2WD, check road conditions at Alice Springs information centres or Glen Helen Resort. An inexpensive transit permit is required to drive the loop and can be obtained from the Central Australian Tourism Visitor Information Centre at 60 Gregory Terrace in Alice Springs, or at Glen Helen Resort. If driving in the opposite direction, it can be purchased at Kings Canyon Resort.

### Websites

- [www.travelnt.com/itinerary\\_ideas/itinerary\\_red\\_centre\\_way.htm](http://www.travelnt.com/itinerary_ideas/itinerary_red_centre_way.htm)
- [www.centralaustralian.com](http://www.centralaustralian.com)
- [www.deh.gov.au/parks/uluru](http://www.deh.gov.au/parks/uluru)
- [www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks)

### Red Centre Way— Travel Times

Route	Distance	Duration
Alice Springs - Gosse Bluff	194 km	2hrs 30mins
Gosse Bluff - Kings Canyon	229 km	3hrs
Kings Canyon - Uluru	309 km	4hrs 10mins
Uluru - Eridunda	290 km	3hrs 50mins
Eridunda - Alice Springs	201 km	2hrs 30mins



### A Heading out from Alice

Well before driving out of Alice Springs you'll find plenty of reasons to stop. The Alice Springs Cultural Precinct ([www.nt.gov.au/nreta/museums/ascp/mca.html](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/museums/ascp/mca.html)) contains the **Albert Namatjira Gallery**, featuring the largest collection of paintings by this iconic Aboriginal artist, and the Museum of Central Australia. It also hosts the annual Desert Mob Festival (September/October), exhibiting contemporary art from communities throughout Central Australia.

There are plenty of other superb Aboriginal galleries in Alice. It's particularly worth taking a look at Mbantua Gallery, on Gregory Terrace near Todd Mall, which has a vast collection of authentic artefacts and artworks in a museum upstairs ([www.mbantua.com.au](http://www.mbantua.com.au)).

The Alice Springs Desert Park ([www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au](http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au)), off Larapinta Drive on the outskirts of Alice, provides a fabulous introduction to Red Centre animals and plants. There are informal talks on topics such as **bush tucker** and you'll probably want to spend about half a day getting up-close to the reptiles, mammals and birds of the region.

Immediately beyond the park is the grave of John Flynn, founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. The grave also marks the start of the 17 km Simpsons Gap Bicycle Path, a sealed track running through the open woodland north of Larapinta Drive into Simpsons Gap. **Bicycle rental** is available from Alice Bike Hire ([www.alicebikehire.com](http://www.alicebikehire.com)).

Another track to the north of the road is the long-distance **Larapinta Trail** ([www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/walks/larapinta.html](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/walks/larapinta.html)), stretching 223 km along the length of the west MacDonnell Ranges. Each of the attractions along Larapinta and Namatjira Drive allows easy access to the track, presenting opportunities to sample it for a day or two, or just a couple of hours. Some of the track's best sections can be seen by wandering from the Ochre Pits into cycad-filled Inarlanga Pass, climbing Mount Sonder from Redbank Gorge or ascending Brinkley Bluff from Standley Chasm.

**B** West MacDonnell Ranges

Simpsons Gap offers the first glimpse of the many gorges that cut the west MacDonnell Ranges into slices. This deep gorge, with its soft, sandy bed, offers a great chance for the eagle-eyed to spot the endangered black-footed rock-wallaby, regularly seen among the boulders on the gorge's eastern wall.

From the car park at Standley Chasm, it's a 15-minute walk into the slot-like gorge, which is illuminated by sun for a short time around midday. Scramble beyond the chasm, through the dry creekbed, and a second, narrower chasm can be reached.

Back in the car, take a detour to Hermannsburg, which began as a Lutheran mission in the 1870s and was handed back to Arrernte ownership in 1982. Visit the **Kata-Anga Tea Rooms**, an art gallery and the home that Albert Namatjira, who was born in Hermannsburg, built for his family.

Just west of Hermannsburg, a rugged 4WD track heads 20 km into Palm Valley in Finke Gorge National Park, an oasis that supports around 3000 endemic red cabbage palms. If in a 2WD, it's worth joining one of the many 4WD **day-tours** from Alice to get to this special place.

Just beyond Standley Chasm, swing onto Namatjira Drive. As the road crosses Hugh River, adventurous **4WDers** can take a turn to the north, following a rough track to little-visited Hugh Gorge, a spectacular and deep chasm backed by towering, rust-red cliffs.

Namatjira Drive continues through open woodland streaked with ghost gums, while the ranges continue to be inset with gorges. Ellery Creek Big Hole is one of the largest permanent waterholes in the West MacDonnell National Park, and a great spot for a **swim** if you can brave its chill. It's also one of the region's top **camping** spots, along with Ormiston Gorge and Glen Helen Resort.

Beyond Serpentine Gorge, said by the Arrernte people to be home to a large water serpent, and the colourful walls of the Ochre Pits, a side road winds north to Ormiston Gorge. The West MacDonnells' deepest gorge harbours a couple of beautiful waterholes. The short Ghost Gum Lookout Walk climbs to a spur topped by a single ghost gum, in vivid contrast to the deep-red walls of the gorge. If you're feeling more energetic, the **Ormiston Pound Walk** heads out behind Ormiston Gorge and into the circular surround of Ormiston Pound. Allow 3–4 hours for the loop walk.

Returning to Namatjira Drive it's just a few minutes to Glen Helen Resort ([www.glenhelen.com.au](http://www.glenhelen.com.au)), beside the natural oasis of Glen Helen Gorge. **Accommodation** is available in motel rooms, stockman quarters or camped



Alice Springs and Surrounds

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Standley Chasm

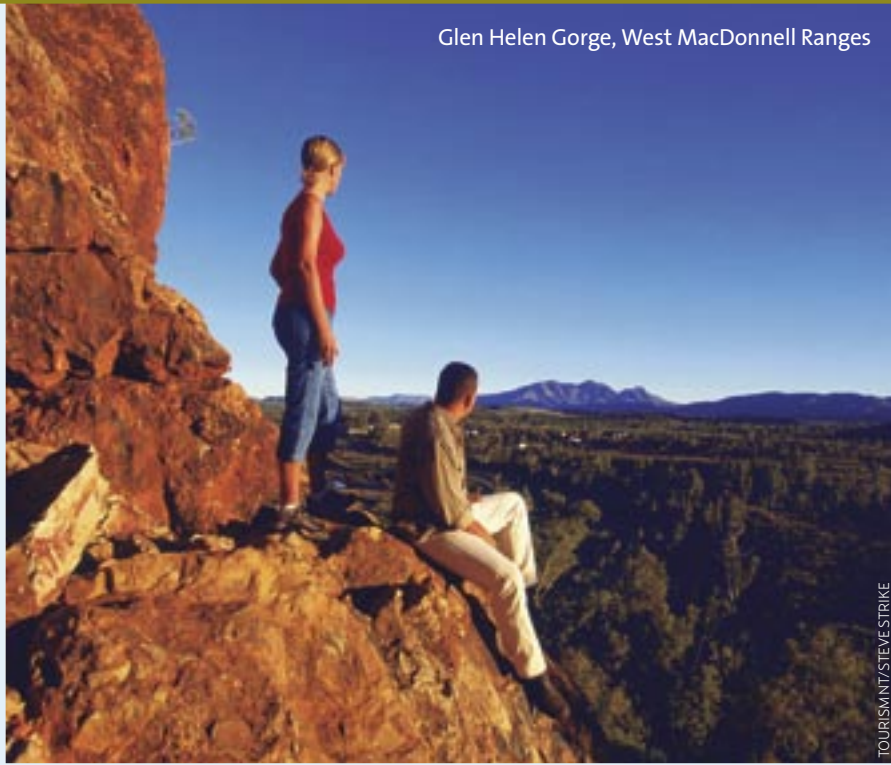
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in sight of the high escarpment. Scenic **helicopter flights** ([www.australiannationalhelicopters.com.au](http://www.australiannationalhelicopters.com.au)) can whisk you across the MacDonnell Ranges or further afield to Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve or Palm Valley.

Out of Glen Helen, the drive immediately crosses the Finke River, said to be one of the oldest rivers in the world. The Mereenie Loop from here is progressively being sealed. If travelling in a 2WD, check road conditions at Alice Springs or Glen Helen Resort before continuing.

Mount Sonder dominates the view here. Shaped like a sleeping woman it's one of the West MacDonnells' most striking peaks.

Last in the queue of West MacDonnell gorges is Redbank Gorge, 25 km beyond Glen Helen. Wander up the creekbed to an icy pool at the point where the gorge narrows to a thread. To explore beyond, you'll need an air mattress or tyre tube.



TOURISM/NT/STEVE STRIKE

## **B** to **C** West MacDonnell National Park to Kings Canyon

To the north, look for Mt Zeil. At 1531 m, it's the NT's highest mountain. Soon the road turns south to cross Tylers Pass, where there's a **good view** of Tnorala (Gosse Bluff). Detour into Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve (4WD recommended) and you'll be among the circular ripple of peaks created by a meteor strike around 140 million years ago.

About 12 km beyond the Tnorala road, this tour turns west, but you can detour east at this point to Hermannsburg and Palm Valley in Finke Gorge National Park. (4WD access only into Palm Valley.)

Back at the junction, the main route heads west, crossing through Katapata Gap before entering Watarrka National Park. Within the park is one of the Red Centre's most spectacular sights, Kings Canyon, with its pockmarked sandstone walls rising up to 270 m from the canyon floor. To best appreciate this amazing canyon, follow the 6 km **Kings Canyon Rim Walk**, which climbs steeply to the canyon rim before circuiting atop it. Be sure to also detour into the Garden of Eden, where abundant plants, including ancient cycads, flourish among the waterholes. A shorter walk (about one hour) leads along the canyon floor, while the two-day, 22 km Giles Track sets off overland to Kathleen Springs. Hikers on this track must register with the Overnight Walkers Registration Scheme ([www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/walks/pdf/overnight\\_walker\\_web.pdf](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/walks/pdf/overnight_walker_web.pdf)).

**Accommodation** is available at either Kings Canyon Resort ([www.kingscanyonresort.com.au](http://www.kingscanyonresort.com.au)) or Kings Creek Station ([www.kingscreekstation.com.au](http://www.kingscreekstation.com.au)), just south of the park. The former offers camping through to deluxe spa rooms, while the latter has camping and canvas safari cabins. Both feature restaurants and a range of tours, from **camel rides to helicopter flights**. To add some outback romance, dine at the resort's **Sounds of Firelight dinner**, where you'll get a fireside table for two among the desert oaks.

Camel Train at Uluru/Ayers Rock



TOURISM/NT

## **C** to **D** Kings Canyon to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park

The road south from the canyon passes the turn-off to Kathleen Springs, a spring-fed rock pool reached along an easy walking track, and the entrance to Kings Creek Station, before beginning the journey towards Uluru/Ayers Rock. Along the foot of the George Gill Range the landscape is dominated by desert oak, their green "needles" hanging like cascades.

Turning west onto the Lasseter Highway, the view ahead is dominated by flat-topped Mt Conner, its escarpment ribbed like a turtleneck jumper. Tours to the horseshoe-shaped mountain

are available from Curtin Springs station ([www.curtinsprings.com](http://www.curtinsprings.com)). **Accommodation** is also available at the station.

The station's road-house offers the final stop before Yulara and Uluru, 80 km ahead, but the land between is its own reward, featuring spinifex and desert oak amid rippled red dunes. Most striking of all is the growing red bulk of Uluru, the most famous of outback sights. About 20 km before the Rock is the tourist town Yulara, with a wide range of accommodation choices, from the Ayers Rock Campground to the five-star Sails in the Desert

([www.ayersrockresort.com.au](http://www.ayersrockresort.com.au)). Dining options are equally varied: grill your own bush tucker at the Pioneer Barbecue; enjoy fine dining at Kuniya, inside Sails in the Desert; or dine atop the dunes, in view of Uluru, at the **Sounds of Silence dinner** ([www.ayersrockresort.com.au/sounds-of-silence](http://www.ayersrockresort.com.au/sounds-of-silence)).

At Uluru, which rises 348 m above the surrounding sand, be certain to visit the **Uluru–Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre** for an insight into the history and culture of the Anangu, the traditional custodians. You can also gain an insight into the Rock from a cultural perspective with Anangu Tours ([www.anangutours.com.au](http://www.anangutours.com.au)). They offer **dot-painting classes**, walking tours, spear-throwing and camel rides. **Helicopter flights** over Uluru can be arranged through the Ayers Rock Resort ([www.ayersrockresort.com.au/helicopter-flights](http://www.ayersrockresort.com.au/helicopter-flights)).

At ground level you can watch Uluru's changing colours from the sunrise or sunset viewing areas, or wander around the rock on the 10 km base walk. Shorter walks include the 2 km Mala Walk into Kantju Gorge and the 1 km Mutitjulu Walk to a waterhole. The Anangu request that visitors respect the sanctity of the rock by not climbing it.

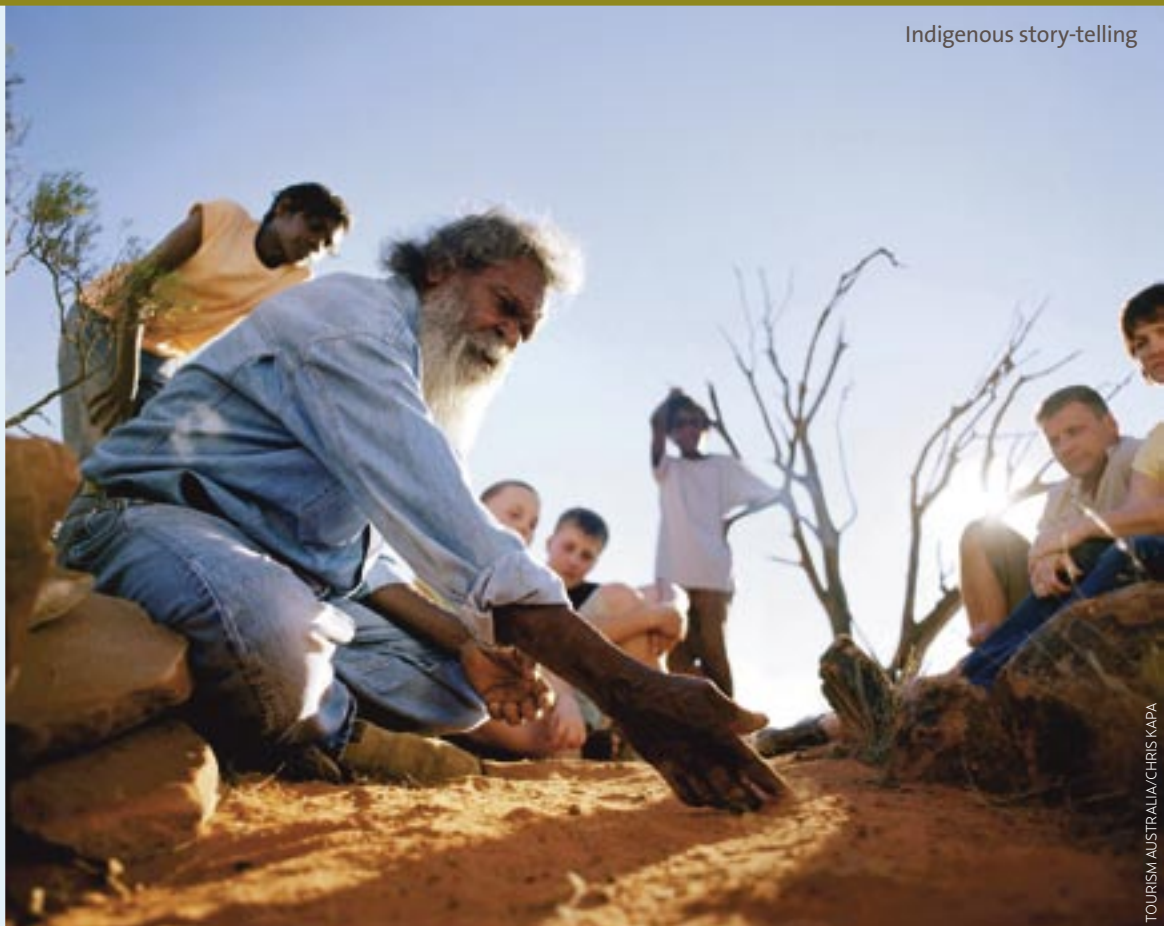
Allow a day for a visit to the rock domes of Kata Tjuta/Mount Olga, a 50 km drive from Yulara. Kata Tjuta features two **walking tracks**: the 7.4 km Valley of the Winds Walk heads through gorges in behind the outcrop to Karingana Lookout, while the shorter Walpa Gorge Walk leads into a narrowing gap between two of the domes.

## **D** to **A** Uluru–Kata Tjuta NP to Alice Springs

Follow the Lasseter Highway back past Yulara and the Kings Canyon turn-off and out to the Stuart Highway at Erldunda Desert Oaks Resort ([www.desertoaksresort.com](http://www.desertoaksresort.com)). Turning north, past the resort's curious emu, the highway crosses through low ranges and offers 4WDers a couple of diversions. Ernest Giles Road leads a short distance west to Henbury Meteorites Conservation Reserve, featuring 12 meteor craters.

Grab a final **camel ride** – from five minutes to five days – at Camels Australia ([www.camels-australia.com.au](http://www.camels-australia.com.au)) near the Stuarts Well Roadhouse, or absorb the full palette of outback colours in the sandstone bluffs and cliffs at **Rainbow Valley Conservation Reserve**.

An hour or so on, you'll pass through Heavitree Gap, a break in the west MacDonnell Ranges that shepherds you back into Alice Springs, where you might like to survey some of the country you've just travelled from the basket of a **hot-air balloon** ([www.outbackballooning.com.au](http://www.outbackballooning.com.au); [www.balloonflights.com.au](http://www.balloonflights.com.au)). ■



TOURISM AUSTRALIA/CHRIS KAPA