FROM ALICE SPRINGS TO ULURU, WITH A FEW WATERHOLES, CANYONS AND SPIRITUAL SITES IN BETWEEN, TAKE A SENSORY ROAD TRIP THROUGH AUSTRALIA’S BEATING HEART...

WORDS: Marie Barbieri

He suede on my once-brown hiking boots turns deep claret. The nearby ranges ferment from Rosé to Merlot. And the sky upstages the sparkle in our wine glasses with its scattering of southern stars, as a didgeridoo baritones the burgundy sand.

I’m sat upon Alice Springs’ ancient soils at Earth Sanctuary World Nature Centre, before a backdrop of Tjoritja (MacDonnell Ranges), the land of Yeperenye Aboriginal Caterpillar Dreaming stories.

Brothers Dan, Tom and Ben, and dad, Joe, run this 100-acre property, living in energy-efficient geodesic domes. Materialism doesn’t exist here. Through their advanced eco-certified, sustainable

Main image, Uluru’s many blushing cheeks

Images: Marie Barbieri
Outdoor dining at Earth Sanctuary
Uluru: where paintings were made
Mount Conner standing sentinel on the horizon, leaving only 400 head of cattle by 1967. Curtin Springs is now a popular Glistening salt plains near Mount Conner.

Crown land expanding the township’s current development will be located on recently released Crown land surrounding the township’s current 28,000 population. For further information, visit: www.landdevcorp.nt.gov.au

The following day, the real world returns: the Red Dusty Road. Today, my achy gluteals comfortably recover on an AAT Kings coach. We begin our 450-kilometre-long, six-hour drive towards the UNESCO-recognised Biosphere Reserve of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, contrary to its seemingly parched topsoil. Central Australia is well hydrated beneath the ground. “We have over 300 bores in the Great Artesian Basin,” informs our driver. The desert is far from barren, with stands of coolabah trees sporting tesselated bottoms and smooth bark flashing by.

We pass the turn-off for Chambers Pillar, named by John McDonnell Stuart. From the comfort of the vehicle, I think about Stuart’s historic 1862 return expedition crossing Australia from south to north. His route was used during the laying of the Overland Telegraph Line completed 30 years later, paving the way for pioneer-led pastoralism.

Organic beef is common here. Buffel grass is prolific across the landscape, which feeds cattle, however, it’s a pest to native plants. There can be 150 head of cattle on a road train, and we pass several over the next couple of hours.

Our mid-journey pit-stop is at Aboriginal-owned and run Mount Elenero Roadhouse and Art Gallery. Constructed mainly with desert oaks, it has a true outback feel, home to the much-photographed Bull Bar. And the gallery bursts with unique dot paintings by the Iamaps locals, as well as unique pyrography wood carvings.

“Breathing in the 360 degree space, I find it the least lonely landscape on earth.”

After crossing sandy riverbeds that boot camp the thighs, arcing around Spencer Hill is a breeze. Bar a handful of other cyclists, we pass only lizards and a flock of squeaking galahs: their pink and grey dot-paint the sand.

Approaching Curtin Springs, the landscape becomes poached with low bushes in glittering plum-red soil. Salt plans shine to our right, and Attila (Mount Conner) hogs the horizon to our left. The first-time visitor often mistakes Attila for Uluru. “We call it Fooluru!” jokes our driver.

Attila is enormous: 340 metres high (above the plain), and 32 kilometres in circumference. By contrast, Uluru is a similar 348 metres high, but with a smaller 9.4 kilometres perimeter.

Locals, Peter and Dawn Sevein define resilience. They developed Curtin Springs’ million-acre cattle station in 1956 with 1,500 head of cattle (today, 4,000). They lived in a bough shed (now a mind-blowing star and planet is a spread of Northern Territory-inpsired foods, alongside tenderloin chicken, scotch fillet steaks and fresh, seasonal veggies. Then kicks off a mind-blowing star and planet talk from Dan.

Above the still of the desert, we view the Milky Way, the Southern Cross, Scorpius and Libra, as-shooting stars zip up blackened nebulae. The talk brings to life indigenous stories of the sky. With a laser-pointer, Dan outlines the Emu constellation, as recognised by the indigenous people. The star-spangled sky reveals Saturn and its ring, viewed through a high-powered telescope. We’re all star-struck – literally – our terrestrial world seems light years away.

OUTBACK CYCLING
The following day, the real world returns: red and rumbly. I join Outback Cycling at Earth Sanctuary’s indigenous-inspired shine

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stopover for those heading to Uluru, offering free camping. And impressively, local native grasses are handmade into paper at the station’s old abattoir, impressively crafted into unique souvenirs.

On the final slog, desert oaks, mulga and spinifex part to reveal Uluru, one of the world’s most recognisable landmarks. We say: “Paly!” (“Hello” in the local language of the Anangu: the traditional custodians of Uluru and Kata Tjuta).

**SPIRITUAL ULURU**

Pre-dawn, I wake in a puffly bed at Ayers Rock Resort to join AAT Kings’ Uluru Sunrise and Sacred Sites tour. Our driver plays Tjukurpa Ninti (Touch the Silence) by indigenous songwriter, Stewart Gyakumungu, penned to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Ayers Rock Resort.

Tjukurpa is the Aboriginal spiritual law stemming from the creation period when Tjukurrpa ancestral beings began life. It denotes the Anangu people’s philosophy on how society lives with the land, respecting its plants, animals and people.

“We disembark at Talinguru Nyakunytjaku (the sunrise sun dancer lookout). As the dawn sun steps across the spinifex-tufted plain, Uluru’s many campfires might portray a person sitting in the sand. And those thin lines there may be of kalya (emu) footprints.”

The walk is a floral oasis, and was a lifeline for Anangu. Gum trees had a source of water beneath them. Desert bloodwoods created a nutritious sap. And women carved bowls from their trunks to carry food and water. Tracing ancestral footsteps and looking through Anangu eyes, Uluru’s base was carved by a snake.

“Evidence of creation beings are all around us,” says our guide. He points out a series of large honeycomb pits created by Minyma Kuniya, the non-venomous, woma python woman. She left behind knee prints, marks from her stick, and handfuls of earth. Here, Kuniya battled with Wati Kuyu, the poisonous mulga snake man.

We reach sacred Kapi Mutitjula (Mutitjula waterhole). Anangu believe that the spiritual wanampi (ancestral water snake) lives here, and guards the waterhole from intruders. The waterhole is in the shade right now. But a magical window to the sun-soaked sky and deep reds of Uluru’s escarpment.

“ULURU’S CHEEKS BLUSH DURING ITS MORNING MAKEOVER OF PASTEL OCHRES AND DEEP RUSTS”

A new day, and a 300 kilometre coach transfer from Uluru leads us to Watarrka National Park (Kings Canyon). The six kilometre rim walk begins with a 100 metre-climb up stone steps to the canyon’s jagged escarpment. Handsome ghost gums greet us at the top, shedding a white powder that Aboriginal people utilise as insect repellent.

The George Gill Range has been the traditional home of the Luritja people for 20,000 years. They fashioned spearheads from the spearwood vines and mulga trees here. Stuart, our guide, shows us the tjantja (bush tomato) plant, of which, only two types are edible.

A bonai fig grows from the vertical rock-face, as do mountain primrose flowers, and the yellow blooms of the desert lantern bush blossoms nearby. Alongside cacti, several hundred years old, a young spinifex pigeon poises.

We then climb through ‘Priscilla’s Gap’ that featured in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. Past this is Camel Rock, a formation impressively resembling a resting camel.

Kings Canyon’s 400 million year-old crusted walls guard a fossilised lakebed featuring ripple rock, preserving fossils from yesteryear. A precipitous timber ladderbridge then leads us over Kings Creek to the south rim.

Descending to the riverine-vegetated Garden of Eden, we take a breathe. This spring-fed waterhole quenches the thirst of lushi cycads, nardoo ferns and gum trees. Climbing once again, we capture arresting views of the beehive-like domes of the ‘Lost City’. These sand domes have been re-sculpted over millennia by wind and water. The final camera-happy moment points across to the freshly-sliced sheer walls of Kings Canyon’s gorge: a rockslide from 97 years ago.

**SCENIC RIMS**

“Stabling overnight at Kings Canyon Resort, I end my trip as I began: beneath the stars. The intimate Under a Desert Moon experience has us seated at tables around a crackling brazier for a degustation dinner. Delicacies include: herb-crusted Northern Territory Garden of Eden, we take a breathe. This spring-fed waterhole quenches the thirst of lushi cycads, nardoo ferns and gum trees. Climbing once again, we capture arresting views of the beehive-like domes of the ‘Lost City’. These sand domes have been re-sculpted over millennia by wind and water. The final camera-happy moment points across to the freshly-sliced sheer walls of Kings Canyon’s gorge: a rockslide from 97 years ago.

**DINING WITH THE STARS**

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**THE RED CENTRE**

Drive, cycle or hike the quartzite gorge country of Tjoritja (West MacDonnell National Park). Watch the black-footed rock wallabies at Simpson’s Gap. Needle through the sandstone cliffs at Standley Chasm. Take a dip at Ellery Creek Big Hole. Climb the ramparts of Ormiston Gorge. And try, waterhole-side, at sensational Redbank Gorge, at the western end of Tjoritja.

**DON’T MISS!**

[0x0]www.parksandwildlife.nt.gov.au/parks/find/Glen Helen Gorge: home to native desert Gorge. And lay, waterhole-side, at sensational Creek Big Hole. Climb the ramparts of Ormiston cleft of Standley Chasm. Take a dip at Ellery western end of Tjoritja Redbank Gorge, at the
dominating the Uluru area for over 22,000 years (scientists suggest around 30,000 in the MacDonnell Ranges, and around 60,000 in other parts of Australia). We begin the Kuniya Walk, learning that Uluru is actually grey in colour, as is evident in its rock shelters. It’s iron oxide that gives Uluru’s arcosic sandstone its rusty epidemics.

On the ceiling of Kulpi Nyininkaku cave, we admire indigenous rock art. Our guide tells us that: “Concentric circles can depict waterholes, honey ant nests or
Need to know... The Red Centre

GETTING THERE
Qantas (www.qantas.com) and Virgin Australia (www.virginaustralia.com) service Alice Springs from most Australian capital cities, and Jetstar (www.jetstar.com) services Uluru (Connellan Airport).

GETTING AROUND
Travel in comfort on a variety of Red Centre itineraries with AAT Kings (www.aatkings.com). Their fleet of new, large-windowed, air-conditioned coaches feature DVD entertainment and WiFi.

CLIMATE
The arid Red Centre experiences summer temperatures around 35 degrees Celsius, with winters bringing cool, sunny days (and overnight lows below freezing). Hat, sunscreen and water are necessary year round.

FURTHER INFO

SLEEP Overlooking the MacDonnell Ranges, Lasseters Hotel Casino (www.lasseters.com.au) offers a heated pool and spa. Family rooms boast two queen beds, and premium rooms showcase Indigenous artworks. From A$174 (£80) per night.

EAT Enjoy a vast Thai and Indian menu at Hanuman in Alice Springs (www.hanuman.com.au). Small plates will satisfy the kids while the adults can indulge in grilled wild barramundi, duck, beef, chicken and veggie dishes. The Punjabi lamb cutlets are divine!

DO Follow desert habitat walking trails at the Alice Springs Desert Park (www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au), which showcases local flora and fauna in a natural environment, and a fantastic birds of prey show. Family passes from A$43 (£20).

Voyages Ayers Rock Resort (www.ayersrockresort.com.au) is home to the exclusive Longitude 131, the closest accommodation to Uluru, boasting 15 luxury tents, elevated atop rust-red dunes. Priced from A$1,200 per person per night.

EAT The Sounds of Silence dinner (www.ayersrockresort.com.au) is served upon a dune overlooking Uluru and Kata Tjuta. Sunset-gaze enjoying canapés, sparkling wine, a bush tucker-themed buffet, indigenous performances and a star-talk. From A$195 (£90) per person.


SLEEP Camp beneath the stars at Kings Canyon Resort (www.kingscanyonresort.com.au) from A$20 (£9), or upgrade to hotel rooms sensitively hidden within the escarpment, from A$139 (£64) per night.

EAT Gecko’s Café located at Ayers Rock Resort (www.ayersrockresort.com.au) offers a fresh and crispy salad bar, and affordable burgers, steaks, pizza and pasta dishes, set within a buzzing Town Square.

DO Visit the Royal Flying Doctor Service Tourist Facility in Alice Springs (www.rfdsalicesprings.com.au). Learn how aeromedical care is provided to remote outback communities; watch the Reverend John Flynn hologram video; see old wireless transceivers; and board the replica Pilatus PC12. Entry is A$15 (£7).

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