Many great sights, and sites, exist in our minds, much thought about and clearly visualised, long before we see that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some many disappoint — too small, too large, too crowded, too remote — failing to live up to the wondrousness of our imaginations. I wonder if Uluru has ever fallen short of matching anyone’s expectations. I have a friend who tells me she’s in no hurry to visit it as it always be there. So pervasive is the imagery of that great bulbous shape, this extraordinary thing seemingly plopped in the arid middle of nowhere, that perhaps there is bucket-listers who feel they have already seen and touched Uluru and been overshadowed by it, reduced to a sense of nothingness.

Last week marked my fifth visit to Uluru, not many in a lifetime of travelling but the trips have been concentrated into the past six years. I went in June, now I’m back to check newly refurbished Longitude 131, the top lodges, set close to Voyages Ayers Rock Resort at Yulara, itself a varied and most comfortable base camp.

Longitude 131 has a new wellness spa and rejuvenated pool and outdoor bar area; also fresh to the mix is an extraordi- nary thing, an expansive of 50,000 stems of nifex on the orange-red soil appear like colourful canvases of the redoons. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon.

But I am not here to lie down. At least not yet. The 2km Mala Walk circuit around a portion of the base beckons. We enter the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and proceed in our small coach before assembling to follow a ranger along a marked walking trail edged with dusty-green wattle bushes and honey grev- lea. We pause to stand in the overhang of stony caverns with ridged ceilings that seem to bow like sails, their walls etched with the faded lines of age-old rock art. We listen to storytelling about the men’s cave where senior Mala males made their fires for ceremonies, and fixed their tools with kangaroo snow and plant resin. In the women’s kitchen cave, older females, girls and small children would prepare and cook bush tucker gathered in carved bowls. Some surfaces are smooth and even, pounded with stones used to smash seeds. Beyond these now-silent recesses, rangy circles of spini- nified on the orange-red soil appear like colourful canvases of the redoons. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon.

As the sun begins to set, Uluru changes colour with the speed of a slide-show as if the sandstone’s iron content is sitting beneath the surface. Out little group is so astonished that no one says a word. As the sun begins to set, Uluru changes colour with the speed of a slide-show as if the sandstone’s iron content is sitting beneath the surface. Out little group is so astonished that no one says a word.

Now it is jet-black night and Longitude 131 guests gather at the lodge’s Table 131 beside a fire pit. There are tables for two or more, set in a semicircle, and staff serve, as if summoned from a magician’s top hat, a four-course wine-matched dinner from an outdoor kitchen. It feels like dining in an African boma and we listen not for lions roaring but dingoes howling.

The British couple nearby jump at the sound of rustling. Snakes? No, it’s sommelier Sally unfolding stuffed linen napkins. The night is crisp and cold, the twice-baked cheese souffle is cooling too fast. Out come hooded ponchos and hot-water bottles as the temperature briskly drops to just above zero.

As the tarte tatin is served, bush guide Caroline is talking stars, aiming her time-green laser at the Southern Cross and Scorpio, pointing out the blazing brightness of Proxima Centauri. Caroline is a former South African camp manager and while chatting to her I am reminded of the typical safari cycle and the agreeable way that days and nights shape up. Breakfasts and dinners are hearty, lunches more laid-back affair, guests are early to rise and keen to retire after dinner. At Longitude 131, that could mean time to enjoy a swag slumber on your private deck, even if for just an hour or so until the warmth of indoors beckons.

While the Li’tya checklist


Determined to Design

Longitude 131 opened in 2002 and James and Hayley Baillie of Baillie Lodges took over management a decade later; its last phase of a series of refurbishments was completed ten years ago. It is now, however, that the venue has undergone a series of changes to better reflect the place and the experience of Uluru. The Baillies, who also operate Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island and Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, are well-known for creating nature-based properties that successfully meld creature comforts and environmental excellence with layers of creature comforts and environmental excellence with layers of luxury and top design.

But you won’t find fancy faderalders and inappropriate excess at all your lodges. Longitude 131, in particular, feels thoroughly earthed and therefore quite natural. Co-existence of sand, earth, bush shrubs and the charcoal of camp fires. Australian makers and designers have been given priority for the remake, from Max Pritchard Gunner Architects and furniture maker Nathan Day to lighting artists Pierre and Charlotte Julian and ceramist Malcolm Greenwood. Staff uniforms are by RM Williams; in-room toiletries have been especially blended with zestily exculcayhus and bush botanicals. Indigenous connections are far from tokenistic here. While the Li’tya products used at the two-room Spa

**SUSAN KUROSAWA**

TRAVEL & INDULGENCE TRAVEL & INDULGENCE

when the 4pm alarm signals an end to siesta, I press the automatic switch. The reveal is slow and tantalising. First the bright soil and desert oaks, and then Uluru, caught by the afternoon light, is a shade of greyish mauve. It looks one-dimensional from a distance, a painted scrim. From the side window, I see that Kata Tjuta is getting dressed for sunset, its domes, big and small and jumbled, will soon be a deep lavender and then swiftly bronzed and humushed.

It is so unutterably beautiful, so immutable and imbued with significance, that I burst into tears. On a scenic helicopter whirl from Ayers Rock Airport on a clear, warm morning, we hover over Uluru and the perspective is so different. No longer a dwarfed ant looking up, I feel like a dragonfly buzzing high. The rock is not a flat, uni-faceted thing but a blocky mass of striations and honeycombs, of plucky bursts of greenery clinging in grooves. It’s so furrowed that some of its indentations form clearly defined shapes, such as a brain and the tracery of animal tracks.

It is this topographical perspective that informs indigenous painting. Look down and see those ochre, green and white canvases with shapes of clustered vegetation, riverbeds, song lines and the honoured Tjukurpa stories of country, ancestry and law. There are many places that truly touch the soul but the red centre has me hooked. I have insisted my sceptical friend must advance it to the top of her bucket list. Now she’s ready to tick off Uluru and Kata Tjuta at sunrise and sunset, to tackle Walpa Gorge and walk the Valley of the Winds, and visit the Cultural Centre to appreciate the customs of the Anangu people, handed back the title deeds to their land as shamefully late as 1985.

And, yes, she will stay at Longitude 131, with Uluru out front and Kata Tjuta to her right. She’ll book a 13hupa body ritual at Spa Kinara and succumb to a body mask of yellow desert clay and then rinse off in an outdoor shower, perhaps with wedge-tailed eagles circling and the spirits of rufous hare wallabies swishing about in the spinifex.

You could call it a bucket list experience with benefits.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Baillie Lodges.