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# THE

The sacred sites of Uluru and Kata Tjuta sit at the very heart of Australia, both geographically and spiritually. Fall under their spell on a luxury tour of the Red Centre.

A landscape photograph of Uluru at sunset. The rock formation is a deep red color, and the sky is a mix of orange and blue. In the foreground, there is a field of tall, dry grass. Large white text is overlaid on the image.

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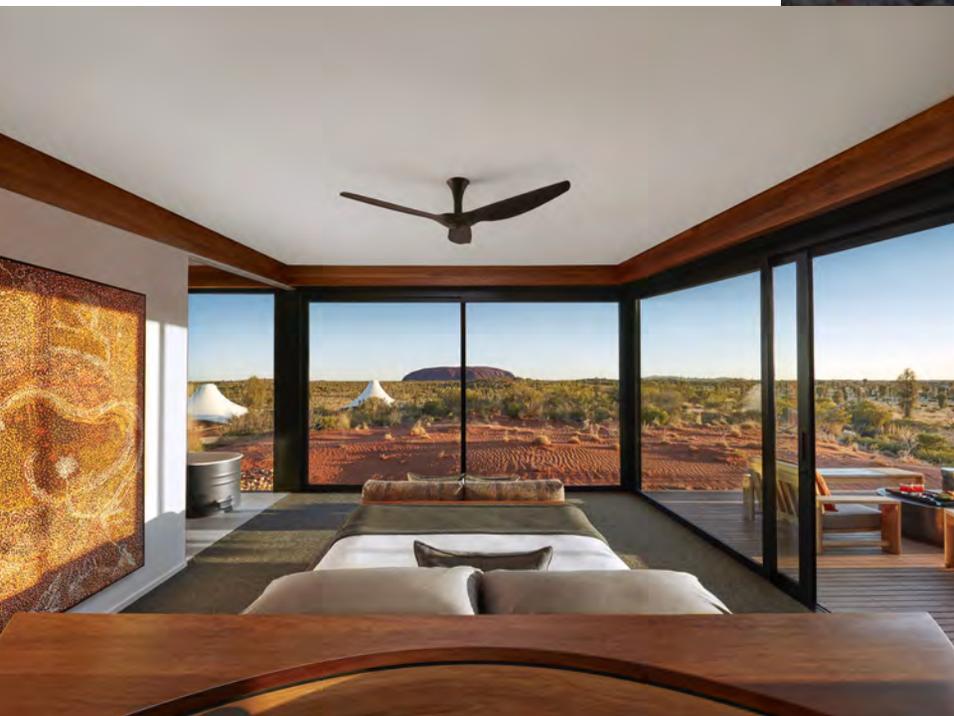
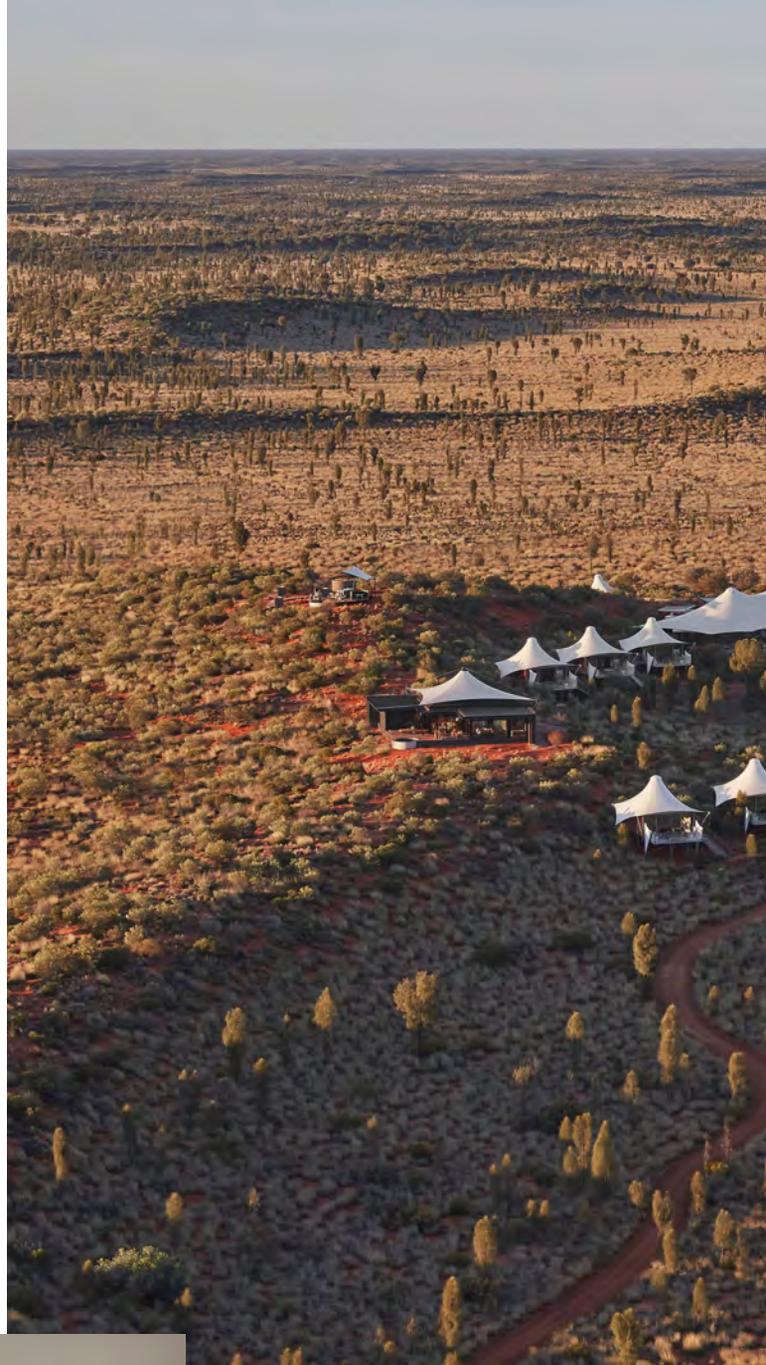
**LURU LOOKS SOFT** from a distance. The curved contours of its face, worn down by the elements over millennia, fold like fabric. Rising up through the grey-green spinifex grass that moves with the breeze, this Central Australian landmark is deceptive. The entire landscape looks soft, inviting — but don't believe it.

'Warning!' shouts the sign that welcomes us to the start of the Valley of the Winds walk at the Red Centre's other famous rock formation, Kata Tjuta: 'Hot weather closure point, do not enter after 11am, or if the temperature is 36 degrees or above'.

Hardly inviting — and it is hot but, luckily for us, not hot enough for the walk to be closed down. Kata Tjuta is around 40 kilometres west of Uluru and, though it's less famous, locals often cite this rock formation as their favourite. And it has a different energy. While its easy to scoff at visitors who enthuse about the 'presence' of these natural wonders, it's not easily understood until you're physically here. Kata Tjuta feels gentler, more secretive and shy than the bold, brash Uluru. Hiking through its deep gorges allows you to appreciate it even more.

At 7.5 kilometres it's one of the longer walks on offer, but the goosebump-inducing views at almost every turn are worth it. The track starts as a scramble down the slippery terrain (wear good walking shoes), but as you get closer to the rock face it levels out. The soaring red crags stretch around us, spotted with tenacious plants clinging to the surface; the walk gets steeper, but the close embrace of the rock widens out to allow stunning views to come into focus. Miles of bright blue sky, contrasting and changing reds, soft greens and greys of the native plants. Mother Nature in all her finery.

We've recruited a renegade band of fellow hikers who swapped the more sedate Walpa Gorge walk to join us. A couple from Luxembourg, a young German girl and her sprightly 72-year-old mother. We work around language barriers with clumsy gesturing, but once we reach the Karingana Lookout words aren't needed. We stare, dumbstruck, taking in the views.



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** The Dune Pavilion has views over Uluru and Kata Tjuta; Longitude 131° from the air; Kata Tjuta; seeing rain cascading down the rock is a once-in-a-lifetime experience; take advantage of Professional Helicopter Services for the best view of the Red Centre.



## FIELD OF LIGHT

Bruce Munro's spectacular light installation has been extended until December 2020. This extraordinary piece of art comprises 50,000 bulbs of light turning from deep violet to blue to white across the desert landscape.

Take a tour through it, or treat yourself by booking into the Sounds of Silence dinner, where guests can watch the sunset while sipping sparkling wine, before dining under a star-filled sky. At the end, guests take a tour into the lights. Visit [www.ayersrockresort.com.au](http://www.ayersrockresort.com.au) to book.

As the temperature rises, we head back to the resort to rinse off the dust and congratulate ourselves with champagne in the Dune Top pool. Such is a stay at Longitude 131°: soul-touching experiences bookended by luxury indulgences.

First opened in 2003, the resort was taken over by Baillie Lodges in 2013 and has since undergone a number of gentle upgrades, but in August last year, the most ambitious remodel was unveiled. After a spend of more than \$8 million, the resort now boasts a number of structural changes, including the Dune Top. Situated on the highest spot of the property, it features a round pool offering panoramic views of Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

The new Dune Top common area is joined by the Dune House — the main building of the resort — in getting more than just a spit and polish. Walls have been taken down to

open up the space, a wide outdoor terrace added for alfresco dining options and, as always with a Baillie-designed property, much attention has been paid to the finishing touches and smallest details. Custom-made timber furniture adds warmth, and colour schemes blend and meld with the bush outside. The tiled back of the open bar was designed by an up-and-coming artist from the Ernabella Arts Community, who then enlisted other members to paint each tile individually.

In fact, the Baillies' integration of Indigenous art and culture into the property is much deeper than just a polite nod. All the artworks here are sourced from nearby art centres.

"Engaging with local Indigenous communities through their art centres is a way for our guests to learn about their culture," explains Baillie Lodges co-founder Hayley Baillie. ➤



**FROM LEFT** The Valley of the Winds hike through Kata Tjuta; you'll find modern delicacies at Dune House.

## DETAILS

**Longitude 131°**  
[www.longitude131.com.au](http://www.longitude131.com.au) **Professional Helicopter Services**  
[www.phs.com.au](http://www.phs.com.au)

“The financial contribution to this local economy is often the only way income is brought into the community. It also ensures the culture is maintained across generations.”

At reception, a large piece by the Wynne Prize-winning collaboration, the Ken sisters, reflects the colours of an outback sunset; ceramic vases created during a residency at the Big Pot Factory in Jingdezhen, China are scattered through common areas, while the lobby doubles as a small art gallery.

Two more buildings were added during the most recent renovation: the Dune Pavilion, a two-bedroom accommodation option that offers unfettered views of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, private plunge pool and custom-made furniture; and Spa Kinara, a domed, rusted-steel building that merges with the red outback soil. Here again, Indigenous influences are integrated through custom-made artworks and inclusion of native ingredients such as scented emu bush in spa treatments.

These structures join the 16 famous white tented rooms that mimic the pitched tents of the early settlers of Australia. Each room features design details that are inspired by one of these pioneers. There's the Kidman room that celebrates cattle rancher Sidney Kidman, and one named for William John Wills of Burke and Wills fame. During the recent renovation, the Baillies made the decision to include more Indigenous culture into the rooms as well, celebrating the first Australians. Artworks adorn the walls, wooden sculptures sit on table tops and there are traditional baskets from the Tjanpi Desert Weavers. Outside, each 'tent' is a deck from which you can gaze over this wide expanse of land. Enjoy a cup of tea from the daybed or spend a night under the stars in a swag, warmed by the gas fireplace.

Here, you're encouraged to be an explorer yourself — days are structured safari-like, making the most of early morning and late afternoon, and leaving the hot middle of the day to lounge by the pool. On arrival at the lodge guests are taken through suggested itineraries, giving them a chance to explore Uluru and Kata Tjuta in different ways — but always in luxury.

For many visitors the first experience of Uluru is at sunset the day of check in. Guests meet for drinks in the Dune Pavilion before being transported by minibus to the viewing area. Champagne and canapés in hand, we join the throngs of excited tourists waiting to witness the colours of sunset. Soon, chatter is swapped for furious camera-clicking as the rock turns from shimmering gold to deep red to moody purple in the space of half an hour. This phenomenon can be explained by science but the magic of the spectacle, and its lasting impression on all who see it, is what you take away. “Just going to get one more,” says our driver as he pulls over, jumps out and takes another shot of Uluru. So mesmerising is the scene that even a man who has seen it a thousand times can't get enough.

Another walk sees our group being guided along a section of the rock and given the history of the Mala people. Uluru holds centuries of Indigenous culture in its stone and is the star of many Creation stories. Such tales were not only told to teach children moral lessons, but also to help these nomadic people navigate the land. The stories were built around Songlines, which follow natural ridges and formations across the entire country. Each story is a chapter of longer tales that weave together. The walk concludes in a naturally occurring cave which allows you to get 'inside' the rock, then we gather at a small but permanent pool where, again, drinks are served.

The Indigenous culture of the area is all encompassing and a visit to the Cultural Centre is a must. Here, Creation stories and Tjukurpa, the traditional law that guides the lives of the Anangu people, add yet another level of spirituality to the visit.

There are any number of ways to get close to Uluru, but to truly understand the scale of the landscape you need to get up high. Professional Helicopter Services offers everything from a 10-minute scoot over Uluru to a three-and-a-half-hour air safari to Kings Canyon. If time is short, book the trip as your transfer back to the airport for your return flight. The resort takes care of your luggage while you marvel at Uluru and Kata Tjuta from the air. From high, the expanse of the flat desert below highlights the otherworldliness of these landmarks even more. How these inanimate objects elicit such emotion in the millions of people who visit them each year is something you have to experience yourself to understand. 

**GETTING THERE** TO BOOK YOUR FLIGHT TO AYERS ROCK (ULURU), VISIT [WWW.VIRGINAUSTRALIA.COM](http://WWW.VIRGINAUSTRALIA.COM) OR CALL 13 67 89 (IN AUSTRALIA).