

KIRSTIE BEDFORD TAKES A TRIP TO THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY'S HEART TO VISIT ONE
OF THE NATION'S MOST SIGNIFICANT LIVING
CULTURAL LANDSCAPES.

ULTIMATE *Aussie* ADVENTURES

FEATURE

FEATURE



It's hot up here. Not just a throw on your shorts and thongs kind of hot; it's a heat that takes your breath and sears the landscape. Our clothes are stuck to our skin, the flies are in abundance, and no body part is off limits – not your eyes or ears or mouth.

Our driver greets us with face nets and it's a welcome relief to climb into the air-conditioned van that eases out of Ayres Rock Airport down a long, burnt-orange road. Our surrounds are a vast contrast to anything we've seen. The only break in the Mars-like landscape is the odd low-lying spinifex and the blackened trunks of twiggy eucalyptus and acacia trees. It doesn't take long before Uluru comes into view. There's no slow build to seeing this 600-million-year-old sandstone monolith, such is its size. You are given a glorious glimpse from the air as you fly in, and the 348-metre-high rock

looms over the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, as if watching your every move.

We drive to the tiny town of Yulara, and our driver points out the few buildings – the local pub, a campground, shopping area and police station – we pass. We see no one, and it's hard to imagine more than 300,000 people visit each year. Historically (from the late 1930s), many visitors came purely with the intent of climbing Uluru, despite it being sacred to the local Anangu traditional owners for tens of thousands of years. However, as visitors learned more about the spiritual significance of the site, the number of climbers reduced, until it was eventually decided to prohibit it altogether in October 2019. That doesn't, however, mean it's completely off limits. You can still walk the 9.4-kilometre circumference of the base and into some of the caves, something we're looking forward to later in our trip.

Above: Some of the 16 luxury pavilions at Longitude 131, each named after an outback explorer and all have picture-perfect Uluru views.

Right: Inside one of the tented suites, and the Dune Top's plunge pool on the district's best viewing platform.

Lay in THE LAP OF LUXURY

Ten minutes after leaving the airport we arrive at our resort, Longitude 131. The luxury wilderness camp has 16 tented pavilions, each named after an outback explorer, dotted among the red-rust dunes of the desert, as if they always belonged there.

In the main lodge, large paintings by Aboriginal artists lean against windows and walls. There is a bar decorated with 500 tiles hand-designed by the local Anangu people, a lounge, and the main restaurant, where tables are lined along the windows for picture-perfect views of Uluru.

We're met by Ben Lanyon, who runs the property with his wife, Louise. He takes us to the Dune Top, a lookout point that he tells us is "the best viewing platform in the district", and it's not hard to see why. Uluru sits majestically as the backdrop to a circular pool and the white-peaked roofs of the pavilions. We linger in the view by the self-serve bar before Ben takes us to our luxury tent, a short walk away. Inside flowing white fabric is draped from the ceiling above a king-size bed that faces floor-to-ceiling doors that frame Uluru, as if it's a superimposed artwork. There's a mini-bar and all the extras you'd need including espresso machine, Bose speaker and iPad, but no TV, not that you'd miss it.

The resort is all-inclusive and we head to the bar for a drink and to go over our plans for the next few days. Dinner is a daily changing affair with multiple options. The food philosophy is a nose-to-tail and root-to-shoot approach, and it's exquisite – as are the fine wines paired with the cuisine, served by attentive staff. Tonight we dine on prosciutto-wrapped grissini,



goat's curd, rocket and heirloom tomato granita, followed by deep sea cod with white bean puree, edamame, micro herbs and a citrus gel, and finish with a Daintree chocolate mousse gateaux as the sun sets over the iconic monolith.



Into KATA TJUTA

It's 9am and already 32 degrees when we meet our guide, Georgia-May, for a trip to Kata Tjuta, Uluru's lesser known but equally impressive neighbour, once known as the Olgas. Kata Tjuta means 'many heads', which is apt given its 36 domes. This rock is actually bigger than Uluru, and its tallest dome soars to 546 metres.

Georgia-May points out an active sacred site that's for men only. She says visitors aren't permitted, and no one, including the Aboriginal women, know what takes place here. There are, however, several other areas you can explore, including the Walpa Gorge, which we're about to walk. It's an easy track, just 2.6 kilometres return, and carves its way between the two tallest

domes. As we're enveloped by the towering rocks, Georgia-May tells us they are actually only the tips – both Uluru and Kata Tjuta continue underground for up to six kilometres.

On our way back we stop at the Uluru Cultural Centre and learn the Anangu people weren't recognised as the traditional land owners until 1985, after more than 35 years of campaigning. It's a sobering thought.

We are heading back across the reddened plains when Georgia-May slows the van to point out a camel almost camouflaged in the distance. Wildlife is few and far between, but if you're lucky you'll spot an eagle, dingo or lizard and if not, there's a resident lizard at Longitude 131 called Frank. He's a male sand goanna, more than a metre in length, who often frequents the area around the pavilions.

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Up close WITH ULURU

The next day we're up early, which is not easy given the generous wine matching with our degustation menu the night before. We're heading to the base of Uluru and excitement is high. On the way our guide, Dani, points out the closed Aboriginal community of Mutitjulu and tells us how the people here continue to live by ancient laws and traditions passed down through Dreamtime stories from their ancestors to this day.

We round a corner and Uluru towers over us. From here, we can see the deep crevices that run the length of the rock, as if a giant red curtain has been draped over it.

We park and walk around the base to the teaching caves where there are Aboriginal drawings estimated to be 10,000

years old. For many generations, Anangu elders taught boys how to travel and survive in these caves. Grandfathers would paint pictures much like a teacher uses a blackboard.

DEEP CREVICES RUN THE LENGTH OF THE ROCK, AS IF A GIANT RED CURTAIN HAS BEEN DRAPED OVER IT.

We end the tour sipping champagne and strategically eating canapés under our face nets. It's a completely different experience to see Uluru this close and marvel in a living cultural landscape, where it's believed spirits of the ancestors of the traditional owners still reside.

Above: The deep crevices that run the length of one side of Uluru.



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We head back to the resort and spend the rest of the day dining, lounging in the resort pool, and resting in our pavilion admiring Uluru. When the sun starts to set, we're taken to another spot to take photos as the rock transforms from a brown-orange to a glowing red – a natural display that happens every sunrise and sunset. It's a humbling experience and quiet reflection plays out on the way back to the resort.

That evening we dine at Table 131° – a remote dune top at Longitude 131 – under a blanket of stars. Tonight's menu includes mango and chilli soup with glazed prawn tartar and lilly pilly, miso-braised wagyu beef cheek with Asian coconut gravy and broccoli, and crème brûlée tart with biscotti and rosemary honey gel. I wonder if I've ever eaten anything so decadent in my life.

While days here are hot, by night the temperature drops and it's the perfect time for stargazers. Low humidity and no artificial light means you're guaranteed unobstructed views of the Milky Way. We're guided through some of the constellations before heading back to our pavilion, where a swag has been laid atop the daybed on our balcony. Near the orange glow of the gas fire are carafes of Baileys, cognac and port. It's another personal touch by the staff, offered every second night.



We sip our selected spirits in front of the fire and gaze at those endless stars, knowing that when sunrise comes Uluru will be there, changing its colours as if just for us.

Top: Walking the base of Uluru is a great opportunity to explore the Aboriginal rock art, dating back to 10,000 years. Above: The jaw-dropping views from the pavilions at Longitude 131.

10 OTHER EXCEPTIONAL LOCAL TRIPS

you need to take



FEATURE

ROAM WITH WILDLIFE

^ KAKADU NATIONAL PARK *Northern Territory*

UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park will not only get you close to wildlife, it's also one of the most spiritual journeys you will ever make. The park is jointly managed by the Bininj/Mungguy people and Parks Australia, and has one of the world's greatest concentrations of rock art sites, with some paintings estimated at 20,000 years old. Mangrove-lined coastlines and

endless floodplains make it a bird-lover's paradise, with more than 280 bird species to spot. The park is also home to 77 types of mammals, 50 species of fish and 132 different reptiles. With thousands of saltwater crocodiles calling Kakadu home, swimming is definitely out, but open-top 4WDs and airboats provide an extraordinary safari experience. Bunker down for the night at Bamurru Plains, on the edge of the park. It's luxury bungalows built on stilts offer perfect views of the annual magpie goose migration.

bamurruplains.com

> FLINDERS RANGES, *South Australia*

Among the towering ancient cliffs and tree-lined gorges of the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park, you'll get a large dose of iconic Aussie wildlife. The 95,000-hectare park is home to kangaroos, wallabies (including the rare yellow-footed rock wallaby), quolls, possums, emus, galahs and the wedge-tailed eagle. The Adnyamathanha people have lived here for tens of thousands of years, and the area is renowned for its natural amphitheatre, Ikara (also known as Wilpena Pound), which is the centrepiece of the park. Overnight at Arkaba Homestead, a former sheep station turned private wildlife conservancy, where daily excursions are designed by dedicated conservationists and nights are spent curled up in the library or in front of the open fire. The rustic-chic 1850s farmhouse has just five guestrooms and accommodates a maximum of 10 guests.

arkabaconservancy.com



Photo: Great Walks of Australia.



ADVENTURE SEEKERS

^ NITMILUK GORGE, *Northern Territory*

Could there be a more Aussie adventure than this? Jump in a helicopter, soar over the jaw-dropping 13 gorges in the Nitmiluk National Park then stop at your own private waterhole and take a dip. End your day with a cruise through the gorges to see if you can spot a croc (they're mostly freshies around here).

For a land-based adventure, grab your hiking boots and tackle the five-day, 62-kilometre Jatbula Trail, where you can immerse yourself in rainforest and admire ancient rock art. A getaway here wouldn't be complete without staying at Cicada Lodge, a five-star resort overlooking the Katherine River and owned by the local Jawoyn People. Every room features artworks by local Indigenous artists.

nitmiluktours.com.au



INTO THE ISLES

< FLINDERS ISLAND, *Tasmania*

Sparkling beaches, rugged ranges and abundant wildlife make Flinders Island the ideal getaway for those wanting to get close to nature. And while it may be remote, there's no need to go without. The island has a rising reputation for its chefs, artisan producers and entrepreneurs, and its own gourmet hub called The Flinders Wharf. Here, guest chefs are invited to dive, forage, hunt and meet local producers, before serving their own menu for a weekend. Unwind at Wombat Lodge, a three-bedroom farmstay a short walk to Stacky's Bight Beach, or its sister property, The Cray Shack, located right on the foreshore with some of the best views the island has to offer.

theflinderswharf.com.au

THROW IN A LINE

^ THE KIMBERLEY, *Western Australia*

Dream of catching a big barra? You're not alone. Anglers from all over the globe head to the Kimberley for the chance to go on a heli-fishing adventure. However, with an area covering Australia's entire northwestern corner (that's three times the size of England!), the elusive barra isn't easy to find. Your best

bet is to stay at Berkeley River Lodge, one of Australia's most remote luxury lodges (and only accessible by air), and head out with the experienced guides who will help you find the big one, along with mangrove jack, archerfish, grunter and catfish. When you return from a day's fishing, or three days if you wish, the chef will cook your catch while you enjoy a drink and watch the sun set over the Timor Sea.

berkeleyriverlodge.com.au



OPEN YOUR HEART

< HAMILTON ISLAND, *Queensland*

In a world first, guests to Hamilton Island can now visit Heart Reef following the launch of Heart Island, a state-of-the-art floating pontoon. Previously, the only way to see this reef was from the air, but after a decade of development and a multi-million dollar investment, you can now cruise right up.

The James Bond-like experience begins when you board a chopper with Hamilton Island Air and are whisked away to the split-level pontoon, where a glass-bottom boat will be waiting to take you to the famous reef. Jump in the water to swim or snorkel, or simply sit back and take in the crystal-clear waters of the Great Barrier Reef. Treat yourself to a few nights at adults-only Qualia, where ocean-facing pavilions are surrounded by tropical bushland, and you can dine at one of two world-class restaurants.

hamiltonislandair.com
qualia.com.au

Photos: Above; Robbie Josephsen, Left; Ken Butti

TEE OFF

> BRIDPORT, *Tasmania*

Want to take a swing on one of the best golf courses in the world? Grab the clubs and head to The Dunes at Barnbougle, on the remote coast of northeast Tasmania. The former potato farm is rated the second-best golf course in Australia, and 11th in the world. Designed by US golf course architect Tom Doak and former Australian professional golfer Mike Clayton, the fairways are wide and the greens roll with the natural undulation of the dunes. If your travel companion isn't a golfer, there are plenty of other things to do. Seven of the country's top cool-climate vineyards are nearby, including Jansz, producer of one of Tassie's finest sparkling wines. About an hour's drive away you can stroll the museums, art galleries and cafes of the Apple Isle's second largest city, Launceston. Stay at The Dunes, in one of the new Ocean Villas. These two-bedroom additions are perched atop a coastal sand dune with views across Bass Strait and Barnbougle Beach.

barnbougle.com.au





WINE AND DINE

^ DAYLESFORD, *Victoria*

Daylesford's award-winning Lake House is owned by the doyenne of regional dining, chef Alla Wolf-Tasker and her artist husband, Allan. Luxury accommodation accompanies a two-hat restaurant and a purpose-built kitchen where cooking classes are held. Suites have deep ceramic tubs, sun-drenched courtyards and lake access. There's also

an art studio where you can peruse Allan's work, a state-of-the-art spa and an infinity pool overlooking Lake Daylesford. Lake House guests can also stay at the newly opened Dairy Flat Farm, a 10-minute drive away. The 16-hectare property has an olive grove, vineyard with pinot noir and chardonnay grapes, and a bakehouse specialising in slow-fermented sourdough.

lakehouse.com.au
dairyflatfarmdaylesford.com.au



^ THE BAROSSA VALLEY, *South Australia*

The Barossa Valley is one of the country's oldest wine regions, home to more than 150 wineries and 80 cellar doors, including some of the biggest names in Australian wine, including Penfolds, Jacob's Creek and Wolf Blass. Here you'll find all the European charm you'd expect in regional Italy – villages and hamlets surrounded by vineyards and sweeping mountain views – and all less than an hour's drive from Adelaide. Be sure to visit Henschke, where the sixth generation of family members is now at the helm, and Seppeltsfield, which releases a 100-year-old single vintage wine annually. Stay at the Barn at Barossa Shiraz Estate, which was once the Royal Mail Coach House and still features the original stone walls and enormous windows with panoramic vineyard views.

barossashirazestate.com.au



ART LOVERS

< MELBOURNE, *Victoria*

Ever wished you could wander around a museum after dark? Well, now you can. The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) is offering an exclusive experience where you will get full access to the gallery, enjoy an intimate music performance, and dine in front of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's revered masterpiece, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*. The St Kilda Road building houses more than 70,000 works that span thousands of years. Stay at The Westin, at the Paris end of Collins Street, just a 10-minute walk from the gallery across the Yarra River, where rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows frame views of city skyscrapers and historic buildings.

culturalattractionsofaustralia.com
marriott.com.au



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