

Since time

Returning to Australia's Red Centre three decades after its otherworldly landscapes and enigmatic energy first stopped her in her tracks, LAUREN JARVIS discovers cutting-edge technology and empowered First Nations women telling its timeless stories in compelling new ways.



The Milky Way's silver glitter shimmers across the inky dome of night as I step out into the pre-dawn stillness of the Central Australian desert. Soaring oaks form stoic battalions silhouetted against the sky as I make my way to a wooden deck that murmurs with human voices.

Before me, a timeless landscape bathes in aqua and violet light that illuminates spinifex grass, umbrella bush and bloodwood, as a vast, dark mound slumbers on the horizon, its distinctive shape dusted in moonlight. Music rises from the plains as I pull a blanket close, and a woman's voice speaks in mellifluous Indigenous Pitjantjatjara.

"This is our Country," she says. "You are on Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara land. Our Country

holds many stories. Our stories have always been here. They are here now and will be for ever."

It's April, the time known as Wanitjunkupai by the Anangu, a collection of several Aboriginal groups who have lived in Central Australia – aka the Red Centre – for at least 30,000 years. One of five seasons, Wanitjunkupai has brought crisp air, as the desert begins its transition to winter, and showers that have seen the ochre dunes burst into life with swaying golden grasses and whispering viridescent trees. As the sun – and with it music – begins to rise, the desert blooms with magic of a man-made kind, a sound-and-light show that paints a vibrant artwork across the land, projecting on to the desert's natural canvas birds, animal tracks, storm clouds and

Photography courtesy of Tourism NT/@domandjesso and Tourism NT/Luke Tscharke





Photography of Ngura nganampa Wiru mulapa with artists Denise Brady, Valerie Brumby and Selina Kulitja courtesy of Sunrise Journeys/2025 Voyages indigenous Tourism Australia

The inside track



KYLIE MANSFIELD is lodge manager at luxury wilderness camp Longitude 131°, in the heart of Australia's Red Centre. She has worked in hospitality for more than 25 years, at locations ranging from Lord Howe Island in the Tasman Sea, to the Barossa Valley, in South Australia's wine country.

Marvel

If you're lucky enough to be in the Red Centre when it rains, head out to the national park to see waterfalls cascading down the sides of Uluru. Wildflowers will bloom soon after and your perception of the desert will be completely turned on its head.

Explore

One of my favourite ways to experience the Red Centre is by helicopter, flying high above the landscape, its contours and patterns reflecting the beauty and wisdom of Aboriginal stories told in paintings for thousands of years.

Mingle

Alice Springs is known as the Queer Heartbeat of the Red Centre. Try the Epilogue Lounge or Alice Springs Brewery, and sync your trip to coincide with the fabAlice Festival in March, which showcases inclusive drag, family and cabaret events.

wildflowers – symbols used to tell the story of the oldest surviving culture on Earth.

Called *Sunrise Journeys*, the show, staged by Ayers Rock Resort, is the latest visitor experience to use state-of-the-art technology to illuminate ancient Aboriginal stories in the Red Centre. Central to it is a painting commissioned from three celebrated Anangu artists (*pictured left, from left to right*) – Selina Kulitja, Denise Brady and Valerie Brumby. Entitled *Ngura Nganampa Wiru Mulapa*, which translates from Pitjantjatjara as 'our Country is truly beautiful', it is recreated in the show at massive scale in light. With a dramatic score by Australian guitarist and composer Jeremy Whiskey, and design by Mandylights, a company that creates installations for the *Vivid Sydney* lighting spectacular, *Sunrise Journeys* is followed each morning by a native-inspired breakfast at the resort, as the sun's rays awaken the spectacular desert panorama and reveal in the distance the monumental, world-famous landmarks Uluru and Kata Tjuta, formerly known respectively as Ayers Rock and The Olgas.

"Our hearts burn with passion to share our Country and knowledge with the world," Denise tells me. "We created *Sunrise Journeys* to invite people into our culture and share our way of life." The canvas is currently on display at the Gallery of Central Australia at Ayers Rock Resort – Uluru's accommodation, dining and shopping hub – which partners with community arts centres and independent artists and galleries to spotlight Aboriginal art through exhibitions, artist-in-residence programmes and workshops.

It's been three decades since I first visited Australia's remote and wildly beautiful Red Centre, which also encompasses the storied outback town of Alice Springs and the epic gorges of Watarrka National Park's Kings Canyon, immortalised in the movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Planning a two-night backpacker stay, I made the snap decision to seek work at Ayers Rock Resort, and stayed three months, bewitched by the magnetic magic that radiates from Uluru and the sirenic spell of the impossibly starry night skies. Connection to Country, to others and to self deepened, and, a world away from my South London roots, this place remains, unfathomably, where I feel most at home.

Today, it's beautiful to see how respectful connection with the land's authentic culture through experiences shaped by its traditional custodians is an increasingly essential part of both the visitor experience and daily local life. Travellers will now find meaningful and ever-more innovative ways to engage with Aboriginal culture all over the continent, but in Central Australia, these are as

omnipresent as the sacred rock that looms 348m (1,142ft) above the dunes, dominating the landscape.

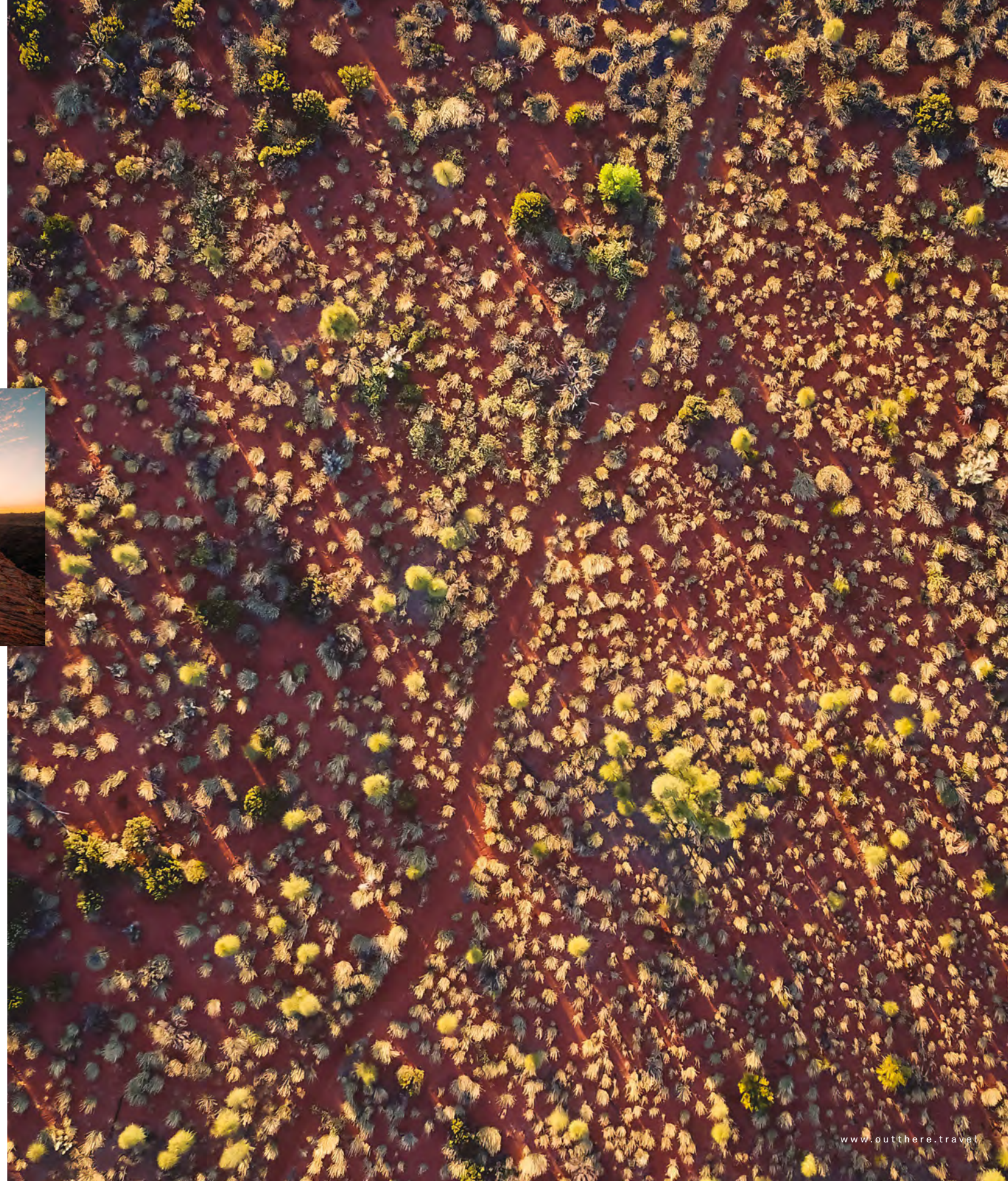
On this visit, my Red Centre trip begins in Alice Springs (Mparntwe, pronounced *m-ban-tua*, to its traditional Arrernte custodians), a small but spirited town with an airport offering flights to many of the country's state capitals, and a station on the Adelaide to Darwin railway line plied by legendary luxury train *The Ghan*. It's also home to one of the highest proportions of lesbian couples in the country, a phenomenon said to have its roots in the 1980s feminist activist peace camp at nearby Pine Gap, protesting against uranium mining and nuclear war.

Galleries along the town's Todd Mall showcase world-renowned Aboriginal art from the Central and Western Desert regions, as do local community spaces, including the Araluen Arts Centre. As at Uluru's galleries, these are great places to learn more about Aboriginal dot paintings' depictions of geographical features from an aerial perspective and decorative motifs. Also intriguing is the way artists incorporate coded references to aspects of Tjukurpa, a philosophy that shaped Anangu moral and societal structures and customs.

The town also hosts the annual *Parrtjima: A Festival in Light*, which celebrated its 10th year this April. An award-winning 10-night spectacular, *Parrtjima* brings Indigenous art and culture to life through immersive large-scale light installations and soundscapes, comedy, music and talks. Themed 'Timelessness', this year's edition included a light show projected on to the MacDonnell Ranges and a performance by the Darwin Symphony Orchestra with Indigenous singer/songwriters the Desert Divas.

"The Arrernte love this festival, because it's a platform to show everyone who they really are, rather than how the media often stereotypes them," says *Parrtjima* curator Rhoda Roberts, a Widjabul Wia-bal journalist, author and activist from the Bundjalung territories in New South Wales. "It's about expressing our desire for our culture to be embraced, rather than feared."

After a five-hour drive along 290 miles (470km) of desert highway edged by vermilion dunes, I arrive at Uluru, a deeply sacred site for the Aboriginal peoples of the area, and in many ways Australia's epicentre. The area became a national park in 1950, which was extended eight years later to encompass Kata Tjuta, 25 miles (40km) to Uluru's west, whose 36 vast granite and basalt domes glow rust red, amber, lilac and plum as the sun crosses the sky. These 'many heads', as Kata Tjuta translates, are also home to important ancient ceremonial areas, and were given an initial 1987 World Heritage listing for their rare geological formations, plants and animals.



Do...

make sure you're well prepared if you're planning to hike in the Red Centre. Always check the weather conditions, carry lots of water and wear a hat and high-factor sunscreen.

Do...

take home some Aboriginal art. You'll find original Indigenous artworks by established and rising stars in the various galleries in Yulara, Alice Springs and around Uluru.

Do...
make time to experience Aboriginal culture, whether it's a tour of Uluru with one of the land's traditional owners or dining on Indigenous-inspired cuisine.



Get out there

Don't...

take photographs or film Aboriginal people without asking for their permission first. Look out for signs that highlight sacred Indigenous sites – these shouldn't be photographed either.

Don't...

rely on your smartphone or your car's GPS when you're driving in the Red Centre, as reception can be unreliable or non-existent. Always carry a physical map as a back-up.

Don't...

hike off the designated trails and paths in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. It's home to delicate ecosystems, wildlife and areas of cultural significance to the Anangu People.



Photography by Julian Kingma and courtesy of Tourism NT/Matthew Vandeputte, Tourism NT/@domandjesso, Tourism NT/Sean Scott and Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia



Photography courtesy of Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia

UNESCO later added a cultural certification, making Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park one of the few places on Earth with a dual listing.

Often described as a monolith, Uluru is in fact an inselberg, a steep-sided ‘island mountain’ of sandstone rising from the desert that dates back to the Precambrian, 550 million years ago. Iron-bearing minerals have dyed the rock rust-red, and deep surface grooves provide channels for rare rain, which cascades into water holes shaded by fragrant eucalyptus trees. Here, men would hunt red kangaroo, emu and goannas, while women gathered bush figs and witchetty grubs. Hiking the 6.6 mile (11km) loop around Uluru’s base, I am shown Tjukuritja – marks left by activities of ancestral beings – and a scar worn in by the feet of thousands of tourists who, misunderstanding the significance of Uluru to its custodians, and disregarding their appeals not to, scaled the rock to plant metaphorical bucket-list flags on top. For many years this practice distressed Indigenous local people – not least because at least 37 lives were lost in the attempt – and it has been prohibited since 2019.

Today, the park offers unparalleled opportunities to explore the Red Centre’s unique environment with spectacular hiking, cycling and Segway options, alongside world-class luxury lodgings, dining and wellness. Guided interpretive tours offer deeper immersion than ever before into the region’s geology, art and spiritual significance. Indigenous Red Centre communities have long kept their traditions strong through ceremonies, storytelling and art, and today their voices shape the region’s contemporary culture with ever-increasing agency and authenticity, even as expressions of that culture embrace cutting-edge innovation and reach out to more diverse audiences.

When I first came here, it was the 10th anniversary of another landmark date for Uluru – the handback, in October 1985, of the title deeds for Uluru-Kata Tjuta to the Anangu people. And while the struggle to restore Indigenous communities’ land and water rights continues in Australia, the handback’s 40th anniversary, the reason for this visit, marked inspiring strides forward in Indigenous cultural ownership, aspiration and achievement.

“People from every place have come to see Uluru,” says Aboriginal artist Rene Kulitja. “Now, we want people to experience our story in a new way, to look and listen and feel with us.” A founding member of Walkatjara Art at the Cultural Centre near Uluru, Rene has had glasswork, ceramics and woven works exhibited internationally, while her painting *Yananyi Dreaming* adorns a Qantas Boeing

737. “Our stories have been here since the beginning, and we want to share them with the world.”

In 2023, Rene joined an Anangu Working Group of 10 community members chosen to advise Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, the hospitality group that owns Ayers Rock Resort, on developing *Wintjiri Wiru*, the world’s largest ongoing drone, light and sound spectacular at Uluru. Brought to life by Canadian-born creative light artist Bruce Ramus and his Melbourne-based design studio, *Wintjiri Wiru* – which means ‘beautiful view out to the horizon’ – sees 1,200 drones take to the skies for an immersive show that tells the ancient story of the Anangu’s ancestors, the Mala (rufous hare-wallaby) People. The experience is paired with a native-inspired dining or drinks experience at sunset and after dark, which incorporate bush foods such as lemon myrtle and quandongs or wild peach.

“We’re thinking about our future, and have created *Wintjiri Wiru* for the next generation, for our grandchildren,” explains Rene. As music pulsates across the plains, lasers light up the mulga and desert oaks with hopping wallabies and flickering flames, before drones rise to form the shape-shifting spirit Kurpany, the devil dingo dog, who attacked the Mala People who lived at Uluru.

“We tried to stay faithful to the Aboriginal art you’ll find in the caves here,” Bruce tells me, “and the Anangu were very clear about how we should visualise it. It was very powerful for me to see the strong connection they have to Uluru and hear the way they speak about their stories.” The caves where the Mala sheltered can be seen on Uluru’s Mala Walk, where paintings layered by many generations can be found, as well as rocks rubbed smooth by grinding stones women used to pound native grass seeds to make bread.

But for all the impressive new ways the Anangu and their allies are today sharing their stories and spreading respect and understanding for a culture that suffered so much as modern Australia took shape, for me Uluru’s most invaluable gift is as it always has been. Here, we – First Nations people and visitors to their land alike – can sidestep Western ideas of time, and the pressures it puts on us, to gain a broader and more generous perspective, and a vision of harmony with Country that its custodians have always lived by. Here, we have time and space to contemplate our place in the world, and in eternity, and reshape the stories we want to tell, and to live out. As the Aboriginal narrators of *Sunrise Journeys* put it: “Our stories are beyond time. They are the past, the present and the future.” ©

www.northernterritory.com | www.australia.com | www.discoveraboriginalexperiences.com

OUTTHERE
RECOMMENDS

Longitude 131°

*Yulara Drive, Yulara, Northern Territory
0872, Australia*



Lounging stylishly amid swaying desert oaks and ochre dunes, exclusive wilderness lodge Longitude 131° seems a world apart from the Red Centre's main tourism hub of Ayers Rock Resort, a short road transfer away. Comprising 16 marquee-sized pavilions – including one wheelchair-accessible tent – it offers unparalleled views of Uluru through panoramic windows. Splash out on the Dune Pavilion and you'll be bunking up in Australia's only guest suite to offer views of both World Heritage-listed wonders, Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

Since Baillie Lodges took over the property in 2013, Australian architect Max Pritchard has overseen a multi-million dollar transformation and his subtly sumptuous, sustainable design has made Longitude 131° one of the most



sought-after properties in the Luxury Lodges of Australia portfolio.

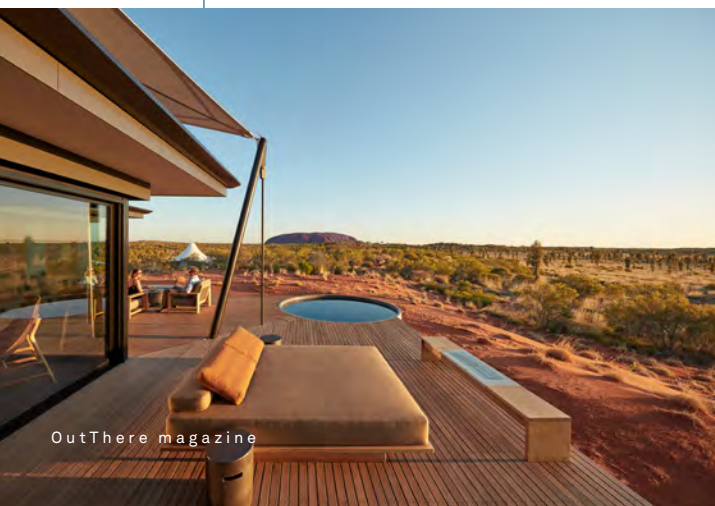
Dune House, the cool, airy lounge and dining room, soon became our home away from home, with its well-stocked bar, comfy sofas and large terrace ideal for watching Uluru's colour shade-shift through the day.

Cuisine is Red Centre-inspired, combining contemporary Australian meat and fish dishes with seasonal 'bush tucker' flavours, such as quandongs, finger limes and paperbark. Vegetarians have a choice of diverse and dazzling dishes. There's an Indigenous twist to the cocktail list too, with lemon myrtle zinging up gin, and saltbush adding a tang to tequila.

After a hike or one of the lodge's guided experiences, head to the outdoor pool or Spa Kinara for a pampering that draws on marvels such as scented emu bush, desert lime and botanical blends from First Nations remedies.

www.longitude131.com.au

Photography by George Apostolidis and Julian Kingma



INNKEEPERS

Samsara Ubud, Payangan, Bali, Indonesia

Wandering spirit

With zero experience in hospitality, Bayu Sarwono faced down personal, logistical and cultural challenges to create the exquisite Samsara Ubud, a tranquil, 17-villa retreat wrapped in untamed jungle north of Bali's eponymous spiritual centre.

WORDS BY STEFFEN MICHELS

Photography courtesy of Samsara Ubud