

By Albert Ehrnrooth

The flight to Uluru is the perfect lead-up to the adventure that is the Red Centre. Sitting in a window seat I am offered a moveable artscape that passes within an hour, but will last a lifetime. From above, NSW appears to be a giant geometric puzzle, but as we fly westwards it looks as if a cover of dust has been pulled slowly over the lush fields of green. I start to distinguish the serpents of creation, our riverbeds, carved in the sand and rock. These dormant veins will soon pulsate in time with the beat of incessant rains. Salt lakes appear and they brush this palette with a hint of Bordeaux red, rosé or white. Spinifex, desert oak, acacias and waterholes dot, dot, dot-paint the increasingly bulging and undulating canvas. Finally the spine of this country, the barriers, the Ranges emerge. We descend into a land full of rust, where the heat only seems to stir, but I am about to find out how this desert can be sung to life.

Fourteen people have signed up for the Uluru field trip (6-8 November 2009) which takes place the weekend before the Eco Conference in Alice Springs kicks off. This writer and one other have been invited by Tourism Australia and we are the only two journalists on this "familiarisation" trip. The rest are regional managers from various national parks, the odd policy officer, a senior policy analyst from a governmental department and various other learned people. Normally one would need some time to mould into a group of sorts but we are thrown in at the deep end right from the start.

Our room at the Voyages Outback Pioneer Lodge in Yulara, Uluru's service village and the only place to offer accommodation, turns out to be a unisex dormitory. This is bunk-bed-country; the no-towel, no-power point, cold-showers-only world that I left behind in high school. Or so I thought. The outside bar with live music is next door to the dormitory and I wish I were young enough to enjoy the decidedly average cover band, whilst hiding under a pillow in a horizontal position. No wonder visitor numbers to Uluru have been declining year by year since the Olympics!

With hindsight this was clearly the low point of the whole trip and perhaps it was a good thing that we had to cope with it right at the start. The accommodation facilities certainly got us all talking and there were some signs of early bonding.



Walpa Gorge



Uluru



King's Canyon

DAY 1

The first afternoon Chris Martin from Tourism Northern Territory, our informative and amusing field guide for the entire journey, whisked us off in a bus to Kata Tjuta (The Olgas), 30 km west of Uluru. With its thirty-six domed 'heads' or rocks it is a more impressive sight than Uluru but less photogenic than 'the Rock'.

Unfortunately we only have time to do Walpa Gorge, but with its pockmarked cliffs glowing in the late afternoon sun, this is a good teaser. The main attraction here is without a doubt the magical Valley of the Winds (which I visited during my previous visit), but you need a long morning for that walk.

That evening's BBQ is laid out next to the cultural centre with only the stars for a roof. Plenty of food, wine and beer gets the group talking. After dinner all lights are turned off and one of our waiters now expertly guides us with a powerful laser torch through the galaxy of the Southern Hemisphere. All my life I have seen skies, mostly covered by clouds, but this is truly spectacular.



Uluru viewing platform



Kata Tjuta



Micah and 'A Real Ranger'



The Lilla Waterhole

DAY 2

After a restless night, with some shared snoring, we are up before dawn heading once more for Australia's most iconic stone. This time we are inspecting the brand new viewing platform which, with all the infrastructure, has cost a staggering \$21million to construct. It all blends nicely into the landscape and despite the presence of 700-1000 (sleepwalking) tourists the whole experience does not feel overcrowded. But spiritual it ain't, I can assure you.

Expectations are high and before the sun manages to reveal itself on the horizon, many cameras are prematurely flashing to no avail. I get off the platform because a desert oak is partly obscuring the view. Around 7.00am the star of the show finally starts to soak up the rays of the sun but he doesn't wear his most glowing face this morning. The monolith obligingly changes his hue, going through some subtle changes of colour, but the sparkle is not quite there. The helicopters with thrill seekers are now encircling the rock and the whole soundscape is somewhat off-putting. The lovely burnished red comes through in the end but the distance allows for a filmy haze between us and the mountain.

Personally I find that the platform is too far away and unless you have a camera with a powerful lens, the scaly skin texture of the rock is not revealed. Uluru seems smooth from a distance just like this touristic 'experience'.

The Anangu people are the custodians of this land and their wishes have been respected in constructing the new viewing area. There are some 20 culturally sensitive sites at Uluru that are used by Anangu people for ceremony and art. The owners of the land felt that previous sunrise viewing areas were too close to some of the sacred sites that they would prefer not to be photographed.

We take the bus to one of the waterholes and then proceed to the foot of the Uluru climb which turns out to be closed that morning because of strong winds. We wouldn't have done the climb anyway out of respect for the Anangu who prefer that visitors stay off the sacred rock.

During breakfast Tourism and Visitors Manager Chris Hannocks gives a very informative talk about how joint management works with the Anangu people in Uluru and Kata Tjuta National Park. The major issue in the near future will be the proposed total closure of the climb, a move which has not been welcomed by all tour operators nor by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. But few people doubt that the traditional owners will get their way within a couple of years.

Our next stop is three hours away by bus at Kings Creek station. This camel, cattle and tourist farm was set up by Ian and Lyn Conway who quite recently featured in an episode of the ABC's Australian Story. When the Conways started out on the huge and remote property in 1982 there was no infrastructure whatsoever. What they have achieved since then is nothing less than astounding. The Conways have also established a not for profit organisation that provides educational opportunities and broader life experiences for young Aboriginal people in this area.

The late afternoon is reserved for one of the most satisfying walks I have undertaken lately. Sadie and Philip are part of the Luritja people and they look after the Lilla waterhole. They occasionally take visitors on a tour around the area and are hoping to expand their little business. They seem shy at first but within 15 minutes they have warmed up and take pride in showing us around. Shrubs, bushes and trees take on a new meaning. With so much fruit and medicine it is a wonder that whitefellas could ever have thought of this land as barren.

Philip leads us to a rock wall. He points out 'the men's waiting room' which is hidden behind a massive stone, close to the cliff. This is where a man will sit and wait while his woman is giving birth in the cave just around the corner. The stone is flat and somewhat reminiscent of a giant bar. Most people in the party are quite surprised that next we are

actually taken to the shallow cave, as this is considered to be a sacred area normally reserved for the women only. It is markedly cooler here and Sadie points out some circular rock paintings. Women also paint this pattern on their bodies for the ceremonial dancing which is performed close to the waterhole situated just below the 'birth' cave.

Philip and Sadie have loosened up and we get to see more rock art in a different place. We slowly progress to the real gem of the tour: the Lilla billabong. The sun has already left this hidden corner with its pool half encircled by steep rocks. We sit down on the smooth rock, our urban chatter echoing against the natural walls. Slowly our surroundings start to do the talking.

Sadie and Philip make the place come alive by evoking a songline. We surrender to the spirit of this rare piece of paradise. Only birds hunting and insects humming negate the silence. Water is heard dripping, slowly keeping ancient time.

That night we stay at Kings Creek Station in the perfectly comfortable safari cabins. We are treated to the full 'barbie' experience and afterwards we have billy tea and damper by an open fire. It is early doors because next morning awaits 'the big climb'.



Phillip - Lilla Watrehole Tour



Kings Canyon

DAY 3

The 6km Kings Canyon walk was not as arduous as it was made out to be by Chris Martin, but he was right about the two litres of water per person required for the hike. Around 10am, when we are only halfway, the sun is truly beating down on us and my stomach starts a little dance of its own accord. It is 35 degrees plus and I need to sit down. Is the chasm of the canyon too deep for my delicate nerves? The ravine shaped like a horseshoe is running off with my imagination. Have I turned into a butterfly? I am stung like a bee. Can I fly, should I try? Pull yourself together, man! You are hallucinating. This is what a serious lack of water can do to you.

I take time to study the Kings Canyon's rock domes with their convex lids. They seem to tower over some historic desert city. I manage to recover enough to continue interviewing our guide Micah Laughton on the hop. He is young, rather serious and, because he is sporting a crew cut, he has something of the warrior about him. This image is strengthened by the spear he carries to demonstrate hunting techniques and the weapon comes in handy as a pointing stick. Micah needs a lighter touch here and there, but he brings the surroundings with their amazing stone beehives alive.

His geographical and Aboriginal knowledge is exemplary for this purpose. We descend into the lovely Garden of Eden, a gorge with cycads, ghost gums and a waterhole. The hardest part of any climb is always the descent and this is no exception. The heat makes me feel like a blowfish on dry land. I can't see myself making my exit on a stretcher or an aquarium, so I cope. OK, I am being a bit theatrical and this has been a brilliant walk. Micah has helped to invoke this place with some spirit. He has given a whitefella a useful kind of songline to follow.

We came to worship at the altar of the great monolith (Uluru). That turned out to be a tad disappointing. But every experience after that made me think that I should hire a little cabin out here among the termites, deadly snakes and spinifex to finally write the Great Novel that will simply change the world. But then the thought of no power points, no towels, oafish camels and mainly nocturnal animals for company frightens me. I think I will just return for a longer visit and leave the novel with the hard rubbish collection (it is a brick).