



Darwin & Uluru

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Why Go?

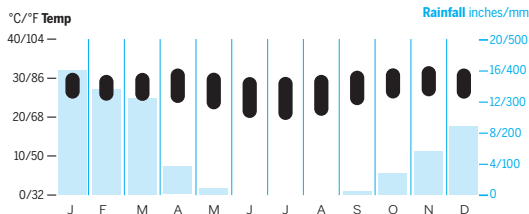
There's an enigmatic, ethereal feel to the Northern Territory (NT): endless blue skies collide with flat desert expanse around Uluru, while Darwin and the tropical Top End burst with birdlife, wild rivers and untamed wilderness.

Outback NT has an undeniable edge: there really are wild crocodiles in the waterways and another car might not come down the desert road for weeks. Then there's hedonistic Darwin, the most 'frontier' of Australia's capitals, and Alice Springs, a modern town in the middle of nowhere.

The NT experience for many travellers is following the Adelaide-to-Darwin Stuart Hwy (Rte 1), with must-see side trips to Uluru, Kakadu and Litchfield. But take some time to look around: visit remote Aboriginal communities, hike through rainforest and rocky gorges, sleep in a swag under a billion stars and dine on bush foods and billy tea.

When to Go

Darwin



Mar The atmospheric Tiwi Islands Grand Final coincides with the islands' annual art and craft sale.

Jun-Aug Peak season in the NT, with low humidity and manageable desert temperatures.

Dec-Feb Experience the Top End monsoon: thunderstorms and hot, sticky nights.

A QUESTION OF CLIMBING

Many visitors consider climbing Uluru to be a highlight – even a rite of passage – of a trip to the Centre. But for the traditional owners, the Anangu, Uluru is a sacred place. The path up the side of the Rock is part of the route taken by the Mala ancestors on their arrival at Uluru and has great spiritual significance – and is not to be trampled by human feet. When you arrive at Uluru you'll see a sign from the Anangu saying 'We don't climb' and a request that you don't climb either.

The Anangu are the custodians of Uluru and take responsibility for the safety of visitors. Any injuries or deaths that occur (and they do occur – a man died in 2010) are a source of distress and sadness to them. For similar reasons of public safety, Parks Australia would prefer that people didn't climb. It's a very steep ascent, not to be taken lightly, and each year there are several air rescues, mostly from people suffering heart attacks. Furthermore, Parks Australia must constantly monitor the climb and close it on days where the temperature is forecast to reach 36°C or strong winds are expected.

So if the Anangu don't want people to climb and Parks Australia would prefer to see it closed, why does it remain open? The answer is tourism. The tourism industry believes visitor numbers would drop significantly – at least initially – if the climb was closed, particularly from visitors thinking there is nothing else to do at Uluru.

The debate has grown louder in recent years and a commitment has been made to close the climb for good, but only when there are adequate new visitor experiences in place or when the proportion of visitors climbing falls below 20%. Until then, it remains a personal decision and a question of respect. Before deciding, visit the Cultural Centre and perhaps take an Anangu tour. You might just change your mind.

Ayers Rock Helicopters HELICOPTER FLIGHTS
(☎08-8956 2077) A 15-minute buzz of Uluru costs \$125; to include Kata Tjuta costs \$240.

Ayers Rock Scenic Flights SCENIC FLIGHTS
(☎08-8956 2345; www.ayersrockresort.com.au/helicopter-flights) Prices start from \$95 for a 20-minute flight over Uluru. Include Kata Tjuta and it's \$185. For \$390 you get a two-hour flight that also takes in Lake Amadeus and Kings Canyon.

Professional Helicopter Services HELICOPTER FLIGHTS
(PHS; ☎08-8956 2003; www.phs.com.au) Charges \$135 for its Uluru flight and \$250 for its 30-minute Uluru and Kata Tjuta flight.

Uluru (Ayers Rock)

Nothing quite prepares you for the first sight of Uluru on the horizon – it will astound even the most jaded traveller. Uluru is 3.6km long and rises a towering 348m from the surrounding sandy scrubland (867m above sea level). If that's not impressive enough, it's believed that two-thirds of the rock lies beneath the sand. Closer inspection reveals a wondrous contoured surface concealing numerous sacred sites of particular

significance to the Anangu people. If your first sight of Uluru is during the afternoon, it appears as an ochre-brown colour, scored and pitted by dark shadows. As the sun sets, it illuminates the rock in burnished orange, then a series of deeper reds before it fades into charcoal. A performance in reverse, with marginally fewer spectators, is given at dawn.

Activities

Walking

There are walking tracks around Uluru, and ranger-led walks explain the area's plants, wildlife, geology and cultural significance. All the trails are flat and suitable for wheelchairs. Several areas of spiritual significance to Anangu people are off limits to visitors; these are marked with fences and signs. The Anangu ask you not to photograph these sites.

The excellent *Visitor Guide & Maps* brochure, which can be picked up at the Cultural Centre, gives details on the following self-guided walks (except the climb).

Base Walk WALKING
This track (10.6km, three to four hours) circumnavigates the rock, passing caves, paintings, sandstone folds and geological abrasions along the way.