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ACCOMMODATION

As well as the usual slew of hotels, motels, caravan parks and youth hostels, central Australia offers some truly Aussie ways to spend the night. Roll out your swag under the desert stars, park your campervan at a remote cattle station, dream Shiraz-coloured dreams in a plush wine region B&B or blow a small fortune on a luxury 'tent' with views of Uluru.

In this book high-season prices are quoted unless indicated otherwise. Accommodation sections are divided into Budget (up to \$80), Midrange (\$80 to \$160) and Top End (over \$160).

In most areas you'll find seasonal price variations. In South Australia (SA) prices peak during summer (December to February) and school and public holidays (see p291). Outside these times discounts and lower

walk-in rates can be found. In the Northern Territory (NT) peak season (the Dry) is June to September, plus school and public holidays. April to May and October to November are quieter shoulder seasons up north, and summer (the Wet in the Top End) is the low season – prices can drop by as much as 30%. Book accommodation in advance in peak periods.

B&Bs

The atmosphere and privacy of B&Bs can be hard to top – everything from restored stone cottages to converted boat sheds, upmarket country houses, romantic escapes and simple bedrooms in family homes. The majority of B&Bs are 'self-catering', meaning breakfast provisions are provided for you to cook. Rates are typically in the \$100 to \$160 range, though they can climb much higher.

The South Australian Tourist Commission (SATC) publishes a B&B booklet. Online, try www.bandbfsa.com.au, www.bnbbookings.com or www.bed-and-breakfast.au.com.

Camping

Bush camping at remote sites or in national parks is a highlight of any central Australian trip. Nights around a campfire under blanketing stars, listening to the sounds of the night, are unforgettable. In the desert, where rain is relatively rare and mosquitoes aren't an issue, you don't even need a tent – just slip into a swag (zipped canvas bedrolls with mattress, available from camping stores).

There are plenty of free camping places out here, including roadside rest areas. In

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

BUSH-CAMPING TIPS

- You need a permit to camp on Aboriginal land.
- Select your campsite carefully before nightfall, and for privacy and security choose a spot invisible from the road.
- Some trees (eg river red gums and desert oak) are notorious for dropping branches – don't camp under them.
- Ants live everywhere, and beware spiny seeds that can puncture groundsheets.
- Carry out your rubbish, don't bury it.
- Observe fire restrictions and ensure fires are safe.
- Don't chop down trees or branches to light fires; in national parks BYO firewood.
- Use a gas stove for cooking.
- Respect wildlife and observe crocodile warnings – camp at least 50m from suspect areas.
- Don't camp close enough to rivers or streams to pollute them – a safe distance is 20m.

national parks camping is usually only permitted in designated areas, where facilities can range from a fireplace and simple pit toilet to hot showers and free gas barbecues. Payment is made into honesty boxes (\$6 to \$12 per person).

Caravan Parks

Generally speaking, central Australia's caravan parks are well kept, conveniently located and excellent value, charging from \$20 to \$25 for two people camping, slightly more for a powered site. Most have basic cabins with shared facilities (from \$50) and en suite cabins with cooking facilities (\$70 to \$120). Additional adults/children incur a small extra fee.

Most places have a camp kitchen, swimming pool, laundry, barbecues and a shop or kiosk, and all offer toilets and hot showers. You'll have no trouble finding a camping space, but it pays to book ahead for powered sites and cabins in peak season.

Unless otherwise indicated, the unpowered/powerd campsite prices listed in this book are for two people.

Farm & Station Stays

For a true country experience, stay on a farm or working cattle station. Some let you kick back and watch workers raise a sweat; others rope you in to day-to-day chores. Most accommodation is very comfortable – B&B-style in the main homestead (dinner on request), or in self-contained cottages. Some farms

also provide budget outbuildings or shearers' quarters. Check the options online at www.farmstaysa.com.au, www.australiafarmhost.com and www.frabs.com.au.

Hostels

Hostels are a highly social and low-cost fixture of the central Australian accommodation scene. A dormitory bed costs around \$20 to \$28, and most also have comfortable private rooms from around \$50 (\$60 to \$80 with en suite). Most hostels have kitchens with fridges, stoves, microwaves and cooking utensils, communal areas with TV, a laundry, internet access, travellers' noticeboards and tour-booking services. Some roadhouses and towns along major highways also have backpacker beds.

HOSTEL ORGANISATIONS

Australia-wide backpacker organisations:

Nomads World (☎ 1800 091 905, 02-9280 4110; www.nomadsworld.com) Relatively small organisation that runs pubs and hostels around the country. Membership for 12 months costs \$34. Hostels in Adelaide, Darwin, Uluru, Kangaroo Island, Alice Springs and Kings Canyon.

VIP Backpacker (☎ 07-3395 6111; www.vipbackpackers.com) International organisation is affiliated with a dozen hostels in SA and the NT. A one-/two-year membership costs \$43/57.

YHA (☎ 08-8981 6344; www.yha.com.au) The world's biggest youth-hostel network has 15 hostels in SA and the NT. A Hostelling International membership costs \$42/82 for one/two years.