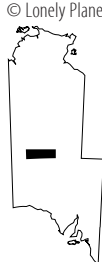


Uluru-Kata Tjuta



Australia's most recognisable natural wonder, Uluru (Ayers Rock), draws tourists from around the world like moths to a big red flame. A close encounter with the Rock exposes a multi-faceted stone possessing many more contours, fissures and formations than the emblematic loaf of bread lit by the setting sun. Your first view from the Lasseter Hwy is of a gradually sloping mound. As you approach from the park entrance, past the sunset viewing area, you get the characteristic postcard profile. As you drive or walk around the rock you will discover waves of smooth stone, honeycomb ulcers, vertebra-like ridges and spillways that link rock pool after rock pool. Surely there would be few better spectacles than storm waters cascading off the dimpled surface of Uluru.

Nearby is the mystical clutch of stone siblings, Kata Tjuta (the Olgas). The 36 textured, pink red domes flaunt their amazing curves in the concentrated light of sunset. Deeply cleaved with narrow gorges and decorated with occasional tufts of vegetation, the revelation is as much biological as geological. Little wonder that these intriguing formations hold sacred secrets known only to the initiated.

These monumental landforms that so spectacularly interrupt the wide horizons have drawn people for millennia. Creation stories and sacred sites abound around the arid lands of Uluru and Kata Tjuta; home for thousands of years to the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal peoples. Thanks to the current custodians and traditional owners you have the chance to hear these stories and share in the wonder of an ancient culture.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reveal the concealed details and experience the immense presence of the Rock on the **Uluru base walk** (p155)
- Enter the colossal and sacred defile of **Walpa Gorge** (p157) separating two of Kata Tjuta's mightiest domes
- Discover the Dreaming and the richness of Anangu culture and tjukurpa (lore), at the **Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre** (p154)
- Gather at the **Uluru sunset viewing area** (p156) as the setting sun briefly ignites the monolith with an incredible radiance
- Wander quietly through Kata Tjuta's eerie **Valley of the Winds** (p157)
- Gaze at a billion brilliant stars studded in the black desert sky at the **Night Sky Show** (p158)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: ☎ 08

■ www.environment.gov.au/parks/uluru

■ www.ayersrockresort.com.au

LASSETER HIGHWAY

Named after prospector and explorer Harold Lasseter who spent half his life searching for a lost gold reef, the Lasseter Hwy links the Stuart Hwy with Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. The 244km sealed road strikes west from Erlunda and takes less than three hours to cover.

MT EBENEZER

The first stop along the highway is Mt Ebenezer, an Aboriginal-owned station 56km west of the Stuart Hwy in the shadow of the Basedow Range and Mt Ebenezer to the north. The roadhouse is the art-and-craft outlet for the local Imanpa Aboriginal community and prices here are very competitive. A small gallery shows a picture board of local artists along with paintings (\$30 to \$45 for small pieces, up to \$700 for larger ones), wood carvings and printed T-shirts.

At **Mt Ebenezer Roadhouse** (☎ 8956 2904; Lasseter Hwy; camping free, powered sites per person \$10, dm/s/d \$20/88/98; ☎ 8am-10pm; 🚻) the camping area is a bit parched, though the facilities are adequate and the motel-style rooms have en suites. Meals are available (mains \$15 to \$25).

MT CONNER

Mt Conner, the large mesa that looms 350m out of the desert floor about 20km south of the highway, is the outback's most photographed red herring. On first sighting many people mistake this for Uluru, but other than being a large mass protruding from a vast plain, it bears no resemblance. With a base circumference of around 32km, it is much larger than Uluru. There's a rest area and panoramic lookout towards Mt Conner on the highway 26km beyond the Luritja Rd turn-off.

Mt Conner lies within Curtin Springs Station and there is no public access, except by joining an organised tour. **Undes Tours** (☎ 8956 2916; www.undestours.com.au; half/full-day tours \$100/185, 2hr sunset tour \$60, dimb \$100), departing from Curtin Springs Roadhouse, has informative tours out to Mt Conner, across saltpans and to the old station homestead. The six-hour return Mt Conner climb requires a decent level of fitness and all tours require a minimum of two passengers.

CURTIN SPRINGS

A further 52km from the Luritja Rd turn-off to Kings Canyon is Curtin Springs, the last stop before reaching Yulara, about 80km away. The roadhouse here gets plenty of traffic and can be quite lively.

Curtain Springs Wayside Inn (☎ 8956 2906; www.curtinsprings.com; Lasseter Hwy; camping free, powered sites \$25, budget cabin s/d without bathroom \$60/80, d \$135-200; 🚻 📺) is a popular accommodation alternative for those not wishing to pay the resort prices at Yulara. You can pitch a tent in the camping ground for free, and the various configurations of cabins are well maintained. There's a licensed restaurant (mains \$16 to \$25), a small store, takeaway food and fuel.

ULURU-KATA TJUTA NATIONAL PARK

For most visitors to Australia, a visit to Uluru is high on the list of 'must-sees', and for many Australians this World Heritage-listed icon has attained the status of a pilgrimage.

The park offers much more than just the chance to see the Rock. Along with the equally (some say more) impressive Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), the area is of deep cultural significance to the local Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal peoples (who refer to themselves as Anangu).

Although many tour groups zip through the area in 24 hours, it's recommended to spend at least the three days allowed by the park pass. There's plenty to see and do: meandering walks, guided tours, desert culture and, of course, the many aspects and changeable moods of the great monolith itself. The resort village of Yulara offers a range of accommodation and dining, though be prepared for premium prices reflecting the remote locale.

Aboriginal Heritage

Archaeological evidence suggests that Aboriginal people have inhabited this part of Australia for at least 10,000 years. According to tjukurpa (Aboriginal lore derived from the Creation) all landscape features were made by ancestral beings, and the Anangu today are the descendants of the ancestral beings and custodians of the land.