

ROMANTIC TRAVELING

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24 THE RED CENTRE: AYERS ROCK AND ALICE SPRINGS

By ELLEN SARBONE

Distances in Australia are so vast that visitors often restrict their travels to the Eastern Coast. This is a mistake, in my opinion, because "The Red Centre" is one of the most romantic and mystical places in the country. This area, including Alice Springs and Ayers Rock, is the southernmost part of the Northern Territory, and at 1329 miles from Sydney is almost in the center of the continent/country.

The world's largest monolith (Uluru is the Aboriginal name), Ayers Rock rises more than 1,000 feet above the stark red-dish-orange desert that surrounds it for a minimum of 700 miles in every direction. Sunsets are unforgettably romantic at the "Rock," and you'll want to immerse yourselves in its changing moods and colors at various other times of the day.

Because Ayers Rock is one of the most hallowed sites of Australia's native population, the Aborigines, and in order to preserve

the uniqueness of their sacred sites, a small, self-contained town was built twelve miles away to accommodate the ever-expanding number of tourists. Yulara is compact and beautifully designed to blend in with its surroundings. It's a wonderful oasis with a choice of hotels, restaurants and visitor facilities.

We flew from Sydney to Alice Springs, then took a bus the 277 miles to Yulara. The coach trip was comfortable, educational, and scenic. It took us south along the Stuart Highway, through the picturesque James and Waterhouse Ranges. At Eridunda (a "petrol" and "take-away" food town of two buildings) we turned west on the Lassiter Highway. The "highways" are two-lane macadam roads that seem to stretch straight ahead in a direct line to infinity.

Our bus driver was so knowledgeable that we felt we were on a private guided tour which really gave us a feel for the area—the flora and fauna, as well as the challenge of life in such a remote land. We liked the trip so much that we opted to return to Alice by coach. If you prefer, you can fly into Yulara's small airport, or rent a car in Alice and drive yourselves. For those who welcome the romance of trains, the legendary "Ghan" goes to Alice from Adelaide.

Of course, the reason for our trip to the Red Centre was to see and climb Ayers Rock. We were greatly surprised at the multitude of other activities available for varying degrees of exertion. Remember, this is the desert and daytime temperatures are in the 80-100 degree F range most of the year, so plan your schedule accordingly.

We arrived in Yulara at midday, checked into our hotel, and took an afternoon bus tour to explore the Olgas (Kata Tjuta). The

Centre. Standing together in the star-filled night, we looked up at one of the clearest, most brilliant skies we'd ever seen. We had the sense of being utterly alone in the vast outback and felt a rare peace and tranquility.

Early next morning it was time for our assault on the Rock. Seeing people of all ages, sizes and shapes climbing up, you'd think it's easy. Well, it's not! It's very strenuous, and there are many steep, treacherous portions, so you should be in pretty good shape if you plan to go to the top. The view from there is unparalleled, though the descent isn't any easier than the ascent. A few years ago, a 100-foot-long chain connected to waist-high poles attached to the Rock was added, starting close to the base, as an aid to climbers. Now people can pull themselves along it and go a short way up to view some of the surrounding landscape.

After climbing Uluru, there's still plenty to do. We ambled around the base on our own, exploring the ancient caves decorated with aboriginal paintings and enjoying the unusual, eroded rock formations at our own pace; however, you can participate in guided walks with rangers who explain the history and geology, or walks led by aboriginal guides who'll reveal their unique culture, lifestyle, and ancient legends.

Floating in the hotel pool and sipping a cool drink on the veranda as we congratulated ourselves on our achievements was the perfect finish after all the exertion.

Yulara has an extensive visitors center which should be your first stop upon arrival. You'll get an overview of the area from the huge photographic displays, fascinating walk-through exhibits, choice of videos, reference books, maps, and brochures. The helpful staff gives good advice and can book special tours.

We stayed at the luxurious *Sheraton Ayers Rock Hotel*, which sits under unusual white shade sails that give the property the appearance of a cool tented city set among landscaped terraces. Other choices include the stylish *Four Seasons Hotel*, the more economical *Red Centre Hotel*, family "maisons-ettes," and two well-equipped campgrounds, if your idea of romance is sleeping out under the Southern Cross.

The variety of dining choices at Yulara was a nice surprise, too. The Sheraton's "Kunia Room" and the "Stuart Room" at the Four Seasons are elegant, fine restaurants, as you'd expect in any international resort. The "Rock's Bistro" in the Red Centre Hotel is more casual, and the village boasts snack shops, take-away food, and a small variety store *cum* supermarket.

While it was difficult to say goodbye,

more fun awaited in Alice Springs, a pleasant town of manageable size for sight-seeing. We checked into the *Sheraton Alice Springs Hotel*, not far from downtown. It is a series of two-story buildings with patioed rooms in a grassy setting and has a health club, pool, and three restaurants.

We decided to spend the evening on a "Take a Camel to Dinner" tour. What fun! Beginning with a brief orientation at the camel barn, we mounted our camels and were turned loose to follow the guide through eucalyptus forests and over dry river beds to the Chateau Hornsby Winery for dinner.

Different from horseback, a camel ride feels like a gently swaying sailboat on a calm sea. The animal seems to cushion each step.

After cocktails and a brief rest from our half-hour journey, we had a chance to learn about the winery and its wines—quite modest and "down home" compared to California standards. Dinner was good, and the chatter among "Comrades at Camels" was amusing. We returned by four-wheeled rather than four-legged means.

While in Alice, visit the base of the Flying Doctors, famous throughout Australia for bringing medical care to the remotest outposts. A recent addition to the sight-seeing options is a tour to sample traditional "bush" food at the "Alice Springs Bush Restaurant," 18 miles east of Alice in the Macdonnell Ranges.

SPECIFICS For more information contact the Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 2121 Avenue of the Stars, #1230, Los Angeles, CA 90067. 800-4-OUTBAC or 310-277-7877.

Yulara. Hotel rates range from about \$70 to \$210 (more for suites) per room.

Alice Springs. Sheraton ranges from \$130 to \$261. "Take a Camel to Dinner" is about \$60 each.

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