



Rock it at Uluru

A thousand photographs cannot capture the beauty of Ayer's Rock — a sacred site of the Anangu tribe — as it changes colours from brown to blazing red to deep purple. In the case of this Australian icon, seeing truly is believing

BY KALPANA SUNDER

I flick a switch by my bedside and raise the electronic blinds. I plump up my pillows, switch on the haunting tones of didgeridoo music and am enraptured by the sight of the sunrise over the world's largest monolith, the Ayer's Rock — also called Uluru — in the 'red centre' of the Australian continent. The most mysterious and enduring Australian icon...

Uluru's red colour comes from the irons in the rock which, weathered by water and oxygen, rust just like iron. Longitude 131, which is my front seat

to the iconic rock, is a luxury tented property with just 15 suites in earthy natural finishes and colonial furniture. The rooms with floor to ceiling glass windows are on elevated platforms above the golden spinifex grasses and the hardy desert oaks.

Long ago people thought that it was a meteorite; Uluru is actually an island mountain, a remnant of an eroded mountain range with another six kilometres thought to be still underground. Five hundred million years ago, it sat at the bottom of the sea bed. It's made of

ruddy sandstone and is the largest monolith in the world at 348 metres. Since 1985, 510 square miles around the rock have been designated as the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park and is now managed by a joint committee of tribal people and white officials. Long ago, it was named after the South Australian Governor Henry Ayers, but in 2002, the name was changed to Uluru — the name coined by the local people of the area. Uluru is 9.3 kilometres in circumference, with the vegetation around its base offering refuge for wildlife.

ROCK OF AGES

Uluru, the sandstone rock formation, is in the southern part of Northern Territory in central Australia

“Chase the sun: watch the rock’s colour change from brown to deep red and orange, and then a brownish purple at dusk till it becomes a dark void under a star-spangled sky



GROUND BENEATH YOUR FEET

The remarkable feature of Uluru is its homogeneity and lack of jointing and parting at bedding surfaces, leading to the lack of development of scree slopes and soil

It is also the revered place of the local Anangu people, who believe that its pock marks are the scars of ancient battles. It’s a place filled with mystic and spiritual connotations. A place where people sense some energy and positive vibes and has messages from generations of people who have lived here. You can see Uluru from a car park along with other vans and hotels laying out canapés, or from a lone sand dune. You don’t have to stick to walking. You can take a classic pillion ride on a Harley Davidson around the rock and even a helicopter ride around the rock is on offer. A peaceful way to see it is to amble through sand dunes with views of the rock on the Ship of the Desert. After all, as they say a soul travels at

the same pace as a camel! Long ago, camels were introduced as pack animals to build railway lines and transport people. Later, they were released into the desert and today there are more than one million wild camels in this part of the country.

Walking around the rock with the breeze whispering in nooks and corners makes me appreciate all the weird and wonderful shapes and textures here – sacred rock pools, caves with ancient rock paintings, wind erosion patterns from something that looks like a brain to a wave pattern. My guides teach me to appreciate Anangu culture: how they made tools with kangaroo sinew and resin from spinifex grass... I visit caves blackened by soot, where women

taught their daughters to cook and make food from bush tucker. I am fascinated by this transmission of culture. After all, Aboriginal culture was passed on orally and never written down; these pictures acted like books to narrate stories or teach morals.

Most tourists stay at the Ayers Rock Resort, a typical small outback town built specifically to accommodate tourists to Uluru with a deli, souvenir shop, art gallery, a café and a lone hairdresser – “where you can dye your hair red to suit the occasion”, quips our guide. The accommodation in the town ranges from Longitude 131 – the luxe tented accommodation outside town – to the recently refurbished Sails in the Desert and the Desert Garden



Hotel as well as a campground. I visit the award-winning Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre made from locally made mud bricks for a closer look at Aboriginal art, artefacts and videos explaining creation stories. The Aborigines trace their origins to ‘dream time’ – the golden age when their ancestors travelled and created the world

and its physical features. I learn to understand and appreciate Aboriginal artwork as not just dots on canvas but as painting a million pictures of native myths and legends.

Climbing the Rock is a topic that has been hotly debated over the years, but as my guide put it, “Imagine walking on the roofs of temples or cathedrals

as a tourist pastime!” I see boards all around the rock asking tourists to desist climbing it as it is culturally insensitive; they believe that their ancestors climbed the rock for some sacred ceremonies. Also more than 40 people have died climbing the rock and that saddens the Anangu people. The Anangu people call the climbers ‘min-



Qantas has flights from Perth and Melbourne; connections from Sydney and Brisbane via Alice Springs

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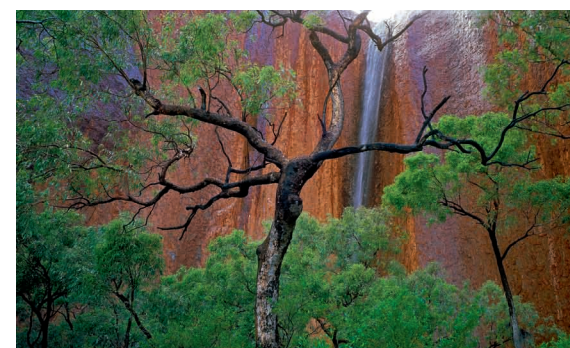
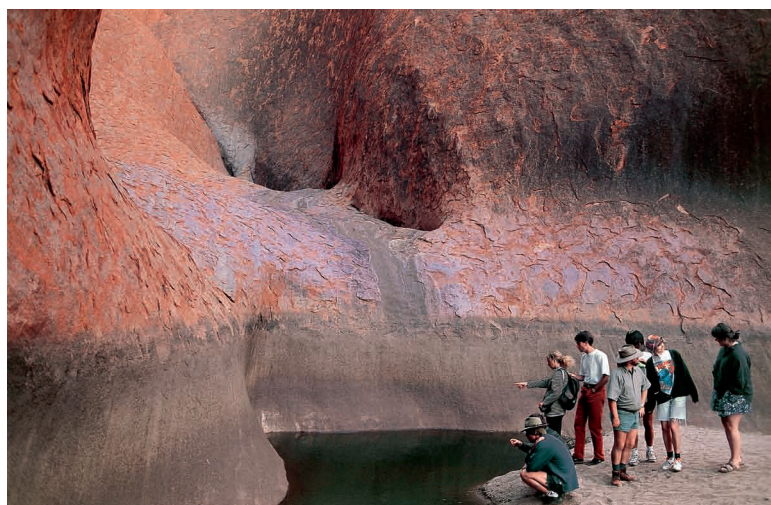


TAKE A TRIP

Uluru is listed as a World Heritage Site, and the area around the formation is home to a plethora of springs, water-holes, rock caves and ancient paintings

ga’ or ants – that’s how they look from a distance when they struggle in a single file.

Our guide drives us to the less known Kata Tjuta (meaning many heads, in the local language) also called the Olgas – 36 majestic red domes rising from the floor of the desert to form another sacred site just 32 kilometres away. I walk through Walpa Gorge, with fly nets on my face, through huge boulders of conglomerate with large pebbles of granite and basalt lined with hardy plants and the wind whistling through. ‘Walpa’ means wind in the local language. I love the contrast between the dark red soil and the perfect blue skies. Legend goes that the Rainbow Serpent with a flowing mane and



long teeth lives here. I see the unusual Upside Down Plant, with its red flowers growing around its base.

One of the main things to do at Uluru is chase the sun and watch the colour of the rock change from brown to a blaze of deep red and orange and then a brownish purple at dusk till it becomes a dark void under a star spangled sky. Watching the southern skies is rewarding with our astronomer guide who leads us across the sky with his laser pen, pointing out the brilliant

Southern Cross, the smoky magellanic clouds and bright Jupiter.

In the days to follow, I discover myriad aspects of life around the rock. I listen to tales of love, death, revenge and creation that are passed down by the Anangu people about each aspect and texture of the rock. Some resemble animals or birds, others look like old men and women giving credence to ancient myths. There is the golden spinifex grass that cools the sand for animals and provides food for grazing

mammals and insects. Hardy desert oaks thrive by growing long roots reaching down to the permanent water table. I watch the Wakageetti dancers, the local Anangu people who dance to the light of a bonfire, imitating animals like the emu and the echidna, interspersing the act with the eerie strains of a didgeridoo. I try and capture the magnificence of the rock in a thousand photographs from rusty orange to lilac purple, but the best images are still in the deep recesses of my mind. **W**

A BIT OF HISTORY

According to an Aboriginal legend, Uluru was once an ocean, but after a major battle at its shore, it rose and became a symbol of the heroic battle.