SCENIC ROUTE TO THE RED CENTRE

This off-road route between Alice Springs and Uluru provides a geological jaunt deserving of more than the couple of days we allocated

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The view from Discovery Parks Glen Helen overlooking the Finke River.

Anzac Hill's perspective of Alice Springs.

WITH A TRAVEL conference to attend at Uluru, I accept an offer from Tourism NT to drive a campervan in a small convoy from Alice Springs via Mereenie Loop Road, the unsealed section of Red Centre Way. It's the 4WD-recommended backroad route, as opposed to the five-hour highway drive that most visitors to Uluru experience. The journey will be spread across a few days, so I convince a colleague/friend of mine to join me and share the driving. It will be our first self-drive outback trip, first campervan trip, and first road trip together. What could possibly go wrong?

We receive the itinerary and find my friend's surname (McGuinness) is misspelt as 'McGussiness'. A tad offended by the 'gussying up' of her name, it naturally becomes her nickname for the trip. We fly to Alice Springs the afternoon before to explore the town, though only make it as far as the Women's Museum of Australia. Put two female writers in a museum filled with stories of inspiring women and time disappears like our G&Ts at sundown. Intrigued by compelling articles and artefacts, we linger until closing time, before walking back to our hotel at Aurora Alice Springs.

Plans threaten to go pear-shaped next morning when we go to collect our campervan and discover it's a Toyota LandCruiser. This was supposed to be a campervan story and I'm slightly anxious about the situation. It's not the car hire company's fault, as a misunderstanding has seen the two campervans in our convoy of four vehicles already allocated and collected.

So the LandCruiser it is. It does have a nifty pop-up rooftop tent, inflatable mattresses, chairs, table and kitchen equipment. McGussiness doesn't mind either way, having already booked a room at our stops, unsure she wanted to spend all day and night with me. Then she looks inside, spots the manual gear shifter, and turns pale. But her latent teenage gear-changing skills are coaxed back to life on Anzac Hill with nary a grind or bunny-hop. Offering panoramic views over town to the MacDonnell

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Ranges, the hill is also significant to the local Arrernte (pronounced 'Ah-runda') people as part of their creation story.

There's more on the history of Alice Springs at the Telegraph Station Historical Reserve, 4km north of town. The first white settlement in Central Australia, it was the midway point of the 3000km Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin, which opened in 1872. Connected to an undersea cable from Indonesia, it enabled communication with the rest of the world within hours, instead of weeks by boat. Dubbed the 'singing wire', it's regarded as one of the great engineering feats of the 19th century. After the telegraph and post services moved to town in 1932, the Telegraph Station became an Aboriginal Children's Home. Heartbreaking stories from the Stolen Generation linger with us as we hit the road.

Like a grey ribbon topstitched with white thread and flicked by a rhythmic gymnast, the bitumen of Larapinta Drive undulates through dips and floodways. It feels exciting to be underway, the purr of tyres on tar a backdrop to our banter. However, we soon realise our itinerary is too tight to visit all the natural attractions within Tjoritja/West MacDonnell National Park, so we forgo Simpsons Gap and head straight to Standley Chasm.

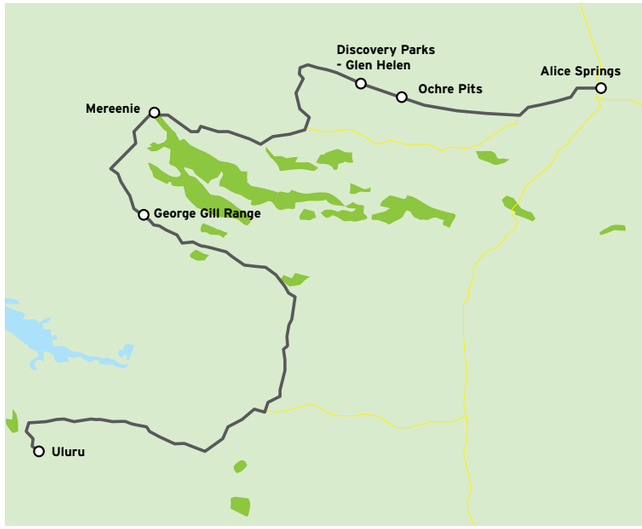
Located within a nature reserve owned by the Arrernte community, Standley Chasm is traditionally known as Angkerle Atwatye, meaning 'gap of water', and is a sacred site of women's dreaming. A subtle spritz of eucalypt permeates the heat as we stroll beneath shady ghost gums. The dry riverbed supports a profusion of the ancient endemic cycads (Macrozamia macdonnellii) and a vertical fissure cracks through the quartzite, leaving us dwarfed by 80-metre rock walls glowing jack-o-lantern

Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

The glowing walls of Standley Chasm.

A rest stop on the path to Standley Chasm.

The Women's Museum of Australia in Alice Springs.



Glass of wine in hand, we join fellow travellers watching the setting sun ignite the escarpment

orange in overhead sunlight. Created by erosion of a dolerite dyke, the enduring faceted cliffs are exactly as depicted by artist Albert Namatjira – it's like standing within his watercolour. We keep a lookout for black-footed rock wallabies on the return walk to the kiosk for cool drinks, where I impress McGussiness by flourishing a Turkish towel as a picnic cloth.

Turning onto Namatjira Drive, we zip past the turnoffs to evocatively-named Ellery Creek Big Hole and Serpentine Gorge, in favour of the Ochre Pits. Once the floor of a massive inland sea, layers of horizontal sediment buckled with uplifting, and now coloured mudstone and siltstone tumble vertically down the cliffs like spilt spices. Shades of ground coriander, cumin, turmeric and paprika are trickled with golden syrup and stained with purple mangosteen. Zig-zags of colour resemble conjoined rainbow stairs. The Arrernte mixed the ochre with animal fats for decorative, ceremonial and medicinal purposes – everything from body adornment to relieving congestion.

Sunlight slips below the ridge of Ormiston Gorge, rendering the permanent waterhole a dark, fathomless mirror. Corralled by cliffs, soft sand and graceful gums, the pool is a pensive place at this time of day, silent but for birdsong. Port Lincoln ringneck parrots fossick in the grass and a white-faced heron, neck tucked in and chin on chest, mimics a white-bellied sea eagle perched on a high rock ledge. There are several walks here, but we need to reach our accommodation before sunset.

Discovery Parks Glen Helen is the only accommodation within the national park and overlooks the Finke River to iron oxide-tinted cliffs. Glass of wine in hand, we join fellow travellers watching the setting sun ignite the escarpment, like a giant

From top to bottom: Ormiston Gorge waterhole attracts birdlife and swimmers looking to cool down; boots from walkers finishing the Larapinta Trail at Glen Helen Lodge (now Discovery Parks Glen Helen); the road undulates through dips and floodways along the drive.

WOMEN'S MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

Opened in 1993, the museum (**wmoa.com.au**) was established by the late Molly Clark after she found the Longreach Stockman's Hall of Fame lacking women's perspectives. It celebrates the extraordinary lives of ordinary women, along with trailblazers in fields such as law, medicine, government, film, architecture, aviation and physics. Accounts of discrimination include that of Ruby Payne-Scott, Australia's first female radio astronomer, who was barred from her permanent position at the CSIRO once she married, despite her boss declaring her "the best physicist in the lab".

geological screen. There's no time to set up my roof-top tent before our scheduled dinner in Namatjira Gallery Restaurant, and after yet more wine with our kangaroo steaks, I'm beyond setting up in the dark, so retreat to a motel room instead.

In the morning we stroll along the riverbed of marooned puddles to Glen Helen Gorge, which surrounds a lake-sized waterhole. One of only a handful of permanent waterholes along the 600km Finke River, it's vital for the survival of fish during drought. On the road again, we stop at Tylers Pass to view Gosse Bluff, which protrudes like a pimple on the plain. It's believed the rocky crater formed 140 million years ago from a comet impact, but I prefer the Arrernte story. Known to them as Tnorala, it's where a baby in its wooden coolamon fell to earth as it's mother and other sky-women danced as stars in the Milky Way.

We turn right onto the gravel of Red Centre Way, marked by a sculptured Corten steel signpost. Shredded tyres litter the roadside and a black crow caws mournfully. Corrugations set off a discordant clattering of cutlery and plates. We stop several times to rearrange possessions, jamming tea towels between tableware and clothes between chairs. Eventually we settle into a rutted rhythm as an ephemeral veil-tail of dust plumes in our wake. We appreciate the LandCruiser's handling and ponder how many more rattles a campervan might have produced. The landscape becomes our entertainment; folded, pleated ranges silhouette against a cobalt sky, jump-ups appear as abruptly as their name implies, and a sinuous ridge is evocative of the Arrernte's Caterpillar creation story.

As if we haven't had enough bone-jarring for one day, we leap atop quadbikes at Kings Creek Station. Following our laconic guide Steve, we slalom through the scrub, dodging prickly spinifex, errant livestock and doughnut-like mulga ant nests. Steve explains the ants stack mulga leaves in a mound around the entry hole as protection from dust and dirt. The nests descend up to two metres and interconnect in an underground network. After jerking up a rocky ridge for a view of the George Gill Range, McGussiness asks if there are any fossils here. "Only me," quips Steve.

The station is the largest exporter of wild camels in Australia and covers 1800 square kilometres. Glinting aluminium beer cans dangle from fences like outback earrings, helping stockmen detect the wires. During a dinner of camel burgers at the onsite café, our mates recount eating witchetty grubs on the Karrke Aboriginal Cultural Experience. Conversation continues around the fire pit before we bed down in tented safari cabins.

We're eager to experience the geological diversity of the George Gill Range at Kings Canyon in Watarrka National Park, but signage suggests three hours minimum for the 6km Rim Walk. We need to be at Uluru, showered and dressed for a workshop by 2:15pm, and with driving time that leaves only two and a half hours for the moderate-to-difficult walk. McGussiness, who suffers from asthma, wisely chooses the flatter one-hour Kings Creek Walk instead. Puffing up the 500-odd steps to the canyon rim, I concentrate on my footing, conscious of tonight's gala function. I'm not keen to accessorise my cocktail dress with a bloodied shin (as I did a previous year

From top left to bottom: a steel sculpture makes a nice change from the usual road signposts; the LandCruiser sits beside Larapinta Drive; a camel at Kings Creek Station; the cascading colours of the Ochre Pits' cliffs; quad biking at Kings Creek Station.

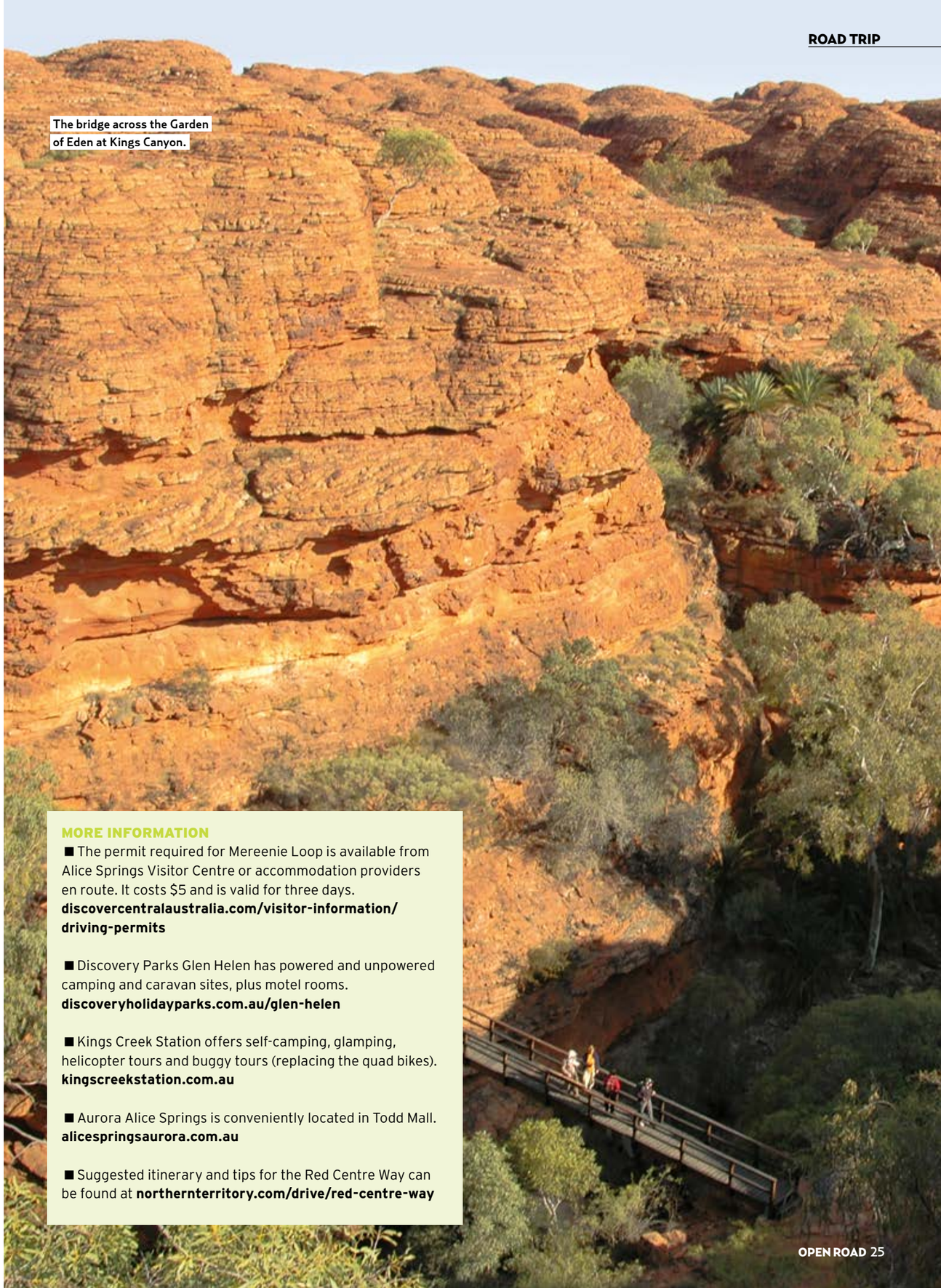
The 400-million-year-old plateau is an ochre moonscape of weathered rock domes studded with spinifex

following a mishap with a mountain bike pedal). Dubbed Heartbreak Hill, it's over quickly and views reward the effort.

The 400-million-year-old plateau is an ochre moonscape of weathered rock domes studded with spinifex and stunted trees. Rippled slabs, resembling corduroy, were once the bed of an inland sea. Cracks in the Mereenie sandstone have eroded and splintered, leaving sheer walls falling into capacious canyons. Timber stairs descend into the Garden of Eden, a lush oasis of waterholes in a valley where fairy martins flit between lanky gums and 400-year-old cycads. A sacred men's site for the traditional owners, it feels primordial and spiritually nurturing; a fitting place, if I had time, for 'forest bathing' (or shinrin-yoku – the Japanese practice of listening to nature). The southern rim overlooks the mass of eroded beehive-shaped mounds, like domed huts of an ancient civilisation. Known as the Lost City, they resemble Western Australia's Bungle Bungles, or the perforated stupas of Indonesia's Borobudur temple.

Back on the road, we compare experiences. McGussiness says, while I had a dress circle perspective, she soaked up the canyon's music from the stalls, walking amongst the cycads, watching raptors soar, and observing mistletoebirds' nests "hanging like babies' bottles" from the trees.

It's pedal to the metal to the Lasseter Highway, where monumental Mount Conner looms to our left. Often mistaken for Uluru, it's known locally as 'Fool-uru', though as a flat-topped mesa its silhouette is vastly different. It's on private property of the Curtin family and they offer scenic tours, but we scarcely have time to refuel at Curtin Springs before the final push to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. OR



The bridge across the Garden of Eden at Kings Canyon.

MORE INFORMATION

■ The permit required for Mereenie Loop is available from Alice Springs Visitor Centre or accommodation providers en route. It costs $5 and is valid for three days. **discovercentralaustralia.com/visitor-information/driving-permits**

■ Discovery Parks Glen Helen has powered and unpowered camping and caravan sites, plus motel rooms. **discoveryholidayparks.com.au/glen-helen**

■ Kings Creek Station offers self-camping, glamping, helicopter tours and buggy tours (replacing the quad bikes). **kingscreekstation.com.au**

■ Aurora Alice Springs is conveniently located in Todd Mall. **alicespringsaurora.com.au**

■ Suggested itinerary and tips for the Red Centre Way can be found at **northernterritory.com/drive/red-centre-way**