

TRAVEL

& INDULGENCE

ROCK SOLID

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Rock solid

The eternal magic of Uluru

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Many great sights, and sites, exist in our minds, much thought about and clearly visualised, long before we see that monument, museum, natural wonder or phenomenon. Some may disappoint — too small, too large, too crowded, too remote — failing to live up to the vividness of our imaginations.

I wonder if Uluru has ever fallen short of matching anyone's expectations. I have a friend who tells me she's in no hurry to visit as it'll always be there. So pervasive is the imagery of that great bulbous shape, this extraordinary thing seemingly plopped in the arid middle of nowhere, that perhaps there are bucket-listers who feel they have already seen and touched Uluru and been overshadowed by it, reduced to a sense of nothingness.

Last week marked my fifth visit to Uluru, not many in a lifetime of travelling but the trips have been concentrated into the past six years. I went in June, now I'm back to check newly refurbished Longitude 131, the top lodgings, set close to Voyages Ayers Rock Resort at Yulara, it's a varied and most comfortable base camp.

Longitude 131 has a new wellness spa and rejuvenated pool and outdoor bar area; also fresh to the mix is an ultra-luxury Dune Pavilion with dual Uluru and Kata Tjuta views, two guestrooms with ensuites featuring deep tubs, a vast outdoor space with a plunge pool that resembles the most sophisticated of water tanks, and a kitchenette brimming with gourmet extras.

Furnished front decks have been added to the 15 refurbished glamping tents, which sit under swooping white roofs that resemble nuns' wimples or cockatoos on the wing. The footprint is light on the earth, the lodge is hunkered low, there is nothing between you and the 600 million-year-old Uluru except red, raw landscape.

DEDICATED TO DESIGN

Longitude 131 opened in 2002 and James and Hayley Baillie of Baillie Lodges took over management a decade later; its last phase of a series of refurbishments has been unveiled this month.

Dune House, the central pavilion, has been reconfigured with a long bar designed by Tobias Staheli, a free-flowing lounge area, and a repositioning of the foyer. The external walkway to the entrance is now all smooth curves and contours and a new Dune Top belvedere features a splash pool, sunset bar and a clutch of private pods for dining by moonlight.

The Baillies, who also operate Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island and Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, are well-known for creating nature-based properties that successfully meld creature comforts and environmental excellence with layers of luxury and top design.

But you won't find over-fancy faddeals and inappropriate excess at any lodge in the portfolio.

Longitude 131, in particular, feels thoroughly earthed and authentic. Colours echo sand, earth, bush shrubs and the charcoal of camp fires.

Australian makers and designers have been given priority for the remake, from Max Pritchard Gunner Architects and furniture maker Nathan Day to lighting

Checklist

An additional tourism drawcard, until March 31, is Bruce Munro's Field of Light installation, its expanse of 50,000 stems can be viewed on tours from Longitude 131 and properties within Ayers Rock Resort. Rates at Longitude 131 include meals and beverages, transfers and scheduled tours. There is a minimum two-night stay and children 10 years and over are welcome. More:

baillielodges.com.au; longitude131.com.au.



But I am not here to lie down. At least not yet. The 2km Mala Walk circuit around a portion of the base beckons.

We enter the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and proceed in our small coach before assembling to follow a ranger along a marked walking trail edged with dusty-green wattle bushes and honey grevillea. We pause to stand in the overhangs of stony caverns with ridged ceilings that seem to billow like sails, their walls etched with the faded lines of age-old rock art.

We listen to storytelling about the men's cave where senior Mala males made their fires for ceremonies, and fixed their tools with kangaroo sinew and plant resin. In the women's kitchen cave, older females, girls and small children would prepare and cook bush tucker gathered in carved bowls. Some surfaces are smooth and even, pounded with stones used to smash seeds.

Beyond these now-silent recesses, rangy circles of spinifex on the orange-red soil appear like colourful canvases; the scrolled patterns resemble waterholes.

Towards the end of our walk, at Kantju Gorge, we look up and up past dwarfing rock and feel as lowly as ants. The guide tells us about 2.5km of the sandstone monolith sits beneath the surface. Out little group is so astonished that no one says a word.

As the sun begins to set, Uluru changes colour with the speed of a slide-show as if the sandstone's iron content is oxidising before our eyes. My non-stop snaps over half an hour reveal a paint-chart progression of colours. All the reds of the world are on show against the deepening blues of a cloudless sky.

Now it is jet-black night and Longitude 131 guests gather at the lodge's Table 131 beside a fire pit. There are tables for two or more, set in a semicircle, and staff serve,

as if summoned from a magician's top hat, a four-course wine-matched dinner from an outdoor kitchen. It feels like dining in an African boma and we listen not for lions roaring but dingoes howling.

The British couple nearby jump at the sound of rustling. Snakes? No, it's sommelier Sally unfolding starched linen napkins. The night is crisp and cold, the twice-baked cheese soufflé is cooling too fast. Out come hooded ponchos and hot-water bottles as the temperature briskly drops to just above zero.

As the tarte tatin is served, bush guide Caroline is talking stars, aiming her lime-green laser at the Southern Cross and Scorpio, pointing out the blazing brightness of Proxima Centauri.

Caroline is a former South African camp manager and while chatting to her I am reminded of the typical safari cycle and the agreeable way that days and nights shape up. Breakfasts and dinners are hearty, lunches more laid-back affairs, guests are early to rise and keen to retire after dinner. At Longitude 131, that could mean time to enjoy a swag slumber on your private deck, even if for just an hour or so until the warmth of indoors beckons.

Longitude 131's James and Hayley Baillie have recently introduced the swag concept as the finale to Table 131 and we walk back to the lodge looking like a congregation of hooded Star Wars characters to find five-star bushmen's bedrolls set up for stargazing with an Eco-Smart fire set in a stone and timber bench, snug bedding, pillows and decanters of liqueurs on side-tables.

Like snoozing animals in the heat of day, late mornings and early afternoons are also times to retreat. Feeding times are over, there's a need for burrowed darkness.

At the Dune Pavilion, the shades are drawn down and



artists Pierre and Charlotte Julian and ceramicist Malcolm Greenwood. Staff uniforms are by RM Williams; in-room toiletries have been especially blended with zesty eucalyptus and bush botanicals.

Indigenous connections are far from tokenistic here. While the Li'tya products used at the two-room Spa

Dune House at Longitude 131

Kinara, which is set in corrugated domes rusting and weathering at satisfying speed, feature the likes of quandong, wattleseed and desert lime, it's the artwork that really reinforces the connections.

In pride of place, on walls and displayed in niches, are quirky woven baskets, birds and animals from Tjanpi Desert Weavers of Alice Springs; carvings and artworks from communities in the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) Lands; and vibrant ceramics from the long-established Ernabella Arts centre at Pukatja, just across the South Australian border.

A long wall behind the main bar uses almost 500 tiles with a reed design by young artist Marceena from Ernabella and paintings in the top-drawer Dune Pavilion accommodation include a large canvas from Tjala Arts by Mona Mitakiki Shepherd, and a work by 2017 Wynne Prize finalist Wawiriya Burton is featured in Tent 12. And 19th-century outback pioneers are remembered, too, with photographs and memorabilia displayed in guest tents from expeditions by the likes of Eyre, Bourke and Wills.

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PICTURES: JULIAN KINGMA

bled, will soon be a deep lavender and then swiftly bronzed and burnished.

It is so unutterably beautiful, so immutable and imbued with significance, that I burst into tears.

On a scenic helicopter whirl from Ayers Rock Airport on a clear, warm morning, we hover over Uluru and the perspective is so different. No longer a dwarfed ant looking up, I feel like a dragonfly buzzing high.

The rock is not a flat, uni-faceted thing but a blocky mass of striations and honeycombs, of plucky bursts of greenery clinging in grooves. It's so furrowed that some of its indentations form clearly defined shapes, such as a brain and the tracery of animal tracks.

It is this topographical perspective that informs indigenous painting. Look down and see those ochre, green and white canvases with shapes of clustered vegetation, riverbeds, song lines and the honoured Tjukurpa stories of country, ancestry and law.

There are many places that truly touch the soul but the red centre has me hooked. I have insisted my sceptical friend must advance it to the top of her bucket list.

Now she's ready to tick off Uluru and Kata Tjuta at sunrise and sunset, to tackle Walpa Gorge and walk the Valley of the Winds, and visit the Cultural Centre to appreciate the customs of the Anangu people, handed back the title deeds to their land as shamefully late as 1985.

And, yes, she will stay at Longitude 131, with Uluru out front and Kata Tjuta to her right. She'll book a Ipilypa body ritual at Spa Kinara and succumb to a body mask of yellow desert clay and then rinse off in an outdoor shower, perhaps with wedge-tail eagles circling and the spirits of rufous hare wallabies swishing about in the spinifex.

You could call it a bucket list experience with benefits.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Baillie Lodges.

when the 4pm alarm signals an end to siesta, I press the automatic switch. The reveal is slow and tantalising.

First the bright soil and desert oaks, and then Uluru, caught by the afternoon light, is a shade of greyish mauve. It looks one-dimensional from a distance, a painted scrim. From the side window, I see that Kata Tjuta is getting dressed for sunset, its domes, big and small and jum-

From opposite page,
far left: the main pool
at Longitude 131;
Uluru framed by a
guest tent window; the
Dune Pavilion pool
deck and day bed; one
of two guestrooms in
the Dune Pavilion