

Visiting Australia's Red Centre is like travelling  
to another planet, writes **JOANNA HUNKIN**.

# R O C K









# OF AGES





The many heads of Kata Tjuta.  
PREVIOUS PAGES Left: the luxury tents  
of Longitude 131° offer uninterrupted  
views of Uluru. Right: an aerial view  
of the Red Centre.







**Kata Tjuta ... feels like walking on another planet, as you navigate giant, sleeping boulders the size of small elephants.**

When it comes to visiting Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, there are some things you can prepare for. The heat, for example, is a given. If you are visiting any time between the months of October and April, it will be hot. Every time you step outside during daylight hours will, more often than not, feel like stepping into a fan-forced oven. It's why most tours and activities take place first thing in the morning or as the sun starts to set.

Which brings us to the second thing you need to prepare for: being tired. Thanks to the early morning starts and late finishes, you will be tired. At Longitude 131°, the day's activities begin at 6.30am, with breakfast served beforehand. Most tours return mid-morning, before your itinerary resumes in the late afternoon, from 5pm onwards. If you enjoy a midday siesta, you'll be fine. If not, you will need a post-holiday lie-down when you return home.

You should also be prepared for the flies. It's the first thing everyone warns you about when you tell them you're heading north. "Ugh, the flies!" they exclaim, before insisting you pack fly nets and repellent. And it's true, there are a lot of flies and they are quite annoying. But honestly, they are manageable. Helpfully, Longitude provides you with both nets and repellent, should you be particularly irked by insects.

But there are some things you simply cannot anticipate, no matter how much research or reading you do leading up to your visit. Nothing will prepare you for just how vast and majestic Uluru is up close. Or the alien landscape of Kata Tjuta, which feels like walking on another planet, as you navigate giant, sleeping boulders the size of small elephants.

At Uluru, you'll be both dazzled and dazed by the ever changing colour of the rock, which morphs from blue and grey to pink, red and orange depending on the time of day and where you happen to be standing. Likewise, photographs just can't do justice to the extraordinary texture of the rock, which is cracked and flaking like the bumper of a rusting Holden Kingswood. It makes sense once you realise the rock is, in fact, rusting – and has been for many millions of years. Up close, you can see the original colour of the rock, which is a steely blue-grey. Exposure to the elements causes it to rust and turn that magnificent shade of orange.

At Kata Tjuta, which means "many heads" in the local Aboriginal language of Pitjantjatjara, the rock is different. Formed from clusters of small pebbles and boulders cemented together in sand and mud, it has the texture of multigrain bread, compared to Uluru's smooth wholemeal. ➤



It's here at Kata Tjuta that we get our first up close encounter with the Mars-like landscape, as we embark on an early morning walk through Walpa Gorge. Walpa means wind in Pitjantjatjara, which is something else you should prepare for. No matter how still the air at base camp, wind whips around the base of Kata Tjuta, particularly through Walpa Gorge and the Valley of the Winds.

Our guide, Sam, has been hosting tours in the area for a year-and-a-half. At best guess, he reckons there have been less than 20 days with little or no wind here. Some days, he says, it's so strong, it can be a struggle to stand up. In cooler months, it can be arctic.

As we head through the giant canyon, struck silent by the size and scale of the surrounding cliffs, we're surprised to discover pockets of emerald green bursting from the earth, in stark and surreal contrast to the burnt orange ground.

This is thanks to recent rainfall, explains Sam, which is absorbed by the rock and slowly seeps back out, creating valleys of verdant plant life. A nearby water hole is full of wriggling tadpoles, which will soon see the gorge echo with a choir of frog song. Sam looks for animal tracks as feral camels regularly visit the gorge to quench their thirst. The luckiest of visitors have been known to stumble across a camel or two on their morning walk but sadly, not today.

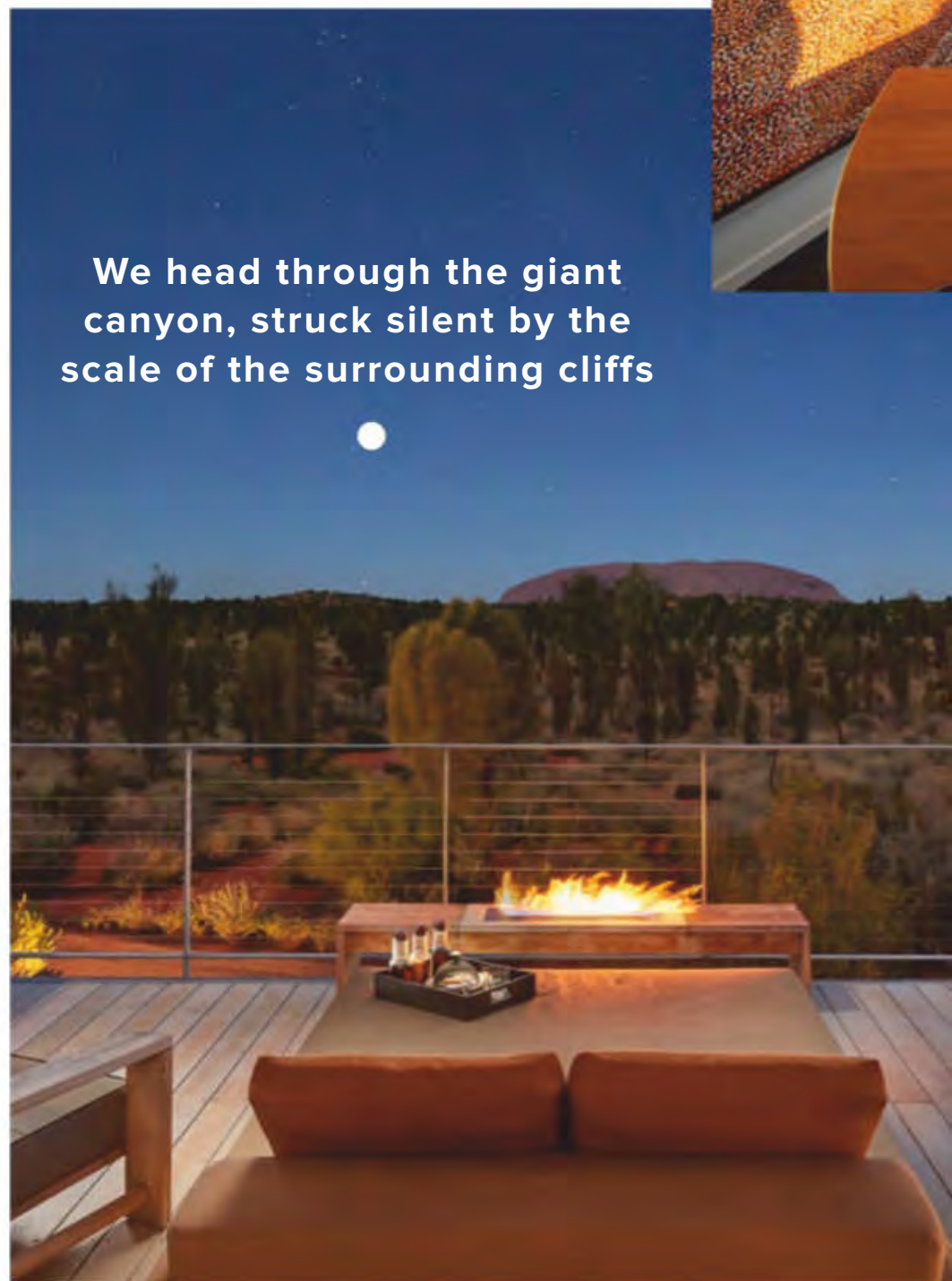
On the way back to camp (an affectionate euphemism for what is, in fact, a very well-appointed and luxurious resort) we stop at a tali [sand dune] to admire the many heads of Kata Tjuta from a distance. Once again, it's a view you can't prepare for.

Upon returning to Longitude, we spend the rest of the morning lounging poolside in an increasingly futile attempt to stay cool as the temperature climbs. By midday, it's time to retreat inside for lunch, where an ever-changing daily menu is offered, prepared by chef Tom Saliba, along with some of Australia's best wines. Longitude operates on an all-inclusive basis and guests are free to help themselves to refreshments from several well-stocked bars whenever they like. Henschke, Tyrells and Four Pillars Gin are just a few of the labels on offer, along with Louis Roederer Champagne.

After lunch, it's time for a kip in our tent, which is again a euphemism for a spacious and substantial dwelling, craftily shaded by sun sails on the outside and draped internally with billowing fabric to create the illusion of being in a tent. In truth, it is a private villa offering cinematic views of Uluru from the comfort of your bed – and air-conditioning. ►



**We head through the giant canyon, struck silent by the scale of the surrounding cliffs**







Clockwise from top left: Bruce Munro's *Field of Light*; the view from Longitude's Dune Pavilion; the plunge pool at Longitude; Umatji Tjitayi from Ernabella Arts dots her canvas; the evening view from Longitude's luxury tents.



**The true star of the show is Uluru and it is only by visiting the monolith that you can really understand its significance and story.**

Sitting on stilts, each elevated villa has its own private terrace, complete with a large daybed. Only the brave (or stupid) would actually venture out during the day – but come nightfall, it offers the perfect spot to soak up the night sky. Guests are given the option to spend the night under the stars, with an authentic outback swag provided, along with a less authentic gas fireplace and selection of nightcaps.

At this point, you will most likely find yourself conflicted as the siren call of sleep beckons but the magic of the night sky keeps you bright-eyed. Again, prepare to be tired. Accept it and move on.

Of course, the true star of the show is Uluru and it is only by visiting the monolith that you can really understand its significance and story. In keeping with the beliefs of the traditional custodians of the land, the Anangu, they are not my stories to share. But I would encourage anyone living in Australia to make the journey and learn more about these important chapters of First Nations' history.

Which brings us to the uncomfortable point in any trip to this area: the controversy and disharmony that comes from sightseeing in a sacred and culturally sensitive area. While one of the most painful chapters in Uluru's history ended last year, when climbing the rock was officially banned in October 2019, the scar remains. Both literally – a white line marks the rock where thousands of feet have carved a scar – and figuratively. Not everyone is happy about the hordes of visitors that descend on this treasured place.

So it is important to be sensitive and culturally aware. Come prepared to listen and learn. Every guide working in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is required to complete a six-month course through Charles Darwin University before they can take tours into the park. The course is approved by the park's management board, which comprises eight Aboriginal members, nominated by Anangu, alongside a further four members.

Another source of discomfort, for some, is British artist Bruce Munro's installation, *Field of Light*. Beloved by Instagrammers, the multi-coloured artwork, which



PHOTOGRAPHY KONRAD KASISKE





**Clockwise from far left: the glowing red rock of Uluru; the Mars-like landscape of Kata Tjuta; the pool at Longitude.**



### **Getting there**

**Jetstar and Qantas fly direct to Ayers Rock airport from all main centres. Transfers between the airport and Longitude 131° are included in rates.**

**Rates for Longitude 131° start from \$1700 per person per night, for a minimum two-night stay. Packages include dining and beverages, as well as signature tours and experiences. [longitude131.com.au](http://longitude131.com.au)**

features more than 50,000 solar-powered lights, originally opened in 2017 as a temporary exhibit. Its popularity has seen it become a permanent fixture.

But the contrast between the imported, artificial artwork and the natural beauty and cultural significance of the surrounding area, is hard to reconcile. More problematic is the fact Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, which operates the exhibition, charges visitors \$44 per person to enter and does not offer concessions to local Anangu (a spokesperson says requests are managed case-by-case and they are happy to accommodate when there is availability). For me, learning this took away any pleasure initially derived from the superficial experience. Elsewhere, the tourism industry is doing good things to support and build relationships with Anangu. During our stay at Longitude, two artists arrive from Ernabella Arts, Australia's oldest Indigenous art centre. Artworks from the centre are displayed throughout the resort and available for guests to purchase.

The artists – sisters Janet and Umatji Tjitayi – are set up in Dune House, where they will spend the next four days painting, as part of a residency programme with the resort. Guests watch the artworks emerge as the sisters quietly and carefully dot their canvases.

“Bringing artists here lets them concentrate on their artwork and be creative. They’re getting some respite from community life, which can be really difficult,” says Ernabella Arts manager Mel George, before explaining that all money raised through the sale of artworks, goes back into the community. “At our art centre, we generate and put about \$700,000 a year back into Anangu hands. It’s one of the only income sources in the community.”

The relationship with Longitude is both significant and authentic, says George.

“Anangu have a word – ngapartji-ngapartji – and it means reciprocal relationship. You give, I give, and we take away equally. They support us in multiple ways. They donate to a salary for a staff member, which we wouldn’t be able to afford without their help. That one staff member allows all of these Anangu to come in and create work and earn an income. They allow us to do 21 exhibitions a year. It’s really genuine and I can’t stress that enough. A lot of people do things because they have to. But we are constantly in communication and supporting one another.”

It’s that kind of respect and care that really sets Longitude apart. And in a place as special and sacred as Uluru-Kata Tjuta, it is the measure that matters most. ●