

# *Red Centre Pocket Guide*



*Exploring  
Australia's  
Outback*

*Monica Coleman*

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## Part 1: Introduction

### Chapter 1: FOREWARD

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**T**he Red Centre evokes images of the outback and so it should. It's remote, colourful and full of surprises. And it's Red. There are red cliffs, red sands and even red roos (kangaroos). And there's no disputing that it's in the Centre of Australia.

This book covers a vast area of over 500,000 square kilometres. It's hard to be exact as we cross the SA and WA borders on a couple of the routes. On a map the area might look small but it's more than three times the size of England, bigger than Germany, larger than Victoria and Tasmania together, or comparable to California. Interestingly, it's also about the same size as the Kimberley region of West Australia. The population is estimated to be around 60,000 with just over 20,000 of them living in Alice Springs.



*Hiking at Palm Valley near Hermannsburg*

Some people expect that there will be nothing in the centre of Australia. That couldn't be further from the truth. Expect stunning national parks featuring awe inspiring landscapes, with cliffs, mountain ranges, waterholes, rivers and canyons. The land is teeming with wildlife and unique plants, the night skies have to be seen to be believed and you can find solitude in the bush. Active people can go hiking, swim in a rock hole, ride a camel, handle a lizard or enjoy a mountain bike ride.

We'll tell you how to find secluded waterholes where kangaroos, native birds and other wildlife come to drink. We'll show you places where you can camp for free under the brilliant starry sky. We'll help you choose which of the many walks to do in the national parks. We'll let you know how to get the most out of visiting Aboriginal communities and help you soak up their 40,000 year old culture. We'll show you the must-see highlights but,

most importantly, we'll satisfy your adventurous streak and take you off-the-beaten-track to some special places not many people get to experience.

Having travelled to the Red Centre numerous times over the past 30 years, we were very aware that there was no comprehensive guide book available that covered the area well. There are some excellent field guides on the geology, flora and fauna as well as interesting books on the history of the region. Guidebooks for the Northern Territory are available but they don't give you the necessary detail. Nothing gives a step by step guide to everything you can see and do in this hugely diverse area. So we jumped at the chance when Birgit Bradtke asked us to write this guide.

Birgit has written two excellent guide books in this series – [Destination Kimberley](#) and [Destination Top End](#). We have used both of her books and found them to be invaluable in our trip planning, and whilst on the road. We are not Birgit; We have our own style and way of writing but essentially we share a similar philosophy on what makes a great guide book.

As well as travelling to the Red Centre for lengthy personal holidays, we have guided trips there for many years for my previous business. This forced us to really get to know the place much more than a tourist does. It forced us down every little dirt road and track to see what was there. We climbed the mountains, learned heaps about the indigenous culture and met numerous fascinating people along the way.

These days Phil and I travel in a Toyota Landcruiser and tow an off-road camper trailer. Our favourite experience is finding a remote campsite in a wonderful setting, far away from others, or tackling a section of the magnificent [Larapinta Trail](#). The Red Centre is full of such places and we will share them with you. We love walking so we've described many stunning walks that you can do on your travels. We also enjoy visiting remote communities and chatting with the locals so we'll share that as well.

When doing the final research for this book, we travelled very much incognito. We told very few people what we were doing, so that we could make unbiased recommendations. We don't accept "freebies" and have no interest in pushing a particular accommodation or tour or restaurant. We've written reviews based on experience and we're proud of the fact that we've told it how it really is.

Finally, a huge thanks to Phil for all the driving and putting up with me yelling "Stop" or asking if we could go back and check that bit again. His patience on the road and in proof reading the book was invaluable. And thanks also to our good friend Alison for her thorough proof reading assistance too.

Thanks for buying the book and we hope you find it most useful as well as entertaining.



*Binns Track in the Davenport Ranges*

## Chapter 2: HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

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**T**his guide is written in e-book format. You may be familiar with e-books, in which case you can skip this section and dive straight into the book. But for those of you who are not familiar with e-books, here are a few tips:

First of all, you need to save it to your hard drive. Look around the screen for a disk icon or where it says “Save a copy”. Click it, browse to your desktop and click save.

Now you can open the e-book from your desktop and read it on your screen any time you like. Or you can print a copy and read it like any other book.

The book also has some features that are designed to be used from your computer. While you are still in the planning stage of your trip this can be very handy.

You will come across links in this book. Some of them work just like links on the internet, taking you to a website. Other links are internal links, and they take you to a different part of this book. The links in the Contents page are internal links. Clicking on them takes you straight to that chapter.

### Navigating around the book

You have many options to get around this book. You can just scroll up and down with your mouse or with the scroll bar on the right side of the screen. You can use the little arrows (at the top or bottom of the screen, depending on your version of Adobe Acrobat). You can use the links in the TOC. And, if you remember the page number you want to go to, you can type that at the top or bottom of the screen where you see the page numbers. Play around with everything a bit and see what you find most comfortable.

You can also adjust the size of the text by using the plus and minus sign at the top of your screen, or by changing the percentage number that's displayed between the plus and minus sign.

And if none of this makes you feel comfortable while reading, just print the darn thing!

### How the book is laid out

The book is written in two parts, the first being the introduction and the second part being the detailed guide for Alice Springs and the routes you can take.

In Part 1, we have started by giving you an overview of where things are in the Red Centre followed by a brief description of each of the routes we describe in the guide. See *The Red Centre at a Glance*.

Next we've provided information on what you can expect from the weather at different times of the year and when we think is the best time to visit.

The General Travel Information chapter gives talks about getting there, getting around, facilities, costs, internet resources and agricultural quarantine.

This is followed by a chapter explaining the different camping and accommodation options you will experience in the Red Centre.

We expect visitors to do the right thing when in the Red Centre so we've provided some information on minimal impact techniques and taking care of the environment.

The Driving in the Red Centre chapter is jam packed with information on the type of vehicle to use or hire, common sense driving techniques, fuel, tyres and tyre pressures, how to get your car out of a bog and where to check on the current road conditions.

There's a chapter on Walking in the Red Centre. It provides information on walking safely, what to wear, what to carry etc. Plus there's a list of all of the walks in this book – easy, moderate and challenging.

Next there's useful information on staying safe on your travels. This includes communications equipment and safe camping, swimming and bush walking.

The next chapter tells you what to pack and how to pack it safely.

We've provided comprehensive information on Aboriginal people, including their history, lifestyles and how they live today. We tell you how you can visit communities and what to expect when you are there.

Then we start on the environment and what you can expect to see out there on your travels. There are chapters on the common plants, animals and birds to look for. There's a bit on geology and information on the night sky so you'll know how to find the Southern Cross and Milky Way.

For non Aussies, we've also included some typical Aussie words you'll hear on your travels.



Part 2 of the book starts with Alice Springs – what to see and do, where to stay and eat, where to shop and more.

Next, each of the 7 routes is described in lots of detail, offering step-by-step instructions to help you find the way and discover the wonders on offer in the Red Centre. They cover the driving instructions, camping and accommodation information, walks you can do, history, cultural experiences and much more.

## Distances & odometer readings

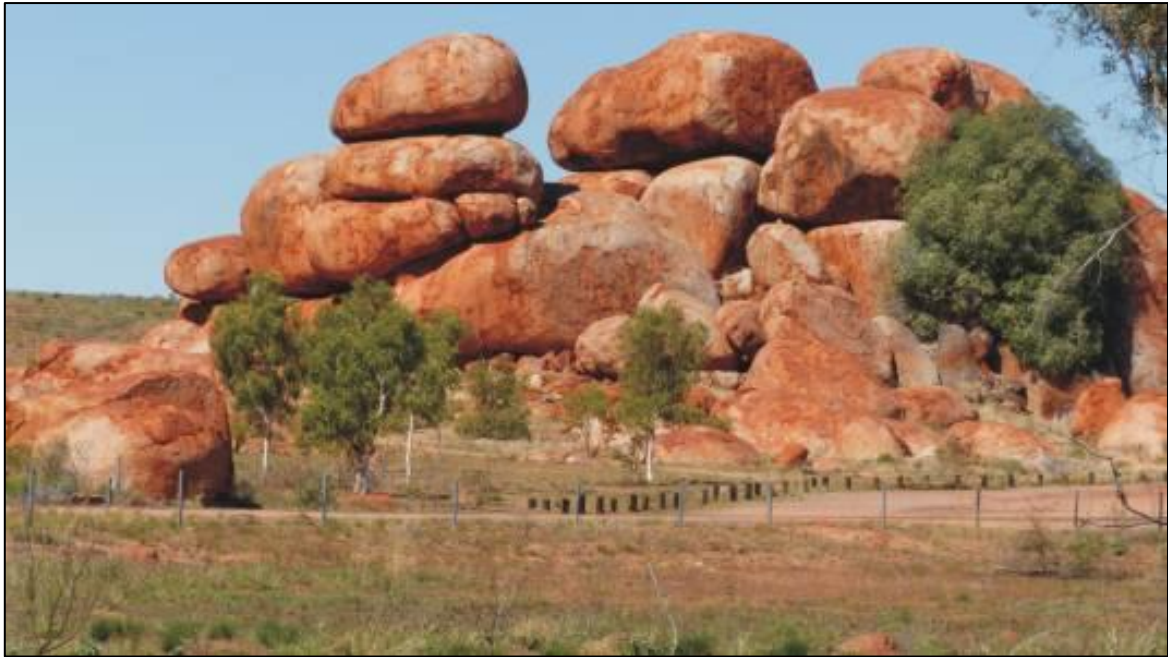
We have provided comprehensive driving directions and distances between turnoffs. Please be aware that odometer readings vary from car to car and are affected by wheel and tyre sizes etc. So you may find our distances a little different from what your odometer shows. The most important thing to remember is that all the driving routes were done with the same car and using the same wheels and tyres so they should be consistent.

## Aboriginal names versus non-Aboriginal names

We have used Aboriginal place names where they are commonly used e.g. Uluru. Otherwise, We have used the non-Aboriginal names e.g. Wallace Rockhole. Over the years it is likely that more places will become known by their Aboriginal name.
















## Abbreviations used

rd	road	L	left	NT	Northern Territory
st	street	R	right	WA	Western Australia
hwy	highway	N	north	SA	South Australia
Ave	Avenue	S	south	kg	kilogram
Tce	Terrace	E	east	psi	pounds per square inch
km	kilometre	W	west	SC	self-contained
m	metre	sqkm	square kilometre		



*Devils Marbles*

## Icons used

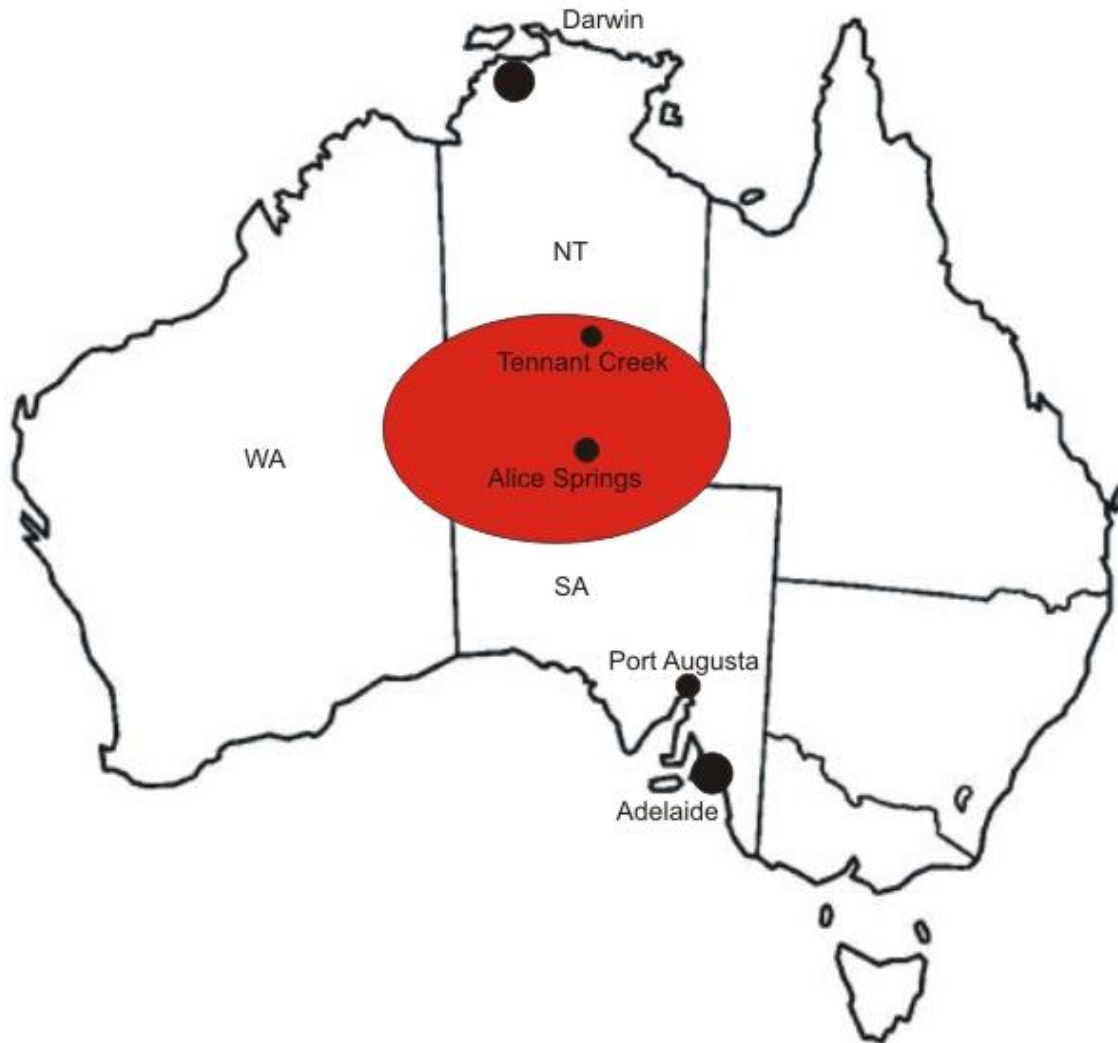
	Free camp		Picnic facilities
	National Parks camp (fee)		Campfires
	Commercial camp		Drinking water
	Accommodation		WIFI available
	Dining		Walking, easy
	Groceries		Walking, more challenging
	Fuel (diesel & unleaded / Opal)		Star - don't miss this!
	Toilets		

Note: All places in this guide that sell fuel have diesel and unleaded (or Opal which is suitable for use in unleaded cars).

## Chapter 3: THE RED CENTRE AT A GLANCE

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Let's have a brief tour around the Red Centre to get you oriented. It's obviously in the centre of the country so that's an easy start. Most of it lies in the Northern Territory (NT), with a couple of the routes we will tell you about crossing the borders into South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA).










The largest city is Alice Springs and it's located in the southern end of the NT. The area's major road is the Stuart Hwy. It starts in Port Augusta in the south (near Adelaide) and travels via the opal mining town of Coober Pedy to Alice Springs. It then heads north via the Red Centre's only other town, Tennant Creek, and on to Katherine and Darwin in the north.

In this guide we have detailed information about 7 different routes that you can take, together with numerous side-trips. We've offered a lot of options along the way so your trip can be as

easy or as adventurous as you want it to be. You can see a rough sketch map of the routes on the following page (this is for orientation only and shouldn't be used for navigation).

## Routes in this guide

-  Route 1: Stuart Hwy North from the SA border to Alice Springs. 283km plus 86km of side-trips (1-2 days). Easy, sealed all the way.
-  Route 2: Stuart Hwy South from Threeways to Alice Springs. 515km plus 58km of side-trips (2-3 days). Easy, sealed all the way.
-  Route 3: Red Centre Way including Uluru, Kata Tjuta & Kings Canyon. 1218km plus 135km of side-trips (5-10 days). Easy, mostly sealed with some 4WD sections.
-  Route 4: West MacDonnell Ranges Loop. 425km plus 265km of side-trips (3-5 days). Mostly easy sealed roads, plus 4WD side-trips.
-  Route 5: Binns Track North via the East MacDonnells to Tennant Creek. 871km plus 184km of side-trips (5-7 days). Moderate driving on 4WD tracks most of the way.
-  Route 6: Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop. 1004km plus 198km of side-trips (5-7 days). Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.
-  Route 7: Western Outback Loop. 1527km plus 10km of side-trips (6-7 days). Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.





All of the routes are centred on Alice Springs, and are described in a generally anti-clockwise direction. That means that you can piggy back one loop off another. There are many side-trips described as well. Click on the links to see full details of the routes. We've also included a very detailed chapter on Alice Springs.

### **Route 1: Stuart Hwy heading North from the SA border to Alice Springs**

297km plus 63km of side-trips. Allow 2-3 days.

Easy, sealed all the way except for two optional side-trips, one of which is best with a 4WD.

This route starts at the SA border near Kulgera and it's the quickest and most direct route to get from the southern states to Alice Springs. If you're coming from Adelaide, Kulgera is 1270km on a good sealed road, so we would allow 2 days for that, or take a bit longer and explore the opal mining town of Coober Pedy on the way.

From Kulgera the road is sealed all the way to Alice Springs and has several quality roadhouses along the route that provide fuel, meals, accommodation and camping. You can easily drive this section in a day but if you can allow 2 days you can do the side-trips. There's a side-trip on a good quality dirt rd to Henbury Meteorite Craters where you can do a short walk amongst the large holes left behind by ancient meteorites. Plus another side-trip to Rainbow Valley, one of our favourite sunset viewing places in the Centre, so if you can allow a night to camp here that would be a bonus.

### **Route 2: Stuart Hwy heading South from Threeways to Alice Springs**

524km plus 49km of side-trips. Allow a minimum of 2-3 days.

Easy, sealed all the way except for two optional side-trips that can be reached by 2WD.

This route starts at Threeways, which is just north of Tennant Creek (and where the road to Queensland starts). If you're coming from Darwin in the north it's 963km on a good sealed road to Threeways, which you could drive in one very long day. However, it is better to allow some more time and stop to explore the Nitmiluk Gorge National Park (Katherine Gorge) and the hot springs and Mataranka on your way south. If you are coming from Queensland there are many routes you can take to Mt Isa and then it's another 633km to Threeways.

From Threeways the road is sealed all the way to Alice Springs and has several quality roadhouses along the route that provide fuel, meals, accommodation and camping. We've described plenty of interesting side-trips including the Pebbles, Tennant Creek's many attractions, two historic telegraph stations, the Devils Marbles and Native Gap Conservation Reserve. You can visit several excellent Aboriginal art galleries, to the Red Centre farm and the Big Man at Aileron Roadhouse (see photo).



All the side-trips are short and can be reached by 2WD. So you could drive from Threeways to Alice Springs in a day but then you'd miss out on most of the side-trips. The Stuart Hwy is

just a highway and a quick way to get somewhere – you won't regret it if you take the time to explore along the way.

### **Route 3: Red Centre Way**

1148km plus 61km of side-trips. Allow a minimum of 5-10 days.

Easy, mostly sealed with some 4WD sections. Some of the side-trips can be done by 2WD but to do the entire circuit you will need a 4WD.

This is undoubtedly the quintessential trip that should be on every traveller's bucket list. It's a circuit out of Alice Springs, heading to the west, and is packed with highlights. The Red Centre Way begins with the magnificent and very popular West MacDonnell Ranges, and the main road is sealed for the first 200km or so. There are waterholes, lookouts, gorges and heaps of great walks to do, as well as a couple of excellent 4WD side-trips that will get you right away from the tourists.

Next comes about 150km of rough, corrugated road to get to Kings Canyon and you'll need a 4WD for this. The best way to explore this fabulous national park is on foot, with my favourites being the Giles Track and Kings Canyon Rim Walk. From here it's a sealed road for the rest of the loop. Uluru is undoubtedly the major highlight for most travellers. You can drive, walk or cycle around this massive monolith and then relax with a glass of bubbles while watching the sun set. Close by is Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) and it too offers a tremendous walk amongst the huge domes. Back on the Stuart Hwy it's just 200km back to Alice Springs.

As we mentioned you'll need a 4WD to complete the entire loop as one short section is on a rough, corrugated dirt road. But don't worry if you don't have a 4WD – this is what you should do. From Alice Springs, go south on the Stuart Hwy for about 200km to Eralunda (use the Route 1 notes to help). Then take the Lasseter Hwy to visit Uluru and Kata Tjuta as well as a side-trip to Kings Canyon (use the Route 3 notes to help). If you also do Route 4 you'll be able to get to most of the main attractions in the West MacDonnell Ranges as well. That's the real icons covered!

### **Route 4: West MacDonnell Ranges Loop**

477km plus 189km of side-trips. Allow a minimum of 3-5 days.

Mostly easy sealed roads. Some optional side-trips can be reached by 2WD but you'll need a 4WD to do them all.

Nobody should miss the West MacDonnells as they have so much variety to offer. The main part of this loop is sealed all the way and it's basically the same as the first part of Route 3, the Red Centre Way. The route begins with the magnificent and very popular West MacDonnell Ranges with its many waterholes, lookouts, gorges and heaps of great walks to do. Highlights include the sheer walls of Standley Chasm, great swimming in Ellery Creek Big Hole, the stunning Ormiston Gorge hike, watching the sunset at Glen Helen and challenging yourself on a climb of Mt Sonder.

From here we continue via Gosse Bluff meteorite crater site to Hermannsburg. Both Hermannsburg and nearby Wallace Rockhole are great opportunities for your first visit to an Aboriginal community and we'll tell you later on exactly how to do that and what to expect. On a side-trip to Palm Valley you can enjoy stunning walks to high vantage points over the Finke River. Another side-trip to Boggy Hole will offer challenging driving and the reward of

remote camping. Both of these require a 4WD and Boggy Hole is really only suitable for experienced drivers.

The last leg of this route takes a 4WD track through Owen Springs Reserve, or you can simply continue on the highway back to Alice Springs.

### Route 5: Binns Track North

888km plus 182km of side-trips. Allow a minimum of 5-7 days.

Easy driving on sealed roads through the East MacDonnell Ranges. Then moderate driving on 4WD tracks for most of the rest of the way. If you only have a 2WD, don't worry because you can drive an ordinary car all the way from Alice Springs to Trepkina Gorge and it's definitely worth doing this bit.



From Alice Springs, the route heads east through the East MacDonnell Ranges. It's less touristy and less crowded than the West MacDonnells. A major highlight here is Trepkina Gorge, offering outstanding hiking and fabulous camping. It's one of our all-time favourites and if you like walking you can easily spend a couple of days there.

Now the road changes to a good quality dirt road and passes through huge outback stations (farms). Some of the stations have opened their properties to tourists and offer fuel, supplies, meals, accommodation, camping and sometimes local tours. It's a special experience to sit around a campfire chatting with the local workers. Our favourites include Hale River Homestead where you can get a real cup of coffee and Murray Downs Station where you can camp on a welcome green lawn.

We've included Aboriginal communities that you can visit on short side-trips. They are great spots to restock with fuel, water and supplies and have a look at how the indigenous people live. No permits are required to visit the communities on this loop.

The driving becomes a little more adventurous as we head through remote countryside to rugged Tower Rock. You should definitely plan on camping here for the night. You can explore the rocks, look for agile rock wallabies leaping all over the place, climb to the summit (see photo) and enjoy a marvellous sunset view.

Not long after, the road changes into an interesting, windy, scenic route through the mountains. A highlight of the route is the Davenport Ranges National Park. You can expect remote camping at delightful waterholes in this fairly new park, as well as short walks, abundant birdlife and just that special feeling of being in the middle of the outback.

Eventually you'll reach the Stuart Hwy where you can go north for 87km to Tennant Creek and Threeways for a look-see, or south for 369km to Alice Springs.

### **Route 6: Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop**

953km plus 190km of side-trips. Allow a minimum of 5-7 days.

Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.

Now we're getting into more remote, more challenging driving terrain. It's dirt pretty much all the way and you'll need a high clearance 4WD. The route starts in Alice Springs and quickly heads off along the Old Ghan Route where you'll see historic railway sidings and other relics. Interpretive signs show you how tough life would have been like for the early explorers and workers building the rail line.

Next is the excellent side-trip to the much-photographed Chambers Pillar. A short walk brings you up close and personal with this giant rock pillar and the sunsets are amazing. We recommend you camp here for a night to truly appreciate the place.

After visiting Finke Aboriginal community we leave the Old Ghan route and travel across remote station properties. Our favourite camp spot along here is Eringa Waterhole where the birdlife is prolific. If you have a kayak or canoe you'll enjoy a paddle on this surprisingly large waterhole. If not, walk around it for a different perspective.

Across the border into SA you'll visit Dalhousie Springs in the Witjira National Park. This huge, deep waterhole is always very warm (some would say hot) and is a great place to soak weary muscles.

Old Andado Homestead is another highlight, with the historic house still set up as it was when the owner left. Often, caretakers are there and they'll bake a batch of scones for a small donation.

Now it's onto Binns Track via the Aboriginal community of Santa Teresa where visitors are made very welcome. The track winds its way through scenic mountain ranges back to Alice Springs.

### **Route 7: Western Outback Loop**

1552km. Allow a minimum of 7-8 days, more if you want to include Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.

This is the most remote and challenging route in this guide. It's also the longest. You'll need a high clearance 4WD and some remote travelling experience. The route travels largely through Aboriginal lands and is very scenic for almost all of the way.



## Destination Red Centre

The route goes via several remote Aboriginal communities, including three that offer excellent art centres. It is usually possible to see the artists at work and always possible to buy some genuine, local artwork.

At Giles Meteorological Station you can learn about weather forecasting and watch weather balloons being released to gather data. There's a short side-trip to Lasseter's Cave where you can learn the fascinating story of the legendary Lasseter's Reef gold discovery.

The route continues past Kata Tjuta and Uluru giving you a chance to explore these must-see places if you haven't already done so on the Red Centre Way. The final leg of this route takes you via a dirt back road that passes close to Mt Conner and ends up on the Stuart Hwy near the SA border.

### Some route combinations to consider

- If you're travelling from the south through to the north, consider this. Take the Stuart Hwy heading North to Alice Springs. Do the Red Centre Way finishing back at Alice. Then take Binns Track North to Threeways, from where you could continue north to the Top End or Kimberley areas.
- Another option for those travelling from the south to the north and who prefer to get off the beaten track is as follows. Take the Stuart Hwy heading North to Alice Springs. Do the Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop. Next do the Western Outback Loop. Then Binns Track North to Threeways.
- If you're travelling from the north to the south and don't have heaps of time, here's a good option to consider. Take the Stuart Hwy heading South to Alice Springs. Do the Red Centre Way. Then tack on the Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop if time permits.
- If you're really tight for time take the Stuart Hwy to Alice Springs then do the Red Centre Way.

### Is there a way you can do it all?

That's a tough ask. There are a lot of roads and tracks to choose from. If you do want to do the lot then you will need to do a bit of back tracking, but not too much. Think of it as an opportunity to restock in Alice Springs. So, if you've got 4-8 weeks to spare, here's a way you can cover it all and get some variety along the way:

- Coming from the south (Adelaide / Port Augusta), take the Stuart Hwy heading North to Alice Springs
- Take the West MacDonnell Ranges Loop finishing to Alice
- Do the Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop, arriving back in Alice
- Do Binns Track North up to Tennant Creek
- Take the Stuart Hwy heading South back to Alice
- Do the Red Centre Way then back north on the Stuart Hwy to Alice
- Do the Western Outback Loop

## Chapter 4: WEATHER, CLIMATE & THE BEST TIME TO VISIT

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**T**he Red Centre is located in an arid zone, as is 70% of Australia. An arid area is defined as having insufficient rainfall for the regular production of crops. It's dry, doesn't rain often and the humidity is low. The area has a typical four season weather pattern like the southern states, but the transition between the seasons is quite subtle.



*An unexpected rainstorm can make the roads impassable*

Rainfall is not predictable and can fall at any time of the year. In some years there will be no rainfall at all. Most downpours occur in the summer months, often after long, dry periods. When the rain does fall, it will frequently come with spectacular thunderstorms and flash flooding that will fill up usually dry river beds and close many roads. Imagine knee deep water flowing down Todd Mall in Alice Springs – it happens! In the first 2 weeks of 2017, Tennant Creek had 75% of its average annual rainfall! Even a small amount of rain will make dirt roads slippery and potentially impassable. The good news is that the roads usually dry out very quickly.

### When to go

#### May to August

The cooler months of May to August are my favourite time to visit the Red Centre. But we should confess that's because we don't like hot weather and love to be outdoors hiking. The day time temperatures are usually mild, the sun is shining, the sunsets are superb and the chances of rain are less than the hotter months. It's a fabulous time of year to be active in the outdoors. Bring the sunhat and sunscreen. The nights can get very cold so make sure you are prepared with warm clothing and bedding. The occasional frosty night has the benefit of killing off the bush flies, which is a real bonus. Accommodation prices will be higher in the peak season months of June to August and the major tourist spots can get very busy. Visit the major tourist spots during the day time and this guide will help you find secluded campsites off-the-beaten-track.

## September & October

This is still a nice time to visit. The weather starts warming up by September and plenty of tourists are still about. Whilst the nights are more pleasant than winter, the days sometimes get quite warm. If there's been rain the wildflowers will be out in force, but so will the pesky flies.

## November to February

November is starting to get too hot to enjoy a visit, unless you want to see the Red Centre from the windows of your air conditioned car. That said, it's a dry heat with little humidity. It will be very hot though with temperatures into the high 30s and low 40s. December to February in particular is much too hot for an enjoyable outdoors holiday experience. The flies will eat you alive! Some attractions, accommodations and restaurants will close for part of this time. Learn from the locals. You'll find them in the air conditioned shopping malls, the library or at the swimming pool at this time of year!

## March & April

Travelling in the Red Centre in March is a bit of a lottery. Things start to cool down a little in April although there can still be a lot of hot days and the pesky flies are still being pesky. It's best if you can wait till at least May but plenty of people still travel during this time.

## Average Temperatures & Rainfall in the Red Centre

All the temperatures in the table below are in degrees Celsius and rainfall is in millimetres. Averages are only a rough guideline, as what really happens on the ground can differ from year to year. However, you can see some patterns.

Heading north out of Alice Springs and the temperature is generally higher, both during the day and at night. The further north you go the more you'll come under the influence of the Top End (northern NT) weather patterns with its distinctive wet and dry seasons. You should expect quite a bit more rain in the summer months and greater humidity.

Heading west to Uluru and beyond doesn't make a great deal of difference to the averages. Heading south to Finke and beyond, the weather tends to be a bit cooler and drier.

<b>Alice Springs</b>	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Average daily max temperature	<b>35.9</b>	<b>35.0</b>	<b>32.3</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>23.0</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>27.0</b>	<b>31.1</b>	<b>33.9</b>	<b>35.5</b>
Average night min temperature	<b>20.9</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>17.1</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>16.0</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>19.9</b>
Average monthly rainfall	<b>42.7</b>	<b>41.4</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>25.1</b>	<b>36.3</b>

## Useful weather websites

The Bureau of Meteorology (known as the “bom”) is the official weather forecaster in Australia and they have an excellent website. [www.bom.gov.au](http://www.bom.gov.au)

We also find the Willy Weather website quite useful. Simply type in where you are and it fetches the information off the Bureau for you. [www.willyweather.com.au](http://www.willyweather.com.au)



## Chapter 5: GENERAL TRAVEL INFORMATION

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### Getting there

#### Visa Information

Nearly every non-Australian needs a Visa to enter Australia. It is usually quick and easy to obtain. Visit the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs website:

[www.border.gov.au](http://www.border.gov.au)

#### Flying

The only practical flights to Central Australia are to either Alice Springs or Uluru/Yulara, and all of them start from one of the Australian state capital cities. Some Uluru/Yulara flights touch down at Alice Springs on the way. Overall there are plenty of flights, but the schedules change a lot during the year. Unless you are short of time, we think it makes more sense to fly into Alice Springs and hire a car from there. Alice Springs has plenty of vehicle rental companies and they are usually significantly cheaper than rental vehicles at Uluru/Yulara.

Qantas ([www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)), Virgin ([www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com)) and Air North ([www.airnorth.com.au](http://www.airnorth.com.au)) fly into Alice Springs, while Virgin and Jetstar ([www.jetstar.com.au](http://www.jetstar.com.au)) fly to Uluru. Qantas also fly to Uluru, but stop at Alice Springs on the way.

Alice Wanderer Airport Transfers provides a door-to-door shuttle service for all flights into and out of Alice Springs. Ph: 1800 722 111, and there are also plenty of taxis to get you into town.

#### Driving

Driving can be a very attractive option for those who have the time. Car hire details can be found in the Alice Springs chapter.

#### Driving from Adelaide

It's an easy highway drive of about 1530km on bitumen. You can sit on 110kph, or cover this distance in a more leisurely 2-4 days, or even take a bit longer and do some sightseeing along the way. The section from the SA/NT border to Alice Springs is described in our Stuart Hwy heading North chapter in this guide.

#### Driving from Darwin

This is also an easy highway drive of about 1500km, also on bitumen. You can cover this distance in 2-4 days, at 130kph, or take a bit longer doing some sightseeing along the way. The section from Threeways (near Tennant Creek) to Alice Springs is covered in our Stuart Hwy heading South chapter in this guide.

#### Driving from the West:

The Great Central Road leaves Leonara in Western Australia, then continues for about 900km to Giles, not far from the NT border. This is a reasonable quality dirt road all the way, usually suitable for about 70kmph – 80kmph travelling. The section from Giles through to Alice Springs is covered in our Western Outback Loop in this guide.

## By Bus

Greyhound is the main operator of coach services to Alice Springs from Adelaide, Darwin and Cairns. See their website for current details on prices, passes and specials.

[www.greyhound.com.au](http://www.greyhound.com.au)

## By Train

Between February and November, you can travel to Alice Springs on the Ghan Railway. The service leaves Adelaide at 12.15pm on Sundays and arrives in Alice Springs at 1.45pm the following day. From Darwin, the service leaves at 10.00am on Wednesdays and arrives in Alice Springs at 9.10am the following day. At some times of the year there are additional services. [www.journeybeyondrail.com.au](http://www.journeybeyondrail.com.au) Also [www.railmaps.com.au](http://www.railmaps.com.au)

## Getting Around

### Self Driving

The best way to see the Red Centre is in your own vehicle. We've covered car hire in the Alice Springs chapter.

### Public Transport

You can use public transport to get to Alice Springs and Tennant Creek but that's about it. If you don't have a car and don't want to hire one, your only sightseeing option will be to join tours along the way.

### Tours

There is quite a selection of tours available in the Red Centre, particularly out of Alice Springs and Uluru (Ayers Rock). There are coach tours and some operators are offering walking holidays, cycling trips, 4WD trips and Aboriginal cultural experiences. The best place to start is the Alice Springs Visitor Information Centre. In addition, it's amazing how many minor local tourism operators there in out-of-the-way places.

[www.discovercentralaustralia.com](http://www.discovercentralaustralia.com)

## Facilities/Costs

### New National Park fees

As of 2023, fees have been introduced at [many of the sites managed by Parks Victoria](#). This includes Arltunga Historical Reserve, Chambers Pillar Historical Reserve, Finke Gorge National Park, Henbury Meteorites Conservation, Iytwelepenty / Davenport Ranges, Karlu Karlu / Devils Marbles Conservation, Mac Clark (Acacia peuce) Conservation Reserve, Napwerte / Ewaninga Rock Carvings, N'dhala Gorge Nature Park, Owen Springs Reserve, Rainbow Valley Conservation Reserve, Ruby Gap Nature Park, Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park, Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve, Trepina Gorge Nature Park and Watarrka National Park (Kings Canyon).

The important thing to note is that these fees apply over and above any camping fees. And if you're hiking the Larapinta Trail you'll be hit with a walking fee, a visiting the national park fee and a camping fee!

The fees cost \$10 per adult per day, \$5 for children and \$25 for a family. You can also buy a 2 week pass for \$30 per adult, \$15 for children and \$75 for a family. There's also an "Open Pass" which lasts for a year - \$60 for adults, \$30 for children, \$150 for families. Residents of the Northern Territory are exempt from these new fees (however, if they have non NT residents on board those people do have to purchase a pass.

These passes will not be available until 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023. And Parks NT doesn't know yet what the online link will be, so stay tuned!

The fees at Uluru have not been changed as this national park is managed by Parks Australia, not Parks NT.

### **Banks**

Alice Springs and Tennant Creek have the usual range of major banks, which usually open Monday-Thursday from 9:30am – 4.00pm and on Fridays from 9:30am – 5.00pm. Away from the towns there aren't any banks, but most cattle stations, roadhouses and Aboriginal communities accept EFTPOS and major credit cards. There are few ATMs away from Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, so you should always carry at least several hundred dollars in cash.

### **Costs**

Costs in Alice Springs are comparable to major cities. Tennant Creek is more expensive. Once you leave those two towns though, everything costs substantially more. Outback stations and Aboriginal communities are in remote locations, where transport is expensive.

Do your food shopping in Alice Springs. Try to buy enough food to last any of the routes that you choose from this book. Roadhouses are usually the most expensive for food. Aboriginal communities have reasonable basic food supplies such as bread and milk, but some things will probably be frozen e.g. bread and UHT (long life) milk. Prices for fresh fruit and vegetables in the Aboriginal communities have come down over the years and the quality is usually pretty good. Meat prices are mostly not too bad, but there will only be a small variety.

Treat yourself to a night or two at one of Alice Spring's restaurants (see our Dining section). For a mid-range restaurant, expect to pay \$30-\$40 for a main course. Kings Canyon and Ayers Rock resorts offer a range of dining options but they are more expensive than in town. They also offer high end dining experiences that will set you back a few hundred dollars.

Fill up with fuel before leaving town – you'll be very glad you did! Fuel prices in remote places can be 50% more than in Alice Springs.

### **Electricity**

The mains power voltage in Australia is 220 – 240V. We have different power plugs to most other countries. Our plugs have 3 flat pins, and you'll definitely need an adapter to use our power points.

### **Phone and Internet**

Most Australian mobile phones will work in Alice Springs. If coming from overseas, you could buy an Australian Telstra SIM card for your phone, which will get you coverage along much of the Stuart Hwy and some of the remote communities. Regardless of where you are

from, big areas of outback Australia do not have any phone reception. See the Communications Equipment information. Wireless internet is common in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. Telstra has an ongoing program to install free mobile hotspots along the Stuart Hwy and at major tourist attractions. We find that this can increase my reception by one bar, which is at least enough to send a text message.

If you are connected on Telstra, you can often get limited reception in remote communities and re-fuelling places.

Since August 2021, calls from Telstra public phone boxes are free in Australia, to Australian numbers. You don't need coins or cards. There are about 15,000 public phone booths Australia-wide – although not too many in the outback!

## Visitor Information Centres

These are a great place to collect information, free tourist maps, leaflets and tourist guides as well as learn more about the area you are visiting. Often, they also act as a free booking service, and can help you find accommodation, book a tour or with onward travel. There are two official Visitor Information Centres in the Red Centre:

### **Alice Springs Visitor Information Centre**

Corner Todd Mall & Parsons St, Alice Springs

Ph: (08) 8952 5800 (international +61 (0)8 8952 5800) or 1800 645 199

[www.discovercentralaustralia.com](http://www.discovercentralaustralia.com)

[info@discoverca.com.au](mailto:info@discoverca.com.au)

Open Monday to Friday from 8.00am – 5.00pm and weekends from 9.30am – 4.00pm.

### **Tennant Creek Visitor Information Centre**

Located in the Battery Hill Mining Centre, Peko Rd, Tennant Creek

Ph: (08) 08 8962 1281 (international +61 8 8962 1281) or 1800 500 879

[www.barklytourism.com.au](http://www.barklytourism.com.au)

[info@barklytourism.com.au](mailto:info@barklytourism.com.au)

Open from 8.30am to 5.00pm every day in season (shorter hours out of season).

## Internet resources

Travel NT is the Northern Territory Government's official tourism website for visitors to the Territory. The Alice Springs section of the Travel NT website contains maps, itineraries, travel advice and lots of other information. [northernterritory.com/alice-springs-and-surrounds](http://northernterritory.com/alice-springs-and-surrounds)

The Parks and Wildlife NT's website has information for those intending to walk the [Larapinta Trail](http://www.parksandwildlife.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit) or visit the many National Parks in the region. [www.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit](http://www.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit)

Tourism Central Australia is the Regional Tourism Association. It has listings for accommodation, car hire and other services for visitors to Alice Springs. It also manages the local Visitor Information Centre in Todd Mall. [www.discovercentralaustralia.com](http://www.discovercentralaustralia.com)

The official Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Park website has up to date information on visiting Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. [www.parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/index.html](http://www.parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/index.html)



There's also an excellent free app called the Field Guide Northern Territory. It has great information on the birds and animals in the region.

## Agricultural Quarantine

Australia has very strict quarantine laws and regulations. These restrictions don't usually cause problems for the average traveller. Nobody flies into Australia with bags full of soil or fresh produce. However, it's a different story when people travel around Australia. Backpackers, campers and caravanners are usually self-sufficient rather than relying on restaurants, so they often they carry fresh food in their vehicles.

For the purposes of quarantine, they define fruit as anything that has a seed in it. So, that includes things that you might normally think of as vegetables e.g. pumpkins, tomatoes etc.

## Travelling to the NT

If you are travelling into the NT from any other state in Australia, you must be aware of laws that stop you taking some fruits and vegetables across the border. It is very important that you abide by these quarantine regulations. There are interstate and overseas pests and diseases that haven't been found yet in the NT, and we all need to ensure that it stays that way. Some of these pests and diseases would pose a major threat to the NT's agricultural export industry. Pests like fruit flies are not just an inconvenience. Due to our isolation, the long distances to markets and the associated costs, the growers here rely on that "fruit fly free" status. To lose that "fruit fly free" status would place a huge financial burden on agricultural businesses in the area and would make many of them unviable.

NT borders aren't patrolled. However, you will find quarantine bins at border crossings. A little bit of planning will prevent you throwing out a lot of perfectly good fruit and vegetables at the border, by eating it before the border. And it's good to know that Alice Springs has an excellent range of food shopping opportunities.

### Do the right thing!

Please obey the law. If you bring in forbidden items, you may save yourself a few dollars, but you may also wipe out someone's livelihood.

Here are some things that you can't take into the NT:

- Bananas
- Citrus fruits
- Cucumber fly hosts e.g. zucchini, cucumber, melons, pumpkin, tomato, passionfruit
- Home-grown fruit and vegetables
- Home dried fruit and vegetables
- Fresh herbs
- Pawpaw (papaya)
- Potatoes, including any packaging
- All other fresh commercially grown vegetables

It is OK to take:

- Commercially grown fruit not listed above

- Fruit and vegetables that have been frozen, freeze-dried, dehydrated or canned
- Fresh fruit salad
- Dried herbs
- Nuts
- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Fish
- Meats
- Commercially produced honey
- Packaged and canned foods

If you are travelling to the NT from WA the same rules apply with one addition – you also cannot bring commercially grown fruit across the border.

### **Travelling within the NT**

You should be aware that there's a special Ti Tree Fruit Fly Exclusion Zone (FFEZ), which is between Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. Do not take any fruit (including capsicum, chilli, tomato, eggplant, cucumber, zucchini and squash) into the FFEZ.

### **Travelling from the NT into other states**

It's important to check what you can take into the next state of your journey. It's easy to sort this out if you know the rules in advance.

### **More information:**

Things change rapidly when it comes to agricultural quarantine. Please refer to the resources below to check on the current rules and regulations.

- <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/while-youre-away/biosecurity-border> is a useful website.
- [www.interstatequarantine.org.au](http://www.interstatequarantine.org.au) is also a very useful site.

## Chapter 6: CAMPING & ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS IN THE RED CENTRE

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### Free bush camping



Our favourite way to experience the outback is to camp in the wild somewhere. We've described many such camps in this book. Some are just a patch of ground with no facilities. Others are designated sites with facilities that may include toilets, picnic shelters, fireplaces, rubbish bins or drinking water. Everyone needs to do the right thing to ensure these camps remain available. Don't camp if there's a sign saying not to. Don't leave any rubbish behind. Use existing fire scars if possible. Follow all the Minimum Impact Techniques described in this guide. Don't camp on Aboriginal land unless you have permission. It is OK to camp along a road that passes through and outback station – just stay away from bores, cattle yards, homesteads and other infrastructure. These days there is no such thing as a free (legal) camp in a national park!

### National parks camping



National parks in the Red Centre are managed by the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory. Before visiting a national park, you should check the national parks site to see if the park is open and if the conditions are suitable for visiting. See [www.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit](http://www.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit) All campsites in national parks require pre-booking online. <https://parkbookings.nt.gov.au/Web/Facilities/SearchViewUnitAvailability.aspx> Or phone 1300 281 121.

If you've travelled here before, it is important to realise that since March 2022 ALL sites in national parks and reserves managed by Parks NT must be pre-booked online and there is a camping fee. This includes many spots that we all used to camp at freely. There are signs everywhere warning you of this. It makes it extremely hard to travel without a fixed itinerary as you are expected to book but there is virtually no internet access!

The most basic of the national parks campgrounds have a low level of maintenance and may include toilets, picnic tables, BBQs and tap water. They cost \$6.00 per adult per night.

The next level up are well maintained and may provide toilets, showers (occasionally), rubbish bins (occasionally), picnic tables, cooking facilities, BBQs and tap water. They cost \$10.00 per adult per night.

Some campsites are managed commercially and their facilities and fees vary. Most cost \$10.00 but several in the West MacDonnell National Park (such as Ormiston Gorge) cost more.

If you are going overnight hiking on the [Larapinta Trail](#) you'll need to pay a fee of \$25.00 per person per night as well as the \$6.00 camping fee.

### **These rules apply in national parks in the Red Centre:**

- Fires are only permitted in designated fire pits
- Bring your own firewood; you can't collect firewood in national parks
- Bins are not provided; please take your rubbish with you
- Pets are not permitted in national parks
- Generators are not permitted

### **Witjira National Park in South Australia:**

This information only applies to anyone doing Route 6, the Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop. This national park charges vehicle entry fees as well as camping fees. See their webpage for details. [www.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/Find\\_a\\_Park/Browse\\_by\\_region/flinders-ranges-outback/witjira-national-park#fees](http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/parks/Find_a_Park/Browse_by_region/flinders-ranges-outback/witjira-national-park#fees) You must pre-book online.

## **Commercial camp grounds**



These are available in towns, at most roadhouses and at resorts. Most offer excellent facilities including power, flushing toilets, hot showers, laundries, camp kitchens and recreational opportunities.

## **Cabins**

Many of the commercial camp grounds offer self-contained cabins and these are an economical choice for those travelling without camping gear. Cabins tend to have one or two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, bed linen and cooking equipment. Sometimes there will be cheaper, budget cabins available with shared bathrooms and communal kitchens.

## **Self-contained units**

There are heaps of these available in Alice Springs. The main difference between them and cabins is that self-contained units are not located in a camping or caravan park. Prices vary hugely depending on the standard and facilities you want.

## **Backpackers**

Alice Springs has a good range of backpacker accommodation, some of it with shared dormitory rooms and some with private rooms. They usually have a shared kitchen.

## **B&Bs**

Alice Springs has a few excellent B&Bs. These are usually a room or two in a private house and include either a full cooked breakfast or a self-serve continental breakfast ingredients.

## **Hotels / motels / resorts**

These all offer private rooms with ensuite bathrooms and a range of facilities including swimming pools, spas, tennis courts, restaurants, bars etc. Motels tend to be the cheapest,

## Destination Red Centre

followed by hotels and then resorts. In the resorts – well, the sky's the limit on what they charge!



## Chapter 7: TAKING CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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**L**eave nothing but footprints, take nothing but photographs and memories. You can easily achieve that with a bit of common sense. Actually, you can achieve a whole lot more. Why not pick up some rubbish that other thoughtless campers have left behind? You'll often see us doing just that and we carry a large, tough bag for the purpose. We strongly believe that if people arrive at a clean campsite they are more likely to leave it clean.

### Fires

Fuel stoves have less impact than fires. Campfires are very atmospheric but they are hard on the environment as more and more people head into the outback each year. Don't rely on finding firewood to cook with. If you do have a fire, keep it small and use fireplaces when provided. Huge bonfires are not acceptable these days. If there are no fireplaces, look around you and see if you can find other fire scars and light your fire there. If not, then dig a trench and clear all the burnable material on the fire edges for 3 metres all around. Before you leave, ensure the fire is out (cold enough to touch) and fill in the trench. Note that you're not allowed to collect firewood in national parks.

### Rubbish

If you managed to transport it in then you can transport it out and dispose of it in rubbish bins. This includes car tyres. If you're in the bush for a long time, burn all combustible waste in your campfire. Don't bury other rubbish as there's a good chance wild dogs etc. will dig it up. People often think that fruit skins will break down naturally if left on the ground - in the case of orange peel, yes it will eventually break down but it will take a very long time and in the meantime you are leaving an unsightly mess for others to see.

### Toileting & washing

Use toilets if they are provided. If they aren't, dig a hole and bury toilet waste and toilet paper well away from watercourses. Don't wash dishes or yourself in or near streams and waterholes and don't use detergents in waterholes, even eco-friendly ones. If you are bush camping and want a shower, ask to pay at a caravan park or roadhouse - please don't "steal" a shower as you'll ruin it for other travellers.

If you are travelling in a caravan with your own toilet, be aware that there are no many dump points in the Red Centre. Caravan parks in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek mostly have a dump point and these towns have public dump points you can use. Ayers Rock Resort, Kings Canyon Resort and Glen Helen Resort also have dump points. Plan ahead – don't get caught with a full black water tank and, above all, don't dump it illegally! It's obviously bad for the environment and, if you're on an outback station, you could jeopardise the organic status of that property.

### Erosion

To minimise erosion, travel on tracks that already exist. Don't cut corners. If possible, use existing campsites so that you're not creating a fresh scar that can take years to repair itself.

### **Private property**

If you have the recommended HEMA maps (see each section for details), you will have no problem working out what type of land you are on. Some land is Aboriginal land and it will be shown clearly on the maps. Some of the land you will travel through is station land (farm land). Unless you see a sign telling you to keep out, you are allowed to drive through station land on main routes passing through. That means all of the tracks mentioned in this guide that go through private land are OK to drive through. The farmers just ask that you leave gates as you find them (either open or closed).

In most cases you are allowed to camp on station land, but you need to stay close to the road. Don't camp within 1km of a homestead and don't camp near stock watering points or any station infrastructure as station animals may be too frightened to come near you and drink. Some station owners have put up signs saying "No Camping" – it's best to obey those signs.

### **Wildlife**

Don't feed wild animals as it will change their behaviour and they will come to rely on humans and stop hunting. Besides, most human food is bad for their health. Slow down when passing birds of prey feeding on road kill as they take some time to get airborne.

## MORE INTRODUCTORY CHAPTERS

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**T**he full book contains detailed chapters on the following topics:

- Driving in the Red Centre
  - Which routes require a 4WD
  - Hire cars
  - How much experience you need
  - Towing,
  - Driving rules
  - Safety
  - Common sense 4WD driving techniques
  - Road trains
  - Fuel
  - Tyres and tyre pressures
  - What to do if you're bogged or broken down
  - Where to check road conditions
  - Essential phone numbers
- Walking in the Red Centre
  - Easy walks
  - Moderate walks
  - Challenging walks
  - Safety
  - Planning
  - Dress sensibly for the conditions
  - Footwear
  - Drinking water
  - First Aid
  - Communications equipment
- Staying Safe in the Red Centre
  - Emergency Plus App
  - Mobile phones
  - Satellite phones
  - The next generation of satellite technology
  - UHF radio
  - Personal locator beacons
  - Bushfires
  - Camping safety

- Swimming safety
- Dangerous animals in the bush
- Safety in Alice Springs
  
- What to pack
  - Navigation equipment
  - Money
  - Water
  - Food
  - Clothing
  - Camping gear
  - Tools & recovery equipment
  - Tools that we use often
  - The other tools and spares
  - How to pack it all
  
- European History
  - Early European explorers
  - The Cameleers
  - The Overland Telegraph Line
  - Early settlers
  - The Ghan
  - World War 11
  - Tourists arrived
  
- Aboriginal People – their history, lifestyles & visiting communities
  - The first Aboriginal people
  - The Creation
  - Tjukurpa
  - The strong connection to the land
  - White man arrived
  - An ancient culture has been changed
  - Attempts to right the wrongs
  - Try to judge them from their culture, not ours
  - The situation today
  - What is Aboriginal land?
  - What to expect when visiting Aboriginal communities
  - The impact of Covid-19
  - Sacred sites
  - Alcohol on Aboriginal lands
  - Opal fuel
  - Entry permits
  - Some thoughts from workers in Aboriginal communities
  
- Different environments
  - Ranges

## Destination Red Centre

- Rivers
- Woodlands
- Dunes
- Shrub lands
  
- Common plants of the Red Centre
  - Trees
  - Shrubs
  - Ground covers and wildflowers
  - Grasses
  
- Common animals of the Red Centre
  - Mammals
  - Reptiles
  - Insects
  - Feral animals
  
- Common birds of the Red Centre
  - Parrots
  - Birds of prey
  - Water birds
  - Other small birds
  - Other medium sized birds
  - Large birds
  
- Geology
  - Mountain ranges
  - Uplifting
  - The Amadeus Basin
  - Lake Eyre
  
- The night sky
  - The Milky Way
  - The Southern Cross and how to find it
  - Meteorites
  
- Aussie words
  - Common expressions used



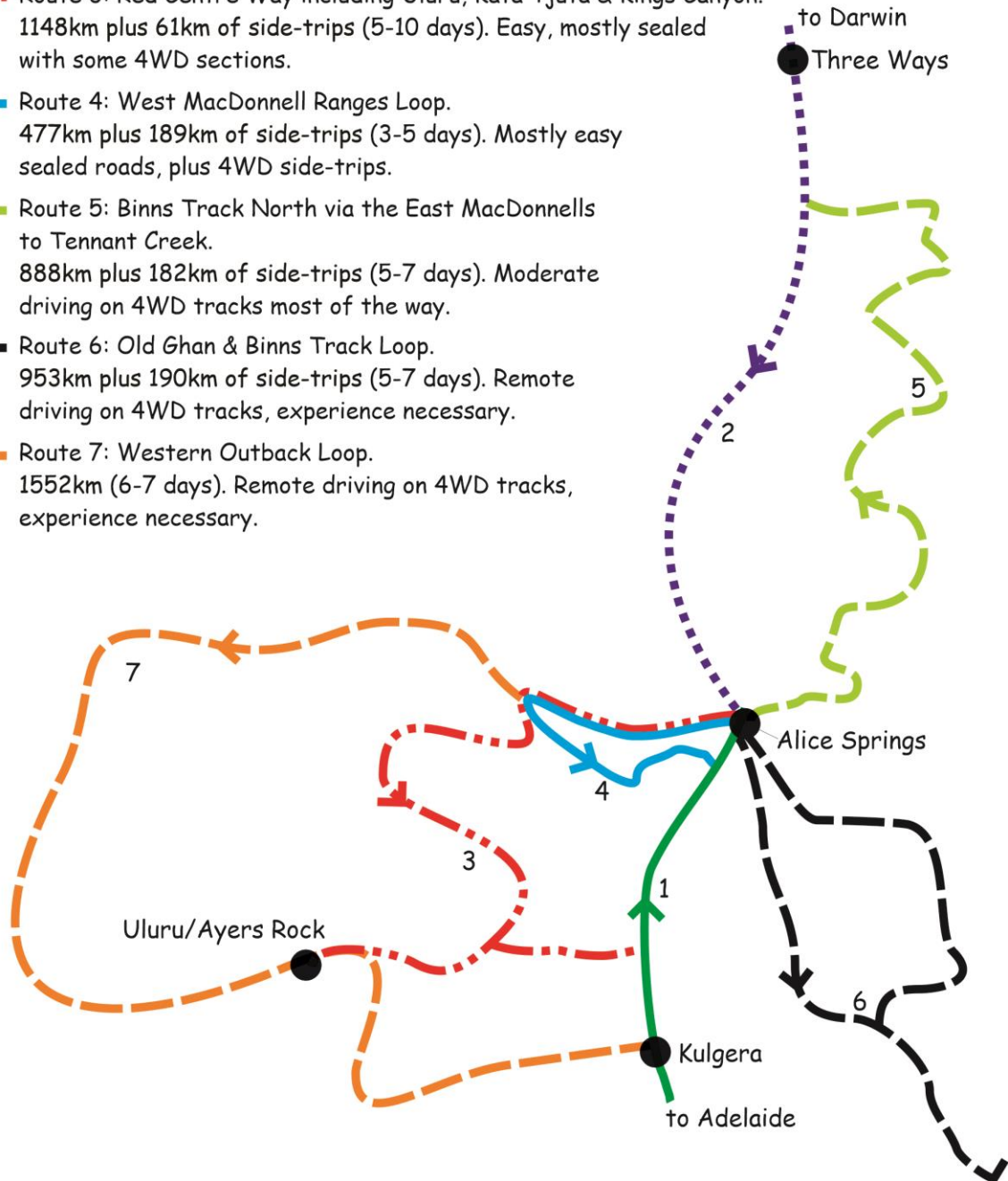
## PART TWO: The Detailed Guide

There's a comprehensive chapter on Alice Springs, followed by the detailed notes on each route.

- Alice Springs
  - Alice Springs history
  - Alice Springs Visitor Information Centre
  - Alice Springs orientation map
  - Alice Springs downtown area map
  - Alice Springs attractions
  - Plan your visit – if you have one day, two days, three days or more
  - Where to go if you are interested in indigenous art
  - Where to go if you love walking
  - Where to go if history is your thing
  - Where to go if you love wildlife
  - Walking & biking around Alice
  - The Larapinta Trail
  - Aboriginal Art & Craft
  - Visiting Art Centres in Aboriginal communities
  - Festivals & Events
  - Tours – 4WD, Aboriginal, camel rides, helicopter rides, hot air ballooning, mountain biking, quad biking, walking
  - Shopping & services
  - Accommodation – B&Bs, backpackers, hotels/motels, self contained, caravan parks
  - Dining – including our favourites
  - Alcohol buying and drinking rules
  - Car & camper hire
  - Contact numbers

## MAP OF THE ROUTES IN THIS GUIDE

- Route 1: Stuart Hwy heading North from the SA border to Alice Springs. 297km plus 63km of side-trips (2-3 days). Easy, sealed all the way.
- - - Route 2: Stuart Hwy heading South from Threeways to Alice Springs. 524km plus 49km of side-trips (2-3 days). Easy, sealed all the way.
- - - Route 3: Red Centre Way including Uluru, Kata Tjuta & Kings Canyon. 1148km plus 61km of side-trips (5-10 days). Easy, mostly sealed with some 4WD sections.
- Route 4: West MacDonnell Ranges Loop. 477km plus 189km of side-trips (3-5 days). Mostly easy sealed roads, plus 4WD side-trips.
- - - Route 5: Binns Track North via the East MacDonnells to Tennant Creek. 888km plus 182km of side-trips (5-7 days). Moderate driving on 4WD tracks most of the way.
- - - Route 6: Old Ghan & Binns Track Loop. 953km plus 190km of side-trips (5-7 days). Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.
- - - Route 7: Western Outback Loop. 1552km (6-7 days). Remote driving on 4WD tracks, experience necessary.



## Route 5: BINNS TRACK NORTH: Alice Springs to the Stuart Hwy near Tennant Creek

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Here is part of the Route 5 chapter so you can get a feel for how detailed the information is.

**B**inns Track is one of Australia's iconic 4WD trips. The entire track (which we don't send you on here) is 2,191km long from Mt Dare in the south via Alice Springs and the East MacDonnell Ranges to Timber Creek in the Kimberley. It is named after Bill Binns who worked as a ranger with the NT National Parks & Wildlife Service for 32 years.

The section described here begins in Alice Springs and heads east through the East MacDonnell Ranges. As well as a few tourist sites along these ranges, a highlight is the magnificent Trepkina Gorge. The campsites here are delightful and the walking superb. There's enough walking to comfortably fill a couple of days, with easy tourist walks and challenging hikes on offer. If you don't have a 4WD or enough time to complete our entire route 5, consider visiting just the East MacDonnell Ranges from Alice Springs. It is always less crowded and less touristy than the West MacDonnells.



*Trepkina Gorge*

## Destination Red Centre

Beyond Trepina Gorge, the road becomes dirt and meanders through the countryside, passing through huge outback stations (farms). The driving is not hard, though there will be some corrugations, and the scenery includes rolling hills and rocky outcrops. Some of the stations you'll pass have opened their properties to travellers, and offer fuel, supplies, meals, accommodation, camping and sometimes local tours. It's a special experience to sit around a campfire chatting with the local workers. My favourites include Hale River Homestead where you can get a real cup of coffee and Murray Downs Station where you can camp on a welcome green lawn.

A highlight is Arltunga Historic Reserve where you can explore gold mining relics dating back to 1887. These are the remains of historic buildings in what was once the first town in Central Australia. You can drive or walk for many km's exploring the old relics, including mine shafts, cemeteries, and an old gold battery.

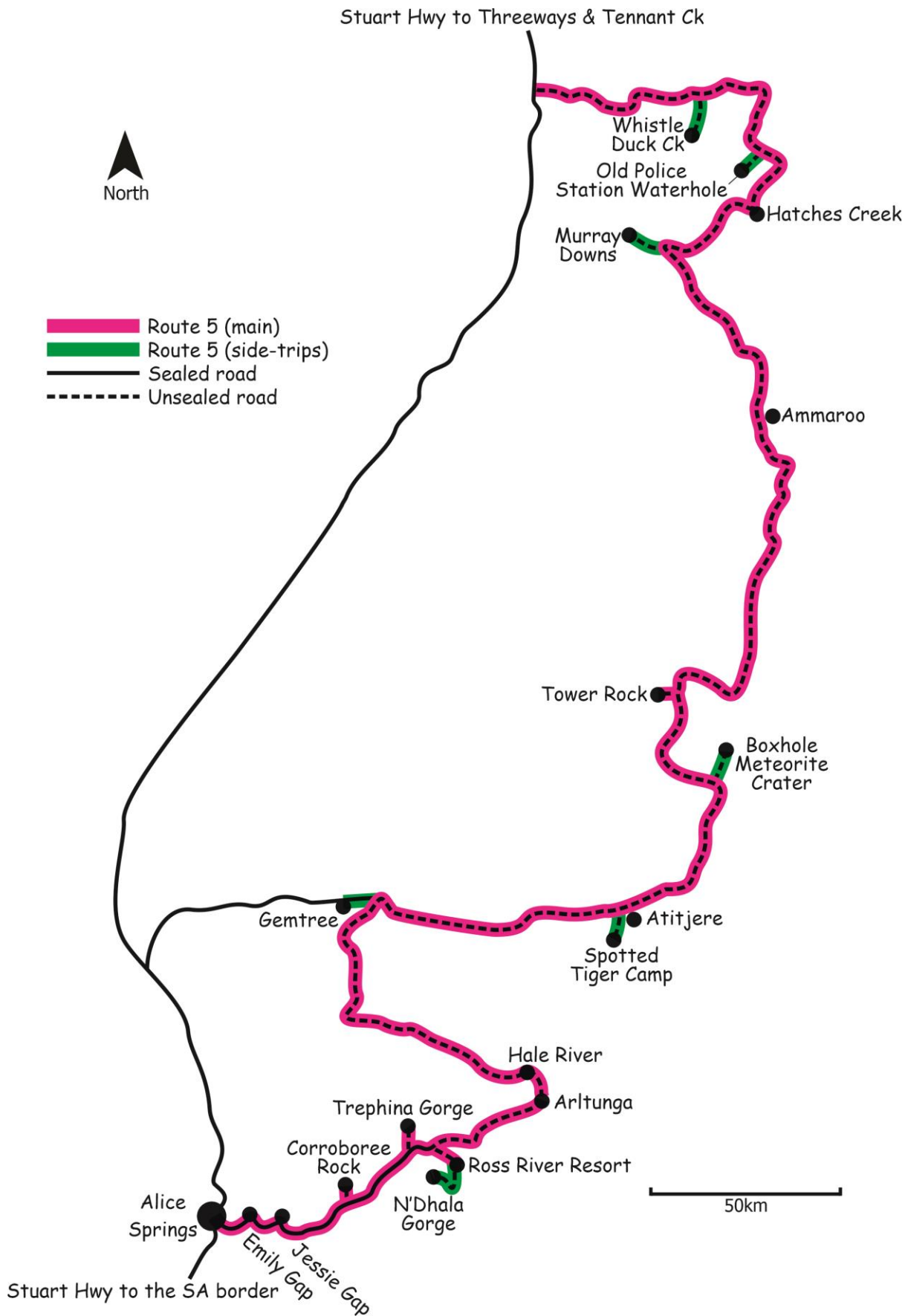
Binns Track then continues through scenic countryside, passing fossicking areas where people regularly find gemstones, and Aboriginal communities that you can visit on short side-trips. They are great places to restock and have a look at how indigenous people live. No permits are required to visit the communities on this loop, but please have a read of our Chapter 12 before visiting.

The driving becomes a little more adventurous and through more remote countryside in rugged Tower Rock area. We definitely recommend camping here for the night. You can explore the rocks, look for agile rock wallabies leaping all over the place, climb to the summit and enjoy a marvellous sunset view.

Not long after, the road changes into an interesting, windy, scenic route through mountain ranges, into the Davenport Ranges National Park. On the way, you can visit the remains of an historic tungsten mine, which appears as though it will commence operations again. At Old Police Station Waterhole you'll find walking tracks and waterfront camping. Whistleduck Creek also offers remote camping at a delightful waterhole as well as short walks, abundant birdlife and just that special feeling of being in the middle of the outback.

Eventually you'll reach the Stuart Hwy again, where you can either go north for 87km to Tennant Creek and Threeways, or south for 369km to Alice Springs.

# Destination Red Centre





## Distance

About 888km plus 182km of side-trips.

## Time to allow

This route could be driven in 4-5 days but then you'd miss out on a lot of excellent walks to do along the way. There are 2-5hrs of tourist walks and another 5-14hrs of more challenging walks on the various side-trips. Much of this walking is at Trepina Gorge. So, if you love remote hiking, allow yourself about 8 or 9 days, or at least a week, for Route 5.

## Difficulty & road conditions

About 160km of the route is on a sealed rd, the rest is unsealed. Much of the unsealed section is good quality dirt rd, with a few sections of rough, rocky track, especially through the Davenport Ranges. You'll need a high clearance 4WD to complete this loop. It is important to know that Binns Track is not an actual road or track; it is a route following various existing roads and tracks. Sections of this track have been re-routed over the last couple of years, mostly to bypass homesteads that were tired of tourists in their driveways. Consequently many maps are inaccurate.

The first section is easy driving on sealed roads through the East MacDonnell Ranges. Then it's moderate driving on 4WD tracks for most of the rest of the way. If you only have a 2WD, don't worry because you can drive an ordinary car all the way from Alice Springs to Trepina Gorge and it's definitely worth doing this bit.

## Fuel

Fuel is available in a lot of places on this route including Gemtree, Atitjere, MacDonald Downs, Ammaroo, Ampilatwatja, Murray Downs and Tennant Creek. The longest distance without fuel is 375km between Ammaroo and Kurundi Homestead (although you could side-trip to Murray Downs to get fuel). These distances include all side-trips.

## Maps

“[The Red Centre](#)” HEMA map covers the first part of the route. You'll also need HEMA's “[Great Desert Tracks Central Sheet](#)”. It may be more worthwhile to get HEMA's “[Great Desert Tracks Atlas & Guide](#)” which covers most of outback Australia.

## Permits and bookings before you go

No permit is required to do this loop.

- 1) All national park campsites on this loop require online booking in advance, including several camps that were free before March 2022. This includes Trepina Gorge, Old Police Station Waterhole and Whistleduck Creek. [book campsites online](#)
- 2) It's advisable to book ahead for the private camps which are at Hale River, Gemtree and Murray Downs. There's no need to book ahead for Spotted Tiger Campground or Arltunga Camp.

## Alice Springs to Trepina Gorge turnoff

### 0.0km

Set your trip meter at zero at the intersection of the Stuart Hwy with Stott Terrace and head south on the Stuart Hwy.

### 2.8km (2.8km) Heavitree Gap

The road passes through a narrow gap, along with the Todd River and the Ghan railway line.

### 4.3km (1.5km)

Turn L into the Ross Hwy. (This is a sealed road all the way to Ross River Resort.)

### 4.6km (0.3km)

Immediately after crossing the Todd River, go R on the Ross Hwy. You are now heading through the East Macdonnell Ranges. The views are quite dramatic and the area has a much less touristy feel to it than the West Macdonnell Ranges.

### 13.7km (9.1km) Emily Gap



Emily Gap is in the Yeperenye Nature Park. An easy 3 min walking track leads to the Gap itself where you can see some unusual Aboriginal paintings. The Gap is a sacred site with a large rock painting that shows the caterpillar dreaming story. Aboriginal people believe that these caterpillars formed the Gap and many of the other features around Alice Springs. Unfortunately, vandals have damaged some of the paintings. Camping and fires are not permitted.

There's a fairly new, longer walking track here as well. It's called the Yeperenye Trail and it goes for 7.2km each way, joining Emily Gap with Jessie Gap. You can hike it or ride it on a mountain bike. The gradients are quite gentle.

Back on the main Rd, continue L along the Ross Hwy.

### 21.4km (7.7km) Jessie Gap



The short 3 min walking track leads to the Gap where you can see more Aboriginal paintings. Camping and fires are not permitted.

### Ranger nature walks – **FREE**

From May to September you can join one of these walks. Dates and times are advertised on the national parks website.

### 44.3 km (22.9km)

Turn L towards Corroboree Rock.



### 47.3km Corroboree Rock

This dolomite outcrop is a sacred site for the Arrernte people. Don't miss the 15 min walk around the base of the rock to admire the large grey column of dolomite. This

site was probably used for storing ceremonial objects, but it is doubtful that it was ever used as a corroboree site, due to the lack of water in the area. Camping is not permitted. Drive back to the Ross Hwy.

#### What is a corroboree?

It's a ceremony that allows Aboriginal people to connect with their history, law and stories through dance, music, mime and costume. Their bodies were painted in different ways, and they wore various adornments, which were not used every day. Music was made with didgeridoos, sticks, rattles and boomerangs. There were many reasons for holding a corroboree. There were non-secret celebrations performed around a campfire and others where only a specific group of people were allowed to attend e.g. initiations. The singing and dancing was a good way to pass on information to their young people. Corroborees are still held today.

**48.3km** (1.0km)

Turn L along the Ross Hwy.

**70.8km** (21.5km)     **Trephina Gorge turnoff**

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### Side-trip to Trephina Gorge



**0.0km**

Turn L here for Trephina Gorge. It's about 7.5km to the picnic and camping areas, with the last 3.5km being a good quality dirt road. This park features magnificent sheer quartzite cliffs, red gum lined creek beds and outstanding walks.

**4.7km** (0.5km)     **Ghost Gum**

On the way in, take this 300m side trip to the R see what is thought to be the largest ghost gum in Australia. Look for the dark green drooping leaves and the smooth white bark.

**7.5km** (2.5km)     **Campgrounds**

The three campgrounds are all attractive. Bluff Campground has a lovely river-side location. It's not suitable for trailers or caravans. A bit further on is Panorama Campground with great views over the bluffs. It's not suitable for tents, but OK for trailers and caravans. And there's also the Gorge Campground where everyone is welcome. All the campgrounds here have toilets, picnic tables, drinking water, communal fire pits and free gas BBQs. All campsites must be pre-booked online.

**Ranger guided walks & campfire talks – FREE**

From May to September you can join one of these walks or talks. Look for dates and times on the camp noticeboard or on the national parks [website](#).

Trephina Gorge is all about walking and every walk is excellent.



### **Trephina Gorge Walk**

Starts at the Gorge Campground. This moderate 2km (1 hour) loop walk climbs to a vantage point overlooking the gorge and its wide sandy creek bed. It then descends into the creek and follows it back to the campground. Magnificent river red gums line the creek. It's amazing to think that during the 1950s many of the larger trees in the area were logged and sawn for use as railway sleepers on the Ghan rail line. Fortunately, not anymore!



### **Panorama Walk**

Starts at the Gorge Campground. This moderate 2.5km (1.5 hour) loop walk also climbs up to a lookout before descending back to the campground. There are some exposed sections that might be difficult for people who don't like heights. If you do this walk first thing in the morning, or late in the day, keep an eye open for the rare black-footed rock wallabies living amongst the nearby cliffs which they can scale with little effort. Look carefully as they blend extremely well with their background.



### **Ridgetop Trail**

Starts at the Gorge Campground. This is a one-way, hard 10km track to John Hayes Rockhole and it's only suitable for experienced hikers. It offers panoramic views of the ranges for most of the way. You should allow at least 4-5 hours one way. If you can arrange to leave a car at the end of the walk that would be good. If not, you could walk back to camp along the road, which should take another 2-3 hours. Another popular, and attractive option along this route, is to walk out and back along this track, to the stunning lookout about 6km from the campground.



### **John Hayes Rockhole & Chain of Ponds Walk**

If you have a high clearance 4WD to get there, then this walk is a must. You need to drive from the campground back along the Trephina Gorge entry road, for about 3.3km, then turn R towards John Hayes Waterhole. Drive about 4km along this rough track to a carpark at the end of the road where there is also a small campground with toilets, picnic tables and communal fire pit. As usual, campsites must be pre-booked online. There's a 100m walk to the rockhole. One of my favourite walks is the fabulous Chain of Ponds route. It's a 3.5km (1.5 hour) loop walk, plus side gorges that can be explored by agile people. The track is quite rough underfoot, and features a gorge with steep, narrow rock walls. This gorge system usually contains several pools of water along an otherwise dry creek bed. Sit quietly beside one of the waterholes and before long there will be heaps of birds coming for a drink, and just about ignore you.

After enjoying the delights of Trephina Gorge, retrace your route back to the hwy.

**15.0km** (7.5km)

Arrive back at the hwy.

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## **Trephina Gorge turnoff to Ross River Resort**

**Note that Ross River Resort has closed to all but group business.**

### Contact Ross River Resort

Ph: 1800 241 711 or (08) 8956 9711. [www.rossriverresort.com.au](http://www.rossriverresort.com.au)

#### 0.0km

Set your trip meter to zero back on the Ross Hwy and turn L towards Ross River. The road is sealed all the way to Ross River Resort.

#### 4.9km (4.9km)

Continue straight ahead towards Ross River so you can visit the Resort and N'Dhala Gorge. After that, you'll come back to this intersection and follow the Arltunga Tourist Drive.

#### 11.2km (6.3km)

There's a sign here to the right to N'Dhala Gorge

#### 12.0km (0.8km)      **Ross River Resort**

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## Side-trip to N'Dhala Gorge

#### 0.0km

An excellent scenic drive. Set your trip meter to zero at the fuel pumps at Ross River Resort then continue driving past the resort, across the river and past the camp ground. You need a high clearance 4WD to continue as the route usually involves several creek crossings. If you're travelling with a trailer or caravan, we recommend you leave it at Ross River as there is only a very small turning space at the final carpark.

#### 7.3km (7.3km)

Turn R towards N'Dhala Gorge.

#### 10.8km (3.5km)      **N'Dhala Gorge**



N'Dhala Gorge is an important site for the Eastern Arrernte people as is known to them as Irlwentye (pronounced eel-oon-ja). The gorge contains more than 6000 petroglyphs (ancient engravings) as well as art sites and shelters. The oldest engravings here are believed to be 10,000 years old. There are two styles – the finely pecked and the pounded, possibly done at different periods in history. Interpretive signs help you identify the two styles. A 1.5km, (1 hour) return walk leads into the gorge. A small, simple bush camping area is located at the end of the road. Facilities include picnic tables and a BBQ but no water. Campsites must be pre-booked online.

Retrace your route back to the start of this side-trip.

#### 21.6km (10.8)

Back at Ross River Resort.

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## Ross River Resort to Arltunga Visitor Centre

### 0.0km

Set your trip meter to zero back at Ross River Resort and retrace your route back to the turnoff on the Arltunga Tourist Drive.

### 7.1km (7.1km)

Turn R into the Arltunga Tourist Drive / Binns Track heading north. The road is unsealed for most of the route from here until you reach the Stuart Hwy at the end of this chapter. There are a few rocky bits and sometimes corrugations. If you haven't done it yet, now is the time to lower your tyre pressures.



### 8.0km (0.9km) Old grave site

On the R is an old grave site. Follow the track for about 100m behind the grave, where you'll find a bush camp site.

### 39.1km (31.1km) Arltunga Bush Pub and Eco Retreat



This is the old Arltunga Campground, which has been taken over by a young, vibrant couple with great plans. There are new toilets and showers and a camp kitchen. If you stay 2 nights, using this as a base to explore the historical reserve, then the second night is half price. The best news is that they are working on renovating the quaint Arltunga Hotel and hope to have it open for meals by the end of 2023. Phone (08) 8956 9383. [www.arltunga.com.au](http://www.arltunga.com.au)

### 39.4km (0.3km) Arltunga Visitor Centre turnoff

Turn L here.

### 40.4km (1.0km) Arltunga Historical Reserve Visitor Centre



When gold was discovered in a dry creek bed here in 1887, Arltunga sprang up quickly, becoming Central Australia's first town. Prospectors travelled huge distances to get here, often travelling for weeks or months on foot. Such is the lure of quick riches. The gold rush didn't last long but the ruins of the town have been well preserved by the dry climate. There are a lot of drives and walks you can do here. Camping is not permitted anywhere in the reserve.

Arltunga spreads across a large area so start by dropping in at the Visitor Centre. Grab a sketch map to show you the way around the many visitor sites as well as info sheets on any of the walks you would like to do. They also have an excellent info sheet on the Gold Extraction Process at Arltunga. Browse the many cultural and historical displays on offer, as well as an excellent short film. The attractive picnic area has gas BBQs. You could easily enjoy a day exploring the Arltunga area. Ph: (08) 8956 9770. Open 8.00am – 5.00pm every day.

### Fossicking

Fancy finding a bit of your own gold? Well you can't do that in the reserve but you can go

fossicking in the adjoining Fossicking Reserve, so long as you hold a current permit. See the rangers at the Visitor Centre.

**Insider's Tip**

If you don't have much time, do the Government Works Walk.

If you follow these notes, you won't miss anything. The roads are rough in places. If you are towing a large caravan I recommend leaving it at the Visitor Centre while you explore the reserve.

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## Visitor Information Centre to Crossroads

### **0.0km**

Set your trip meter to zero at the Arltunga Historical Reserve Visitor Centre and drive towards "Historic Sites".

### **1.8km (1.8km)**

Turn L towards Government Works Carpark.



### **3.5km (1.7km)**

#### **Government Works Carpark**

There's a 250m walk here to see the Government Battery that was used to crush and sort the ore, as well as the fascinating Cyanide Works where cyanide was used to dissolve the gold, making it easier to extract. There's so much to see here that you'll need at least an hour. This area has the largest concentration of historic buildings and remains including government official's homes, miners' homes, the old post office, blacksmith's shop, gold room, well and government battery. Retrace your route back to the last intersection.

### **5.2km (1.7km)**

Turn L.

### **5.3km (0.1km)**

#### **Old Police Station Carpark**

Lock your friends up in the old gaol that was built in 1912. Before the gaol was built, a prisoner would be handcuffed to the policeman's bed at night! Check out the battery for crushing rock and a well with an all-important permanent water supply. In the car park you'll find toilets and a picnic shelter. Then continue driving along the road.

### **7.3km (2.0km)**

Turn L towards the Historic Mines Carpark.

### **7.9km (0.7km)**

#### **Historic Mines Walks**

From the car park, you can do the 900m walk around the MacDonnell Range Reef Mine. Access to the underground section of this mine has been closed due to safety concerns. From the same car park you can also do the 1.7km Golden Chance Mine walk where you can see dry-stone hut construction, and also climb a small hill to get a view over the whole of the Arltunga site. Drive back to the main rd.

**8.6km** (0.7km)

Turn L at the main rd.

**8.8km** (0.2km)      **Crossroads Area**

This was the initial site chosen for the town, but the planners left it too late to act, and the gold ran out before they could complete construction. You can still see the ruins of the bakehouse and old hotel. Alongside, to the L and R, is Binns Track. You will return to here after exploring more historic sites. For now, cross the main rd, and drive straight ahead towards Crossroads Cemetery.

**9.3km** (0.5km)      **Crossroads Cemetery**

On your L, look for the graves of early miners.

**10.4km** (1.1km)      **Joker Gorge Walk**

From the carpark on the R you can do a 200m walk to see some early stone buildings. One is an interesting roundhouse. Joker Mine itself can be reached by scrambling a further 200m uphill.

**11.9km** (1.5km)

Turn R towards Great Western Mine.

**12.0km** (0.1km)      **Great Western Mine Carpark**

There are toilets and picnic facilities here. This 600m walk leads to (what was) one of the most productive mines in the area. You can scramble down into the mine and explore it. Return back to the main rd.

**12.1km** (0.1km)

Turn R. Straight ahead, there are distant views of the magnificent Harts Range which you will be close to later along this route. You'll also cross the Tropic of Capricorn.

**13.3km** (1.2km)      **White Range Cemetery**

The carpark is on the L. Have a look for old graves. It's a stark reminder of how tough life was out here. There's also a 200m walk to a viewpoint over White Range Mine.

Retrace your route back to Crossroads.

**17.5km** (4.2km)

Crossroads, and Binns Track.

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We've run out of room here so the rest of the information on this route can be found in the [full guide](#).

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Safe and happy travels!

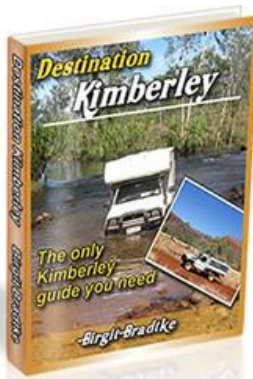
## Safe & happy travels

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**T**hat's it. We hope we've convinced you to take a closer look at the full guide so that we can share heaps more information with you. It's jam packed with 272 pages.



More books in the series:



[Destination Kimberley](#) takes you via the Tanami Track and the Bungle Bungle National Park to Kununurra. From there you can explore the famous Gibb River Road and other attractions in the region. By Birgit Bradtke.

[Destination Top End](#) takes you further north on the Stuart Hwy to Darwin with opportunities to explore Katherine Gorge, Litchfield National Park, Kakadu National Park and much more. By Birgit Bradtke.

