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star attraction

By Sarah Marshall

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Glowing red at sunrise and sunset, an enormous monolith beams brightly from Australia's fiery Red Centre, inspiring awe and wonder from every angle. Formed more than 600 million years ago, this mass of crimson sandstone is thought to be one of the oldest rocks in the world, created at a time when microscopic organisms were the only signs of life on Earth.

More than 250,000 people per year visit the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, making it one of Australia's star attractions – and with good reason. Almost three times the height of The Shard, with a 12km circumference, this inselberg (an island mountain) rises dramatically from scrub and ochre soils stretching to the horizon.

Visually, it's arresting – but Uluru is much more than a pretty sight. Beyond being a geological feature (almost) in the middle of a map, it's considered to be the very centre of the universe for indigenous communities. According to the Anangu people, the Aboriginal stewards of this land for 60,000 years, all life radiates from its burning heart and every fissure represents an artery or pathway.

Formed by their ancestors during Tjukurpa or Dreamtime (the 'Creation Period'), every river, rock, hill, cave and waterhole has a story to tell. Contrary to science, these are living, breathing landscapes where ancient spirits have been laid to rest. Even today, ceremonies are still held in caves and sacred areas. Some places are so sensitive, taking pictures or even sketching drawings is not allowed.



Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is one of Australia's star attractions | CREDIT: Steve Strike/Tourism Australia

In 1994, Uluru was granted dual Unesco World Heritage listings for both its ecological and cultural value. But only in recent years has the full extent of its spiritual significance been truly recognised. In October 2019, climbing the rock was officially banned following

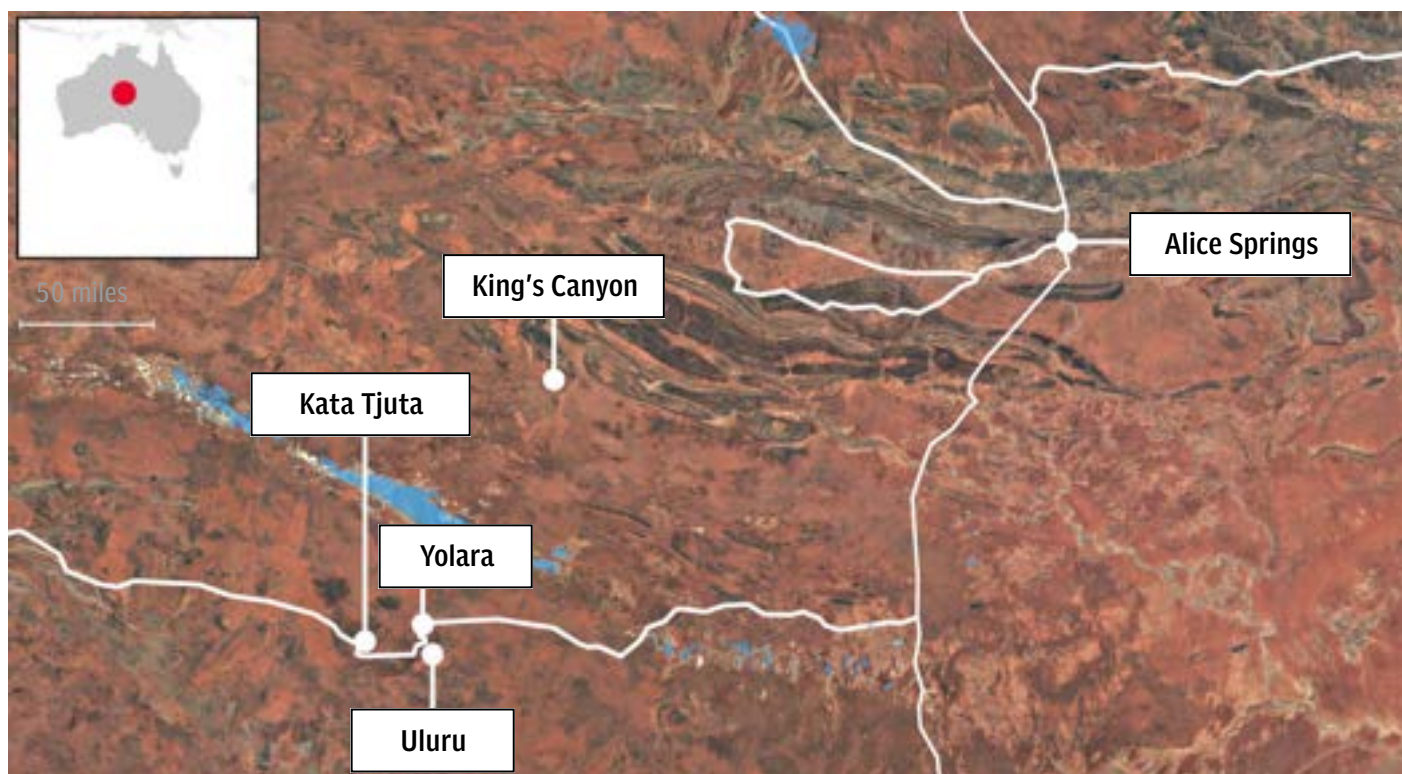
years of complaints from Anangu people; instead, tourists are allowed to hike around the base or observe the changing colours of the landscape from viewing platforms. The colonial name Ayers Rock is now almost obsolete.

The moves are part of a broader shift within Australia to respect and recognise the autonomy of indigenous groups who form the world's oldest continuous culture – living on this land almost three quarters of a million years before the Europeans arrived.

Various schemes have been set up to empower communities and allow them to share their heritage with visitors. Bush tucker trails, lessons in dot painting and hikes to sacred spaces all enrich a trip to Uluru and neighbouring Kata Tjuta, while benefitting communities financially. [Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia](#) offer several tours from their base at Ayers Rock Resort.

Getting to the remote location, 450km miles away from Alice Springs, isn't always easy. But with careful planning, it's possible to make a journey – whether by car or plane – all part of the experience. To help you get the most out of a visit, we've compiled a guide of essential information, turning a trip into the dream adventure it deserves to be.

ULURU AND THE RED CENTRE MAP





The iconic Ghan train is a scenic way to reach Uluru | CREDIT: Journey Beyond

Where to go

Uluru

Undoubtedly the star attraction of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, the Red Centre's spiritual monolith can be explored and admired in several ways. One of the best options is to circumnavigate the 12km base on a six-hour sunrise guided trek with an Anangu ranger. Arrange trips through the Aboriginal-owned enterprise Ayers Rock Resort (from \$177/£95; ayersrockresort.com.au). It's also possible to walk alone, but respect tradition by sticking to a clockwise direction. Alternatively, head to the Talinguru Nyakunytjaku viewing platform to watch the first rays of light creep across the rock. Sunset is less busy. A three-day pass to the park costs \$38/£20pp (parksaustralia.gov.au).

Art galleries

Along with storytelling, Aboriginal communities have always communicated their culture through art. Around 80 sites in the park display rock art up to 30,000 years old; the free 2km ranger-guided Mala walk features a big section (parksaustralia.gov.au), while the Kuniya walk leads to the decorated family cave of Kulpi Mutitjulu. Modern works – mainly paintings and wood carvings known as punu – are exhibited at the Maruku and Walkatjara galleries in the Cultural Centre (on the main road into the park) and GoCA at the Ayer's Rock Resort. Join a dot painting workshop in the Yulara town square, taught by one of Maruku's Anangu artists (\$72/£38.50; marukuartsgallery.com).



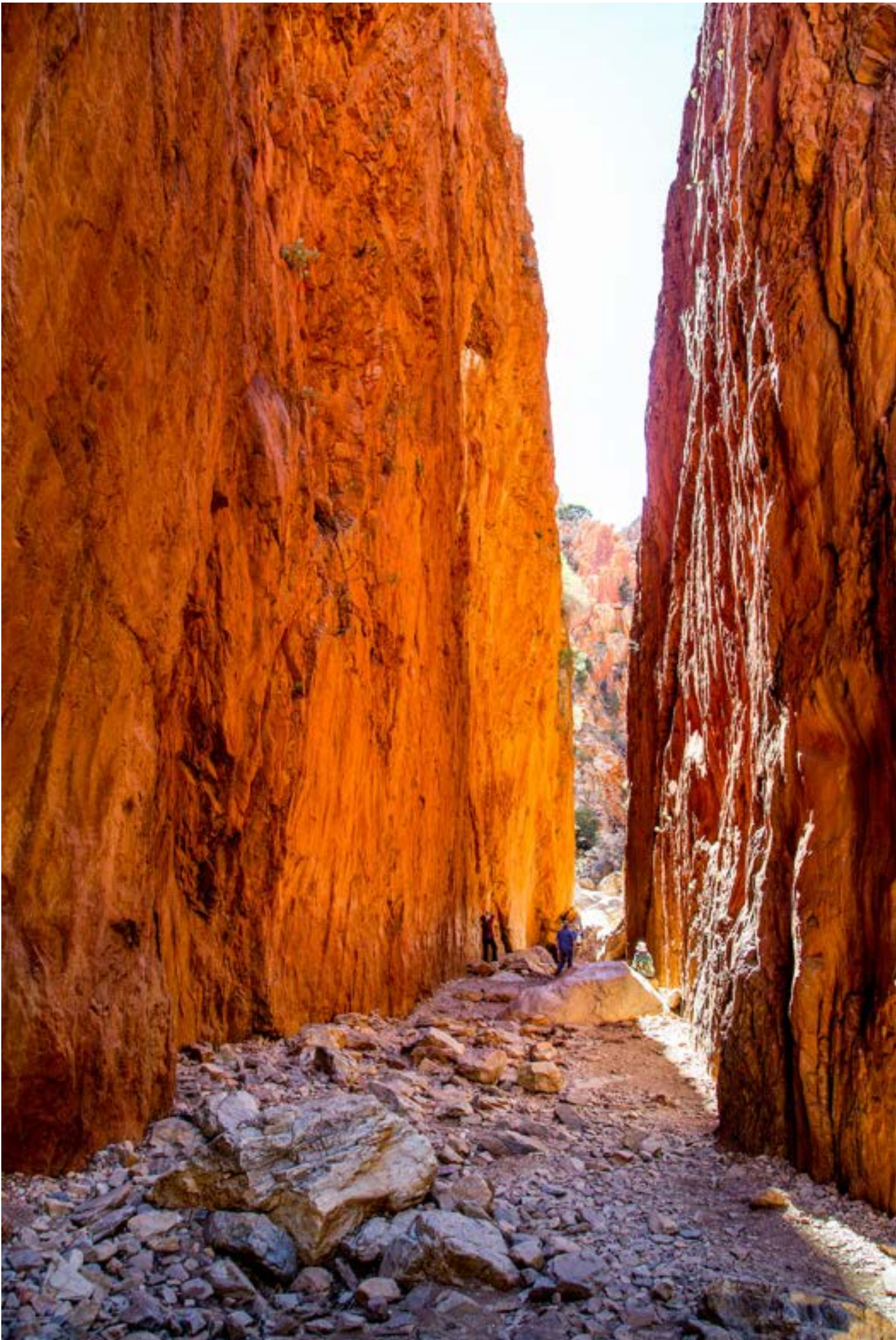
Alice Springs is a good base to explore from | CREDIT: Getty

Light shows

Sunset over the desert is magical. But even after dark, the show continues. Bruce Munro's Field of Light is a garden of fibre optics the size of seven football pitches, blooming with colourful optics. Book a tour to reach the remote location (\$45/£24). Taking over the skies, the new Wintjiri Wiru experience – launched by Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia and Anangu communities – is a storytelling extravaganza performed by 1,000 illuminated military drones and lasers (from \$190/£101pp). Or pull the plug with a stargazing tour: indigenous explanations are incorporated into both the Sounds of Silence (from \$234/£125pp) and the 20-guest Tali Wiru (from \$385/£206) open-air dining experiences. All booked through ayersrockresort.com.au.

Kata Tjuta

Around 50km west of Uluru, within the same national park, Kata Tjuta's 36 rock domes (formerly known as the Olgas) are equally spiritually significant to communities. For full immersion, hike the challenging 7.4km circular Valley of the Winds trail, weaving through hulking formations and contemplative lookouts. The easier 2.6km Walpa Gorge walk runs through a flower-filled gorge connecting the two tallest domes. Although visitors are welcome to explore various trails, communities prefer not to share stories and cultural knowledge about a site considered important for 'men's business'. For a distant sunrise view, stop at the viewing area midway along the road to Uluru.



King's Canyon

For longer trips, include King's Canyon in Watarrka National Park – a three-hour drive north of Uluru. Hike along towering sandstone cliffs on the 6km Rim Walk, descending into the Garden of Eden (a rock hole filled with rare plants). Other highlights include Priscilla's Crack (a narrow path opening onto a viewpoint, featured in cult film Priscilla Queen of the Desert) and The Lost City (a series of weathered domes resembling ruins of an ancient settlement). Learn about bush tucker and medicines used by the Luritja and Pertame people on a one-hour guided cultural tour (\$99/£53; karrke.com.au). Stick around to see Bruce Munro's new Light-Towers installation at Discovery Resorts – Kings Canyon (sunset session \$85/£45; discoveryholidayparks.com.au). Daily Park Pass \$10/£5; nt.gov.au.



How to get around

Although there is no accommodation inside the park, several resorts, campgrounds and hostels are clustered around Yolara, a 10-minute drive away. Driving is the easiest way to explore the area. All roads in the parks are sealed so a two-wheel-drive will be adequate, although you may need a four-wheel-drive if you plan to explore some routes outside.

As long as you stick to trail paths, it's possible to walk unescorted once inside the parks. You can also use a bike (\$70/£37 for three hours; outbackcycling.com) or Segway (from \$179/£96; ulurusegwaytours.com.au) to travel around the base of Uluru.

If you don't have a car, use the Uluru Hop On Hop Off bus service, operating day trips from hotels in Yulara to Uluru and Kata Tjuta. Multi-day passes are available (from \$120/£64 for one day; uluruhoponhopoff.com.au).



Wildlife thrives in the protected landscape | CREDIT: Getty

How to get there

The closest access point is Ayers Rock Airport in Yulara, 22km north of Uluru; Virgin Australia, Qantas and Jetstar all fly here. There are direct daily flights from Sydney and Melbourne. Other cities are available with less frequency and you may need to change planes. Resorts in the park offer free shuttle bus services to the airport.

Another option is to come via Alice Springs, the nearest major town 460km away, by plane or on the iconic Ghan train (a scenic but expensive option). Take a six-hour ride on an air-conditioned coach to reach Uluru (€155/£135 one way; aatkings.com).

Self-driving is a popular choice. Take the scenic Mereenie Loop (332km) from Alice Springs to King's Canyon and finally Uluru, passing through gorges and desert landscapes. You'll need a four-wheel-drive vehicle and a permit to cross indigenous land (\$5/£3 from the Alice Springs Visitor Information Centre, valid for three days).

Alternatively, take a two-wheel-drive on sealed roads along the Stuart and Lasseter highways (450km; 4.5 hours). But watch out for animals running into the road at dawn and dusk. One-way car hire is available if you choose to fly out.

For anyone nervous about driving in remote areas, escorted tours are a good option.



Watch the sunset over Uluru | CREDIT: Tourism NT/Jason Charles Hill

When to go

Between May and September, the weather is cooler (20-30°C) and drier, making it more pleasant to hike but colder to camp at night. Expect bigger crowds and higher prices in June and July; hotels get booked up for the last weekend in July when the Uluru Marathon takes place. Travel in August and September to see wildflowers.

Even though the park is open year-round, temperatures can reach 40°C in high summer (December to February). In extreme heat, the parks will close at 11am; if the mercury rises above 47°C they will shut completely. Throughout summer, limited activities are available – but the benefits are fewer crowds and a chance to witness Uluru's waterfalls after heavy rain.

TIMELINE

The history of Uluru and Australia's Red Centre

11 giga annum (550 million years ago)

Uluru was 'born' after hardened sandstone layers were uplifted to create mountains.

1873

The monolith is named Ayer's Rock by explorer William Gosse, the first to see it. He names it after Chief Sir Henry Ayers.

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When to book

Given Uluru is one of the top sights in Australia, accommodation and flight seats can fill up quickly during the peak season winter months. Popular attractions like the Field of Light and Wintjiri Wiru show should be booked far in advance. To plan the perfect trip with direct flights, it's best to book at least six months ahead. However, if you're prepared to travel in the searing hot low season there are some good last-minute deals: Qantas ([qantas.com](https://www.qantas.com)) have several all-inclusive packages and Ayers Rock Resort offer reduced rates.



How much does it cost?

To enjoy the Red Centre, budget for a three-night trip as a minimum. There's a good range of accommodation options to suit all budgets – from campsites and hostels costing from around \$38/£20pp per night, right up to luxury lodges charging more than \$3,700/£2000 per room. The closest property to the park, Longitude 131, is the most expensive – a price justified by its exclusive wilderness location.

Packages can be as cheap as \$685/£366 if you're prepared to camp. Factor in an additional £200 for return flights – although a global rise in fuel prices could mean flight prices continue to increase. To stay in comfortable accommodation during peak season, expect to pay around £1,500 including flights. Reserve additional cash for some of the shows, dinners and guided tours – activities range from £20 to £200.



There are plenty of free trails and viewing platforms inside the park

Insider tips

Join a free tour

Seeing Uluru through the eyes of the Anangu people will deepen your understanding of the place. Voyages, who manage to Ayers Rock Resort, offer several free guided tours –

from bush tucker treks to art gallery visits. For a full list of Aboriginal-guided experiences visit [voyages.com.au](https://www.voyages.com.au).

Glimpse a rare sight

Rain is unusual in the Red Centre. But if you're lucky to witness a storm, heavy run-off from the top of Uluru creates waterfalls and transforms the rock into various shades of burgundy and silver. It only happens a couple of times a year, but for your best chances, travel between November and March.

Snap sensitively

Tempting as it is to whip out cameras, photography isn't always welcome. In certain places, such as along the Valley of the Wind trail, the Anangu people request tourists not to take pictures or videos of the Kata Tjuta formations or the Walpa Gorge – whether it's a wide shot of a landscape or a close-up of a flower.

Surprising views

Viewing platforms can get extremely busy, especially at sunrise and sunset. But one of the best perspectives of Uluru is from the plane. When flying into Yulara, book a seat on the left for the best views. At times the plane can be as close as 2km away from the sacred rock.



Driving is the easiest way to explore | CREDIT: Getty

The best packages

Whether you choose to self-drive or fly-in, an organised tour will take care of any complicated logistics. Both [Trailfinders](#) and [Travelbag](#) often have good fly or drive deals, while [Abercrombie & Kent](#) are luxury tailor-made specialists with their own team on the ground. [Intrepid](#) and [Original Travel](#) both have a portfolio of escorted programmes incorporating indigenous experiences into itineraries.

Immersive adventure

Learn from the people who know the land best on an escorted tour led by Anangu guides. Intrepid's four-day Uluru & Kings Canyon Adventure goes beyond standard tours of the sites by connecting guests with local communities. Discover the sacred significance of the Mutitjulu Waterhole on a hike led by a First Nations guide, learn about different types of bush tucker and master dot painting with an Aboriginal artist. From £901 per person, including transport, some meals and activities. International flights extra.

Stay on track

If neither road nor air appeals, arrive at Uluru by train on the iconic Ghan. Departing from either Darwin or Adelaide, Journey Beyond's 11-day Red Centre Spectacular tour crosses the length of Australia, traveling through vast landscapes and desert scenery. Hop off at Alice Springs to tour the Red Centre by four-wheel-drive, before continuing the route by rail. From £5,000 per person, including meals and accommodation. International flights extra – departures available from April to October.

Sleep beneath the stars

Ideal for those on tighter budgets, this tour keeps costs low by swapping hotels for nights spent under the stars. Staying in campsites, guests sleep in swags – a bedroll made of canvas with a mattress inside. A four-day escorted Rock to Rock tour with Mulgas Adventures starts in Alice Springs or Ayers Rock Airport. Visit Uluru for sunrise, hike through the Valley of the Winds and explore Kings Canyon. From £365 per person, including camping, swags, transport and all meals. International flights extra.



Road trip

Experience the beauty of the outback by arriving at Uluru by road along the scenic Mereenie Loop with [Discover the World](#). A four-night Highlights of the Red Centre self-drive starts with a tour of the Old Telegraph Station and the Royal Flying Doctor Service Base in Alice Springs and continues to Kings Canyon and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. The trip also includes tickets to the Field of Light and Wintjiri Wiru light shows. From £1,180 per person, including mid-range hotels and car hire. International flights extra.

Luxury with a view

Fall asleep and wake up with Uluru by staying at Longitude 131, where the famous rock is within view from dawn until dusk. Surrounded by terracotta dunes, 16 luxury tents have large glass walls facing the sacred rock, with remote-controlled blinds operated from the bedside. A range of activities exclusive to guests includes scenic plane flights, camel tours and private dining in the desert plains. [Abercrombie & Kent](#) offers a four-night stay from £9,000 per person, full board, including flights.



Longitude 131 is the best address for an up-close view | CREDIT: Longitude 131

On a budget

Being so remote, Uluru isn't a cheap destination. But there are holiday options to suit all budgets.

Factoring in all food, accommodation and most activities, escorted tours are a both convenient and economical option for travellers trying to save time and money. Ensuring a portion of profits goes into local communities, Intrepid have curated several well-priced tours in partnership with Aboriginal communities. Reducing costs while raising opportunities for adventure, Mulgas Adventures offer several camping itineraries.

If several people are travelling, hiring a car is a more economical alternative to flying. Solo travellers should consider using the Greyhound coaches, with routes running across the country.

Another way to keep costs down is to minimise additional ticketed activities; there are plenty of free trails and viewing platforms inside the park.



What to pack

Protect against the fierce sun by wearing clothing with UV protection. Coolibar's LumaLeo Long Sleeve T-shirt is made with lightweight UPF 50+ fabric approved by the Skin Cancer Foundation. Guaranteed to block 98 per cent of rays, it provides more reliable coverage than sun cream. Choose a lighter colour to reflect the heat.

£50, [coolibar.com](https://www.coolibar.com)

They may look a bit ridiculous, but a fly net will probably be your best investment for a trip to the Red Centre – especially during the hot summer months when swarms of insects are common. Decathlon has a handy Pop-up Mosquito and Midge Head Net Hat with a mesh fine enough to obstruct even tiny critters. A toggled cord keeps it in place. *£9.99, [decathlon.co.uk](https://www.decathlon.co.uk)*

Always carry water with you on trails. While some routes have water taps, they are sparsely spread out and the water doesn't always taste good. Instead, invest in a 1litre reusable water bottle. Made from recycled materials and featuring double wall vacuum insulation, an Ocean Bottle will keep drinks cooler for longer.

£48, [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)



Along with storytelling, Aboriginal communities have always communicated their culture through art | CREDIT: Archie Sartracom/Tourism Australia

Dust can be lethal for cameras – and there's plenty of it in the outback. Protect electronic equipment by carrying it in a sealed bag. Lowepro's Adventura Go SH 140 camera bag holds a mirrorless camera and several lenses. Wear it over your shoulder or strapped to a belt as a bum bag for easy access.

£53.95, [johnlewis.com](https://www.johnlewis.com)

Know before you go

Do I need a visa? British and Irish travellers require a visa to be purchased online in advance ([immi.homeaffairs.gov.au](https://www.immi.homeaffairs.gov.au)) costing \$150/£80 for three, six or 12 months.