

OVERNIGHTER

East MacDonnell Ranges, Northern Territory

A road trip through this rugged region east of Alice Springs offers opportunities for adventure, wildlife-spotting and encounters with Aboriginal culture, says Amanda Markham

A journey through the deep gorges, waterholes and mountains of the East MacDonnell Ranges – or “East Macs” – offers the chance to see the Outback in all its glory. Follow the route of ancient Aboriginal songlines (routes followed by “creator-beings” according to Indigenous belief systems) and retrace the steps of early Australian explorers to find a sense of the biodiversity in this part of the Red Centre.

Head south from Alice Springs through Heavitree Gap and turn on to the Ross Highway. After about 10 minutes, you’ll spy the ochre-red walls, deep shadows and impossibly blue skies at Emily Gap. In Arrernte, the local Aboriginal language, Emily Gap is called “Antherrke” (un-DOOR-kah). It’s a sacred site

linked to Caterpillar Dreaming in Aboriginal myths. Rock art adorns the gorge walls here.

WHAT TO DO

Hike up the ridge on the east side of Emily Gap, keeping an eye out for rock wallabies, euros (a type of kangaroo), perenties (a type of monitor lizard) and eagles. At the top, you’ll enjoy views of the East Macs in their entirety.

After another few minutes on the highway, you’ll be at Jessie Gap – perfect for picnics, swimming and photo-taking. Known in Arrernte as “Akepelye”, it’s also home to rock art. Farther east along the highway is the junction of the Binns Track. If you’re travelling in a 4WD vehicle, take the back way to Ross River Homestead along the gravel road via N’Dhala

Gorge and the sandy expanse of the Ross River. In August, you’ll see carpets of wildflowers. For those in conventional vehicles, stick to the bitumen and continue east along the highway to Corroboree Rock, another sacred Indigenous site.

The highway next leads into Eastern Arrernte territory and on to Trepina Gorge, centrepiece of the East Macs. The natural amphitheatre here is often used for concerts.

After Trepina, return to the highway and head for Ross River Resort, where you can enjoy lunch, a cold beer or an overnight stay at an Outback homestead. From the Ross River, backtrack for a few minutes and take the drive to Arltunga, the site of Central Australia’s first gold rush. The mines and buildings are

poignant reminders of the harsh reality of Outback life. History buffs and adventure-oriented travellers will enjoy scrambling down what were once working mine shafts.

WHERE TO STAY

Tours of the East Macs can be completed in a day, so accommodation in Alice Springs is a realistic option. For those wishing to stay in the East Macs, Ross River Resort offers cabin, bunkhouse and campsite stays. Trepina Gorge is home to one of Central Australia’s best campgrounds.

GETTING THERE

There’s no public transport serving the East Macs, so join a tour or hire a car in Alice Springs. Outback Experience offers day tours.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTOLIBRARY

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

1 BEHANA GORGE, CAIRNS: Hire a car at Cairns airport, drive south towards Cairns and turn on to the Bruce Highway. After travelling about 29km, turn in to stunning Behana Gorge, home to a tropical landscape complete with waterfalls. www.cairnsinfo.com

2 KITTY’S GORGE, PERTH: Located an hour’s drive southwest of Perth, Kitty’s Gorge is not far from the historic town of Jarrahdale. Enjoy a short hike through granite outcrops and waterfalls, then stop for lunch at a winery or at one of Jarrahdale’s cafés. www.jarrahdale.com

FIND IT:

- **Trepina Gorge Nature Park**, www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/trephinagorge.html
- **Arltunga Historical Reserve**, www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/arltunga.html
- **Ross River Resort**, tel: 1800 241 711, www.rossriverresort.com.au
- **Outback Experience**, tel: (0)8 8953 2666, www.outbackexperience.com.au



TOP 5

Living Little in Perth

Looking for ways to keep the kids entertained in Western Australia’s capital? Carmen Jenner lays out the options

- 1 Kings Park** is home to playgrounds, a treetop walk, guided tours and picnic grounds. Visitors can take part in cooking classes, enjoy movies and performances, drink in river views or just enjoy nature. www.bgpa.wa.gov.au
- The port town of **Fremantle** is a delight with its maritime museum, markets, buskers, historic harbour and F&B outlets selling cappuccino (or “babyccino” for the little ones), fish and chips, and more. www.fremantle.com.au
- 3 Stroll alongside sharks, stingrays and turtles in the underwater tunnel at Aqwa**, Australia’s largest aquarium. At this Hillarys Boat Harbour facility, 30 minutes north of the city, the kids can even hold a sea-horse. www.aqwa.com.au
- Junior surfers should head to **Scarborough** and **Trigg**, while the top spots to visit for swimmers and snorkellers are picturesque beaches like Cottesloe, City, Floreat and Sorrento as well as Mettam’s Pool. www.wavisorcentre.com
- 5 Cuddle a wombat at Caversham Wildlife Park at Whiteman Park**, where visitors can also take a train and tram, cycle, rollerblade, cool off at the water park, enjoy a picnic or have a go at orienteering. Visit the lolly shop and the park’s playgrounds. www.whitemanpark.com.au