

Listening to Our Heart

There's a back way to Uluru that most tourists whiz past on their way up the Stuart Highway. It's an easy four to five hour detour on a wide gravel road, accessible to any vehicle towing a sturdy caravan or camper trailer.

Locals call it the Mulga Park Road. It leaves the black top near the Territory's southern border and heads west for 180 kilometres along the final, ambitious section of Len Beadell's legendary Gunbarrel Highway, before turning north and rejoining the tourist trail of the Lasseter Highway, just outside Curtin Springs.

The Mulga Park Road is a world away from the roadtrains, tour buses, and YouTube-worthy waves of first time outbackers on the Stuart Highway. The moment I turn on to it, a forest of grey-green mulga surrounds me, low sandstone domes hint of monoliths to come, and soon, I'm passing unenthused cattle hunting for slim pickings on fragile gibber plains.

This is *country*; not in the rolling green hills and fat dairy cow sense of the word, but in the *Anangu* –the Aboriginal- sense of the word. Country –*ngura*- is what I've come here to seek. I want to find out whether the ordinary traveller can escape the crowds on the well-beaten tourist tracks of Australia's vast, red heartland and begin to see the land as Aboriginal people see it.

For many non-Aboriginal people, *ngura* –country- is not an easy concept to grasp. In the languages of the Western Desert peoples, the Luritja, Yankuntjatjara and Pitjantjatjara for whom this part of Australia has been home for tens of thousands of years, *ngura* means 'land'. Yet, it also means 'home', the place that one belongs to, and ultimately, *who one is*. Who you can marry, who you should avoid, who you can borrow the car from and not be refused – all comes from country, from *ngura*, and the Laws set down by Dreaming ancestors who not only shaped the landscape but live forever in it.

Seeing Country: Amanda Markham. Submission to Australian Caravan + RV

At Mulga Park Station, the road turns north and soon I'm teased with views of the flat-topped monolith that Yankunytjatjara and Luritja people call *Atila*, and cynical tour guides call *Fooluru*: Mt Conner.

Most people who visit Central Australia see Atila –Mt Conner- from the well-known lookout on the Lasseter Highway. Whilst the view from this roadside campsite is spectacular, in peak season (May through August), you'll be sharing it with dozens of tour buses, backpackers and rental campers. Even from the dune across the road from the rest stop, where a short climb reveals a blinding, white salt lake, you're just a stone's throw from the crowds.

On the Mulga Park Road, however, I've got Atila all to myself. There's a choice of free bush campsites along the roadside in the mulga scrub to the south of the mountain –the best spot for sunrise views- but I choose to drive north, where I toast the sunset from a low rise surrounded by Acacias with a glass of red and a small campfire.

The stars come out, and I look for the Seven Sisters, whose Dreamtime travels cross hundreds of kilometres of country, linking Atila with Uluru and places even more distant in South Australia. Atila itself is a Men's Sacred Site, and is located on private property inaccessible to the public. The only way to get nearer to it than the Mulga Park Road is to take a sunset tour with SEIT Tours, from the Curtin Springs Roadhouse.

In the morning, I head for creature comforts at Curtin Springs on the Lasseter Highway –the main sealed road to Uluru. If bush camping isn't your style, Curtin Springs has powered and unpowered campsites, showers and toilets, home-cooked meals, a friendly bar, and Mongrel, the cheeky resident emu.

At Curtin Springs, I check in online and see news of a tourist hurt whilst climbing Uluru. Comments on the story run hot with the usual for-and-against debates about climbing the Rock, which around twenty percent of visitors to Uluru still do despite Traditional Owners' requests not to. One of the comments stands out: *Why should I drive so far and pay so much just to see a big, red rock in the middle of nowhere?*

The comment stays with me as I head west towards Uluru. After a night under the stars, humbled by the sheer red walls of Atila, I can't understand the sentiment. I pass several free roadside campsites along the way, one nestled amongst Desert Oaks, another atop a sand dune with blazing sunset views of Uluru, less than forty minutes from the Rock. Even Curtin Springs is only eighty kilometres –around fifty minutes drive- from the Park Boundary. Perhaps the comment's author has never heard of free camping, or isn't aware that there are more options out here than simply staying at the Ayers Rock Resort?

Uluru looms in the distance, and I dismiss the comment as ignorance. I've visited the Rock dozens of times and every time I see it, anticipation prickles my skin. It rises, dramatic and sensual from the rolling dunes, commanding the eye from sixty kilometres away. That first glimpse thrills me, then there's the game of hide and seek as I drive in through the Desert Oak and sand hill country, and pass into Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.

Nearer to Uluru, the contrast of red rock, ochre dune, and blue sky are impossible to resist. To stand beside it, to see it with your own eyes, inspires not only clichés but the same silent, reverence many find in cathedrals.

This sense of spirit and yearning for connection are a double-edged sword for Uluru. There's a constant tension between the subtle, enduring spirituality of the Anangu and the needs and expectations of visitors from all around the world.

Well-meaning non-Aboriginal people invest their own spiritual journeys in Uluru in many different ways. Frustrated rangers tell me tales of removing New Age crystals, Tibetan prayer flags and Books of the Dead, burning incense, Bibles and other spiritual offerings from caves at the base, as well as on top of the Rock itself.

“We’re constantly throwing them away,” one ranger tells me. “It’s insulting to the Anangu, and it’s litter in the Park.”

Whilst the brochures tell you to visit the Cultural Centre and view the displays, it’s connection with living Anangu culture and country that many visitors long for, but aren’t sure how to find.

The simplest way to get a deeper sense of country and Anangu culture is to get out and walk. It’s what Aboriginal people have been doing for thousands of years. The Uluru Base Walk takes you right around the Rock, and is an almost flat, nine-kilometre stroll that an average person can do in around three hours. If you’re not up for the Base Walk, then Uluru’s best-kept secret is the Mutitjulu Waterhole Walk, on the monolith’s southern side, a lazy twenty minutes anyone can spare.

Walking transports me into Uluru’s hidden gorges, caves, and rock art galleries – a whole world that vehicle-bound tourists never see. At once, I’m in a landscape crisscrossed by the travels of Dreaming ancestors whose actions created the land, the people, the plants, animals, the folds and facets of Uluru. Where a snake ancestor slithered and made a waterhole, there they left a part of themselves, too. That snake is *still there*, forever creating the waterhole and everything around it, including the Anangu born in the area, some of whom are living incarnations of the snake.

The Anangu Elders who hold the stories and songs for these Dreaming ancestors carry a heavy spiritual burden often at odds with the expectations of Park visitors thirsting for Aboriginal culture. Much Anangu Law is secret and sacred, revealed in layers only to those who spend time on country and dedicate a lifetime to learning it. Even for Anangu, some sacred knowledge is forever restricted. Certain sacred sites are considered so dangerous that only the most Senior Law Men or Women can enter them at specific times and under certain conditions. This is one of the reasons Anangu ask that visitors don't climb Uluru.

Back at Yulara, the resort town eighteen kilometres from Uluru, I hear tourists complain there are no 'real' Aboriginal people here. I'm a little surprised – the Mutitjulu ladies are out on the grassed area in front of the town square, giving dot painting lessons and chatting with anyone who cares to sit down with them. It's one of the easiest, most accessible ways to meet Anangu and learn a little more about country and culture from the people who hold the stories for the land.

There are a number of Anangu-guided tours and workshops around the Cultural Centre within the Park, and at the Ayers Rock Resort, but the one the locals recommend is the Cave Hill Tour with Traditional Owner and Elder, Stanley Douglas. Stanley is a custodian for part of the Seven Sisters Dreaming, and he takes visitors to a sacred cave for an immersion in Law and culture. He's a gentle, unassuming man, with a natural affinity for people and a gift for storytelling. You'll need a full day for this tour, which takes you onto country about 100 kilometres south west of Uluru, well off the usual tourist trail.

It's not possible to escape the crowds at the unforgettable Uluru sunset, but the sunrise on Kata Tjuta from the dune viewing area is the pick for anyone wanting some solitude. *Kata Tjuta* means 'many heads' in Pitjantjatjara: 'kata' is head; 'tjuta' is many. The best way to experience Kata Tjuta is again on foot, taking the moderately challenging Valley of the Winds Walk.

Seeing Country: Amanda Markham. Submission to Australian Caravan + RV

Once past the second lookout, where all the tour groups seem to stop, I have the trail largely to myself and emerge into a wide pound, surrounded by the weathered heads of Kata Tjuta. Look carefully, and many of them have dustings of green spinifex on top of their otherwise bald, red pates. This is a place that's hard to leave, and I'm beginning to understand what Anangu Law can teach us: country reveals itself only to those who linger and revisit.

Watarrka –the Western Aranda name for Kings Canyon and the name of the National Park- is a little over three hours drive north-east of Uluru, on the sealed Luritja Road. Whilst Uluru and Kata Tjuta slip readily off the tongues of many Australians, Watarrka is a surprising secret. Its domes, hidden oases, sheer walls, lush greenery reveal themselves only to those who make the effort to hike the six kilometre Rim Walk. It's well worth the four hours – and the famous climb that some call 'Heart Attack Hill'.

Whilst I find fewer options for engaging with Aboriginal people here, the recently opened Karrke Tours running out of Wanmarra, near Kings Creek Station, introduces you to local bush tucker, traditional medicines and hunting techniques. Run by well-known, local Aboriginal man, Peter Abbott, in the hour or so the tour takes, you'll learn how people survived and thrived around Watarrka for thousands of years.

Both Kings Creek Station, thirty kilometres southeast of Watarrka, and the Kings Canyon Resort have well-serviced campgrounds, but my pick is the free campsite on what locals call 'the Jump Up', about twenty minutes north from the Resort along the Red Centre Way. Officially, the site is called 'Ginty's Lookout', but after the sudden switchbacks on the road that climbs the ridge, I'm convinced that *Jump Up* is a much better name.

On the Jump Up, I watch the sun set on the George Gill Range. Here, I'm aware of each passing minute and shift of colour as the day slips away. Perhaps this is what Anangu know: even on the beaten tourist trail, those with the courage to linger, to return, to sit and watch or walk, find that ngura –*country*– is just waiting for them to listen.