

West MacDonnell & James Ranges



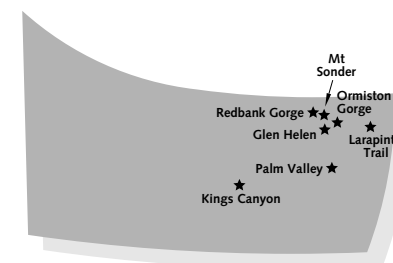
Leaving the brief 'urban sprawl' of Alice Springs, it takes only a matter of minutes to find yourself enveloped in these low-lying but spectacular ranges crawling to the west. In contrast to the flat, desolate regions further north and south, this is central Australia at its enigmatic best. Boasting three outstanding national parks and superb bushwalking, this area beckons travellers with some of central Australia's biggest drawcards. The rugged MacDonnell Ranges, rich in Aboriginal heritage, march like giant caterpillars for 400km across the vast central plain, and to the west of the Alice they open up to form spectacular natural features such as Simpsons Gap, Standley Chasm (Angkerle) and Ormiston Gorge. Stretching across these ranges is one of Australia's great long-distance walking tracks, the Larapinta Trail.

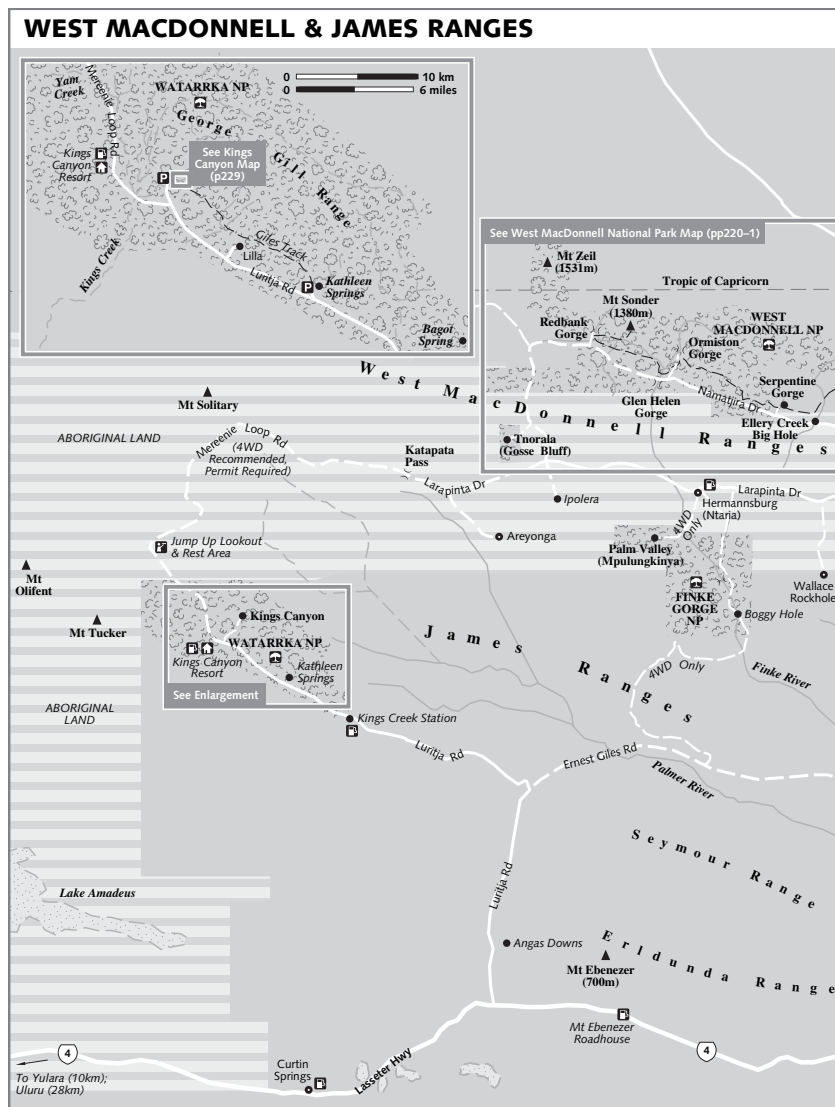
Further south, the James Ranges reach east to Watarrka National Park and the stunning Kings Canyon. In between is the luxuriant Palm Valley, part of the incredibly wild Finke Gorge National Park. Exploring these special places on foot and by 4WD gives a true sense of the rugged isolation and timelessness of the land.

A vehicle is essential to get the best out of the West MacDonnells. Most of the region is accessible by 2WD along sealed roads or maintained gravel roads, but to explore Finke Gorge National Park you'll need a 4WD. Camping is the way to go out here, but you can sleep in style at Kings Canyon and Glen Helen. Although many visitors zip through in a day or two, you could easily spend a week or more bushwalking, relaxing and enjoying the changing moods of the landscape.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wandering around the lush palms and camping overnight at **Palm Valley** (p227)
- Walking the rim trail to stare down into the majestic **Kings Canyon** (p231)
- Rising early to watch a Namatjira painting come to life with the changing colours of dawn breaking over **Mt Sonder** (p223)
- Hiking a stage or two of one of Australia's great walks – the **Larapinta Trail** (p218)
- Enjoying a candlelit dinner and a bush band at **Glen Helen Homestead** (p223)
- Taking a quick helicopter flight over **Ormiston Gorge** (p222), then walking the superb track through the gorge and Ormiston Pound
- Floating on an air mattress through the tranquillity of **Redbank Gorge** (p224)

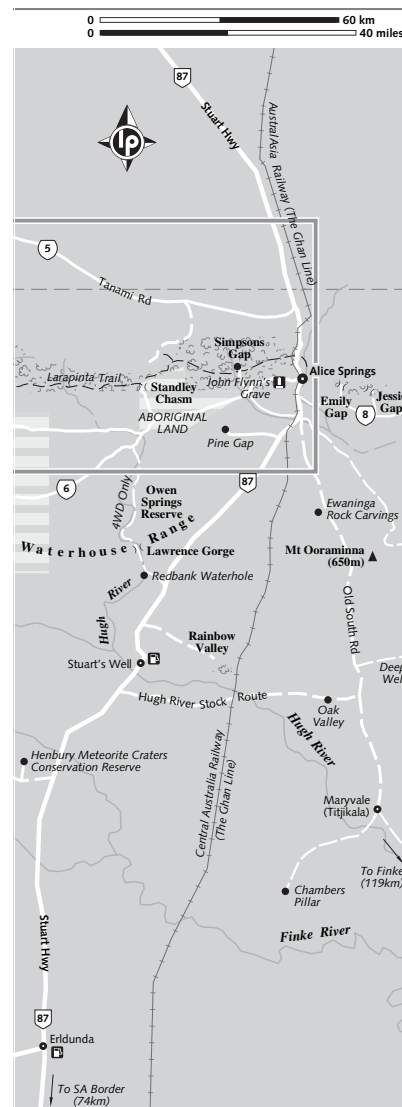




WEST MACDONNELL NATIONAL PARK

With icy waterholes, spectacular red gorges, central Australia's longest marked walking track and all the hues of a Namatjira

painting, the West MacDonnell National Park is the jewel of the ranges. It stretches unbroken along the range from the Stuart Hwy just north of Alice Springs to Mt Zeil, 170km to the west, with short detours off the main sealed road leading to a string of beautiful gorges, camping grounds and bushwalks.



Animals & Plants

To the casual observer the rich wildlife of the ranges can be difficult to appreciate (let alone see), but dwelling in the rocky crevices and permanent waterholes is a diverse bunch of animals – some 167 species of bird, 85 species of reptile, 23 species of native mammal, five species of frog and various fish are found in this area.

Most mammals are nocturnal and shy, although you're likely to see black-footed rock wallabies foraging on the rocks at several spots, such as Standley Chasm and Ormiston Gorge, along with euros and red kangaroos. Birds are easier to spot, and several colourful species of parrot will probably cross your trail at some point.

Although arid, the ranges are covered with a huge variety of plants, including many tall trees, with the majestic ghost gums an outstanding feature. In hidden, moist places are relics of the rainforest flora that covered this region millions of years ago.

Information

There are national park visitors centres at **Simpsons Gap** (☎ 8955 0310; 🕒 5am-8pm) and **Ormiston Gorge** (☎ 8956 7799; 🕒 5am-8pm) and each main site throughout the park has information signs covering geological formations, Aboriginal lore and wildlife.

Fuel is available at Glen Helen Resort, Hermannsburg, Kings Canyon Resort and Kings Creek Station.

GUIDED WALKS & TALKS

During the main tourist season (May to October), Parks & Wildlife rangers conduct free scheduled 'walks and talks' at Simpsons Gap and Ormiston Gorge. The programme varies, but may include walks, a themed campfire talk or a slide show – check with **Parks & Wildlife** (☎ 8951 8211) for times and locations, or check at the respective visitors centres.

Activities

BUSHWALKING

In dry conditions, all the attractions are accessible to conventional vehicles. Most can be visited in a long day trip from Alice, but to get the most out of the area, plan to camp along the way or stay at Glen Helen Resort for at least one night. Namatjira Drive splits off Larapinta Drive and is sealed to the Finke River crossing near Glen Helen Gorge.

Walkers will find plenty to do in the ranges, from a 10-minute stroll into Simpsons Gap to the superb two-hour Ormiston Pound walk. Don't miss the short walks into Standley Chasm or Redbank Gorge. Serious walkers should consider the tough eight-hour return walk to the summit of Mt Sonder, or plan to walk part of the Larapinta Trail.

LARAPINTA TRAIL

The 230km Larapinta Trail extends along the backbone of the West MacDonnell Ranges and is undoubtedly one of Australia's great long-distance walks. It's split into 12 stages starting from the Old Telegraph Station at Alice Springs and following the ridge line to Mt Sonder, the fourth-highest peak in the Northern Territory. Opened in 2002, the trail is gaining popularity, but as often as not you'll find you have the ranges virtually to yourself. The first stage is the most popular, receiving around 2000 walkers a year. Along its length, the trail passes the permanent waterholes at Simpsons Gap, Standley Chasm, Ellery Creek, Ormiston Gorge and Redbank Gorge. Although this is described as a desert walk, in fact there's lots of vegetation, an artist's palette of wildflowers in the spring, amazing rocky outcrops and a booklist of birdlife.

The first day's 24km stretch to Simpson Gap is particularly spectacular, alternating between the ridge and the foot of the range and passing a number of smaller gaps and waterholes along the way. Section 3, a short 15km stretch from Jay Creek to Standley Chasm, is even better, departing the idyllic Jay Creek camping ground and following a twisting cut through the range then offering alternative high and low altitude routes, before descending the dramatically narrow, rocky and picturesque gorge that leads into Standley Chasm. Sections 4 and 5 follow high ridges with wonderful views, descending into Standley Chasm then through a series of challenging gorges. Section 6 is one of the tougher parts of the trail since there are no reliable water sources along the 31km walk. The final stages make a fitting finale to the classic walk. From Ormiston Gorge the trail leads to the Finke River before climbing to the summit of Mt Sonder with spectacular views in all directions.

There are more than 20 designated camping areas, and water sources on most stages. The trail is best walked in the cooler months from April to September since summer in the Centre can be incredibly hot and the waterholes are more likely to have dried up.

To complete the entire distance takes at least two weeks, which is far too long to carry supplies, particularly since even in winter the central Australian climate means you must carry plenty of water. It's best to walk the trail in sections with resupply points along the way.

Several companies offer organised walks of varying lengths on the trail. **Trek Larapinta** (☎ 8953 2933; www.treklarapinta.com.au), run by Charlie Carter, offers fully guided and catered walks from \$590 for a three-day walk from Ormiston to Mt Sonder, to \$1590 for an eight-day trek. The mother of all walks – the 20-day end-to-end – costs \$2970 and is scheduled once a year. Check the website for upcoming walks. **World Expeditions** (☎ 1300 720 000; www.worldexpeditions.com.au) has four-/eight-/14-day treks for \$900/1750/2990.

Detailed trail notes and maps (\$1.10 per section) are available from the Catia office in Alice Springs. Sections are graded as Class B (medium) and Class C (difficult, trail less well defined), but each stage will have some easy and some tough sections. The easiest stages are 1, 2, 7, 10 and 11.

Larapinta Trail Sections

section	trail	distance (km)	duration (hrs)	rating
1	Alice Springs Telegraph Station to Simpsons Gap	24	9	B
2	Simpsons Gap to Jay Creek	25	9	B
3	Jay Creek to Standley Chasm	14	7	C
4	Standley Chasm to Birthday Water Hole	18	11	C
5	Birthday Water Hole to Hugh Gorge	16	9½	C
6	Hugh Gorge to Ellery Creek	31	10	C
7	Ellery Creek to Serpentine Gorge	14	6½	C
8	Serpentine Gorge to Inarlanga Pass (Ochre Pits)	20	8½	C
9	Inarlanga Pass (Ochre Pits) to Ormiston Gorge	30	21½	C
10	Ormiston Gorge to Glen Helen Gorge	13	5½	B
11	Glen Helen Gorge to Redbank Gorge	29	13	C
12	Redbank Gorge to Mt Sonder and return	16	8	C

For long-distance walkers, the problem lies in getting to or from the various trailheads. **Alice Wanderer** (☎ 8952 2111; www.alicewanderer.com.au) provides transfers to nine access points. Rates for two passengers include \$75 to Simpsons Gap, \$200 to Glen Helen Gorge and \$270 to Redbank Gorge, but you may be able to arrange a cheaper seat on a scheduled tour.

Glen Helen Resort (☎ 8956 7495; www.glenhelen.com.au) also runs transfers between Alice Springs and Glen Helen Gorge and the trailheads.

Tours

Alice Wanderer (☎ 8952 2111; www.alicewanderer.com.au) has full day tours as far as Glen Helen Gorge, including morning tea and lunch for adult/child \$110/90, and a half-day trip to Simpsons Gap and Standley Chasm for \$70/55.

Emu Run (☎ 8953 7057; www.emurun.com.au) offers a recommended small-group day tour through the ranges for \$100, including lunch, afternoon tea and entrance fees.

Ossies Outback 4WD Tours (☎ 8952 2308; www.ossies.com.au) has excellent 4WD tours, including a three-day trip that goes through Finke Gorge National Park to Kings Canyon and Uluru. It costs from \$650 for the budget accommodation options. Another is a day trip through Owen Springs Reserve (p225).

JOHN FLYNN'S GRAVE

About 7km west of Alice Springs along Larapinta Dr is the grave of Dr John Flynn, founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Australian Inland Mission, who died in 1951. The grave itself is topped by a red granite boulder and the information shelter here tells the interesting story of nearly 40 years of controversy. In 1952, a large round stone was brought here from the Devil's Marbles just south of Tennant Creek to mark Flynn's grave. For years afterwards the owners of this sacred women's site (Karu Karu) lobbied to have the stone returned. Eventually the local Arrernte community offered to replace the stone with one of their own, and in 1999 an official swap took place – the rock from Karu Karu was returned to its rightful place.

SIMPSONS GAP

The first of many spectacular cracks in the ranges west of Alice, Roe Creek has exploited

SIMPSONS GAP BICYCLE PATH

Cyclists in central Australia are usually stuck with hugging the edge of the road or tackling rough tracks, but the Simpsons Gap Bicycle Path offers the chance for a smooth and traffic-free bush ride. The sealed cycling path between Flynn's Grave on Larapinta Dr and Simpsons Gap wanders 17km along timbered creek flats and over low rocky hills. It's an easy one- to two-hour ride and, if you add the 7km by road from Alice to the start of the path, you can make the 50km return trip in a comfortable day.

There are several bush picnic spots en route, information signs and excellent views of Mt Gillen, Rungtjirba Ridge and the rugged Alice Valley. The path is open only during daylight hours, so head out in the early morning and return in the afternoon. Water is available 3.5km from the start and at Simpsons Gap; always carry a water bottle.

a fault in the quartzite Rungtjirba Ridge and gouged the red gorge and towering cliffs of Simpsons Gap, 24km west of town, and 7km along a sealed road (Darken Drive) north of Larapinta Dr.

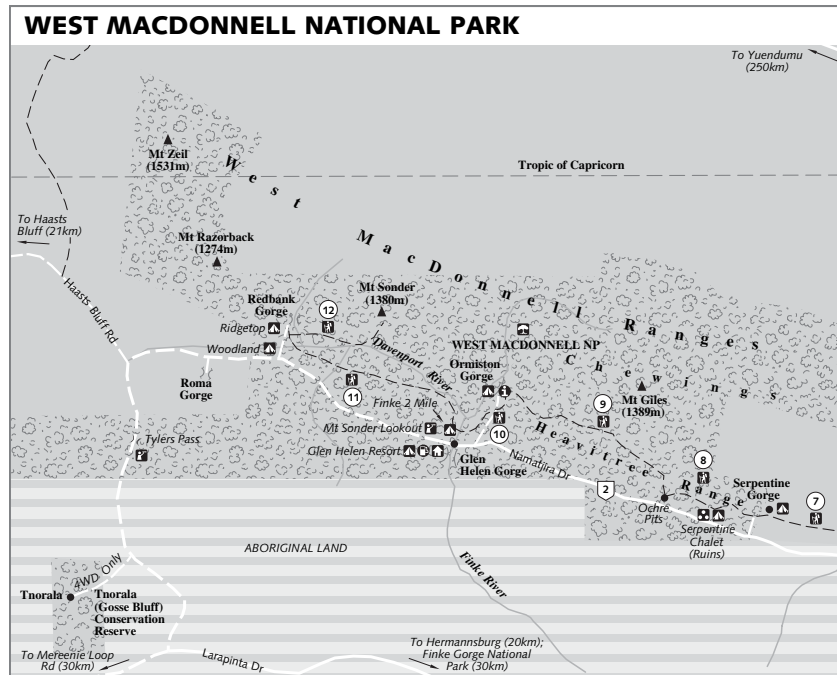
The area is popular with picnickers and also has some good walks. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times to see the rock wallabies that live among the huge boulders in the gap. To the Arrernte people, Simpsons Gap is known as Rungtjirba, the home of Giant Goanna ancestral beings.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 8955 0310; ☎ 5am-8pm), 1km in from Larapinta Dr, has drinking water and displays on local wildlife. At the park entrance there are information boards, toilets, picnic tables and free gas barbecues. From here it's a 20-minute return walk along the (usually) dry creek bed to the Gap and a small waterhole.

Bushwalking

Apart from the short walk into the Gap itself, there are some pleasant and not too strenuous walks around Simpsons Gap. You can also do day walks on the first two sections of the Larapinta Trail – peaceful **Bond Gap** (to the west) and **Wallaby Gap** (to the east) are both worthwhile.

Ghost Gum walk (1km return, 15 minutes, easy) This brief stroll starts at the visitors centre and is lined with



information boards describing some of the vegetation of the area, including a beautiful 200-year-old ghost gum. **Cassia Hill** (1.5km return, 45 minutes, easy to medium) About halfway between the visitors centre and the Gap, this loop walk meanders through groves of witchetty bush, mulga and senna (formerly called cassia), then up a moderate hill for fine views over the ranges. **Woodland trail** (17km return, seven hours, medium) This walk starts about 2km from the visitors centre and passes Rocky Gap.

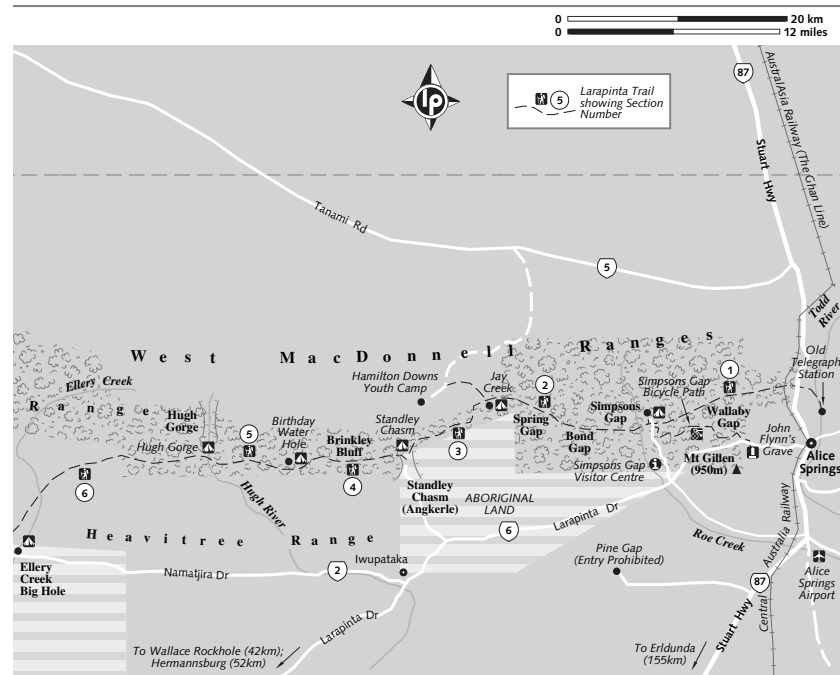
STANDLEY CHASM (ANGKERLE)

From the Simpsons Gap turn-off, you cross Aboriginal land for the next 30km to the sublime **Standley Chasm** (Angkerle; ☎ 8956 7440; adult/senior & child \$7/6; camping \$3; ☽ 8am-6pm). This part of the MacDonnells is owned and managed by the nearby community of Iwupataka. Its English name honours Ida Standley, the first schoolteacher in Alice Springs in 1914. The school for Aboriginal children was moved to Jay Creek (now Iwupataka) in 1925 and Mrs Standley was the first non-Aboriginal woman to visit the chasm. The chasm was formed where a tributary of the Finke River wore a narrow cleft

through the surrounding sandstone. In places the smooth vertical walls rise to 80m and at its widest the chasm is 9m across. It's cool and dark on the chasm floor, and for about an hour either side of midday the stone walls are lit up by reflected sunlight that causes the rocks to glow red and triggers the shutter of every camera. The kiosk at the site sells snacks and drinks; there are picnic tables, wood barbecues (bring your own wood), camp sites and clean toilets near the car park.

Bushwalking

Main chasm walk (800m one way, 15 minutes, easy) Up the rocky gully from the kiosk to the chasm, this walk is crammed with moisture-loving plants such as river red gums, cycad palms and ferns, creating an unexpected lushness in this arid world of craggy bluffs. It's one of the best walks in the area, but most visitors are in too much of a hurry to notice. **Second chasm walk** (2.4km return, one hour, medium) Climb the rocks at the end of the main chasm. At the far end turn left, then follow the creek bed for a further 300m before returning. You need to scramble over boulders and tree trunks here, making it more challenging than the main walk.



Larapinta Hill (1.5km, 45 minutes return, difficult) From the main chasm track, this signposted trail – part of the Larapinta Trail – climbs to a lookout (signposted as Jay Creek). **Loop Walk** (2.5km, one hour return, medium) Follow the signposted trail from the southern side of the kiosk and return via the main road.

ELLERY CREEK BIG HOLE

Just under 90km from Alice Springs on Namatjira Dr, Ellery Creek Big Hole is a popular swimming hole in summer but, as it's shaded by the high cliffs of Ellery Gorge, the water is freezing for much of the year. Ellery Creek was named by explorer Ernest Giles in 1872 after a Victorian astronomer. The Aboriginal name for the waterhole is Udepata, and it was an important gathering point along a couple of Dreaming trails that pass through the area. The **Dolomite Walk** (20 minutes) is worth the detour. An information shelter at the car park explains the area's fascinating geological history, which is exposed in the creek banks downstream from the waterhole. Within easy reach of the waterhole is a small, usually crowded **camping ground** (sites

per adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) with gas barbecues, tables, a pit toilet and limited shade.

SERPENTINE GORGE

About 11km further along Namatjira Dr a rough gravel track leads to the Serpentine Gorge car park. From here it's a 1.3km walk along the sandy creek bed to the gorge and its waterholes, which contain some rare (for this area) plant species, such as the Centralian flannel flower. A waterhole blocks access to the entrance of the narrow gorge, which snakes for over 2km through the Heavitree Range. The stunning scenery of cycads and a second water-filled cleft can also be enjoyed from a lookout above the main entrance.

SERPENTINE CHALET RUINS

Continuing on from Serpentine Gorge you soon arrive at the Serpentine Chalet turn-off. A rough track leads to the ruins of this early 1960s tourism venture. Visitors would travel all day from Alice Springs to reach the chalet, which was a haven of relative (though still basic) comfort in the harsh bush.

Lack of water caused the chalet to close after only a couple of years and all that remain are the concrete foundations and floor slabs. These days travellers stop in for the bush **camp sites** (free) scattered along the track to and beyond the original site. The first five sites are accessible to conventional vehicles, the last six to 4WD vehicles only.

A roadside stop between here and the Ochre Pits takes you up to a fine **lookout** over the ranges, with picnic tables, pit barbecues and a water tank.

OCHRE PITS

A little further along the highway, a car park and boardwalk (disabled access) leads about 300m to the Ochre Pits, a site that has been used by the local Arrernte Aboriginal people for centuries. Small deposits of yellow ochre are still used occasionally for ceremonial decoration, though the remaining ochre here is generally of poor quality and modern materials have largely replaced natural ochre. Still, the swirls of dull red and yellow ochre in the walls of this little ravine make an attractive picture in the afternoon sun. The picnic area has free gas barbecues.

A three-hour-return walk takes you to scenic **Inarlanga Pass** at the foot of the Heavitree Range. The track passes through some rather uninspiring country, though there is some interest in the gorge and the old Serpentine Chalet dam, an hour's walk to the east along the Larapinta Trail.

ORMISTON GORGE

The soaring cliffs, stark ghost gums, rich colours and a deep waterhole at Ormiston Gorge combine to form some of the grandest scen-

ery in the central ranges, and the Ormiston Pound walk is an unmissable highlight of trekking in the park. There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 8956 7799; ☎ 5am-8pm) with information panels, a **kiosk** (☎ 10am-4pm) and an excellent camping ground. Free ranger talks are given here four days a week from May to October – ask at the visitors centre for a programme.

The gorge itself features towering crags that glow red and purple in the sunlight, hemming fallen rocks and waterholes. Ormiston Gorge is a haven for wildlife enthusiasts, thanks to the variety of habitats (mulga woodland, spinifex slopes, rock faces, large river gums and permanent water) found side by side.

The waterhole is part of the Aboriginal Emu Dreaming and is a registered sacred site. Although the water is pretty cold, it's still a popular summer swimming spot. Climb the steps to the Ghost Gum Lookout for an awesome view over the gorge and ranges.

The turn-off to the gorge is 26km on from the Ochre Pits and only 4km east of Glen Helen, then a further 8km along a sealed road to the car park and camping area.

Bushwalking

This part of the park has some of the best short walks in the MacDonnell Ranges. The *Walks of Ormiston Gorge & Pound* leaflet, available from Parks & Wildlife, gives more details.

Water Hole (200m one way, 10 minutes, easy) Signs along this short stroll explain Aboriginal lore and the wildlife of the waterholes.

Ghost Gum Lookout (2km return, 30 minutes, medium) Climb the many steps of the western cliffs to the lone

ghost gum standing sentinel at this lookout. There are superb views down to the gorge itself.

Ghost Gum walk (2km loop, 1½ hours, medium) Follow the track to the Ghost Gum Lookout and return along the floor of the gorge.

Pound walk (7km loop, about 2½ hours, medium) This superb walk climbs to an elevated spinifex-clad gap in the range, passes into remote Ormiston Pound then follows the floor of the gorge back to the camping ground. Do it first thing in the morning in an anticlockwise direction so you can enjoy a sunlit view of the big cliffs, or do the Ghost Gum walk first and link with the Pound walk; take plenty of water.

Longer walks to **Bowman's Gap** (9km, one to two days return, medium) and **Mt Giles** (21km, two to three days return, difficult), which includes a 600m ascent of Mt Giles, can be tackled by experienced bushwalkers. The view at dawn across Ormiston Pound from Mt Giles to Mt Sonder is sensational.

Sleeping

Ormiston Gorge camping ground (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) The ritziest of the West MacDonnell National Park's sites, this camping ground is right next to the gorge car park. There are hot showers, toilets (with disabled facilities), picnic tables and free gas barbecues. Get here early for a site as caravans and campervans crowd out many spots.

GLEN HELEN GORGE & HOMESTEAD

The large waterhole at Glen Helen Gorge, 135km from Alice Springs, has been carved through the Pacoota Range by the Finke River as its floodwaters rush south to the Simpson Desert. A major flood in 1988 backed up so high that it flooded the nearby resort.

To the Arrernte people the gorge is a sacred site known as Yapulpa, and is part of the Carpet Snake Dreaming. In 1872 Ernest Giles was the first white person to explore the area and the pastoral lease was first taken up by prominent pastoralists, Grant and Stokes. Their surveyor, Richard Warburton, in 1876 named the station (and gorge) after Grant's eldest daughter.

In 1901 the station was bought by Fred Raggatt and remnants from that time, such as the timber meathouse, still survive. The homestead on its current site was originally built in 1905. Past owners included Reg Ansett, founder of the former Australian

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Glen Helen Resort (☎ 8956 7489; www.glenhelen.com.au; Namatjira Dr; powered sites for 2 \$22, unpowered sites per person \$10, dm without/with linen \$20/30, d \$160; breakfast & lunch \$4-15, barbecue pack \$24-32, dinner \$21-29). The looming red cliffs provide a dramatic backdrop to the Glen Helen Homestead, a popular spot on the edge of the national park. You can pitch a tent in the shady grounds, stay in a backpackers lodge, or do it in comfort in one of the modern (though overpriced) motel rooms. The back veranda makes an idyllic place to unwind, and there's a lively pub with pool table and live music (Thursday to Saturday, March to December). The excellent Namatjira Restaurant (mains \$21 to \$29) has a good à la carte menu featuring the 'bush tucker mixed grill' and 'chicken Sonder', an open fire and walls adorned with prints or originals by the Namatjira family. There are also helicopter flights from the homestead. A short flight over the gorge is \$40 and a flight over Ormiston Gorge costs \$100.

airline. In 1992 the property was purchased by the Ngurratjua/Pmara Ntjarra Aboriginal Corporation.

A 10-minute stroll takes you from the car park to the gorge entrance, where you can admire the 65m high cliffs, but if you want to go further you'll have to either swim through the waterhole or climb around it. The rugged cliffs positively radiate in the late afternoon sun – you can enjoy them over a beer from the back veranda at Glen Helen Homestead (above).

Just west of the Finke River crossing on Namatjira Dr is the turn-off to the **Mt Sonder lookout** with an evocative view of the reclining mountain made famous in Albert Namatjira's watercolours. First light illuminates Mt Sonder beautifully.

Finke Two Mile Camping Ground offers free bush camping sites on the Finke River, upstream from the crossing on Namatjira Drive. You'll need a 4WD to get to it and there are no facilities, but the views and atmosphere are hard to beat – it's popular with weekenders from Alice. The turn-off is un-signposted but is to the north of Namatjira Drive just past Glen Helen Homestead.

THE MAGIC OF OCHRE

Ochre was an important commodity in local Aboriginal culture, where it was used medicinally and was also a valuable trade item. Red ochre mixed with grease and eucalyptus leaves became an effective decongestant balm, and white ochre was believed to have magical powers – it was mixed with water and then blown from the mouth, a practice which was said to cool the sun and calm the wind. Ochre was also used extensively for body decoration and in painting. Red ochre was used in important ceremonies such as the initiation of young men.

Ochre from the West MacDonnells was occasionally traded as far south as the Pitjantjatjara communities of South Australia. It was dampened and pressed into bricks or rolled into balls for easy transport.

The different coloured vertical layers of the Ochre Pits were created by layers of deposited silt containing varying amounts of iron being compressed, folded and buckled over millions of years.

REDBANK GORGE

Well known to locals but often overlooked by visitors who have had their fill of gorges, Redbank is another scenic detour at the western end of the ranges, reached via a rugged dirt road. There are two camping grounds here and you can really get a feeling of bush solitude that is sometimes lost on the more popular spots.

The Redbank Gorge turn-off is about 20km west of Glen Helen along a dirt road, then 5km north to the car park. From here it's another 15-minute walk up a rocky creek bed to the gorge itself. Redbank Gorge is extremely narrow, with polished, multihued walls that close over your head to block out the sky. To traverse the gorge you must clamber and float along the freezing deep pools with an air mattress, but it's worth the effort – the colours and cathedral atmosphere inside are haunting. Allow two hours to get to the end. Except in summer, swimming the gorge is not recommended – the icy water can cause cramps or worse.

Bushwalking

Redbank Gorge is the starting point for Section 12 of the Larapinta Trail to nearby Mt Sonder. The walk along the ridge from Redbank Gorge to the summit of **Mt Sonder** (16km return, eight hours, difficult) will appeal to fit, well-prepared walkers. After the constructed trail ends, markers show the way along the ridge where the track rises from

680m to 1380m. Some locals regard this as the finest walk in the West MacDonnells and a highlight of the trail. The superb view from the summit of Mt Sonder and the sense of achievement are ample reward. Camping is not permitted on the summit, so start early.

Sleeping

There are two bush camping grounds along the rough track to Redbank Gorge.

Redbank Woodland Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) A few kilometres back from the gorge car park, this large camping ground is on a creek flat with shady coolabahs and well-spaced sites, fireplaces (no wood provided), free gas barbecues and picnic tables.

Redbank Ridgetop Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) Much closer to the gorge, this is a small, intimate camping ground with stony sites and basic facilities – a single pit toilet and fireplaces.

ROMA GORGE

Just outside the park boundary, Roma Gorge sees few visitors, partly because it's only accessible by a very rough 4WD track, partly because there are no facilities (camping is not permitted) and partly because it's hard to find – the turn-off is not properly signposted. But those with a high-clearance 4WD and a sense of adventure will find a tranquil, picturesque waterhole, and an interesting Aboriginal rock art site. The turn-off heads south off Namatjira Drive just a few kilometres west

DETOUR

Beyond Redbank Gorge you can continue west on Namatjira Dr and do a loop drive along the sometimes rough dirt road to Hermannsburg and back to Alice Springs. En route detour to **Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve**, which preserves an ancient meteor impact crater. After about 17km the road turns south over **Tylers Pass**, where a lookout offers the awesome first glimpse of Tnorala's enormous red mass, rising abruptly from the otherwise flat surrounding landscape. This remnant of a huge crater was blasted out when a comet plunged into the ground around 140 million years ago. The power of such an impact is almost impossible to comprehend – the 5km-diameter crater you see today was originally 2km below the impact surface, and is just the core of the original 20km-diameter crater.

The crater was named by Ernest Giles in 1872 after Harry Gosse, a telegraphist at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station. Tnorala is the Western Arrernte name for the crater, and in the local mythology is a wooden dish belonging to some star ancestors that crashed down from the sky during the Dreaming. The area is a registered sacred site and is protected by a 4700-hectare conservation reserve.

Access to Tnorala is 8km along a rough track, best tackled in a 4WD, which goes right into the crater. There's a picnic ground with pit toilet, but camping is not permitted – information boards explain the story of a tragic tribal incident that occurred here.

DETOUR

Opened to the public in 2003, the 50km 4WD route through **Owen Springs Reserve** follows the Hugh River through the old Owen Springs cattle station from the eastern end of Larapinta Drive south to the Stuart Hwy. It can easily be done as a loop day-trip from Alice Springs, a total of about 160km, or there are bush camping sites along the river.

With huge river red gums lining the sandy river bed this is a scenic route and one steeped in history – this was the original route of the Overland Telegraph Line and was first explored by John McDouall Stuart in 1860.

From Larapinta Dr the turn-off comes a few kilometres past the Namatjira Dr intersection and heads south for 17km to the ruins of the Old Owen Springs Homestead (1872), the first station homestead built in central Australia. The track continues through the Waterhouse Range and beautiful Lawrence Gorge (where you can camp; no facilities), crossing or following the sandy river bed in several places.

About 4km before you reach the Stuart Hwy there's a turn-off to Redbank Waterhole, a permanent waterhole where you can camp. Once on the highway it's an easy 45-minute drive back to Alice.

of Redbank Gorge. A rough and rocky track leads 8.5km to the gorge.

JAMES RANGES

The low-lying James Ranges form an east-west band south of the West MacDonnell Ranges. While not as well known as the MacDonnells, the ranges border some of the Centre's top attractions: Hermannsburg, Palm Valley and Kings Canyon.

Most people visit Hermannsburg and Palm Valley on a day or overnight trip from Alice Springs, and save Kings Canyon for a separate trip that includes Uluru. However, you can save a lot of backtracking if you continue from Hermannsburg around the western end of the James Ranges on the gravel Mereenie Loop Rd, which emerges at Kings Canyon, or tackle the exciting Finke Gorge National Park by 4WD.

HERMANSBURG

pop 460

The Aboriginal settlement of Hermannsburg (Ntaria), 125km from Alice Springs, is famous as the one-time home of artist Albert Namatjira, the birthplace of anthropologist Ted Strehlow and the site of the Hermannsburg Mission. It's well worth stopping by to visit the historical precinct, which preserves the work and lives of the early missionaries.

Although the town is sited on restricted Aboriginal land, permits are not required

to visit the mission or store, or to travel through. Groceries, fuel and takeaway food are available from **Ntaria Supermarket** (☎ 8956 7480; 🕒 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5.30pm Sun) on the main road into town. You'll also find an ATM and Internet access here.

History

In 1876, fresh from the Hermannsburg Mission Institute in Germany, pastors AH Kempe and WF Schwarz left Adelaide bound for central Australia with a herd of cattle and several thousand sheep. Eighteen months later they finally arrived at the new mission site, having been held up by drought at Dalhousie Springs for nearly a year.

It was a nightmarish introduction to the harsh central Australian environment, but the pastors were committed to the task of bringing Christianity and 'civilisation' to the Aboriginal people. The missionaries faced many hardships, including strong opposition from white settlers to their attempts to protect Aboriginal people from genocide, and disillusionment at the lack of converts. It eventually became rundown; many of the Aboriginal residents drifted away and the mission was abandoned in 1891.

This was all turned around with the arrival of Pastor Carl Strehlow in 1894. Strehlow was a tireless worker who learnt the Arrernte language, translated the New Testament into Arrernte and wrote a number of important works on the Arrernte people. On the downside, however, he also had the touch of arrogance that

typifies missions, believing that the Aboriginal beliefs and customs were wrong.

Professor TGH (Ted) Strehlow, the youngest child of Carl Strehlow, was born on the mission and spent more than 40 years studying the Arrernte people. The Arrernte people entrusted him with many items of huge spiritual and symbolic importance when they realised their traditional lifestyle was under threat.

In 1982 the land title was handed back to the Arrernte people under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*.

Hermannsburg Historic Precinct

Shaded by tall river gums and date palms, the whitewashed walls of this old **mission** (☎ 8956 7402; adult/child/family \$5/4/14; 🕒 9am–4pm Mar–Nov, 10am–4pm Dec–Feb) stand in stark contrast to the colours of the surrounding countryside that were captured so eloquently by the settlement's most famous inhabitants, the painters of the Namatjira family.

This fascinating monument to the Territory's early Lutheran missionaries is a fine example of traditional German farmhouse architecture. Among the low, stone buildings are a church, a school and various houses and outbuildings. One building houses an art gallery that provides an insight into the life and times of Albert Namatjira and contains examples of the work of 39 Hermannsburg artists.

The **Kata-Anga Tea Room** (meals \$5–9; 🕒 9am–4pm), in the old missionary house, has a marvellous atmosphere, and interesting photos by eminent anthropologist Baldwin Spencer adorn the walls. Devonshire teas, sandwiches and strudel are on the menu; self-serve tea and coffee are included in the admission price. A good range of traditional and watercolour paintings and artefacts by the local Aboriginal people is on sale, including the distinctive work of the Hermannsburg Potters.

Around Hermannsburg

Just east of Hermannsburg, is a **monument** to Albert Namatjira, the Aboriginal artist who made of this country famous. About 5km west of town is **Namatjira House**, a tiny stone cottage where Albert lived with his family for five years from 1944. There's nothing inside.

DETOUR

The Arrernte community of **Wallace Rockhole** is 18km south of Namatjira Drive and was established in 1973 as an outpost of Hermannsburg Mission. It's a worthwhile detour for the excellent Aboriginal cultural tours and you can stay the night here. The access road is unsealed, but accessible to conventional vehicles.

Tours on offer include a 1½-hour **rock art and bush medicine tour** (adult/child \$10/8) and **bush tucker tag-along tours** (\$50; minimum 6 people).

Wallace Rockhole Tourist Park (☎ 8956 7993; www.wallacerockholetours.com.au; powered/unpowered sites per person \$12/10, cabins from \$130) has a pleasant camping area with grassy sites and good facilities, plus cabins with private bathrooms.

FINKE GORGE NATIONAL PARK

Famous for its rare palms, Finke Gorge National Park is one of central Australia's premier wilderness areas. The biggest attraction is the sublime Palm Valley with its lush ribbon of tall palms and cycads, but the main gorge features high red cliffs, stately river red gums, cool waterholes and lovely walks.

For thousands of years, the Finke River formed part of an Aboriginal trade route that crossed Australia, bringing goods such as sacred red ochre from the south and pearl shell from the north to the central Australian tribes.

The area around Hermannsburg was a major refuge for the Western Arrernte people in times of drought, thanks to its permanent water that came from soaks dug in the Finke River bed. An upside-down river (like all others in central Australia), the Finke flows beneath its dry bed most of the time. As it becomes saline during drought, the Western Arrernte call it Lhere Pirnte (pronounced 'lara pinta' hence Larapinta), which means salty river. It was their knowledge of its freshwater soaks that enabled them to survive in the harshest droughts.

Since access to the park follows the sandy bed of the Finke River – Australia's oldest – and rocky tracks, a high-clearance 4WD vehicle is essential to get in here. If you don't have one, several tour operators go to Palm Valley and through the park.

The turn-off to Palm Valley starts about 2km west of Hermannsburg off Larapinta Dr, while the turn-off to Finke Gorge starts about 1km east of Hermannsburg.

Tours

Palm Valley Tours (☎ 8952 0022; www.palmvalleytours.com.au; 1-2-day tours \$115/280) leads small group tours into Palm Valley and Hermannsburg. The two-day tour also includes Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) and Ormiston Gorge.

Palm Valley

If you only have time to see one part of the park, don't miss Palm Valley (Mpulungkinya), where the slender, towering palms contrast sharply with the typical arid setting and red cliffs of central Australia.

Leaving the Finke River at its junction with Palm Creek, head west past an old ranger station and 1km further on you arrive at the Kalarranga car park. En route, a small information bay introduces some of the walks in the area. **Kalarranga**, also known as the Amphitheatre, is a semi-circle of striking sandstone formations sculpted by a now-extinct meander of Palm Creek. It's at its best in the early morning or late afternoon when the low sun makes the red cliffs glow.

From Kalarranga, you soon pass the excellent camping ground, and from here the track deteriorates into an extremely rough and rocky ride for the final 5km to Palm Valley; take it slow!

ALBERT NAMATJIRA

Australia's first famous Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira (1902–59) used watercolours with distinctive purple, blue and orange hues to depict the landscape. He lived at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission west of Alice Springs and was introduced to the art of European-style watercolour painting by Rex Batterbee in the 1930s.

Namatjira successfully captured the essence of central Australia using a style heavily influenced by European art. At the time his paintings were seen solely as picturesque landscapes. However, it's now understood that they depicted important Dreaming sites to which he had a great cultural bond.

Namatjira supported many of his people with the income from his work, as was his obligation under traditional law. In 1957 he was the first Aboriginal person to be granted Australian citizenship. Due to this, he was permitted to buy alcohol at a time when it was illegal for Aboriginal people to do so. Remaining true to his kinship responsibilities, he broke non-Indigenous laws and in 1958 was jailed for six months for supplying alcohol to his community. Released from jail, he died the following year, aged 57.

Namatjira did much to change the extremely negative views of Aboriginal people that prevailed back then. At the same time, he paved the way for the Papunya Tula painting movement that emerged a decade after his death.

At **Cycad Gorge**, along the way, towering chocolate-coloured cliff towers overlook clumps of tall, slender palms. The gorge is named for the large number of shaggy cycads growing on and below the cliff face. About 2km past Cycad Gorge you come to Palm Valley itself. The valley is actually a narrow gorge that in places is literally choked with lush stands of red cabbage palms (*Livistona mariae*) up to 25m high.

BUSHWALKING

The four marked walking tracks in the Palm Valley area are fairly gentle treks, all suitable for families, but the unique scenery makes them top notch.

Kalarranga Lookout (1.5km return, 45 minutes, easy) The view over the Amphitheatre from this huge mushroom-like sandstone knob is striking. Dawn breaks beautifully here.

Arankaia walk (2km loop, one hour, easy) This walk traverses the valley, returning via the sandstone plateau where there are great views over the park.

Mpulungkinya track (5km loop, two hours, easy) This walk through Palm Valley passes dense stands of palms and offers excellent views down the gorge before joining the Arankaia walk on the return. It's the most popular walk in the park and is a good one to tackle in the morning or afternoon when animals descend into the gorge to drink and forage.

Mpaara track (5km loop, two hours, medium) From the Kalarranga car park, this loop track takes in the Finke River, Palm Bend and the rugged Amphitheatre. It leads you in the footsteps of two heroes from the Aboriginal Dreaming, Mpaara (Tawny Frogmouth Man) and Pangkalanya

PALMS FROM THE PAST

The tall, shimmering palms that grace Palm Valley seem out of place in the dry desert environment, but they are a remarkable remnant from a time when central Australia was a much wetter, tropical place.

These incongruous palms and cycads survive here only because of a reliable supply of moisture trapped within the surrounding sandstone: only 200mm of rain falls here each year, but underground springs feed the gorge. Over millions of years, the rock has folded and fractured, allowing groundwater to seep through. The tall red cabbage palms (*Livistona mariae*), found nowhere else in the world, grow within an area of about 60 sq km and are over 800km from their nearest relatives. To the Arrernte people the palms are associated with the Fire Dreaming.

There are only 1200 mature palms found in the wild, so rangers request that you stay on the marked trails out of the palm groves – the tiny seedlings are hard to see and can easily get trampled underfoot.

(Devil Man), whose various adventures are explained by signs along the way.

SLEEPING

Palm Valley Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) Beautifully located beside Palm Creek, it has views across to the red sandstone ridges and is well equipped with hot showers, gas barbecues, fire places and flush toilets. It's a popular spot, so it's worth arriving early to secure a site, especially on weekends. Remember to collect firewood before the park entry sign. Rangers give free campfire talks here on Friday and Saturday nights between May and October.

Finke Gorge

If you have your own 4WD vehicle and you're well prepared, there's a challenging route through the national park following the sandy bed of the dry Finke River. This is a remote and scenic drive and in dry conditions it's possible to drive all the way south to the Ernest Giles Rd, from where you can continue west to Kings Canyon (and Uluru), or east back to the Stuart Hwy. A high-clearance 4WD is essential and, since the rough track involves deep sand driving, it pays to travel

with another vehicle – plenty of people have been bogged on the way to Boggy Hole!

The track starts on the left about 50m or so before the main turn-off to Hermannsburg. It's about 22km (1½ hours) to **Boggy Hole**, a popular permanent waterhole and camping spot (no facilities). Nearby are the scant remains of a police camp set up in 1889 to protect pastoralists and stock. It was closed in 1891 after the head officer, William Henry Willshire, was charged with the murder of local Aboriginal people (as often happened at the time, he was later acquitted).

In all it's just over 100km from Hermannsburg to the Ernest Giles Rd – allow two days from Alice Springs. Check road conditions before setting out and be sure to inform a **ranger** (Finke Gorge ☎ 8956 7401, Kings Canyon ☎ 8956 7460) of your plans to travel along this track, and of your safe arrival.

MEREENIE LOOP ROAD

The rugged Mereenie Loop Rd begins at Kata-pata Pass (Areyonga turn-off), about 26km west of where Larapinta Dr links with the dirt road to Glen Helen, and passes through Aboriginal land to Watarrka National Park. This is an excellent alternative route from Alice to Kings Canyon. In dry conditions the road is suitable for conventional vehicles with good ground clearance, though there are some sandy patches and hire vehicles will not be covered by insurance. However, the Northern Territory government is planning to seal the route between Hermannsburg and Kings Canyon, which will open it up to all vehicles and make this the road of choice for travellers between Alice Springs and Uluru. The project has been on the drawing board for a while, but was yet to begin at the time of writing. Fuel is available at Hermannsburg, Kings Canyon Resort and Kings Creek Station.

To travel along this route you need a **Mereenie Loop Pass** (\$2.20), which is valid for one day and includes a souvenir booklet with details about the local Aboriginal culture and a route map. It's available at Catia in Alice Springs, Glen Helen Homestead, Hermannsburg and Kings Canyon Resort.

The road travels through a variety of semi-desert areas with sand dunes and rocky ridges. An artificial highlight is the road sign that you pass on the southern part of the track – a rusty old 44-gallon drum carries a

warning to slow down: 'LIFT UM FOOT', soon followed by another reading 'PUTTUM BACK DOWN'!

There's a rest area at the **Jump Up Lookout** towards the southern end of the road, but camping is not permitted along the way. It takes around 3½ hours to travel the 204km from Hermannsburg to the Kings Canyon Resort.

ERNEST GILES ROAD

The unsealed Ernest Giles Rd heads off to the west of the Stuart Hwy about 140km south of Alice. This is the shorter (but rougher) route to Kings Canyon and is often impassable after heavy rain. About 100km from the Stuart Hwy the track joins the Luritja Rd, which is sealed for the final 95km to Kings Canyon. Beyond the Henbury Meteorite Craters turn-off, the Ernest Giles Rd is not recommended for 2WDs.

Henbury Meteorite Craters Conservation Reserve

Eleven kilometres west of the Stuart Hwy, a corrugated track on the right leads 5km to

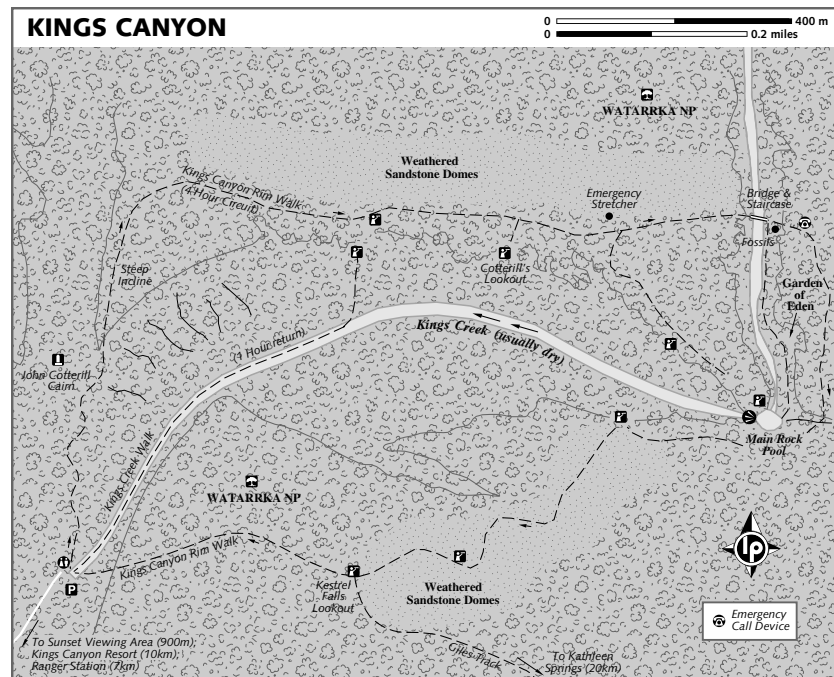
a cluster of 12 small craters in an exposed, stony plain. About 4500 years ago a meteorite clocking a scorching 40,000km per hour broke up as it entered the earth's atmosphere. The craters were formed when the fragments hit the ground – the largest is 180m wide and 15m deep, and was formed by a piece of rock about the size of a 44-gallon drum.

The facts are interesting, but it's only worth a detour if you have a deep interest in this sort of thing. NASA once used the craters for training astronauts.

The exposed **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) here is on stony ground and is pretty grim. There's no water.

WATARRKA NATIONAL PARK (KINGS CANYON)

The western half of the George Gill Range, an outlier of the James Ranges, is protected by Watarrka National Park, which includes one of the most spectacular sights in central Australia – the sheer, 100m-high walls of **Kings Canyon**. In the headlong rush to reach Uluru, many travellers skip Kings Canyon – some unaware it even exists – but if you



have even a single spare day, this detour off the main highway is a must.

The name Watarrka refers to the area around the Kuninga (western quoll or native cat) Dreaming Trail, which passes through the park. More than 600 plant species have been recorded in the park, giving it the highest plant diversity of any place in Australia's arid zone. At the head of the 1km gorge is the spring-fed **Garden of Eden**, where a moist microclimate supports a variety of plants. The narrow, rocky bed of Kings Creek along the floor of the canyon is lined with river red gums and unusual bonsai-like trees.

The gorge is carved from a dominating sandstone plateau, covered in many places by bizarre, weathered sandstone domes.

History

The Luritja Aboriginal people have lived in this area for at least 20,000 years and there are registered sacred sites within the park. There are also three communities of Aboriginal people living within the park boundaries.

In 1872 Ernest Giles named the George Gill Range after his brother-in-law, who also helped fund the expedition. Here he found desperately needed water sources. Giles also named Kings Creek after his friend Fielder King. William Gosse camped at Kings Creek a year later on an exploratory

trip and went on to become the first white man to see Uluru, which Giles had missed when his path was blocked by the salt pan, Lake Amadeus. Being the first European to explore the area, Giles had first option on applying for a pastoral lease, which he did in 1874. It covered almost 1000 sq miles and included the area of the present park.

Pastoralist William Liddle took up a lease and established Angas Downs Station in 1929. The first tourism venture in the area was set up by Jack Cotterill in 1960 on Angas Downs Station, and was run from here until the formation of the park in 1989.

Information

The best place for information is the resort **reception** (☎ 6.30am-9pm), which also has an ATM. Also at the resort there's a **service station** (☎ 7am-7pm) for fuel and supplies, and **Internet access** (Desert Oaks Café; ☎ 10am-9pm). At the canyon car park, there are information boards, shelters, water and toilets. Cool snacks and postcards are on sale from a mobile **kiosk** (☎ 6.30am-5.30pm Apr-Nov). There's a **sunset-viewing area** 1km short of the canyon car park.

From May to October there are ranger-guided **walks** on Tuesday and Thursday from the Kings Canyon car park, and on Wednesday from Kathleen Springs car park.

WALKING THE CANYON RIM

The **Kings Canyon Rim walk** (6km loop, three to four hours, medium) is a fabulous walk that not only offers an awesome view into the canyon from several angles but also takes you through a diverse range of terrain and geological features. From the canyon car park it begins with a short, steep climb up rock steps (about 20 minutes), which is the only 'difficult' part of the walk. From here the trail skirts the western rim of the canyon, passing crevices and precariously balanced gum trees, before opening out to views of the stunning sheer cliff faces of red and white sandstone. The canyon was created when a crack formed in the surface mereneie sandstone and eroded down to the softer red Carmichael sandstone.

Here you see the first of the curious 'beehive' domes: weathered sandstone outcrops which to the Luritja represent the men of the Kuniya Dreaming. A 600m detour leads to Cotterill's Lookout with spectacular views directly down into the canyon. The trail then descends down wooden stairs into the Garden of Eden, a narrow gorge leading to a lush oasis of ferns and prehistoric cycads ending at a tranquil pool. Look out for the ripple rock and fossilised jellyfish on the rock faces near the stairs of the Garden of Eden. The walk continues around the eastern side of the canyon rim with more fine views, then crosses a swarm of beehive domes before descending via stone steps (starting at Kestrel Falls lookout) to the car park.

Although the walk is not difficult, a reasonable level of fitness is required, as are plenty of water and a hat. Watch your step around the rim of the canyon – the cliffs are unfenced and the wind can be strong.

Activities

BUSHWALKING

The main canyon walk at Kings Canyon is one of the best short walks in central Australia – see the boxed text opposite.

Kings Creek walk (2.6km return, one hour, easy) A short stroll along the rocky bed of Kings Creek leads to a raised platform with amphitheatre-like views of the towering canyon rim. There is wheelchair access for the first 700m.

Kathleen Springs walk (2.5km return, one hour, easy) A wheelchair accessible path leads from the car park to a beautiful spring-fed rock pool at the base of the range. This permanent waterhole was important to the nomadic Luritja people and harboured abundant food plants, such as the native fig and plum bush. There is a picnic ground with gas barbecues, shade, water and toilets.

Giles track (22km one way, overnight, easy) If you have more time, this lovely marked trail follows the George Gill Range from Kings Canyon to Kathleen Spring, partly in the footsteps of explorer Ernest Giles. Pick up the track at Kings Canyon (near Kestrel Falls) and walk along the exposed ridge. There's plenty of wildlife to be seen, particularly around the waterholes. It's possible to do part of this track as a day walk from Lilla (Reedy Creek), about halfway along the trail, from where you can walk back to Kings Canyon or to Kathleen Springs. You need to be fully self-sufficient in both food and water. There's a designated camping ground along the ridge above Lilla, and small campfires are permitted here.

BIKE & CAMEL RIDES

The Kings Creek Station (right) offers **quad-biking** (30 minutes/1hr/2½hr \$60/70/150) and more sedate **camel rides** (1hr adult/child \$50/40). If you prefer two wheels, **Chrome Saddle Experience** (☎ 8955 8082; rides \$35-170), also based at Kings Creek, offers Harley rides from 15 minutes to two-hour return trips to the canyon.

SCENIC FLIGHTS

Helicopter flights from Kings Canyon Resort cost \$100 for a 15-minute trip over the canyon, and \$220 for 30 minutes over the canyon and George Gill Range.

Kings Creek Helicopters (☎ 8956 7886; flights \$40-350) has flights from Kings Creek Station, including a short buzz in the local area for \$40, Petermann Pound (\$100, 15 minutes) or Kings Canyon (\$200, 30 minutes).

Sleeping & Eating

KINGS CANYON RESORT

Only 10km from the canyon, this slick **resort** (☎ 1800 089 622; www.kingscanyonresort.com.au; Luritja Rd; powered/unpowered sites for 2 \$31/26, dm \$38,

lodge/standard/deluxe d \$100/260/340; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) is run like a five-star hotel, but with a wide range of accommodation. The grassy camping ground has plenty of shade, a pool (with bar), laundry and barbecues. The refurbished four-bed dorms and lodge rooms share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Thoughtful design of the hotel rooms gives you the feeling of being secluded and alone in the bush – but with all the luxuries including patio spas in the deluxe rooms. The resort also has several dining options.

Outback Barbecue (mains \$16-28; ☎ dinner Jun-Nov) This is in a semi-outdoor area off the bar and serves various grills, salads and vegetarian options, as well as pizza to the toe-tapping tunes of live music.

Carmichael's (☎ breakfast & dinner) A stylish restaurant with a rich buffet for breakfast (\$24) and dinner (\$50). The dinner spread includes a carvery and seafood selection.

Sounds of Firelight (☎ 8956 7660; per person \$130) This intimate bush dinner is similar to the Sounds of Silence dinner at Uluru (without the view), but it's marketed as a romantic night out, restricted to six couples. A six-course meal and drinks is served under the stars around a fire.

Desert Oaks Cafe (mains \$5-10; ☎ lunch) Offers light meals such as burgers and focaccias.

George Gill Bar (mains \$8.50-17.50; ☎ 11am-11pm, dinner 6.30-9pm) The evening meeting place with pizzas and bar snacks in the pub – down a cooling drink under rafters strung with all manner of hats and Australiana.

KINGS CREEK STATION

About 35km south of the Kings Canyon turn-off, **Kings Creek Station** (☎ 8956 7474; www.kingscreekstation.com.au; Luritja Rd; camp sites per adult/child \$13/7.50, power \$4, safari cabins per adult/child \$55/36; ☎ ☎) is a friendly, cheaper alternative to the resort, and also offers something approaching a bush experience. Pleasant camp sites are set among desert oaks. In a separate area there are 'safari cabins' (actually small canvas tents on a solid floor), which come with cooked breakfast. Amenities are shared and there's a private kitchen/barbecue area.

In peak months, there's an evening stock-camp show with billy tea and damper (\$20). Camel or quad-bike safaris and helicopter flights are also available. Fuel, ice, snacks, barbecue packs and limited supplies are available at the **shop** (☎ 7am-7pm).

Getting There & Away

There are no commercial flights to Kings Canyon and no direct buses from Alice Springs, but **Greyhound Australia** (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) has a daily bus service from Yulara (Ayers Rock Resort) to Kings Canyon (\$60, four hours). This trip can be done as part of their three-day Alice–Uluru tour (\$300).

If you have your own vehicle, the most interesting route from Alice Springs is the

331km via the West MacDonnells and the Mereenie Loop Rd. You can then continue on to Uluru and back to the Stuart Hwy at Erldunda. The circuit from the Alice and back is about 1200km, only 300km of which is gravel.

An even more exciting route – for well-prepared, experienced 4WDers – is through the Finke Gorge National Park via Boggy Hole, emerging on the Ernest Giles Rd from where it's another 130km to Kings Canyon.