

desert high



PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON

The best time to visit Central Australia is between May and September, and HUW KINGSTON timed it perfectly when he visited the West MacDonnell Ranges in early May. Walking part of the Larapinta Trail is a great way to appreciate the dramatic landscape – made even better when you arrive soon after heavy rain.

THE WATER WAS COOL, not cold, and I continued swimming into a gorge that at times was no more than a breaststroke wide, hands and feet scraping the rock on each stroke. When I rolled over to float on my back, my eyes followed walls soaring 100 metres or more. These ochre red cliffs, the defining colour of so much of Central Australia, reached a chink of blue sky so far above.

I had never ventured this far up Hugh Gorge. Not because the misspelt name repelled me. On previous visits, deeper into winter, the water had been too cold to endure without

a wetsuit; not something often carried in the desert. But this year, in early May, the water still held some of the warmth of summer. A month earlier, rare heavy rain had fallen across Central Australia. The landscape bloomed; the waterholes filled. Thousands of budgies smuggled themselves into these desert mountains, the West MacDonnell Ranges, and now flitted, as chattering couples, above the Larapinta Trail.

Twenty years ago, before the Larapinta was fully signposted and complete as a trekking trail, I walked the length of the range. That hike was part of a long journey, walking and riding a rather circuitous 6000km route from Perth to Adelaide. After



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT SUNRISE CAMP ON BRINKLEY BLUFF; ON THE LARAPINTA TRAIL; SWIMMER'S VIEW OF HUGH GORGE; LARAPINTA TRAIL SIGN.

weeks in the relative flatness of the desert, those mountains took me by surprise and, relishing the rocky scrambling and lofty viewpoints, refreshed me as mountains invariably do.

Visits since still get me excited. Flying west from Sydney to Alice, waves of red sand line up below but, unlike their ocean counterparts, these waves don't break.

Nearing Alice, mountains appear. Real mountains. First the ridges of the East MacDonnells, then, as the plane banks, the long line of the West MacDonnell Ranges, including Mount Sonder (1379 metres) and solitary Mount Zeil. This is, at 1531 metres, the highest point in the Northern Territory and the highest point in Australia west of the Great Dividing Range.

This time, waves of planes lined up on the tarmac. Alice Springs Airport has never been so busy. When the pandemic emptied skies across the world, airlines looked to mothball much of their fleet. Apparently, the best place to preserve an unwanted jetliner is in the dry and low humidity of an arid land. I counted 60 Cathay Pacific jets alone.

"Can you guide my son and I on a trek somewhere in the desert?" Zeb had asked me just a few weeks before. They had only five days to spare, so I planned somewhere both accessible and spectacular. The easternmost point of the Larapinta Trail is at the Old Telegraph Station, a mere three kilometres from the centre of Alice, with the westernmost end at Redbank Gorge, 230km away. The beauty of the trail is that you can walk its entirety for two weeks or more, or easily access it for shorter sections and day visits from different entry points. I chose Standley Chasm to Hugh Gorge, the most rugged section, for our hike.

I arrived in Alice a few days early, both to prepare for the trek and to sneak in some mountain bike rides. Alice is surrounded by a huge network of riding trails, another surprise about the town.

I was out riding early, the rising sun full in my face, when blinded by it, I didn't see the branch. Clipping it with my handlebars, I was suddenly catapulted over the edge. I had



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ABOVE PARALLEL RIDGES WITH MOUNT SONDER AND MOUNT ZEIL IN THE DISTANCE. BELOW LATE EVENING, LOOKING EAST ALONG THE WEST MACDONNELLS.

enough time between leaving saddle and landing on head, to think, “It’s not a good thing when your guide injures himself just before you fly halfway across Australia.” Then I felt the crunch of my neck as I landed in the sharp spinifex. Slowly I got up and, although my neck was sore for days after, I seemed to have got away with it again.

A visit to the Araluen Arts Centre proved more than worthwhile. The breadth of exhibitions from Namatjira to the Wayne Eager’s *Bitumen and Dirt* set the scene for the trip out into the desert hills.

Any journey in Australia is enriched by some understanding of cultural history. Zeb and Oliver came, straight from the airport, to a session with Kumalie Riley, a Central Arrernte woman. Kumalie painted, in words, over 60,000 years of Aboriginal life. We learned a tiny fraction of their traditions, their system of family, the skin system. The traditions of Australia’s first peoples are so far removed from most Australians’ that it behoves us all to try and understand just a little; to view life from vastly different perspectives.



Soon the Larapinta had me in its thrall once again. Because here is a range that challenges anything Tasmania or the alpine high country offers: airy ridges, deep gorges, mountain amphitheatres and rivers snaking through it all. Trees – the white trunked ghost gum and scrubby mulga – offer shade, while pale green spinifex grass is ready to spike any who wander off the trail.

‘Riverbed’ is perhaps a better descriptor for the rivers: for most of the year, the Finke, Hugh, Ormiston, Redbank and Davenport watercourses are better suited to beach volleyball than swimming. But deep gorges in many of these watercourses often hold shaded waterholes, where ancient cycads sprout on their banks and fleet-footed little rock wallabies scamper with ease on ledges high above the water. They must look with disdain at their fellow bipeds struggling through the gorge below. These waterholes refill when those elusive big rains fall, as they had perfectly timed for us.

We made camp the first night on the summit of Brinkley Bluff. From any high point on the Larapinta, Australia stretches endlessly away. South-west towards Hermannsburg and beyond toward Kings Canyon and Uluru. North away into the Tanami Desert. Between a spectacular sunset and sunrise, the galaxy sparkled. Zeb had used COVID time to teach himself astronomy and now educated us. The conversation wandered from talking about the stars we stare at, from a Western perspective, to the darkness the Indigenous people see between those stars.

The swim deep into Hugh Gorge marked our final day on the trek. After swimming and wading some 300 metres then back again, we were well chilled, shivering a little. Back where the gorge widened somewhat, the sun popped over the edge of the cliffs above and delivered its welcome warmth while we lunched. It was well timed as, within an hour, we were back in shade again.

The Larapinta Trail may have become more defined since my first visit, the signposting more regular. But it remains a very special trek winding through some very special country. **HL**