

Mountains in the desert

THINK CENTRAL AUSTRALIA IS FLAT? THINK AGAIN: THE STUNNING WEST MACDONNELL RANGES IMPRESS ALL WHO EXPLORE THEIR RIDGES AND GORGES.

WORDS: HUW KINGSTON

The narrow ridges draw my eyes in parallel down a seemingly endless valley where, away to the west, Mount Sonder stands proud and dominant. A brief flight the previous evening had shown us similar views, but this was extra special, given our climb onto the ridge had burnt fuel in our stomachs rather than in the tank of a helicopter.

I'm tasting five days on the Larapinta Trail with Life's an Adventure, and the hike had me in its thrall once again. Seventeen years previously I had walked the Larapinta's full 223km before it was fully signposted and complete. On that occasion, with a full pack on my back, I was blown away by the West MacDonnells, the mountain range through which the Larapinta snakes its way.



PHOTO: HUW KINGSTON

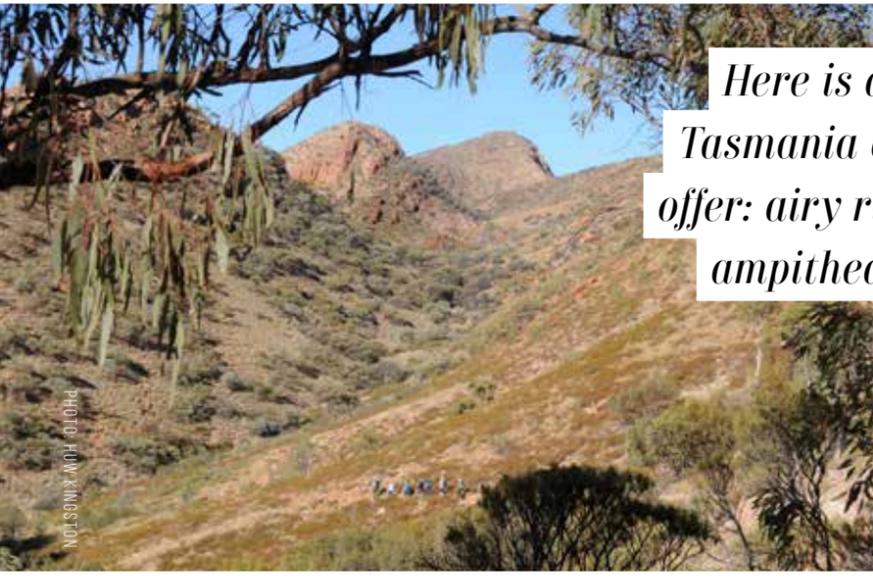


PHOTO: JIM KINGSTON

Here is a range that challenges anything Tasmania or the Alpine high country has to offer: airy ridges, deep red gorges, mountain amphitheatres and rivers snaking through it all.

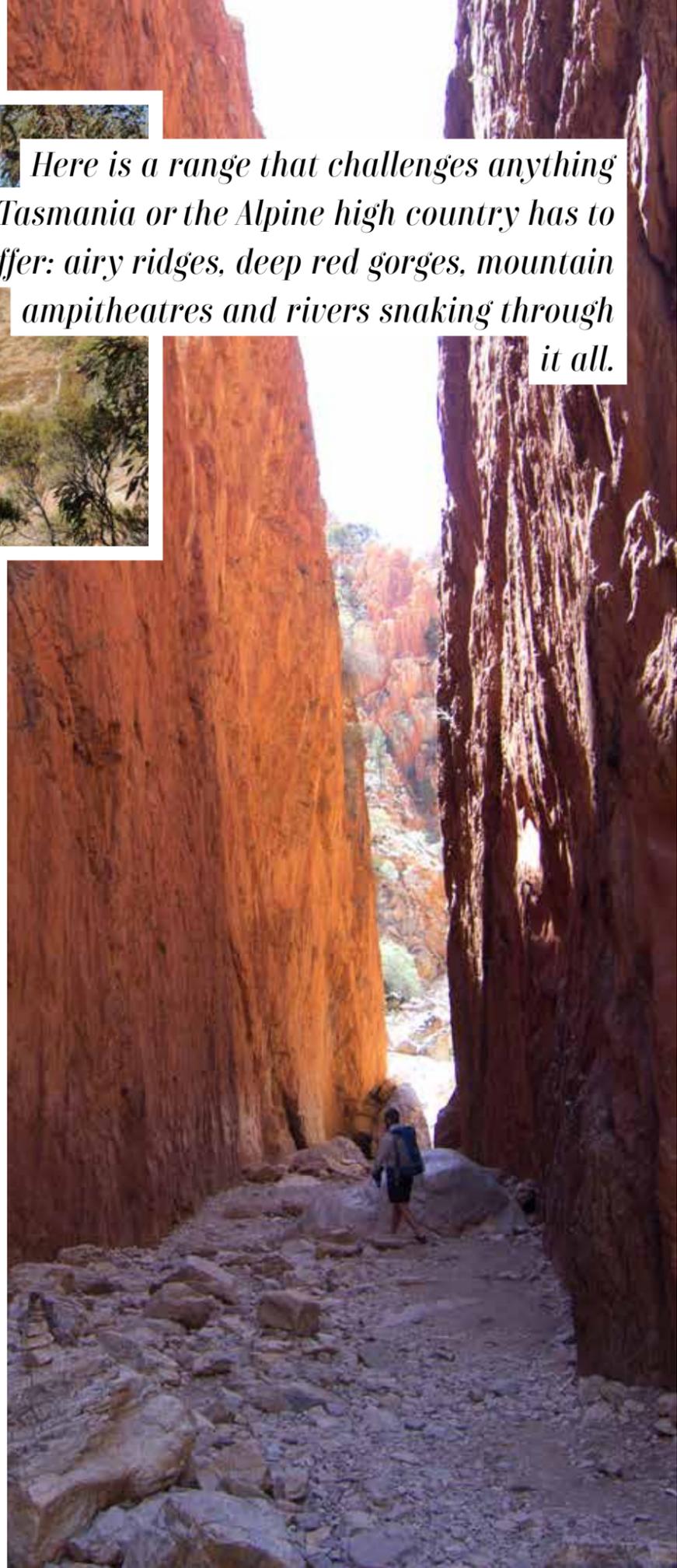
"I just didn't expect this, not in the middle of Australia," says Mary, one of my companions on this trip. It was a statement that mirrored my reaction the first time I'd seen the range. My maps showed it then and Mary had read about it in the notes we'd been given, but it still surprises you when you get there. Central Australia is flat, right? It's all desert sand and rocky plains.

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OK, "riverbed" is perhaps a better description. For most of the year, indeed for all of many years, the Finke, Hugh, Ormiston, Redbank and Davenport watercourses are better suited to beach volleyball than swimming. But deep gorges in many of those watercourses often hold shaded waterholes where ancient cycads sprout on their banks, and fleet-footed rock wallabies scamper with ease on ledges high above the water.

These waterholes fill when those elusive big rains fall, and it's only the brave or foolish who dive into the ice-cold waters. I left my swim to the final day of our trek, when July daytime temperatures are set perfectly in the low 20s. The water temperature was a single figure I'm certain, and the term "swimming" an exaggeration for my briefest of dips.

Any journey in Australia is enriched by some understanding of cultural history, and our session with Dea of Cultural Connections NT did this mightily. "The power is with the listener," she told us at Standley Chasm, where we sat for near three hours as she painted in words over 60,000 years of Aboriginal life across the huge canvas





How to get there

Airnorth flies to Alice Springs
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The easternmost point of the Larapinta Trail is at the Old Telegraph Station, a mere 4km from the centre of Alice. The westernmost end is at Redbank Gorge, 160km west of Alice Springs. The beauty of the Larapinta is that you can walk its entirety for two weeks or more, or access it easily for shorter sections or day walks off the sealed Larapinta and Namatjira Drives. The cooler months from May to August are the best time to go.

Useful links

The Larapinta Trail:
larapintatrail.com.au

Life's An Adventure:
lifesanadventure.com.au

Tourism NT:
northernterritory.com

Wheels in the desert

Locals and well-travelled riders have enjoyed the network of mountain bike trails around Alice Springs for some time. This is about to become more widely appreciated with the NT Government investing in new trails, improvements to existing trails and new signage. Much is already in place and ultimately over 80km of trails for all abilities will be on offer. The big project, though, is the \$12 million Red Centre Adventure Ride, a 200km purpose-built trail set to become the bike version of the Larapinta and running parallel with it. Designed to be an easy grade, it will encompass a number of camps and should make a superb three or four day ride. Central Australia is set to become a destination for biking holidays in the winter sun.



of Australia. Then she brought us back to the local area, to the local people – the Arrernte (pronounced “Aranda”) people, her people. We learned a tiny fraction of their traditions, their system of family: the skin system. Being our first day, this knowledge put so much into context for the rest of the week, as we viewed the landscape both through our own eyes and those who had lived and thrived in it for so long.

Two of our nights were spent camped at Ormiston Gorge, where our guides Danny and Nathan looked after us royally with good food and wine. Danny, all dreadlocks and earthy clothing, almost merged into the landscape and walked through it lightly and calmly – even when labouring under a massive pack that contained our billy, a coffee plunger, and enough water to brew up for the dozen in our group, plus scones, jam and cream for the day we climbed Mount Sonder. Nathan was his foil: clean-cut, clean-shirted, and always ready with a smile.

Mount Sonder (1380 metres) was our highest point – indeed it’s the high point of the trail. Many climb it in the dark to watch the sunrise from its summit, but we were content to have lunch on the

top as sandy coloured lizards shuffled over rocks that clattered under our feet.

From any vantage point on the Larapinta – translated as “salty creek” from the Arrernte language – Australia stretches endlessly away. South towards Hermannsburg, just in view, and beyond towards Kings Canyon and Uluru. North away into the Tanami Desert. You know for sure you’re in a big place.

Glen Helen Homestead was our base for our final two nights, the only non-camping accommodation along the trail. It also offers good meals and a bar that serves a range of wines and boutique beers and hosts a hissing, frothing coffee machine. Some things have certainly changed since my hike all those years ago: Shiraz or soy latte, anyone?

One of our group, Colin, ordered a single malt whisky with sugar-free cola, and washed it down with a strawberry milk. It certainly put a whole new spin on adding malt to your milkshake!

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