

A photograph of Uluru, a large red sandstone rock formation in the Australian Outback. The rock is the central focus, with a vast, flat landscape of sparse green and yellow vegetation in the foreground. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. The text 'going walkabout' is overlaid in a large, white, handwritten-style font across the bottom half of the image.

# going walkabout

HEADING INTO THE RED HEART OF AUSTRALIA, **AMY WATKINS** ENJOYS AN AUSSIE OUTBACK ADVENTURE WITH A UNIQUELY ABORIGINAL FLAVOUR pics © Anna Kreifinger



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**INFO** Amy Watkins is a 2006 FTJ Top 10 travel journalist who's travelled and gromed all over the New Zealand Outback and beyond. She's not a reader's girl.

**“J**ason!” I shouted to our jovial Australian guide. “Will there be toilets at the camp?” “Sure,” he smirked at me. “Every tree is a lava-tree.” I winced. No loos, no tents and no niceties. Welcome to the outback.

Australia is high on many travellers' itineraries and I was no exception when I visited the mind-blowingly massive continent as part of a five-month round-the-world trip. It's a country designed for travellers with its thousands of miles of diverse scenery ranging from beaches, rainforests and deserts to young, vibrant cities.

My to-do list was simple; I wanted to go to Sydney and see the famous Opera House and explore the red, dusty heart of Central Australia where kangaroos bound across open desert and you can go walkabout without anybody missing you. The area also held a special appeal for me as it was shrouded in myth and aboriginal legend – the original peoples had stories for every awe-inspiring rock that had pushed its way through the earth's rusty crust. But most of all I wanted to see the iconic Uluru (Ayers Rock) – star of postcards and one of the most photographed sites in Australia.

My travelling partner decided to go to Cairns rather than see “that big rock”, and as I didn't fancy tackling the outback alone

I searched online and found Wayoutback Safaris. They promised an authentic outback experience off the beaten tourist track, in small groups, sleeping outside and experiencing a true bush camping week. My camping experience was previously limited to festivals and the odd wet weekend in Wales – but if I was going to the outback then I wanted to do it properly. And that's how I found myself standing in the middle of the desert surrounded by eerie silence, animal tracks and miles of red dust, asking Jason where the toilet was.

### INTO THE BUSH

The tour began in Alice Springs, which, as home to the region's biggest airport, is most travellers' first encounter with the outback. Alice feels like a frontier town, with dusty streets lined with saloons and bottle (alcohol) shops and sad-looking men sheltering under trees. There's a gloomy air of desperation that hangs over the town and I couldn't wait to get out of there and into the bush.

At the 5am pick-up Jason arrived in what looked like an armoured tank but was actually a 4WD Mitsubishi minibus, crammed full of perky people who looked like they were going to enjoy the dawn hikes every morning. I huddled in the corner trying to keep my eyes open as we left Alice Springs and drove out into the desert. Bumping along on the long journey gave us enough time to make introductions and I learned that most of my travel companions came from Germany and Canada. German Tim had shorts on in winter (always the sign of a real trouser) and his fellow country folk, a friendly couple called Anna and Raphael, were similarly kitted out ready for the outback.

On our way to our first stop at the Uluru-Kata Tutu National Park Jason announced that we would soon see Uluru on the horizon – and then laughed hysterically as we all got our cameras out and strained to see

were introduced here from India and Afghanistan in the 1840s. Later on we saw herds galloping across the desert alongside kangaroos bouncing past the truck window.

There was no mistaking Uluru when we finally saw it rising up out of the desert. Australia's most famous icon stood proudly like an orange elephant's foot spread across the bushland. Close-up, the smooth lines morphed into a craggy and pockmarked surface full of undulating waves of sandstone that we started to hike around just as the skies opened and a torrential downpour began. Taking shelter in an ancient overhang, we saw cave paintings depicting creation stories and hand prints created by chewing and blowing ochre onto the cave wall. A nearby sacred waterhole, filled with gushing rare rainwater and the porous orange skin of the rock, began to quickly drink up the water and blacken as if burned.

In 1985 the Uluru-Kata Tutu National Park was returned to the original landowners, the Anangu, and in 1993 Ayers Rock reverted back to being called Uluru – the local family name for the rock. Although it still draws hordes of travellers every year there is now more sensitivity towards this sacred site – tourists can climb the rock, but it's a steep and hard hike and more importantly the Anangu ask you not to. Signs also advise visitors where they can and can't take photographs, and there are gender-specific areas related to Anangu ceremonies where only men or only women can go. Inside the Cultural Centre we learned more about the area's history, Tjukurpa (aboriginal law/religion) and read a bulging book of letters from remorseful visitors who'd picked up a piece of Uluru as a souvenir and believed that it has brought them bad luck.

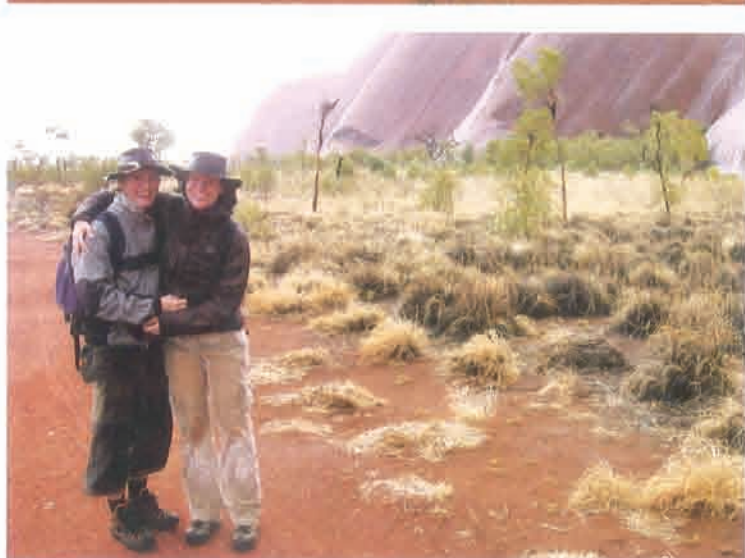
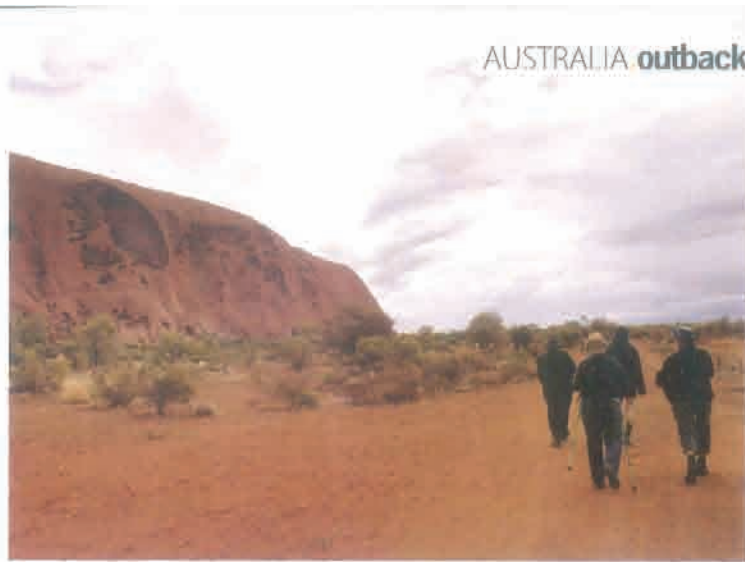
This area is so important to the Anangu people because it's home to many sacred sites that relate to their ancestors' history, dating right back to the creation of the earth.

**“THE ANANGU BELIEVE THE LAND WAS CREATED BY BEINGS WHO TRAVELLED ACROSS LEAVING SONGLINES BEHIND AND WHOSE SPIRITS STILL REMAIN”**

the huge rock in the distance. “That's Mount Connor,” he chortled. “We call it Fool-a-Ru because tourists always think it's Uluru.”

The Park is 460km from Alice and so we stopped along the way at a cattle station to have a break and feed one of the wild camels that

Called 'dreamtime' by non-aboriginal people, the Anangu believe that the landscape was created by beings (Tjukuritja or Waparitja) in the shape of people, plants and animals who travelled across the land leaving songlines behind them and whose spirits still



Jason bringing stories to life



remain in the land. Anangu culture is very secretive, but there are several reported dreamtime stories related to Uluru. One story tells of warring serpent beings that scarred the rock during their battles and another tale describes two tribes of ancestral spirits who were invited to a feast but were distracted by the beautiful Sleepy Lizard Women along the way. The angry host created the dingo by singing evil into a mud sculpture and both chiefs were killed in the ensuing battle – causing the earth itself to rise up in grief and create Uluru.

Visitors need a permit to enter the park, which costs \$25 for three days, but most groups include it in your tour price. The outback can be an inhospitable place, so it makes sense to go on a group tour – it's also more fun around the campfire when you've got more people to share the experience with. It was

just a metal beaker of sparkling wine and some crackers to eat as we watched the sun set over the giant rock and saw it change colour in the dying light. The Anangu believe that stars are the campfires of dead ancestors who are looking down at the Earth, and because we were sleeping outside in swags – canvas sacks – we had a stunning view of the night sky and the famous Southern Cross. It took me a while to realise that the wisps of smoke in the sky weren't from the campfire; the sky was so huge and clear, I was staring straight at the Milky Way.

We had another rude awakening the next day and piled into the truck to drive to a lookout point to watch the sun rise over Uluru and the nearby Kata Tjutas. The local Pitjantjajara name Kata Tjuta means 'many heads', and watching the watery morning sun illuminate the

**"THE KATA TJUTAS ARE LESS TOURISTY AND THEIR EERIE WIND-CARVED CURVES AND HUGE SCALE GIVE THE AREA A HUSHED SPIRITUALISM"**

amazing what food Jason could rustle up on the fire; even in the middle of nowhere he could whip up damper – bread made just from beer and flour – or a gourmet meal. He also conjured up less appetizing options on a firewood-collecting stop when he introduced us to bush tucker. Locating a wicketty bush, Jason dug around in the red dust and pulled out a juicy white wiggling grub. Digging a small hole and lighting some kindling, Jason skewered the grub on a stick and toasted it on the fire like a squidgy marshmallow. This was the point where I'm afraid I let the UK team down by recoiling in horror and watching my chums take a bite.

Back at the Uluru camp there were thankfully no grubs on offer,

slumped body of rock formations it's easy to see how this name came about. Originally called the Olgas after its tallest peak, Mount Olga, Kata Tjuta has many legends surrounding the great snake Wanambi who is said to live on top of the mountain and come down in the dry season. The site has as much cultural significance as Uluru to the Anangu people, and many secret ceremonies are still carried out here at night – one of the older rituals involved public punishment, in some cases death, carried out on top of the rocks.

The Kata Tjutas are a less-touristy destination than Uluru and their eerie wind-carved curves and huge scale give the area a hushed spiritualism. During our 7km hike



through the Valley of the Winds we trudged up rocks, along winding pathways and could hear the wind whistling through the magnificent sandstone and granite valleys that have been etched out over time.

That night we were eased into bush life with an overnight stay on an enormous cattle station which was miles from anyone else. Getting ready for our swag bags, we were introduced to the ingenious bush shower heated with a fire and the best view on the campsite – from the door-less toilet that looked out across the outback and up to the stars. I just hoped the Anangu ancestors were not looking down too closely at Earth that night.

#### CRACKS IN THE EARTH

In Central Australia the awesome power of nature can be seen all around and its sheer strength can be seen in Watarrka National Park, which has been home to the Luritja people for more than 20,000 years and contains Watarrka (Kings Canyon) – an epic crack in the earth with endless views of the desert. The 6km rim walk starts with a steep ascent known as Heart Attack Hill, which takes you around the edge of the massive walls, past piles of rock formations nicknamed the Lost City and down inside the Canyon to the Garden of Eden – a tropical oasis where ducks and plants thrive on the water that gets trapped in the sandstone.

Back in the truck it was time to really go off-road. We'd previously

taken dirt tracks to reach destinations, but Jason warned us he was locking in the hubs – and that meant a bumpy rollercoaster of a ride, with much shrieking, as we bounced along the dried-up riverbeds on a bone-shaking trip along the Hugh River Stock Route. We really were in the middle of nowhere by this point and were travelling through aboriginal land – marked by signs stating no alcohol or pornography beyond this point – on our way to Oak Valley Aboriginal Community for an overnight camp. As darkness was creeping in we reached the gate. It was locked and



Bush camping with Jason



Jason couldn't get hold of anyone in the Community to open it. Showing endless Canadian cheer, one of our group, Matt, suggested we jump out of the truck and break out the beers from the 'eskie' (icebox). Jason turned up his tape of Dire Straits as we all contemplated a night bush camping by the gate. After our second beer Craig, our aboriginal host, and his dog Tufty finally turned up to let us in and we set up camp near his house.

A waft of burning hair hit my nostrils and woke me the next day. Craig was cooking a kangaroo tail on our campfire for our breakfast,

but once again I had to hand it to the Germans, literally, as Anna and Raphael gamely chewed on my piece of the boney, gristly tail.

Craig is an artist who runs a cattle ranch and campsite on his land, as well as tours around the area. One of the Southern Arrente people, he explained that the land had been returned to them 70 years ago and showed us cave paintings that were 5,000 years old and piles of fossils of sea creatures from the inland sea that had once covered the desert.

Craig explained that most of his culture is secret, but that there were lots of common misconceptions

about aboriginal life. "There's no didgeridoos here, mate," he laughed. "That's not my mob – that's just in the west where the Mallee tree grows." Craig grew up in a house, but was still taught to bite the heads off lizards and drink the blood because all liquid is so scarce in the desert. He told us about his life and the problems of living between two cultures – he'd had to leave school when he went through the ceremony to become a man because he could no longer speak to boys. Craig also told us about the punishment system, which follows the eye-for-an-eye philosophy and can involve barbed spears and harsh punishments. He explained that it acts as a deterrent – little kids will ask their parents why a man is limping and they will tell them it's because he's done something wrong.

Leaving Oak Valley we off-roaded across the first cattle station built in this area, Owen Springs Reserve, and through dry river beds to Omiston Gorge. There we spotted rock wallabies perched on boulders on the Ghost Gum walk as we passed through the picturesque gorge lined with wispy white gum trees. On our last night we really were going way outback, and after a fortifying drink at Glen Helen Gorge we drove right into the bush to our home for the night; complete with lava trees and the tracks of what I hoped were the kangaroos that had been jumping alongside the truck on our journey.

Back in Alice we all celebrated surviving a night in the bush with a plate of emu, camel, crocodile and buffalo steaks and, of course, beer at Bojangles pub. On the way back to Alice we had had one last breathtaking surprise when we stopped at Tyler's Pass to see the 5km-wide comet crater Gosse Bluff. Standing on a bunched up frozen shockwave of a hill we could see it sitting in a sea of Martian red dust.

Epic craters, canyons and humongous rocks scattered across the land are all on such a mind-blowing scale that it's impossible not to be moved by the force of nature that put them there. And when you hear the Anangu stories of creation it's easy to squint at the awesome sights and see animal tracks snaking across the rock faces, sense the spirits of ancestors in the wind that whips through the sandstone valleys and feel the lifeblood of the outback coursing through Australia's red heart. ■

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British passport holders require a visa for Australia. Apply for a free eVisitor visa at [www.immi.gov.au/visitors/visit/e/visit](http://www.immi.gov.au/visitors/visit/e/visit)

#### HEALTH

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, Japanese encephalitis, rabies and tetanus should be considered.

