



Solar Centre shines

Eco-tourism draws many to delights of Outback

LARINE STATHAM, who visited Australia's Red Centre, explains why solar energy could save our soul.

GIVE me a camel burger in the MacDonnells over the golden arches in a city any day.

I'd gladly spend a night in the Red Centre camping under one of the most star-studded skies in the world than bar-hopping in a smoggy city.

And it appears there are many others like me. The incentive to experience the great outdoors before it's destroyed by climate change, mining and the invasion of feral pests is growing day by day.

Those of us installing energy efficient light globes, using recyclable shopping bags, timing our showers and capturing grey water to spray on our gardens, also like to travel.

A growing number are making holiday choices based on how much carbon they will emit on the journey and whether the tourism operator is eco accredited.

And many from here and overseas are choosing Alice Springs — well on its way to becoming Australia's first wholly solar city.

Enjoying about 300 days of sunshine every year, the never-ending expanse of shimmering sky and glistening rock formations makes the Red Centre the ideal place to harvest the sun's rays.

In Alice Springs — one of seven cities around Australia chosen to participate in the Federal Government's solar program — more than 50 per cent of all households use solar hot water systems.

Often referred to as the gateway to Uluru, Alice Springs also provides the midway point rest-stop for entrants in the annual Global Solar Car Challenge.

In Alice Springs, 1 sq m exposed to the sun at noon will receive about 1000 watts (1kW) of energy.

The Crowne Plaza Hotel, with its expansive view of the iconic



ICONIC: The MacDonnell Ranges cut through Central Australia like a jagged knife edge, defining the landscape

Todd River, in February last year became home to the largest roof-mounted solar power plant in the southern hemisphere.

With help from the Federal Government, Crowne Plaza installed more than 1300 photovoltaic modules at a cost of \$3 million, reducing the hotel's CO2 emissions by 420 tonnes per year and generating enough energy to power 60 homes.

Powering almost everything at the hotel to varying degrees, the installation has significantly reduced the hotel's electricity bill and the load it places on the Alice Springs power grid.

Educating visitors to the hotel about the importance of developing alternative energy sources, Crowne Plaza Alice Springs won the 2009 Brojga Qantas Award for excellence in sustainable tourism.

For those visitors to Alice Springs wanting to gain a greater

understanding of solar energy, there is no better place to start than the Desert Knowledge Precinct.

Showcasing a range of solar power technologies in commercial-scale installations, the centre, located near Alice Springs Airport, enables researchers and members of the public alike to inspect the panels in person, as well as track and compare the performance of the individual systems in an arid environment via the internet.

But if you're simply seeking an outback adventure that will enable you to return home with a clear conscience — there is plenty to do in the Australian desert that won't leave you feeling like an environmental vandal.

What sets tourism operators in Central Australia apart from the big airlines, is that even the smaller scale providers will off-set your carbon emissions free of charge.

Wayoutback Desert Safaris is one

such operator, which, last year, achieved full carbon neutrality.

Delivering a wide variety of tours in Central Australia, the Advanced Eco Tourism Accredited 4x4 company eliminates their carbon footprint and will reduce your emissions through investment in a Darwin-based project which produces electricity from methane gas harvested from waste.

Visitors to Australia, who tour the West MacDonnell Ranges with Wayoutback, often marvel at how expansive the setting really is.

The fire red, emerald green and sky blue landscape can be appreciated on foot and by road.

Wayoutback's star guide, Phil Taylor, is knowledgeable beyond belief. Showing true passion for Aboriginal culture and bush tucker, as well as native wildlife, Phil spent a whole day showing me around the striking ochre chasms in the West MacDonnell Ranges.

At the Glen Helen Resort, you can help conserve native flora and fauna by wrapping your laughing gear around a burger made from camel — a desert-dwelling pest.

The first Aboriginal mission in the NT, Hermannsburg is a must see to learn more about the history of Australia's indigenous population.

Aboriginal dreamtime stories, relayed by Phil, bring the landscape to life. But the true magnitude will only hit you once you've seen it from the air.

The 180 degree views of the West MacDonnell Ranges from a helicopter are breathtaking.

Dedicated to recycling, solar energy, carbon emission reduction and community engagement, Alice Springs Helicopters is currently the only helicopter operator in Australia to achieve Advanced Eco Tourism Accreditation.

The writer was a guest of Tourism NT.

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