

'ROUND THE ROCK TONIGHT

By Joëlle Dietrich, Correspondent of Le Figaro

After 26 years in Australia, having roamed around pretty much all over the continent from Cape York to Port Arthur and from Cape Byron to Steep Point, I had somehow managed to miss the star attraction of the red centre, Ayers Rock, the iconic big rock the local indigenous Anangu people call Uluru and consider sacred. The closest I had been to it was Alice Springs, 20 years ago, turning back after realising Uluru was still 335 km further down the track and a good four hour drive. So my encounter with the red heart of Australia was well overdue.

The occasion was the 10th anniversary of the exclusive luxury tented resort Longitude 131 , a multi award winning eco-friendly property acclaimed as one of the best wilderness hotels in the world.

Our small group of international journalists representing media from Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Germany and France was visiting at the invitation of Voyages Indigenous Tourism, who manage all the Ayers Rock resorts on behalf of the Indigenous land Corporation.

Upon arrival at Connellan (Ayers Rock) airport, we were flown by helicopter to our destination. I was struck by how much the landscape, viewed from the air, looks like an Aboriginal dot painting, with the ochre background, the tight circles of green and the yellow paths criss-crossing the paprika coloured plain. We checked into our fabulously luxurious tents – more like elevated houses with well insulated canvas ceilings-, boasting iPads and a view to die



Uluru from helicopter

Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich

for. From your king-size bed, you can watch the sun rise and set over the big rock through a huge glass wall.

The place oozes peacefulness and exclusiveness as there are only 15 "tents", each named and decorated individually after a famous Australian pioneer, and nothing but bright red sand for hundreds of miles around sporadically dotted with various Spinifex bushes, desert oaks, mulga trees and iron barks. Only the famous promontory – which I was told is called an inselberg, the land version of an iceberg – of Uluru and the rock peak formation of Kata Tjuta (aka The Olgas) stick out of the flat landscape.

After starting our stay lazily and in utter comfort with a relaxing massage and a delicious light lunch, we set off to get a closer look at what we all came to see. Uluru at sunset is definitely the main attraction. Well equipped with a glass (or two) of champagne and a plateful of delicate canapés, we settled on top of a dune to watch the sun set and gradually disappear over the rock. We were still a few kilometres away from it and never quite alone as there are many, many tourists at any time poised expectantly at every viewing spot. Apparently, the sunsets are more spectacular in winter time but the down side is that the nights are bitterly cold. However, early November seemed like a good time to visit, weatherwise, as the daytime temperatures, during our stay, fluctuated between 25 and 40 degrees Celsius and the nights felt balmy at around 22-23 degrees.



Uluru

Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich

Back at the resort, we enjoyed an amazing celebratory dinner of ashed chèvre; asparagus velouté demitasse; smoked eel; desert lime sorbet; crispy skinned duck breast, strawberries, vanilla mousse and violet ice cream, all served with the best matching Australian wines, while being serenaded by Deadly award winning musician Marcus Corowa before finally surrendering to the irresistible appeal of our fluffy pillows. Next day was more energetic, with a guided walking tour of the spectacular Walpa Gorge where we learned about the natural history of Kata Tjuta, a group of 36 large domed conglomerate rock formations, or bomhardts, born of eons of weathering and geological upheaval.

Early in the hot afternoon, we were to be treated to a Harley Davidson motorcycle tour by the Uluru Motorcycles' crack riders, which I was looking forward to. Alas, the resort's dedicated rider had an accident the same morning and broke his wrist, so the motorcycle was promptly replaced by a camel, a slower but quieter ride. Having (barely) survived two camel expeditions in the past – including a rather humiliating episode when I was hijacked by a runaway camel in Egypt -, I decided to steer well away from camels (who are actually dromedaries in Australia, having only one hump) and went for a swim instead.



Group

Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich

A couple of hours later, we embarked on the Mala walk towards the Kanju Gorge, around the rock itself. Up close and personal, Uluru really does seem enormous. Our guide, Trevor, gave us an enthusiastic commentary on all the Aboriginal tales that make this rock so special and interesting. While it is not totally forbidden to climb to the top of Uluru, at the time of writing, it is actively discouraged as the Anangu people find it offensive and also feel sad when someone is injured, which happens pretty often as it is extremely steep and hot. Many would-be mountaineers are unprepared for the hardship of the climb with catastrophic consequences. Also, with no toilet on top, the run offs poison the waterholes at the base of the rock and the native wildlife.

After another wonderful champagne sunset and dinner, we had planned to go to bed early in anticipation for the 5 am sunrise watching excursion. In fact, dinner finished around midnight as we had to relocate indoors when our promising under the stars dining experience was aborted mid-way due to the sudden invasion of millions of tiny beetles on the table cloth.



On the Mala Walk

Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich

Next morning before dawn, bleary eyed and slightly hung-over – I really had to decline the champagne breakfast- we were bussed to the sunrise viewing spot and the sun obliged. By daylight, we drove further to the Mutitjulu waterhole where we began our walk to the sacred site of Kuniya Piti. During the peaceful walk, our ever-enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides, Nikki and Trevor explained the intricacies of Tjukurpa (accumulated knowledge) and told us the picturesque (literally) story of Kuniya the python woman and the Liru hunters as well as the misadventures of the Mala people.

We then drove to the Cultural Centre where we strolled around for a while, improving our understanding of the Uluru and Kata Tjuta related mythology and purchased some souvenirs and artworks.

Later that morning, we were transferred to our new hotel, the recently refurbished upmarket Sails in the Desert, which is part of Ayers Rock Resort and where we were to enjoy our last night in Uluru. We enjoyed a thorough visit of all the various types of accommodations and facilities offered by Ayers Rock Resort– from the basic bring-your-own-tent sites of Ayers Rock Campground to the Outback Pioneer Hotel and 2 star lodge; the serviced apartments of Emu Walk and the lovely Desert Gardens Hotel. There is really something for every budget.

After a relaxed lunch at the Walpa Lobby Bar, we tried our hands at spear and boomerang throwing with our indigenous guide and jack-of-all-trades, Waylon – he’s also a dancer, singer and a didgeridoo player -who showed amazing patience and kindness, trying not to laugh too loud at our clumsy efforts (speaking for myself, at least). Having exhausted ourselves in the 40 degrees afternoon heat, we were happy to just sit down and watch the



Joëlle on Olgas walk

Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich

Wakagetti Cultural Dance Group perform, enticing us to try their 'kangaroo' and 'emu' moves.

After that, it was high time for another sunset and champagne treat before an extremely elaborate 5 star dinner at the Mayu restaurant, in Sails in the Desert.

On our last morning before flying back to Sydney, we had enough time for a guided garden tour around the resort where an aboriginal gardener explained the merits and disconcerting surviving power of the native plants surrounding us. I learned a useful trick to cure hayfever brought upon by bottle brush bushes: just brew the leaves or smell them if you're away from the kitchen. Got to try!

Shortly before we left, we all gathered in the Circle of Sand, the indigenous heart of Ayers Rock Resort near the "town" square, where an Anangu yarn-teller told us about the history of his people as well as their cultural and traditional techniques. He demonstrated all the aboriginal arsenal of weapons such as katjii (hunting spears), tjutinpa (clubs), kali (boomerangs) and miru (spear throwers).

Having only experienced the luxuries of the 5 star resorts at Ayers Rock, it was sobering to find out that we had so much to learn about the harsh realities of the desert and the skills indispensable to survive in it.



Aboriginal artist
Photograph © Joëlle Dietrich