



Previously, I took you along on my journey through the West MacDonnell Ranges as far as Redbank Gorge. After leaving there, we made our way to the amazing Kings Canyon in the Watarraka National Park. We did this by following a section of the Red Centre Way, much of it unsealed and previously known as the Mereenie Loop. Although only a touch over 200km, this section of road needs to be approached with care and patience.



Kings Canyon is such an iconic destination to visit in Australia.

Starting the trip

The first 50km of the drive from the Redbank turnoff to the western junction of Larapinta Drive and Namitjara Drive is an easy expedition with bitumen all the way. The highlight of this section is Tylers Pass Lookout - roughly halfway to the intersection. From here there are spectacular views of Tnorala (Gosses Bluff), a crater from the impact of a comet some 140 million years ago.

After 15km of winding road from the lookout, there is a turn off to the right that leads into Tnorala. This track is definitely a 4WD track and leads into the crater. The crater is a very significant place to the Western Arrarnta people.



Following the track through the domes.

Arriving at the Western Junction of the Red Centre Way

Back out on the main road you soon arrive at the western junction of the Red Centre Way. Turning to the left leads you towards Hermansberg and eventually Alice Springs, but, we turned right to follow the road formerly known as the Mereenie Loop.

This unsealed section of road is a regular discussion topic with travellers wanting to do the circuit from Alice to Kings Canyon and Uluru. It does live up to its reputation of being heavily corrugated with some deep sandy corners and some crazy drivers, both Australian and international.

We dropped our tyre pressures and then took our time driving through the varying conditions. The road passes through sandhill country and then hard, rocky ground through the actual Mereenie Valley. Then there are some tight corners and highly varied conditions which depend on the traffic and the last time the grader has been through.

Eventually, you arrive at Ginty's Lookout, now a free camping area with views towards Kings Canyon. The road is bituminised off of the "jump up" before reverting to dirt again. Some 40km later you arrive at the King's Canyon Resort, one of four accommodation options in Watarrka National Park.



The view of the sandstone domes in the area.

Watarrka National Park

Watarrka National Park is a significant conservation area with gorges and waterholes



providing home for a wide range of animals, birds, reptiles and an amazing array of plants. The centrepiece of the park is the amazing Kings Canyon, a spectacular slash in the ancient red sandstone range.

The Canyon can be experienced from the air, particularly helicopter, but to truly get the feel, the colours and sheer size of it, you need to get out there and walk.



An early morning view looking up into the canyon from the top of Heartbreak Hill.

The Rim Walk

There are a number of walks but the big one, other than a 2-day walk to Kathleen Springs, is the Rim Walk. 6km in length, it will probably take you between 3 to 4 hours to complete, mainly because you'll want time to take the scenery in.

Physically the hardest part of the Rim Walk is the steep climb to the top of the range, right at the

beginning up the spur, sometimes called Heartbreak Hill.

This is a stepped rise from the valley floor with a number of places to stop, catch your breath and take in the amazing views that are being revealed, particularly south across the flat desert plain.



The weathered sandstone domes look almost like mini versions of the Bungle Bungles.

The track then wanders through an amazing collection of weathered sandstone domes, that look like mini Bungle Bungles. The colours surround you with shades of red, black and cream being predominant. At times the path leads through narrow passages, or more commonly, open sections covered in clumps of spinifex and other tough native plants and the odd cycad palm.

There are a number of lookouts along this section with views of the huge south wall that are just breathtaking.



Cotterill's Lookout on the Rim Walk is not to be missed.

Detouring to Cotterill's Lookout

About 2.5km along, there is a track junction where you can detour out to Cotterill's Lookout. You cross a bridge across a narrow yet deep cleft in the ground to get access to the Lookout on top of a dome. From there you can get more views of the south wall and down into the canyon.

Returning to the main track you eventually descend to a bridge across the creek via a series of staircases.

The 'Garden of Eden'

Take the time here to follow the path and bridges down the creek to the 'Garden of Eden'. This is a cool, shady sanctuary after the exposed walk through the lost world of domes. Here there are birds, insects and pools of water that are beautiful and also understandably sacred



to the local indigenous people. Across the last pool, there is a gap where the water pours over the edge into the canyon below.



The Garden of Eden has a few serene spots like this one tucked away.

Where to stop for a break

When you return to the bridge on the main track there are further stairs leading up to an area favoured by many to stop and have a bite to eat and a drink. There is also one of the three emergency call boxes here that enable contact with the rangers if necessary. The others are located at the top of Heartbreak Hill and halfway across the return path on the southern side of the canyon. Shortly after, there is a bridge and a one-way gate that you pass across Kings Creek to the southern side.

Arriving on a big flat platform there is another lookout, this time viewing the overhanging cliffs on the north side of the canyon. The small figures of other walkers at the northern side lookouts give perspective to the size of these looming red cliff faces. Breathtaking is probably an understatement.



The stairs on the southern side that descend into the Garden of Eden.

Kestrel Lookout

You are now well and truly on the way back. The track continues to wind its way across and through the sandstone domes right away from the canyon. You then arrive at Kestrel Lookout overlooking a large waterfall and rock formation. White stains dot the cliff faces below the nesting sites of Australian kestrels that call this area home.

A bit further along, as you start your descent off the range, another lookout gives you views of the Ranger Station, carpark and the flat expanse of desert country that abuts the George Gill Range.

Back in the carpark, if you haven't already done it you can resupply and follow the track back in along the floor of the canyon to another lookout. This time you can view those huge cliffs from below.



You can see other people on the northern side of the platform.

The walking track at Kathleen Springs

Kathleen Springs is about 20 km from Kings Canyon and has a great walking track that is wheelchair accessible for the whole of its 2.6km length. The walk passes old stockyards and other relics of the area's pastoral history and arrives at a spring-fed waterhole.

As with all significant water supplies in this landscape, the area has special cultural significance to the local indigenous people. Some of their stories and those of the early pastoralists are told along the track with informative signboards.



The track across the plateau on the southern side.



Things to consider when visiting

Watarrka is a special place with fabulous walks and equally fabulous views from afar at sunset viewing areas. The weather must be considered when doing the walks here as dehydration can be an issue. The parks, in fact, have policies in place about the times you can walk when the temperatures are high.

They stress the fact that there is no drinking water available when you tackle the Rim Walk. Walkers should prepare themselves with good footwear, hat, sunscreen, plenty of water, snacks and a sense of wonder.



A view looking back upstream from the bridge into the garden.

Access for vehicles

The Park and its accommodation alternatives can all be accessed by 2WD vehicles from Eralunda on the Stuart Highway on good bitumen roads. Meanwhile, 4WDs can access it a number of ways, including the Red Centre Way. April to September are prime times to go as the weather is kinder.

If you want to experience the majesty and beauty of the Red Centre then Watarrka and Kings Canyon should definitely be on your list.

Is Kings Canyon on your bucket list when it comes to exploring Australia?