

King's Canyon, Australia

Poor cousin to famed Ayer's Rock holds mystery and beauty for those willing to climb its rocky terrain

Story and photo by Ellen Baragon

It is late afternoon and the line of worshippers undulates slightly like a large colorful snake skimming over a low ridge in the desert. Elbow to elbow each gaze ahead expectantly, mumbling, shuffling their feet, but mostly just waiting. Two miles in the distance rests the implacable god that inspires this queer devotion—serene and timeless—an immense lump of sandstone early European explorers named Ayer's Rock, located in the sub-baked Centre of Australia's Northern Territory, 300 kms southwest from the town of Alice Springs.

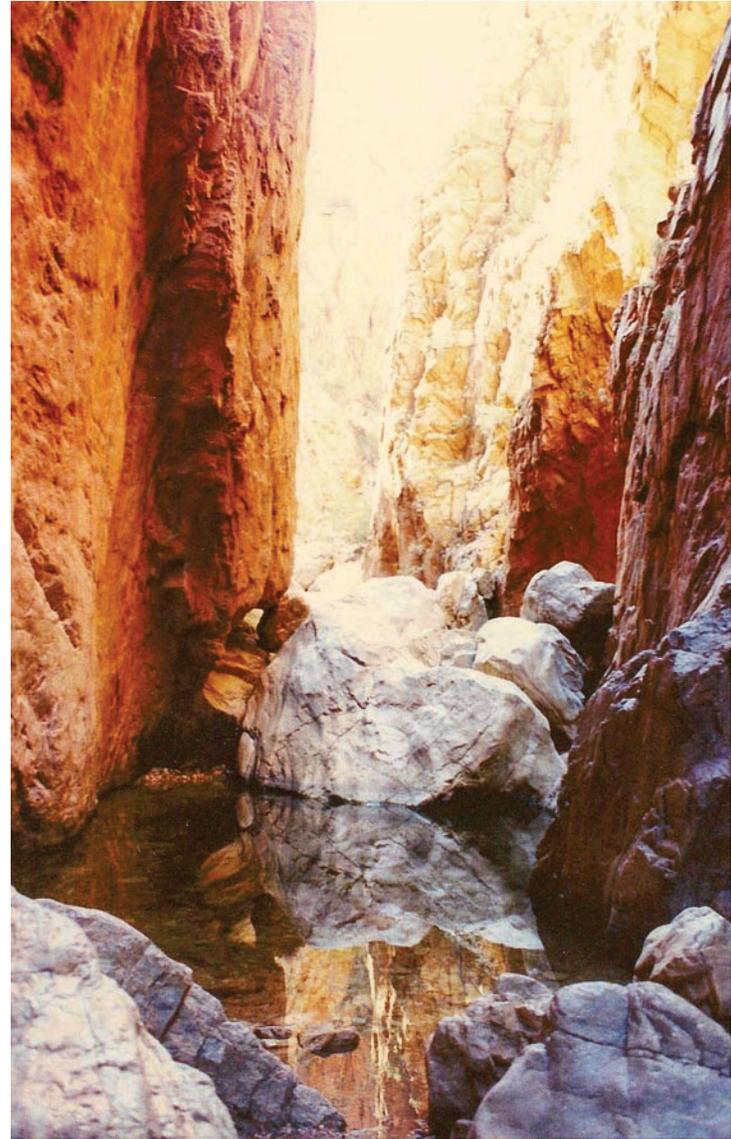
A nomadic tribe of Aborigines once used the rock they dubbed Uluru as a resting place, but today it is both a Mecca for tourists and a gold mine for the many tour operators that cart busloads of visitors here to observe the sunset that casts the monolith in stunning red hues. Suddenly, at 5:55pm, the whir and click of camera shutters breaks the spell and the evening ceremony of Uluru has begun.

Then only 10 minutes later it is suddenly all over—and the tourists, feeling they have experienced something profound, but unsure what, disperse and pile back into their buses and cars.

The peculiar mystique of Ayer's Rock is largely its singular defiance of the never-ending expanse of flat desert lands that surround it. Yet only 75 miles further north, a lesser known though equally intriguing wonder of central Australia awaits the determined traveller willing to endure the two hours of road shock over the bumpy road that leads to it.

At the western end of the George Gill mountain range, located within Watarrka National Park, is the strange and beautiful King's Canyon, a huge chasm that once formed a sea bottom when much of the continent was submerged in water. King's Canyon cliffs reach 300 meters in height, but size is not the canyon's outstanding feature. Rather its splendour is in the play of light and shadow over and around its many narrow crevices and rust-colored terraces.

King's Canyon is habitat to nearly 600 species of plants including the 200-year-old zamia palms, cycad trees, blue bell bushes, white bell flowers and golden cassias, and a variety of exotic reptiles such as the spiny thorny devil and frilly-necked lizard. A small campground at the entrance to the canyon opens on to a trail that leads hikers up the side of a steep wall through a sparse orchard of white ghost gum trees and clumps of spinifex grass. Those equipped with a hat, proper footwear and a flask of water are rewarded for the fairly strenuous two-hour hike up to the canyon's ridge



Deep crevices capture enough rainfall to create the translucent pools of clear water that forms rich habitat of the canyon floor.

oasis of lush vegetation and cool water holes fed by the numerous creeks flowing down to the canyon floor.

The stillness here is broken only by the mystic of songbirds fluttering among the canopy of trees covering the garden. It is a fragile ecosystem, and one which some naturalists fear will be damaged should the numbers of tourists increase. The topsoil is only a few meters in depth and as visitors tramp through the paths they wear away what little earth supports root systems. Yet record-breaking rainfalls have dramatically transfigured the landscape, carpeting the dusty earth flush with brush and small trees. During the summer months temperatures here can reach 45C.

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In winter the climate is a moderate 20-29 C, dropping to below 0 C in the evening. Although King's Canyon has been open to tourists for 30 years, it is relatively obscure in the shadow of Ayer's Rock. The first European to identify and mark the location of King' Canyon was explorer Ernest Giles in 1872, who named it after the financier of his expedition, Fieldon King.

A few years earlier however, an Afghan by the name of Ali Blooch, who was in the business of importing camels for sale to bushmen and explorers, joined in the search to find Ludwig Leichhardt, an explorer who disappeared from the area in 1848 while attempting to cross the continent east to west. Bush wanderer Duncan McIntyre issued a request to Blooch from his deathbed that Blooch find his friend Leichhardt or at least solve the puzzle of his disappearance. The Afghan swore an oath he would and for more than 20 years traveled north and central Australia in his quest. From his descriptions of the landscape it is apparent Blooch discovered the canyon, then camped and took water there before heading further into the desert.

Then in the 1880s, after a long absence, during which he was believed to be dead, Blooch drove his camels into the Powell Creek camp claiming to have seen evidence of Leichhardt--trees with the letter 'L' carved into them and four humans skeletons nearby. But when the South Australian government in Adelaide declined to follow up these clues Blooch gave up the search, and the mystery of Leichhardt's disappearance was never solved.