

The Southeast

If the vast expanse of desert north of Alice Springs seems remote, cast your eyes southeast on a map. Stretching down to the South Australia border and the fringes of the Simpson Desert, much of this corner of the Territory is little-visited but beautiful desert dune country.

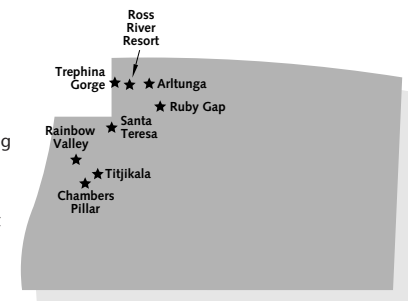
While many sights can be reached by conventional vehicle, you really need a 4WD to fully appreciate the beauty of this region. The remote Simpson Desert in the far southeastern corner of the Territory is an almost trackless region of spinifex and shifting sands that is one of the last great 4WD adventures.

But if you don't have a 4WD and a taste for desert driving, don't despair. Immediately east of Alice, the easily accessible East MacDonnell Ranges stretch in a rugged line for about 100km, the ridges cut by a series of gaps and gorges that culminate in the isolated but heavenly Ruby Gap. Just like the ranges to the west, this is lovely country with superb walks, lots of bush camping and the eerie historical ghost town of Arltunga.

To the south lies a sparsely inhabited region where rolling sand dunes are broken by incredible rock formations (Chambers Pillar is a highlight), accessible Aboriginal settlements and some great outback driving and camping under a vast desert sky. Compared with west of the Stuart Hwy, this is an untouched area and that alone makes it alluring.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Camping out like an early explorer and circumnavigating the dramatic sandstone beacon of **Chambers Pillar** (p242)
- Imagining the ghosts of the past while exploring the old gold-mining town of **Arltunga** (p238)
- Cooling off in the waterhole after trekking through tranquil **Trephina Gorge** (p236)
- Kicking back with a few beers at the bar of the **Ross River Resort** (p238)
- Tackling the tough 4WD track then camping out along the river bed at beautiful **Ruby Gap** (p240)
- Stopping in at the Aboriginal art centres at **Titjikala** (p241) and **Santa Teresa** (p242)
- Watching the setting sun light up the rich colours of **Rainbow Valley** (p243)





EAST MACDONNELL RANGES

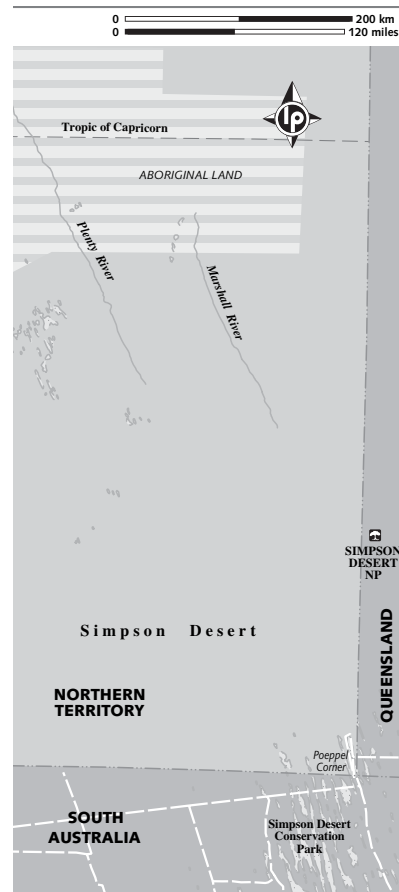
Although often overlooked in favour of the more popular West MacDonnells, the East MacDonnell Ranges are no less absorbing and fewer visitors can mean a more enjoyable bush experience. The Ross Hwy snakes east from Alice to the historical former goldmining town at Arltunga and is a very scenic drive through a jumble of high ridges and hills drained by gum-lined creeks. Along the way you pass several small parks and reserves where you can explore rugged gorges (such as beautiful Trephina),

Aboriginal culture and abandoned mining areas.

The road is sealed for the 85km to Ross River Resort. Arltunga is 33km from the Ross Hwy along an unsealed road which can be quite rough, but it's usually OK for 2WD vehicles in dry conditions. The alternative return route via Claraville, Ambalindum and The Garden homesteads to the Stuart Hwy is recommended for 4WDs only.

Access to John Hayes Rockhole (in Trephina Gorge Nature Park), N'Dhala Gorge and Ruby Gap is definitely by 4WD only.

Although most of the attractions out this way can be seen in a single day, you may find it more rewarding to take it slowly and



plan to camp overnight camp at Trephina, Arltunga or Ruby Gap. Apart from the Ross River Resort, camping is the only accommodation available.

EMILY & JESSIE GAPS NATURE PARK

Following the Ross Hwy east of the Stuart Hwy for 10km you arrive at **Emily Gap**, the first of two scenic gaps in the range. Nobody knows for sure how they got their English names, but both gaps are associated with an Arrernte Caterpillar Dreaming trail.

The highlight here is the stylised **rock paintings** on the gorge walls, though after rain you might have to swim across the waterhole to see them. Known to the Arrernte as Anthwerkke, this is one of the most im-

REGIONAL TOURS

The following tours leave from Alice:
Ossies Outback Tours (☎ 8952 2308; www.ossies.com.au; 18 Warburton St) Comprehensive range of 4WD tours, including day trips to Owen Springs and Rainbow Valley (\$95) and three-day Simpson Desert tour with Chambers Pillar, Old Andado and Mt Dare (\$650).

Outback Experience (☎ 8953 2666; www.outbackexperience.com.au) Run by knowledgeable local Leigh Goldsmith, covers Chambers Pillar and Rainbow Valley in a day for \$150, and East MacDonnells for \$130.

Path Tours (☎ 8952 0525; www.pathtoursadventure.com) Three-day 4WD tours to the East MacDonnell Ranges, Chambers Pillar and Rainbow Valley for \$500.

portant Aboriginal sites in the Alice Springs area, as it was from here that the Caterpillar Ancestral Beings of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) originated.

Jessie Gap, 8km further on, is an equally scenic gorge and a good place for a picnic. Both sites are popular swimming holes and have toilets. Camping is not permitted.

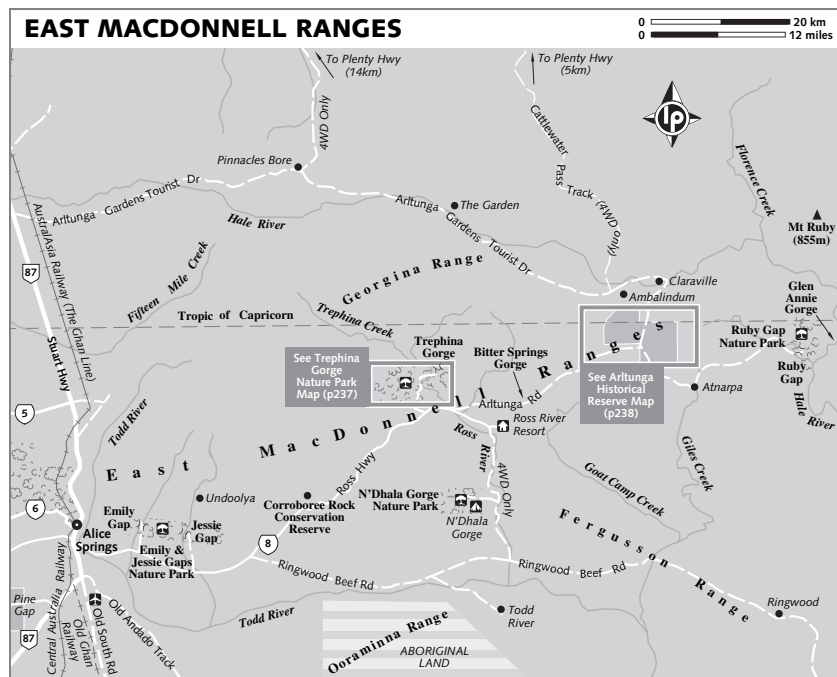
Bushwalking

Sweeping panoramas extend from the high, narrow ridge **walk** (8km one way, 2½ hours, unmarked, medium) between Emily and Jessie Gaps. Look out for wildlife, such as euros, black-footed rock wallabies and wedge-tailed eagles. The trick is to get someone to drop you off at Emily Gap, then have them continue on to Jessie Gap to get the picnic and esky ready.

CORROBOREE ROCK CONSERVATION RESERVE

Past Jessie Gap, you drive over eroded flats, with the steep-sided East MacDonnell Ranges looming large on your left, before entering a valley between red ridges. Corroboree Rock, 51km from Alice Springs, is one of a number of unusual tan-coloured dolomite hills that are scattered over the valley floor.

A small cave in this large dog-toothed outcrop was once used by local Aboriginal people as a storehouse for sacred objects. It is a registered sacred site and part of the Perentie Dreaming. Despite the name, it's doubted whether the rock was ever used



as a corroboree area, owing to the lack of water in the vicinity.

A short **walking track** circumnavigates the base of the rock.

TREPghINA GORGE NATURE PARK

About 60km from Alice Springs you cross the sandy bed of **Benstead Creek** and a lovely stand of red gums, which continues for the 6km from the creek crossing to the Trepghina Gorge turn-off.

If you only have time for a couple of stops in the East MacDonnell Ranges, make Trepghina Gorge Nature Park, 3km north of the Ross Hwy, one of them. The contrasts between the sweep of pale sand in the dry river beds, rich orange, red and purple tones of the valley walls, pale tree trunks with eucalyptus-green foliage and the blue sky are spectacular. There are also some excellent walks, deep swimming holes, wildlife and secluded camping areas. The main attractions are the gorge itself, **Trepghina Bluff** and **John Hayes Rockhole**, a permanent waterhole reached by a rough track that wanders for several kilometres and is usually 4WD only.

The area was excised from The Garden Station in 1966 and gazetted as a park to protect both the large stand of river red gums and the gorge.

Trepghina Gorge makes a great spot to set up camp for a day or so. Visit the waterhole early in the morning and you'll usually spot black-footed rock wallabies nimbly leaping about on the rock face. The area is also home to a number of rare plants, including the glory-of-the-Centre wedding bush.

There is a **ranger** (☎ 8956 9765) stationed in the park and an emergency call box at the ranger station.

Bushwalking

There are several good walks here, ranging from a short stroll to a five-hour hike. A short signposted walk along the entrance road leads to a magnificent ghost gum, estimated to be 300 years old. The following marked trails are outlined in the *Walks of Trepghina Gorge Nature Park* brochure:

Trepghina Gorge walk (2km loop, 45 minutes, easy)

Skirting along the edge of the gorge, the trail drops to the sandy creek bed then loops back to the starting point.

Panorama walk (3km, one hour, easy) Great views over Trepghina Gorge and examples of bizarre, twisted rock strata are highlights of this walk.

Chain of Ponds walk (4km loop, 1½ hours, medium)

From the John Hayes Rockhole camping ground, this walk leads through the gorge, past rock pools and up to a lookout above the gorge. It requires some climbing and scrambling, and it's impassable after heavy rain.

Ridgetop walk (10km one way, four hours, difficult)

This marked trail traverses the ridges from Trepghina Gorge to the delightful John Hayes Rockhole, a few kilometres to the west. Here a section of deep gorge holds a series of waterholes long after the more exposed places have dried up. The walk offers splendid views and isolation. The 8km return leg along the road takes about two hours.

Sleeping

You can pitch a tent at the small camping grounds at Trepghina Gorge, The Bluff and John Hayes Rockhole.

Trepghina Gorge Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) This is in a timbered gully a short stroll from the main attraction, and has 10 sites, running water, pit toilets (one with disabled access), gas barbecues, fireplaces and picnic tables. It's suitable for caravans and campervans.

Bluff Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) The Bluff has similar facilities (eight sites), but a more spectacular creek-bank setting under tall gums in front of a towering red ridge.

John Hayes Rockhole Camping Ground (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) This has just three remote, basic sites with toilets beside a rocky

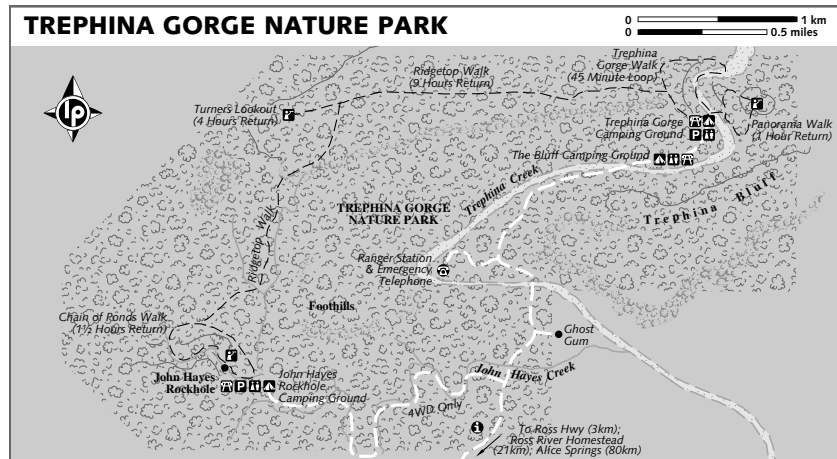
creek down from the waterhole. The rough road here gives a real feeling of remoteness. There's no reliable fresh water supply here – refill at the other camp sites.

N'DHALA GORGE NATURE PARK

The highway continues from the Trepghina Gorge turn-off towards Ross River. Look out for the roadside shrine, complete with motorcycle and headstone, on the right. It's dedicated to a local who died in a motorcycle accident here in 1998.

Shortly before reaching Ross River you come to the 4WD track to N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park, where over 5900 ancient **rock carvings** (petroglyphs) decorate a deep, narrow gorge. The 11km access track winds down the picturesque **Ross River valley**, where a number of sandy crossings make this a bad idea for conventional vehicles. As the sign says, towing is costly.

The rock carvings at N'Dhala (known to the eastern Arrernte people as Irlwentye) are of two major types: finely pecked, where a stone hammer has been used to strike a sharp chisel such as a bone or rock; and pounded, where a stone has been hit directly on the rock face. The carvings, which are generally not that easy to spot, are thought to have been made in the last 2000 years, though some could be as old as 10,000 years. Common designs featured in the carvings are circular and feather-like patterns, and these are thought to relate to the Caterpillar Dreaming. A **walking trail**



(1.5km return, 45 minutes, easy) passes the main rock carvings, though you can continue further down the river bed.

The **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) at the gorge entrance has fireplaces (collect your own wood), tables and a pit toilet. Shade here is limited and there is no reliable water source.

ROSS RIVER RESORT

Once the headquarters for Loves Creek Station, the old Ross River Homestead has a pretty setting under rocky hills beside the Ross River. The homestead was closed to tourists for several years but reopened in late 2005 as the Ross River Resort, and it's well worth the detour for a meal, a beer in the Stockman's Bar or a comfy bed. It's 9km along the continuation of the Ross Hwy past the Arltunga turn-off. Incidentally, if the words 'Ross River' strike the fear of fever into you, rest assured that the name was derived from Ross River in Townsville (Queensland).

With its secluded bush setting, birdlife, a range of accommodation and café, **Ross River Resort** (☎ 8956 9711; www.rossriverresort.com.au; camping per person \$10, bunkhouse \$22, d cabin \$100; ♿) offers a bit of bush comfort and a great place to hang your hat for a night. The air-con cabins have en suite, and there's a pool and spa, plus a store with fuel.

ARLTUNGA HISTORICAL RESERVE

Arltunga is a haunting historical site of crumbling buildings, mine shafts and bat-

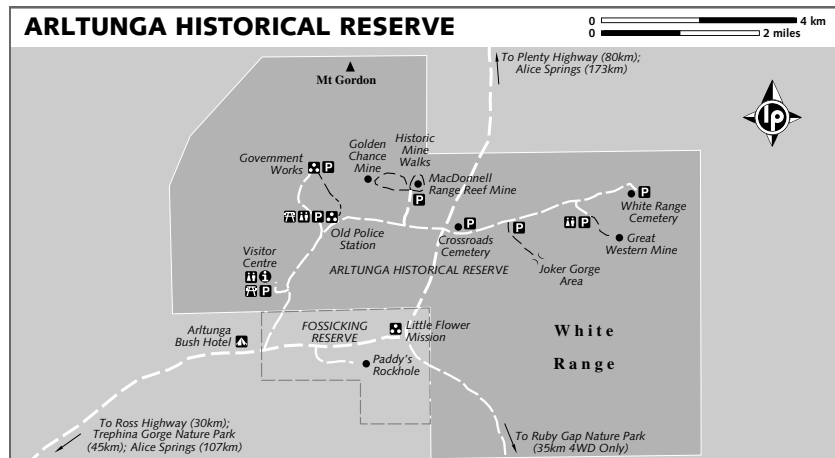
tery equipment left behind from what was officially central Australia's first town – a gold rush settlement that was once home to nearly 300 people. Spending an afternoon wandering among the ruins of this extensive reserve, it's not hard to gain a picture of the hardships and desperation of these early settlers.

The first 12km of the Arltunga Rd passes through scenic **Bitter Springs Gorge**, where red quartzite ridges tower above dolomite hills. This was the route taken by miners as they walked from Alice Springs to the goldfields at the turn of the last century. The road can be rough and is impassable after heavy rain.

About 1km before the Arltunga Historical Reserve, you pass the Arltunga Bush Hotel and camping ground, before arriving at the visitors centre in the reserve itself. The richest part of the goldfield was **White Range** but, showing remarkable short-sightedness, authorities allowed almost all the ruins and small mines that once dotted this high ridge to be destroyed during an open-cut mining operation. The White Range Mine operated for a few years in the late 1980s and was reopened in early 1996 as new technology made the area viable once more.

Fossicking is not permitted at Arltunga, but there is a **fossicking reserve** in a gully just to the south where you may (with luck) find some gold. Ask at the visitors centre.

From Arltunga it is possible to do a loop back to Alice Springs along The Gardens Tourist Drive, or to join up with the Plenty Hwy along a 4WD track.



RUBY RUSH

Ruby Gap was named after a frantic ruby rush in the late 1880s. David Lindsay, an explorer and surveyor who came through this way while leading an expedition from Adelaide to Port Darwin, saw ruby red stones in the dry bed of the Hale River, glittering in the afternoon sun. The whole dream crashed overnight when it was found that the 'rubies' were relatively worthless garnets (albeit high grade), but not before some 200 hopeful prospectors had made the arduous trek from the railhead at Oodnadatta. It's easy to see how the prospectors got carried away when you see the surface of the river bed, shimmering a deep-claret colour as the sun reflects off the millions of garnet specks. They faced incredible hardships here, not least of which were the lack of water and the fierce climate.

However, the rush led to the chance discovery of alluvial gold at Paddy's Rockhole in 1887, and further exploration uncovered the reefs at White Range in 1897. The field was not particularly rich, and the miners suffered from the extremes of weather and the lack of water. In 1898, the government of South Australia constructed a 10-head gold-stamping battery and cyanide processing works at Arltunga – itself a major logistical feat as all the equipment had to be brought by camel train from the railhead at Oodnadatta, 600km to the south.

The improved facilities did little for the prosperity of the field, and even at its peak in the early 1900s there were never more than a few hundred miners working here; most of the time there were fewer than 100. By the time it closed, the battery had treated 11,500 tons of rock, yielding around 15,000 ounces of gold.

Information

The **visitors centre** (☎ 8956 9770; ⏰ 8am–5pm) has interesting displays of old mining machinery and historical photographs. A free 20-minute slide show describes the reserve and its history. Drinking water is available and there are toilets (including facilities for the disabled).

Sights & Activities

Arltunga's history is fascinating and the area gives an idea of what life was like for the early diggers, though it may leave you wondering how anyone could eke out a living in this parched region. The main sites are scattered over a wide area and you'll need a vehicle to get between them. Self-guided walks are scattered through the reserve; pick up leaflets from the visitors centre. Ask the rangers to crank up the old Jenkins Battery behind the centre to crush some gold-bearing ore. Ranger-guided tours are usually conducted on Sunday between June and August.

Allow half an hour to walk around the **Government works** area, where the best collection of dry-stone buildings survives. Among the ruins are the site of the Government Battery and Cyanide Works, and the partly restored Manager's and Assayer's residences. A short walk (1.5km, 15 minutes) leads to the **old police station**, or you can drive there.

Two mines are open in this area, but a torch (flashlight) is essential to explore them. At the **MacDonnell Range Reef Mine** you can climb down steel ladders and explore about 50m of tunnels between two shafts. The **Golden Chance Mine** boasts several old dry-stone miners' huts.

At the crossroads there's an old **cemetery**, plus the ruins of the old bakehouse; this was the site surveyed for the township that never eventuated. **Joker Gorge** features more old stone buildings and a good view reached by a 200m path up a hill.

Another short self-guided walk leads to the **Great Western Mine**. After climbing some steep ridges with great views to the east, the road ends at **White Range Cemetery**, the resting place of Joseph Hele, the first man to find gold here, and numerous other miners.

The remains of **Little Flower Mission** can be seen outside the Reserve. About 200 people lived here from 1942 until 1953, when the Mission moved to Santa Theresa.

Sleeping

Camping is not permitted within the historical reserve, but the nearby **Arltunga Bush Hotel** (☎ 8956 9797; sites per adult/child \$8/4) has showers, toilets, barbecue pits and picnic tables. Fees are collected in the late afternoon. It's been a while between drinks for the hotel, but it was due to reopen as a pub

(Thursday to Monday) at the time of writing, but isn't planning to serve meals.

RUBY GAP NATURE PARK

This little-visited and remote park, accessible only by 4WD, is a challenging but rewarding detour to some of the wildest gorge and river scenery in central Australia. The waterholes at Glen Annie Gorge are usually deep enough for a cooling dip.

It is essential to get a map from Parks & Wildlife, and to register (☎ 1300 650 730) in Alice Springs before setting out – and deregister when you return. Do not attempt the trip if you are inexperienced, especially in summer, or after heavy rain. Carry sufficient water and, as the last 5km is through boggy sand (deflate tyres), a shovel and jack may come in useful.

Leaving Arltunga, head east towards Atnarpa Homestead. Turn left immediately before the gate 11km from the Clarville turn-off. The road then deteriorates and is restricted to 4WD vehicles, thanks to sandy creek crossings and sharp jump-ups. After another 25km you arrive at the **Hale River**; follow the wheel ruts upstream (left) along the sandy bed for about 6km to the turnaround point, which is through **Ruby Gap** and just short of rugged Glen Annie Gorge.

Allow two hours each way for the trip. The park is managed by the **Arltunga ranger station** (☎ 8956 9770), so check road conditions there or in Alice before heading out here. The rangers suggest leaving the park in the event of rain – travellers in the past have had their car stuck at Ruby Gap for a month!

There are no marked walking trails, but you can make the rugged walk by the river bed to Glen Annie Gorge. Although there are no camping facilities in the park, camping is permitted anywhere along the river – bring in your own firewood and water.

NORTH OF THE SIMPSON DESERT

The southeastern corner of the Territory eats into the edge of the vast Simpson Desert, one of the toughest, driest and most inhospitable parts of Australia. That doesn't mean it's inaccessible – with a 4WD you

can cover a lot of ground and experience some of the most challenging outback driving south of Alice. Even without a 4WD, it's possible to travel some of the way down the Old South Rd, which runs close to the old *Ghan* railway line, but the main attractions – including Chambers Pillar, Lambert Centre and the Old Andado Track – are accessible only to 4WD vehicles.

ALICE SPRINGS TO FINKE

The Old South Rd, also known as Maryvale Rd, turns off the Stuart Hwy 12km south of Alice Springs. At Rodinga siding the road splits, continuing south to Maryvale Station, the Titjikala Aboriginal community and the turnoff to Chambers Pillar, or southeast to Finke. The road to Maryvale is rough in patches, but is fine for conventional vehicles in dry conditions. After that it's all 4WD. It's beautiful country, the road cutting through red sand dunes in places, with low mulga scrub and the occasional ghost gum dotting the landscape. At the Rodinga siding the Finke Track heads for 133km to Finke (Apatula). This forms part of the Simpson Desert Loop via New Crown, Andado Homestead and north to Alice along the Old Andado Track.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Ooraminna Homestead & Bush Camp (☎ 8953 0170; www.ooraminnahomestead.com.au; off Old South Rd; swag \$165, d incl meals \$270) This homestead is only 30km south of Alice, but offers a real outback station experience. Roll out a swag (provided) or stay in style in the secluded stone or timber cabins converted from buildings originally constructed for a movie set (one is an old jail!). The cabins have amazing four-poster beds made from desert oak, period furniture and modern private bathrooms, one with a large bath. You can relax on the veranda of the family homestead, which has a bar and dining room, take a station tour or go bushwalking. On the approach to the homestead (5km down a dirt road) you pass what looks like an abandoned town with a pub, store and windmill. It was actually the set for a film based on Ted Egan's *The Drover's Boy*, which never made it to production after funds ran out.

Ewaninga Rock Carvings Conservation Reserve

This small conservation reserve 39km out of Alice protects an outcrop of sandstone next to a claypan sacred to Arrernte people, and known to them as Napatika. The rock carvings found here and at N'Dhala Gorge are thought to have been made by Aboriginal people who lived here before those currently in the Centre, between 1000 and 5000 years ago. The carvings, which include concentric circles and animal tracks, are chiselled into the soft rock, but their meanings are either lost in time or are regarded as too sacred for the uninitiated.

The claypan was an important source of food and water for the Arrernte during rains, and the *stories* told by the carvings are said to relate to the Rain Dreaming. There's an easy 20-minute loop walk with informative signs leading from a picnic area with wood barbecues and pit toilets.

Oak Valley

It's worth calling in at this small Aboriginal community if you're passing between the Stuart Hwy and the Old South Rd. Check road conditions at Stuart's Well for the Hugh River Stock Route (9km south along the Stuart Hwy), which connects to the old *Ghan* line and Maryvale Station.

Oak Valley Camping Ground (☎ 8956 0959; sites per person \$8), run by the local Aboriginal community, is a pleasant spot among desert oaks, with shade shelters, hot showers, toilets and a wood barbecue. Call to inquire about day tours from Alice Springs or tours operating from Oak Valley which take in local rock art and fossil sites and delve into bush tucker.

Titjikala & Maryvale Station

Continuing straight past the turn-off to Finke for 13km brings you to **Maryvale Station** (☎ 8956 0989; ☎ 9am-5pm) where you can get fuel, drinks and basic supplies.

Just past the store is the Titjikala Aboriginal community (pop 300), which you can visit without a permit. Drop into the **Titjikala Art Centre** (☎ 8956 0788; www.titjikala.com.au; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Thu) where local artists have developed a reputation not only for traditional dot paintings but also non-traditional crafts such as wire sculptures, linocuts, screen printing, batik and woodcarving.

SLEEPING

Gunya Titjikala (☎ 8347 1159, 1300 135 657; www.gunya.com.au; tents \$900) If this seems like a lot of money to stay the night in a safari tent, it is. But this is one of those rare opportunities for an intimate outback experience with Aboriginal hosts. The raised canvas tents look out over the desert and Rodinga Ranges and have private bathrooms with shower and composting toilet, double bed and veranda deck. Meals are served in an adjacent tent and an Aboriginal guide will take you through the bush explaining local lore, bush tucker and culture. Thankfully, half the profits go to the Titjikala Foundation for community health and education projects.

Finke (Apatula)

pop 200

Back on the main track, the road turns southeast on the Finke Track at the ruins of the Rodinga siding. Now you're in real 4WD territory for the 140km to the Aboriginal community of Apatula (better known as Finke). The narrow track here follows the old railway line through red sand. You can either drive on the railway line itself, which is flatter and straighter but slow going, or on the adjacent track, which is firmer but is a bit like driving on a small rollercoaster track. This is the route followed in the annual Finke Desert Race (see Festivals & Events p191). Along the way you pass the remains of three old railway sidings, notably Bundooma (45km past Rodinga) and Engoordina (another 23km on).

Eventually you cross the wide sandy bed of the Finke River and arrive in the small town of Finke, which started life as a railway siding and gradually grew to have a European population of about 60. With the opening of the new *Ghan* line further west in 1982, administration of the town was taken over by the Apatula Aboriginal community.

The **community store** (☎ 8956 0968; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) sells fuel and basic supplies, and is an outlet for local artists' work, including carved wooden animals, bowls, traditional weapons and seed necklaces.

Apatula is linked to the Stuart Hwy, 150km to the west, by the Kulgera-Finke Rd, a reasonably well-maintained dirt road

sometimes known as the Goyder Stock Route. It's a fairly dull stretch of road, although the Lambert Centre makes an interesting diversion.

OLD ANDADO TRACK

From Finke, you can do a long loop drive, east and then north to Alice Springs on the western edge of the Simpson Desert. An alternative route is to head south from New Crown into South Australia through Mt Dare Station and on to Oodnadatta.

Either way, this is 4WD country, with plenty of red sand, but the majority of the Old Andado Track runs between two lines of dunes and is not difficult to negotiate.

From Finke the road heads southeast for 30km to **New Crown Homestead** (☎ 8956 0969), which sells fuel (diesel and unleaded) during daylight hours; credit cards are not accepted.

Shortly after leaving New Crown, the road once again crosses the Finke River and then swings north for the 70km run to **Andado Station**. This stretch passes through beautiful sand-dune country that is ablaze with wildflowers after good rain.

From Andado Station (no tourist facilities) an 18km track leads to **Old Andado Homestead**

(☎ 8956 0812; camp site per person \$9, cabin per person \$20, with bedding \$30). It's situated in a pretty valley between two huge lines of dunes and is run by Molly Clark, one of the Centre's great battlers surviving the remote harsh conditions here. Bookings are advised for the cabins. There are no meals or fuel, and credit cards are not accepted.

The track swings north from Andado for the 321km trip to Alice, which takes at least five hours. A 10km detour leads east to **Mac Clark Conservation Reserve**, 38km north of Andado, which makes a worthwhile diversion. The 30-sq-km reserve, on a vast gravel plain, protects a large stand of tall waddy trees (*Acacia peuce*), a rare species that survives in an environment where little else can.

Continuing on from the turn-off to the reserve, the track leaves the gravel plain behind and heads northwards through dune country, looping away to the west around the Arookara and Rodinga Ranges, before arriving at the **Allambi Homestead**, 218km from Old Andado.

It's a further 20km to the Aboriginal community, **Ltyentye Apurte** – better known as Santa Teresa. Permits are not required to pass straight through, but visits to the com-

DETOUR

From Maryvale Station (Titjikala) a rough road heads southwest for 44km to **Chambers Pillar Historic Reserve**. It's 4WD only, with some rocky sections; the last 10km is through sand drifts and dunes.

Although this is a detour of sorts, Chambers Pillar is a big destination for many travellers wanting to see this extraordinary sandstone pillar, the sort of bizarre sight that only central Australia can deliver. Towering nearly 60m above the surrounding plain, the phallic marker is all that's left of a layer of sandstone that formed 350 million years ago. Early explorers used it as a navigational beacon, and their names and the dates of their visits are carved into the base of the soft rock. Unfortunately, it also bears the work of some less worthy modern-day graffiti artists – there are hefty fines for adding your own name.

Like many central Australian sights, the pillar is at its glorious best at sunset and sunrise. Framed against a fading desert sky, it's a photographer's dream. Since it's a tough drive to get here, the best idea is to arrive an hour or two before sunset, camp overnight and enjoy breakfast in the desert with the pillar for company.

To the Aboriginal people of the area, Chambers Pillar is the remains of Irtkawara, a powerful Gecko Ancestor who killed some of his ancestors and took a girl of the wrong skin group. They were banished to the desert where both turned to stone – the girl became **Castle Rock**, about 500m away.

The **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70), in an attractive grove of desert oaks, has pit toilets, tables and fireplaces – bring water and firewood.

Although Chambers Pillar is only 160km from Alice Springs, the trip takes a good four hours. There's a great view along the way from a high ridge 12km to the west of the pillar.

DETOUR

If you think that you are in the middle of nowhere, you're wrong – you are in the middle of Australia. A signposted sandy track leaves the the Finke-Kulgera road about 23km west of Finke, and runs 14km to the **Lambert Centre**, Australia's geographical heart. To mark the spot there's a dinky 5m-high replica of the flagpole, complete with Australian flag, that sits atop Parliament House in Canberra. If you picked Australia up at its centre of gravity, it would balance here at latitude 25°36'36.4"S and longitude 134°21'17.3"E. You can add your name to the visitors' book if you like.

The track is quite sandy and narrow in patches, so a 4WD is recommended. There are two parallel tracks so stick to the left. From the turn-off it is 6km to the Mulga bore, then 8km west to the site.

munity must be arranged in advance through the **council office** (☎ 8956 0999).

The artists at **Keringke Art Centre** (☎ 8956 0956; www.keringkearts.com.au; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Thu) produce some outstanding work with striking, colourful designs a feature. Among the artworks are paintings on canvas and ceramic, carved artefacts, textiles and beadwork. Call ahead to arrange a visit to the workshop and gallery.

From Ltyentye Apurte it's about 82km to Alice Springs. The road is generally pretty rough and dusty from the community to Alice Springs airport, 15km from town, where the bitumen is a welcome relief.

DOWN THE TRACK

South from Alice along the Stuart Hwy, apart from the turn-off to Rainbow Valley and the opportunity for camel riding at Stuart's Well, there's not much other than a couple of roadhouses till you reach the South Australia border.

RAINBOW VALLEY CONSERVATION RESERVE

Only 100km from Alice Springs, Rainbow Valley is one of the more extraordinary sights in central Australia, though it's really only at its best around sunset. Out of

the low dunes and mulga on the eastern edge of the James Ranges rise a series of sandstone bluffs and cliffs that seem to glow in an ever-changing show of ochre red, orange and purples as the sun sets. Although colourfully named, the crumbling cliffs are mainly shades of cream and rust red, formed by the iron-rich sandstone and leached layers of soft white sandstone.

If you're lucky enough to visit after some decent rain, the whole scene is stunningly reflected in the foreground claypans – a photographer's dream.

The rocks here were formed about 300 million years ago, and weathering and leaching has led to a concentration of red iron oxides in the upper layers; lower down the stone is almost white. The reserve is important to the southern Arrernte people, and the large rock massif known as Ewerre in the south of the reserve is a registered sacred site.

There's an information board and a sunset viewing platform near the car park, where a 10-minute walk skirts the claypan and leads around the other side of the foot of the bluff to the **mushroom rock**. Look out for the high rock outcrop that looks just like a face in profile staring toward Rainbow Valley.

The small **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) has picnic tables, a pit toilet and gas barbecues. It's a bit exposed, with little shade and no water, but the setting is superb and perfectly positioned for sunset viewing.

The turn-off to Rainbow Valley is 77km along the Stuart Hwy south of Alice Springs, then 24km along a 4WD access road to the car park and camping area. A conventional vehicle might just make the trip in dry conditions, but there are a couple of deep sandy patches where you could get bogged.

STUART'S WELL

Stuart's Well is a stop on the Stuart Hwy about 90km south of Alice Springs, where the highway passes through a gap in the James Ranges. It's well worth stopping in at the roadhouse for a beer and to browse the walls of photos and memorabilia covering the history of the development of Kings Canyon by the Cotterill family. You might also catch Dinky the famous singing dingo – rescued and raised from a pup by owner Jim Cotterill, it now entertains tourists by tip-toeing across the piano and howling along!

Otherwise, the main attraction here is **Camels Australia** (☎ 8956 0925; www.camels-ustralia.com.au), founded by central Australia's 'camel king', Noel Fullerton. It's a good opportunity to take a short camel ride (\$5 around the yard, \$30/40 for 30/60 minutes and \$85/110 for a half/full day), but the serious stuff is the extended outback safaris from three to five days (\$150 per day) through the gaps and gorges of the James Ranges. Meals, swag accommodation and camel are included.

Jim's Place (☎ 8956 0808; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$14/17, budget r with own swag/supplied linen \$15/25, s/d cabins with en suite \$70/85; ☎ 9am-8.30pm; 📶 🚰 🚿), next door to the camel farm, is a roadhouse run by central Australian identity Jim Cotterill. The Cotterill family, Jim and his late father Jack, opened up Kings Canyon to tourism, cutting a road through from their Wallara Ranch in the 1960s – the truck used to clear the roads now sits out front. There's a monument to Jack at Kings Canyon and Jim is a fount of knowledge on the area. It has a grassy, shaded camping ground, pool and spa, a store with basic provisions and a licensed restaurant (meals \$15 to \$20), which is open from 9am to 7.30pm.

ERLDUNDA

Erldunda is a modern roadhouse and motel complex on the Stuart Hwy 200km south of Alice Springs, at the point where the Lasseter Hwy branches off to Uluru (244km west).

Desert Oaks Motel & Caravan Park (☎ 8956 0984; www.desertoaksresort.com; cnr Stuart & Lasseter Hwys; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$20/26, budget s/d/tr/q \$30/50/60/65, motel s/d \$80/100; 📶 🚰 🚿) gets a fair bit of traffic – presumably people who underestimated the distance to Uluru – and as such it's better than your average roadhouse accommodation. The shady grassed camping area has a pool, tennis court and barbecues. The three air-con backpacker cabins have four beds each with communal facilities, and the modern motel units are well equipped with TV, fridge and en suite.

In addition to accommodation, bistro meals are available in the **Ringers Inn** (mains \$12-18; ☎ dinner), there's a **pub** (☎ 10am-11pm) and the **roadhouse** (☎ 7am-8.30pm) sells takeaway food, souvenirs, groceries and vehicle parts. Fuel is available from 6.30am to 10pm.

KULGERA

Depending on which way you're heading, the small settlement of Kulgera will be your first or last taste of the Territory. It's on the Stuart Hwy 20km north of the South Australian border, and from here the gravel Goyder Stock Route (Finke-Kulgera Rd) heads off east for the 150km trip to Finke.

The busy pub/roadhouse and **police station** (☎ 8956 0974) here services the outlying Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal community and pastoral leases.

Kulgera Roadhouse (☎ 8956 0973; Stuart Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$13/20, budget r \$30, s/d \$65/80; ☎ 6am-11pm; 📶 🚰 🚿) has a large camping area, basic backpacker rooms and comfortable motel rooms with TV, fridge and air-con. The roadhouse also has a shop, pub (open 11am to 11pm), ATM and dining room, and offers takeaways.

SOUTH TO PORT AUGUSTA

At the South Australia-Northern Territory border, 20km south of Kulgera, there's a roadside stop and **border sign** where tour groups are fond of getting their photos taken. From here, there's lots of very little to see as you head south the 900km or so to Port Augusta. The main exception is the town of Coober Pedy (391km south of the border), a fascinating outback town that should be an essential stop on this long haul south.

There are several roadhouses at intervals along the route. All sell fuel (the longest distance between fill-ups is 254km, between Coober Pedy and Glendambo) and meals during regular business hours, and accommodation is available.