

The Ghan at sunset.



STORY FIONA HARPER

# Rail adventure

## AN AUSSIE ICON

THE GHAN REMAINS AN ICONIC RAIL JOURNEY BETWEEN ADELAIDE AND DARWIN LURING TRAVELLERS TO OUTBACK AUSTRALIA.

**STANDING BEFORE STANDLEY** Chasm, our guide Johnson Maloney explained that this was much more than a geological wonder to his people.

“For white fellas, this is just a chasm,” Johnson, an Arrente man, said.

“For our mob it is everything. All our stories are here – in the land, the trees, the people and with our ancestors.”

“It’s easy to talk about sacred sites, but that’s not entirely correct.”

Spreading his arms to take in the striking red-hued cliffs of Standley Chasm (known as Angkerle Atwatye),

Johnson explained how “the sacredness is in the stories that place holds for our people”.

We were standing alongside a dry riverbed that wound its way through the chasm pierced by shards of sunlight when Johnson asked us to rest our ears against the trunk of the red river gums (known in his language as apar).

As I leaned into the trunk, I felt slightly foolish. But soon I heard what amounted to the sound of the trees’ lifeforce surging through its trunk as its roots reached deep into the earth seeking nourishment.

Bizarrely, I heard an almost musical, guttural beat as the wind brushed through the upper branches, sending vibrations into the ground beneath my feet.

We were midway through a four-day-long rail journey known as the Ghan Expedition through the heart of Australia’s Red Centre from Darwin to Adelaide with stops at Katherine, Alice Springs and Coober Pedy.

Though, in truth, this adventure started three days earlier when our small aircraft touched down on to a far-flung dirt airstrip in remote Arnhem Land.

A scenic 40-minute flight from Darwin dropped us into Garig Gunak Barlu National Park (pronounced gah-rig goon-uck-bar-loo), which casts a protective blanket across the Coburg Peninsula.

Checking into Seven Spirit Bay, which sits on the shores of the Arafura Sea, the lodge provided a welcome retreat from the Top End heat.

The Main Lodge, with its lofty ceiling, walls of glass and timber floor, is centred

