

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 Arrrente 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.

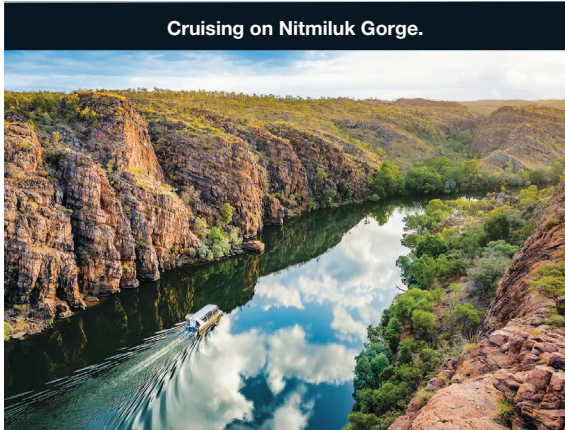
The Main Lodge, with its lofty ceiling, walls of glass and timber floor, is centred





Telegraph Station dinner, Alice Springs.

Relaxing at Seven Spirit Bay lodge.



Cruising on Nitmiluk Gorge.

around a lagoon-style swimming pool while louvre window-lined Habitat Suites nestle discreetly among the native forest.

Daily adventures include 4WD explorations in a safari-style open-sided vehicle from which we saw buffalo and wild banteng cattle foraging near lily-lined billabongs.

Later, on a sea voyage that took us deep into Port Essington to visit the ruins of Victoria Settlement we're greeted on arrival by a triumvirate of manta rays cruising the shallow waters as we stepped ashore on the beach.

Rich earthy tones of laterite cliffs cast their ochre hue across the aqua sea. Weathered trees cling grimly to cliffs eroded by tumultuous seas whipped up by tropical storms that barrel across the peninsula like roiling puffballs of cumulonimbus.

Later, we left Darwin and the Coburg Peninsula behind, boarding the southbound Ghan for a four-day journey through Australia's heart.

Our first stop was Katherine where we cruised the reflective waters of Nitmiluk

Gorge, where a bumper wet season was evident in riverside trees leaning to the rush of a formerly raging torrent.

After the stop at Alice Springs came our final stop at Coober Pedy, a quirky town that arose from the desert's painted sands after precious opals were found

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in 1915. The ensuing opal rush attracted fortune hunters who established shantytown shacks beside their mines which soon grew into a flourishing town fed by opal fever.

Almost the entire town is concealed underground where the sandstone

soil provides natural insulation against daytime temperatures that can reach as high as 50°C in summer.

Single-digit winter temperatures are also made easier with the earth retaining the heat from sun-kissed skies.

Everywhere you look, air vents dot the hills providing ventilation to the homes and hotels, shops and galleries concealed beneath the earth.

It's this opportunity to visit such unique outback towns that lures travellers to The Ghan expedition experience.

On a cross-country journey bookended by the tropical charm of Darwin and the cosmopolitan beachside suburbs of Adelaide, ensconced in a compact cabin we were immersed in the cultural melting pot of outback Australia where the characters are as big as the landscape they call home.

Characters like opal miner Clint who escorted us down a mine shaft for lunch at Opal Quest Mine where we dined beneath a roof chiselled out of rock, the dirt floor beneath our feet strewn with undiscovered opals. Or Train Manager Bruce, for whom the Ghan is like his second home after almost 30 years crisscrossing the country by rail and who can pinpoint our position just from a glance out the window.

Arrente man Johnson Maloney summed up this connection to Country best as the wind whipped through the Standley Chasm tree canopy, creating a soothing soundtrack scented with eucalyptus.

"We're not standing on a sacred site. We're in a site of sacredness," he said.

"This is not a place that is exclusive to our mob. Anyone can come here. We want people to come here. We simply ask that the sacredness of our stories is respected." ■