

0.1 Chapter 5: culture: Travel

0.2 Travel

1 The Western Desert, Australia for Humility

Australia's Western Desert covers some 600,000 square kilometres of the continent, stretching from the Nullarbor plain in the south to the Kimberley in the north, and from the Percival Lakes in the west through to the Pintupi lands in the Northern Territory. The terrain is vast, deeply opposed to life, filled with dangers and a supreme aide to mental health.

The desert has never uttered a word, has never written anything down, has no mind or thought, and yet can be counted as one of the most philosophical entities on earth, always on hand, either practically or as a concept in our minds, to bring perspective back to our otherwise chaotic, harassed lives.



It is usually unpleasant to be made to feel small by more successful peers and colleagues. But there are other far more satisfying ways to feel diminished. In the Great Sandy Desert regions, one sees gashes and fissures in the rocks that speak of disproportionate expanses of time. The earth's tectonic plates have here rippled granite as though it were linen and spread it out in seeming infinity on a horizon, which eventually gives way to the featureless, baking plains of the Tanami desert. There is relief in contemplating rocks created four hundred million years ago; and the erosion of millennia marked on the walls of steep canyons. In the face of the strength, age and size of the universe, humans seem merely dust postponed.

Why the pleasure? Why might we seek out this feeling of smallness and delight in it and recover balance through it? Because we naturally exaggerate our own importance. The incidents of our own lives loom very large in our view of the world. Yet, as the Australian Western Desert teaches us, we are minute and entirely dispensable in the greater scheme of things. The world will go on much the same without us, which can be a source of relief rather than distress. It is very helpful to be reduced, from time to time, in our own eyes, because this calms the urgent, disturbing (and very normal) sense that it matters so much what we do.



We need hints of the unimaginable extensions of space across the solar system, the galaxy, the cosmos. The sky at night from the desert is lit up with the sparkles of a million stars. Gazing up, none of our troubles, disappointments or hopes seem to have any relevance. Everything that happens to us, or that we do, will be of no consequence whatever from the point of view of the universe. For a little while our own lives can seem blissfully unimportant. But it is not a personal affront. The same applies to everyone: it is levelling, humbling and a deep relief.

The desert rehearses in grand terms a lesson that ordinary life typically introduces viciously; that the universe is mightier than we are, that we are frail and temporary and have no alternative but to accept the limitations on our will; that we must bow to necessities greater than ourselves. This is the lesson written into the stones and the red sand. So grandly is it written there that we may come away from the desert, not crushed, but inspired by what lies beyond us; privileged to be subjects to such majestic necessities. We are the playthings of the forces that laid out those canyons and chiselled those barren mountains. The desert moves us to acknowledge limitations that we would otherwise encounter with anxiety or anger in the ordinary flow of events. It is not just nature that defies us. Human life is as overwhelming,

but it is the vast spaces of nature that perhaps provide us with the finest, the most respectful reminder of all that exceeds us. If we spend time in them, they may help us to accept more graciously the great unfathomable events that molest our lives and will return us to dust.

