

Title:

Central Australia: The Western MacDonnell Ranges

Word Count:

627

Summary:

The ancient landscape of Western MacDonnell Ranges stretch west from the Central Australian outback town of Alice Springs for over 200 kilometres, forming a rugged red barrier across the vast desert plains of Central Australia. The ranges hold a wealth of spectacular natural features and landscapes, all within an easy hour or two from Alice Springs by car.

Keywords:

alice, springs, central, australia, western, macdonnell, ranges, tour, travel, holiday, vacation

Article Body:

The ancient landscape of Western MacDonnell Ranges stretch west from the Central Australian outback town of Alice Springs for over 200 kilometres, forming a rugged red barrier across the vast desert plains of Central Australia. The ranges hold a wealth of spectacular natural features and landscapes, all within an easy hour or two from Alice Springs by car.

The long parallel ridges of the Western MacDonnell Ranges rise up to 600 metres high above the valley floors, cut at regular intervals by deep gorges carved by ancient rivers such as the Finke and Hugh Rivers which meander south to empty into the shimmering red sands of the Simpson Desert. Although situated in an arid desert landscape, the Western MacDonnell Ranges are home to an astonishing variety of unique flora and fauna, including majestic ghost gums and rare relict palms left over from an age when Central Australia enjoyed a wetter tropical environment many thousands of years ago.

The Western MacDonnells are home to a many very popular destinations which are all easily accessible by road from Alice Springs in the course of a day tour. These sites include Simpsons Gap, Standley Chasm, Ellery Creek, Serpentine Gorge, the Ochre Pits, Ormiston Gorge, Redbank Gorge, Glen Helen Gorge, Roma Gorge, Thorala (Gosse Bluff) and Palm Valley.

Ellery Creek has beautiful clear, deep waters suitable for swimming, but take care when diving in as the water can be extremely cold below the surface. On the

opposite side of the Ellery Creek waterhole is a pristine white sandy beach from where it is possible to further explore the gorge. There is also a pleasant walk from the Ellery Creek campsite through higher terrain and back along creek bed to the main waterhole.

Ormiston Gorge is a spectacular sight and one of the Western MacDonnell's must-see destinations. The towering red rock walls of the gorge are accessible with an easy 1 kilometre walk to the gorge entrance, but there is also an excellent 7 kilometre Ormiston Pound loop track which is well worth the effort during cooler weather or early morning. Serpentine Gorge has an easy 1km walking track from the car park to the gorge entrance. There is also an optional 600 metre track that ascends rugged cliffs to a lookout offering excellent views of the Western MacDonnells.

Glen Helen Gorge is located on the ancient Finke River, reputedly the oldest river in the world that still follows its original course. It is less than 1 kilometre to the lookout, and only slightly further to the rocks at the waterhole. The entrance to the gorge is behind the Glen Helen Homestead, now a comfortable outback hotel and restaurant and a great spot to stop for a meal.

Camping facilities are excellent throughout the Western MacDonnell Ranges, and particularly so at Redbank Gorge. There are two camp areas, the larger Woodlands area being well provisioned with shady camps and cooking facilities, each site having a shady sandy patch under the trees to pitch a tent in an otherwise rocky area. Redbank Gorge is close to Mt Sonder, one of the tallest mountains in Central Australia and the Northern Territory, and a favourite subject of famous aboriginal watercolour artist Albert Namatjira.

West of Redbank Gorge lies Roma Gorge, a great location to visit but overnight camping is not allowed. Access is along a sandy and sometimes rocky creekbed for 8 kilometres, so this is one of the few locations where a four-wheel-drive vehicle is advisable. Roma Gorge is home to an important site rich in high quality Aboriginal rock art. Further west lies Tnorala (Gosse Bluff), a spectacular crater formed when a comet crashed to earth some 140 million years ago. Local indigenous Arrernte legend tells of a baby falling to earth from the heavens at this site during the Dreamtime.