Sacred to the Anangu people, iconic Uluru is the crimson heart of Australia. When Ron Gluckman revisits the giant rock and its traditional caretakers, he finds a visceral spirit permeates the vast desert and lulls the mind into Dreamtime.

Into the Dreamscape

Glamping, Outback-style, at Longitude 131, which offers unobstructed views of Uluru. Opposite: A couple from Sydney, Matt and Diana Shuter, visit Kata Tjuta and Uluru in homage to Matt’s parents, who met there 45 years ago.
A helicopter tour over Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park provides a bird’s eye view of the 36 domes of Kata Tjuta, or Many Heads, and the monolithic Uluru, known since 1872 as Ayers Rock, after a colonial official, squats almost dead center in Australia, a hulking orange-copper mass bulging from deceptively flat, enflamed desert like a divine pavilion belched up upon a majestic red carpet. Uluru is one of the world’s most famous inselbergs, “mountain islands” that are the remains of an eroded, ancient mountain range. The delightful term conjures up images of icebergs; and Uluru seems to be floating on the endless plain, with much of the mass of this iconic rock really underground. Uluru was the year Uluru officially reclaimed its indigenous Anangu people, who hold this area as one of huge rocks. When I last visited, these were called the Olgas. Now, they have reverted to the far more poetic name used for thousands of years by the Anangu people: Kata Tjuta, or Many Heads.

While Uluru is the largest of the domes, it’s also the most impressive, and extraordinarily located. Uluru, known since 1872 as Ayers Rock, after a colonial official, squats almost dead center in Australia, a hulking orange-copper mass bulging from deceptively flat, enflamed desert like a divine pavilion belched up upon a majestic red carpet. Uluru is one of the world’s most famous inselbergs, “mountain islands” that are the remains of an eroded, ancient mountain range. The delightful term conjures up images of icebergs; and Uluru seems to be floating on the endless plain, with much of the mass of this iconic rock really underground. It has long been mandatory on travel itineraries, My first visit came in 1993. That was the year Uluru officially reclaimed its indigenous name (although it didn’t fully discard the moniker Ayers until 2002) setting off a wave of restitutions of Aboriginal names for landmarks and natural resources across the country. Now, I’m back, with my wife on her first visit. I’ve booked hikes and excursions into the desert, plus starlit dinners in the dunes. And, since it’s our anniversary, the most luxurious retreat in these parts.

A tourism boom has brought everything from camels to Segway tours to Uluru. But mindful of how attitudes have changed about sensitive stewardship over the past 25 years, we’ll be taking tours that highlight native art and legends, including explanations of the powerful Dreamtime creation stories of the indigenous Anangu people, who hold this area supremely sacred. When I last visited, climbing the 348-meter-high Uluru was a controversial habit of tourists—next year, the practice is to be banned. Instead, we’ll hike around it, and have a look at the magnificent art installation nearby: Field of Light. Since meeting the artist, Bruce Munro, I’ve been yearning to see his inspirational work that puts 70,000 long-stem colored lights swaying in the foreground of Uluru, the most provocative, captivating change in this region in half a billion years. And as if to re-emphasize the spell that Dreamtime casts over visitors, Munro tells me the idea came to him in a vision when he also first visited Uluru a quarter-century ago.

Hence, as we peer from the plane down at massive Uluru and the horizon far beyond, we are filled with anticipation. Then, another astounding formation pops into view, looming just as large, but composed of a cluster of huge rocks. When I last visited, these were called the Olgas. Now, they have reverted to the far more poetic name used for thousands of years by the Anangu people: Kata Tjuta, or Many Heads.

TRAVELANDLEISURASIA.COM | SEPTEMBER 2018

63
A hulking copper mass, a divine pavilion belched up upon a majestic red carpet.
company that operates most of the lodges and tourism here for the native Indigenous Land Corporation, has set a goal of 50 percent Aboriginal Australian employment and they are getting close.) Each day starts with an expedition at dawn, and usually continues right through to an epicurean adventure at night, whether dining in the dunes, or canapés by caves carved into Uluru.

One morning, we are taken to Maruku Arts in the park’s small town center for a dot-painting workshop and hands-on introduction to Indigenous art. Alice Wheeler, an elder Anangu artist, draws in the sand, making circles and lines to show how symbols on famous local dot paintings tell the Dreamtime legends of creation. She demonstrates that complex art is composed of simple strokes—a circle for a place, an oval for a person, footmarks to show emu or kangaroo. Within minutes, our group is gleefully creating our own colorful sagas. My wife and I produce a pair of fabulous mementos of a most special wedding anniversary.

The experience of aboriginal people around the world is filled with tragedy and loss. Australia has the unusual opportunity to re-address its interaction with its indigenous people, and I find the ongoing dialogue a fascinating facet of my visits to the country. After decades of protests, the Anangu regained ownership of their traditional land in 1985, although debates over use continue. On my first visit, outrage simmered over tourists climbing Uluru, which is sacred to the Anangu—though it is also dangerous: dozes have died scaling the rock, most recently a 96-year-old Japanese tourist in July. It will be forbidden next year.

STAYS ARE ALL-INCLUSIVE AT LONGITUDE 131, BEGINNING with an introduction in the Dune Lodge, which is packed with reference books and periodicals, decorated with native crafts and colorful dot paintings. Meals are wholesome but hearty, without the fuss all too often confused with pampering at high-end resorts. It’s barefoot luxury, the Aussie way. The model, James Baillie had told me, was pioneered in high-end New Zealand lodges, “But we do it Australian style,” he added, “We want you to feel like you are staying with friends.”

Guests tend to unwind and get to know each other, goosed along by the complimentary bar. Longitude 131 has a deep wine cellar, and, this far out in the middle of nowhere, friendship forms, yarns are shared. We meet Matt and Diana Shuter, a young couple from Sydney, also celebrating their anniversary, and more. Matt’s mother and father met at Uluru, or on it. “My dad was a bit of a hippie driving around Australia with a friend in his VW Beetle,” he says. “My mom was on teacher exchange from the USA.” They met climbing Uluru 45 years ago. This is Matt’s first visit.

On a group hike around then through a spectacular gorge right into Many Heads, he admits a quandary. He is tempted to climb Uluru to where his parents met. His father had been taking pictures of Kata Tjuta at sunset, so the precise point should be pretty easy to locate. But he is wrestling with concerns of whether it would be disrespectful to the indigenous people or the spirit of the site.

Such emotions are invariably stirred by the omnipresence of Uluru and Kata Tjuta. You feel power radiating from the ancient monuments, which shift in color as the sun moves across the sky, and the massive rocks turn from orange to red to rust-brown. A highlight comes another day with a sunset walk around Uluru.

However impressive the mound appears from Longitude 131, close up you realize its true immensity. Uluru is taller than the Eiffel Tower: 8.6 kilometers long, and 3.8 kilometers wide, with a circumference of 9.3 kilometers. The indigenous people say Uluru was created by the spirits, and each side tells a different story. These are conveyed in intricate paintings around Uluru, and locals believe that by touching the rock, they can communicate with those spirits in Dreamtime.

Guide Caroline Haden-Smith walks us around, stopping at caves decorated with ancient paintings. As she points out markings, we learn the characterizations for spears, people and animals. At Kitchen Cave, with its high roof and airy breezes, a great place for preparing meals, she shows signs for children; here the grandparents and older generations would tell little ones the legends and lessons of the world, while their parents were off gathering plants.

As Caroline grows more animated, the fading sun sends giant shadows on the rock walls, and I’m reminded of shadow puppets in Indonesia. She points out figures for snakes and frogs, and spirits, and the black color on the rock from thousands of years of cooking fires. My mind wanders, and in these parts, with all the art and history, it’s easy to feel you are slipping into Dreamtime.

IT HAPPENS OFTEN AT ULURU, WHICH HAS EXERCITED a magnetic pull on visitors for ages. This is the story I heard from artist Bruce Munro when I met him last year in Sydney. Like Matt’s mom, he had been an expat making his life in Australia. Back in 1992, he also had been living in Sydney with his then-girlfriend, now his wife. Before returning to England, they sold everything, bought a car and began seeing the sights. “I was a beach person, I had no real
interest in Uluru,” he confesses when we talk recently, after I’ve seen his installation. “But it completely blew me away. I was inspired by some kind of light force that came right out of the ground.”

Bruce always sketched ideas in notepads, but this wouldn’t be filed away. “I kept coming back to this. I couldn’t get it out of my head.” Then, in 2003, he built the first model for Field of Light in his U.K. backyard, in what sounds eerily like Close Encounters of the Third Kind. It grew to include 15,000 lights. “Everyone thought I was mad. My wife asked where the money was coming from.” He estimates he spent A$125,000 on what seemed a crazy project. But it also began to spark interest with others. Soon, he was exhibiting versions of the installation around the world. Then, a call came from Australia. Voyages wanted to bring it to Uluru. Field of Light was coming home.

Not that it was easy. “There were massive logistics, and planning,” Bruce recalls. The process took five years, including consultation with the Anangu, who typically reject development in this sacred site. But they seemed to empathize with his vision, Bruce says. Or, perhaps could tell he was possessed. “I told them this was a spiritual thing. They seemed to trust me.”

Field of Light opened in 2016, and has proven so popular, it has been extended through 2020, becoming by far the longest exhibit of his career. More than 250,000 have viewed the wondrous display, mainly at sunset, when the solar-powered stems sway in the evening breeze, adding an eerie glow that spreads in the shadow of Uluru. Bruce advises that his creation is particularly powerful at sunrise.

My last day, I decide to heed him, but the lights only are switched on at daybreak for special bookings. No problem, says Adrian at Longitude 131. He makes a call, and personally delivers me to the field. I’m all alone. And I’m so mesmerized as the bulbs sway and change color that I only realize the cold when the shivering makes it difficult to snap pictures.

I stop. There is a supreme stillness, and I suddenly feel a welling of the spirits, connected to Dreamtime. It’s an overwhelming impression of righteousness and perfection. Then, I’m reminded that the Anangu have already put it in perspective. They call this spectacular place, Tili Wiru Tjuta Nyakutjaku. Meaning: “looking at lots of beautiful lights.”

I later learn that Matt never did climb Uluru. My sense is just being near this mystical rock lights a spark inside you. Besides, from his origin story, he already had the spirit of the site in his soul.