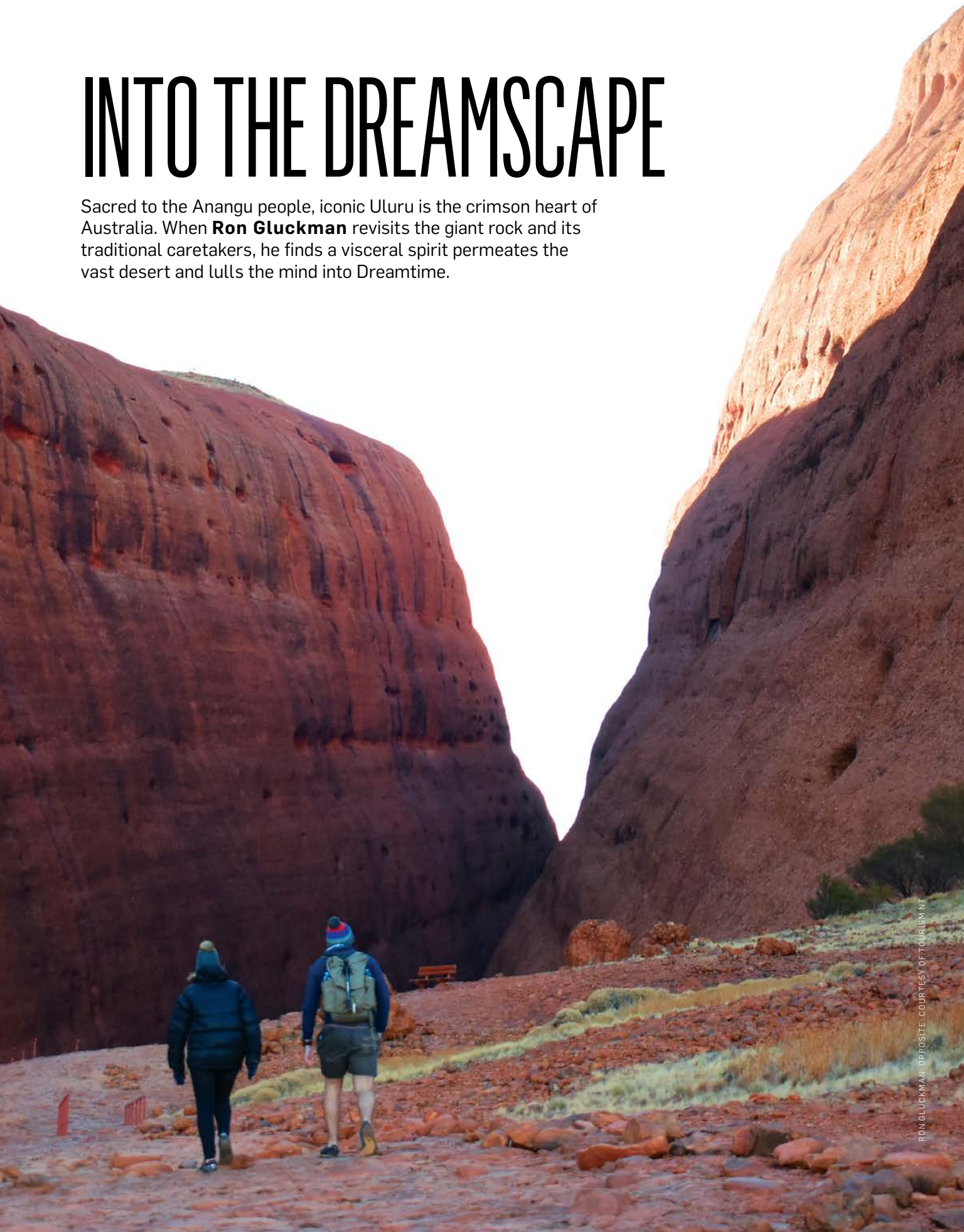


INTO THE DREAMSCAPE

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.



RON GLUCKMAN, OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF TOURISM NT



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.

WE'RE FLYING OVER AUSTRALIA'S Red Centre, a mostly barren landscape stretching to the horizon, a dramatic reminder that this is more a continent than country, and so much is truly the Outback. Which isn't to suggest a lack of beauty. Quite the contrary, since a large measure of Australia's allure stems from its

staggering emptiness, mind-boggling stretches of hills, coastline and raw earth. Such terrain naturally sends the mind drifting into reflective dreams that question our creation and purpose, jarred back to reality only occasionally by evidence of humans: a ribbon of road, some weathered houses, a desolate fence line.

Then, out of nowhere, we suddenly see rocks. Big rocks. Humongous.

By far the largest one is 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 native 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



A helicopter tour over Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.
BELOW: Dune Pavilion views, Longitude 131.



COURTESY OF TOURISM NT, TOP: SHAANA MCNAUGHT/TOURISM NT

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 50,000 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.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THESE HULKING ROCKS CUT FROM

mountains 500 to 600 million years ago is another more recent addition: the pearl-white sails of Longitude 131. The safari-style luxury lodge is hidden on the edge of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, no mean feat, since aside from Uluru and the Kata Tjuta's 36 domes, we see hardly a hill, and scant vegetation across the 1,326-square-kilometer park. From the plane, the uncompromisingly red flatness extends to the curvature of the Earth, a phenomenon that seems even more pronounced after we touch down.

Opened in 2002, this collection of 15 cabins always abounded in natural splendor but originally lacked five-star luxury—until it was taken over in 2013 by Baillie Lodges, acclaimed operator of small, exclusive retreats in remote locations like Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island. Husband and wife James and Hayley Baillie closed Longitude 131 for four months last year, and their A\$8 million makeover revamped the pool and added a spa, balconies around each tented pavilion, and a two-bedroom villa. "It's all about the experience, being there," Hayley said when we met last year in Sydney.

We don't get our first glimpse of Longitude 131 until we bounce along dirt roads with jovial manager Adrian Levy, who suddenly swerves off track, churning clouds of red dust spinning through prickly vegetation. Then, like magic, we arrive at an array of mystical-looking tents. My jaw drops. "That's the reaction we aim for," he chuckles happily.

There is plenty more of that to come. Sunrises bring daily eruptions of color electrifying the thin desert air, which we soak up from our private veranda. At night, we watch stars dance across the open sky, snuggling on the outdoor camp bed, heated by a rustic stove. Tea and treats appear at turndown. Not that we linger long. In this eerie land that existed 250 million years before dinosaurs even roamed the Earth, where temperatures can erupt into the mid-40s in summer and dive well below zero in winter, Longitude 131 guides, some of whom are Anangu, show off ancient rock paintings and explain their local legends of creation. (Voyages, the



A hulking copper mass,
a divine pavilion
belched up upon a
majestic red carpet

COURTESY OF TOURISM NT

The 348-meter-high Uluru dwarfs all in its wake, including the tents of boutique resort Longitude 131.

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.

A fuller, richer understanding of native life in this region is delivered at Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre. Set inside a pair of red-brown buildings that mirror the color and appearance of the nearby rock formations, it features films and exhibits illuminating life in these lands going back thousands of years.

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 sacrilege to the Anangu—though it is also dangerous: dozens have died scaling the rock, most recently a 66-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, friendships form, 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.



Field of Light, by Bruce Munro, will be shining until 2020. ABOVE, FROM LEFT: At a Maruku Arts dot-painting workshop in Yulara; local life includes emus.

RON GLUCKMAN, ABOVE, SHANA MCNAUGHT/TOURISM NT (2)

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. It's 3.5 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 EXERTED

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. ☺



A visit to Australia's Red Centre is sure to evoke an emotional response. There are now more ways than ever to commune with and pay proper respect to this sacred rock.

GETTING THERE

Uluru is 470 kilometers by road from Alice Springs, the nearest city, which has the area's major airport, as well as buses and trains to most parts of Australia. Or you can fly into the Ayers Rock Airport serving the small resort town of Yulara, about 20 minutes away, from which most resorts and tour companies include airport pickup in packages.

WHERE TO STAY

Longitude 131 is the most exclusive property in the region, and the only one offering unobstructed views of Uluru from your balcony, and bed. longitude131.com.au; A\$1,500 per person per night, including all food and drinks, plus a full package of touring; two-night minimum. Voyages, the company that operates most of the lodges and tourism around Uluru for the native Indigenous Land Corporation, has an extensive array of lodging options from camp sites and backpacker hostels, up to its own high-end option, **Sails in the Desert**. ayersrockresort.com.au; doubles from A\$43 to A\$800.

TOUR GUIDES

Most hotel packages include tours but other options abound, from outfitters like **Outback Tour Services** (outbacktour.services.com.au) and **SEIT Outback Australia** (seitoutbackaustralia.com.au). **Voyages** (ulurumeetingplace.com.au) collates special tours highlighting traditional culture, with Indigenous guides—and also has a lengthy list of free activities that are open to all visitors. (ayersrockresort.com.au).

ACTIVITIES

One of my motivating factors in returning to Uluru was to see Bruce Munro's ethereal **Field of Light**, which will be on display through 2020. ayersrockresort.com.au; tickets from A\$42.

Dining in the dunes is a must. With no competing light, or noise, nights in the Red Centre offer supreme solitude and a star-filled sky. Guides delineate the constellations in the Southern sky, and explain the fascinating native names and legends for the star groups. There are various options, but you should splurge not only for a better menu, but smaller, more intimate groups like the **Sounds of Silence** (three-course Bush-inspired meal, canapés and sparkling wine from A\$210), or top-end **Tali Wiru** (four-course dinner showcasing local delicacies and native ingredients, plus wine, from A\$360) dining experiences.

Book through your hotel or ayersrockresort.com.au. **Helicopter flights** offer spectacular overviews of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, at about A\$150 for 30 minutes. Visit ayersrockresort.com.au or flyuluru.com.au for details. One recommended outfit is **Professional Helicopter Services** (phs.com.au).

Camel tours evoke a sense of what it was like when the first non-native explorers trekked to Uluru. Ride a descendant of the camels imported from India and Afghanistan in the 1800s—200,000 of them still roam wild in northern and western Oz. uluru.cameltours.com.au; from A\$80. Or go futuristic and glide around Uluru by **Segway**. ulurusegwaytours.com.au; from A\$129. — R.G.