



This blog represents the second instalment of Day Trips in Alice Springs. Where [Part 1](#) was directed to all drivers, this piece addresses 4WDs only.

The following adventure carries over a full day – with no food or fuel, and few facilities. Fill up, pack a picnic and some drinks, grab the camera, and turn the key.



Fill up, pack a picnic and some drinks, grab the camera, and turn the key.

Photo Focus

As a keen photographer, I had read about and seen many images of Rainbow Valley – a popular destination for day trippers, not far from Alice Springs. I knew that to appreciate the reason the area got its name, it really needs to be seen in the early morning or late afternoon. Although we didn't have time for that, it was still a rewarding day.

However, if you have the opportunity, stay a night or two in this reserve and you will see what I missed. The valley's bluffs, rocky outcrops, and sandstone bands change from purple, to red, to orange, and all the tones in between.

I can pretty much guarantee you won't regret staying.



As a keen photographer, I had seen many images of Rainbow Valley



Harsh land

Drive Safe

If you're leaving Alice to catch the dawn, you will need to be up early and happy to drive in the dark. Likewise, if you decide to return after sunset. The trip takes an hour. It's never a good idea to drive when most of the animals are out, as this increases your chances of a collision.

The first 75kms is bitumen on the Stuart Highway. However, depending on the grader schedule, the last 22km of unsealed track can be unsuitable for 2WD vehicles, which is why a 4WD is recommended. There are a few sharp bends early on, and you'll need to be alert to approaching motorists.

Stop, Look, and Listen

Traditional land of the Upper Southern Arrernte people, the reserve (known to them as Wurre), is an important archaeological site managed jointly with Northern Territory Parks & Wildlife.

This small reserve is proudly reported as the only weed-free conservation area in Central Australia. This lack of weeds has resulted in a very high level of biodiversity, which makes it a popular spot for research too. More than 400 plant species, 110 bird species, 20 mammal species, 46 species of reptile, and three species of frog have been recorded. In addition, there are plants indigenous to the site, which can only grow in this part of the territory. There are two main, relatively short walking trails: Mushroom Rock and the Clay Pan. The latter is particularly special in wildflower season. If you're fortunate to visit after rain, the



benefits of the clay pan reservoirs include waterbirds and reflection photography opportunities. This area is fairly exposed, so you will need a hat, sunscreen, solid shoes, and a water bottle. The flies here can be annoying too, so pack your fly net just in case!



More than 400 plant species have been recorded



More than 400 plant species have been recorded



More than 110 bird species have been recorded



Mushroom Rock

On the walk to Mushroom Rock, Jack's Lookout is a must with grand vista views and a comfortable spot for sunset drinks. The Hermannsburg Sandstone cliffs are very soft and easily water- and wind-eroded. The red and ochre colours (for which the reserve is known) comes from sandstone-based iron deposits, which oxidise as they become exposed to the air.



Nests clinging to the overhang of Mushroom Rock



The view on the walk to Mushroom Rock



Jack's Lookout is a must-see!



Clay Pan

Stay Longer

For those with the time, Rainbow Valley facilities now include a larger camp area with fire pits and drop loos. There are no cabins or other facilities – this is a 100%-BYO site.

There's access for off-road camper trailers and caravans too. The corrugations can be brutal, so take care if your trailer or van isn't an off-road model. Registration and site booking ahead online is recommended by Northern Territory Parks & Wildlife – this is no onsite assistance or payment option.



Redbank Waterhole



Redbank Waterhole

The Road Less Travelled

On the way back to Alice Springs, we decided to turn left to a detour past Red Rock Waterhole and across the Waterhouse range to Larapinta Drive.

Approaching, the track is definitely a 4WD experience (as from the Stuart Highway). This is not for the inexperienced or faint-hearted traveller. In parts, it could be used as a driver training track. High clearance is required, and it would be difficult to traverse after rain.

The 1860s route, taken by explorer John McDougall Stuart for the Overland Telegraph Line through Central Australia, is used for the main reserve track. The road traverses along and across the Hugh River, and it is slow-going. The Hugh River cuts through the reserve. In late



August, there was some water around – but earlier in the season would have been better by all accounts.

We hope to return to sandy banks and shady river red gums at Redbank Waterhole for a few nights next visit.



A rough detour



Vivid red cliffs and lush shrubbery.



A rough detour



The end of the rough stuff!

Full of Surprises

A total surprise to us (as we were just taking a back road detour on our map) was the old Owen Springs Homestead ruins. This is the site of the first station homestead built in Central Australia, and recent protective works – including stark white paint – make this a true bonus after the rough roadway.

There are quite a few spots for a break before the homestead, one being the delightfully named Haunted Tree Bore. These stops offer insights into the lives and work of the district's early settlers. The approach from Larapinta to the homestead is much less gruelling, but a 4WD is still recommended. You will need to turn back from the homestead.



The Owen Springs Homestead ruins: the site of the first station homestead built in Central Australia



The Owen Springs Homestead ruins

Think Before You Leap

Still not confident this is for you? Don't be disappointed, as there are a number of tours that take in the area. It will be much more cost-effective to sign on for one of them than damage your vehicle.

If in any doubt about either roadway, your skill, or vehicle suitability – ask for advice from the Parks Department, or the very helpful staff at the information centre in town.



I can pretty much guarantee you won't regret a day trip like this.

Have you ever been to Rainbow Valley, NT? Let us know in the comments!