



I have to make a confession...I dislike crowded places and sharing a camping area with lots of others. Don't get me wrong, talking and sharing experiences with other campers is a real joy, just not in large numbers all at once.

Why do I confess this here? Well, the West MacDonnell National Park is the most visited attraction in Central Australia after Uluru and Kings Canyon. Don't get me wrong, I still loved our time there. A major plus for many is, it is so easily accessible from Alice Springs on sealed roads, so for the time poor, could be driven in a day out and back.

However, it is the raw beauty of the place, the varied gorges and wildlife that guarantees the interest of visitors. Even the mystique of the names of the two bitumen roads, Larapinta Drive and Namatjira Drive, draws the visitor in.



*Ormiston Gorge is a must visit when passing through the West Macs.*

## The first stop - Simpsons Gap

The first stop driving west from Alice Springs is Simpsons Gap. There are a number of short walks in the area and picnic facilities. For keen cyclists, you can hire and ride there from Alice Springs on a cycle path. Among the attractions is the possibility of seeing some of the resident Black-Footed Rock Wallaby colony.

## Standley Chasm

Further along Larapinta Drive is the turnoff to Standley Chasm. This is actually a private fauna and flora reserve owned by the Iwupataka Lands Trust and a special place for Western Arrernte women. For many visitors, the entry fee, used to maintain the facilities, allows them to visit the chasm when the sun is right overhead. At this time the walls light up in a brilliant orange-red colour.

Interpretive signs along the pathway encourage you to slow down and contemplate the land and its significance. For those with time, a short return trip on part of the [Larapinta Trail](#) will show another rarely glimpsed view of the chasm and its surrounds. Camping is also available for a small fee.



*Our gear all set up at Ridgetop Redbank.*

## Stopping for the night at the Hugh River Bush Camping Area

Being self-sufficient, we drove along Namatjira Drive for a short distance to the Hugh River Bush Camping Area. There we spent a beautiful clear night on the banks of the river. The track in goes for a long way following the creek but it is only suitable for caravans and campers for about 5kms. The next morning we headed back onto the main road.



*One of the perfect day spots is spending time at Ellery Creek Big Hole.*



## The Ellery Creek Big Hole

Ellery Creek Big Hole is a day destination for Alice Springs folk to swim and BBQ – a favourite with visitors. The waterhole is situated at the end of a paved track, providing a wonderful view of the soaring cliffs. Here you can potter around or take the marked Dolomite Trail which is a 3km walk.

You need to be really careful when swimming here, as in the rest of the Ranges, the water, particularly in winter, is freezing cold. You need to take care when entering the water. Don't dive in, as there can be rocks and submerged tree limbs in the water, which can be dangerous.

For the Arrernte, all of these gaps have important Dreaming stories. Honey Ant Dreaming is the main one here, and Fish Dreaming also travels through the rock hole. There are plenty of facilities provided for the traveller and a small open camping area is available at a small cost.



*Serpentine Gorge is a good choice if you don't like crowds.*

## Serpentine Gorge

We had heard that Serpentine Gorge was not only special but also largely ignored by many of the hordes of visitors focused on Ellery Creek Big Hole or Ormiston Gorge. The road in is corrugated dirt and there are only a few picnic facilities and toilets provided.

The walk into the Gorge is an easy stroll along the creek to a small quiet waterhole squeezed between the walls of a small gap in the range. This water has special cultural and environmental significance and shouldn't be paddled or swum in.

The Centralian Flannel Flower and the MacDonnell Range Cycad are rare species found here. Carpet Snake Dreaming and Eaglehawk Dreaming travel through the area. An absolute bonus here is to follow the trail to the east of the gorge that makes a steep sharp climb through the geology of the range to a fantastic lookout, giving you great views of the surrounding area. Nearby is a free camping area at the site of the first tourism venture in the West Macs – The Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area.



*As you can see, Ormiston Gorge is pretty popular with travellers and caravanners.*

## Ormiston Gorge

Back on the popular track, Ormiston Gorge is the next calling point. This is a very well serviced and popular spot for its swimming hole, its walks and the sheer beauty of the surrounds. Culturally, with its permanent waterhole, the area is very important and the Dreaming story here involves emus and a hunter.

There is a ranger station here. During the winter months, the rangers will conduct various guided walks and talks. As the road in is bitumen, the camping area is very popular with caravanners. If you're just visiting during the day, there are picnic areas and BBQs, as well as toilet facilities and the visitor centre offers food, drink, coffee and souvenirs.



*Ormiston Gorge is not only a popular spot, it also has a lot of cultural significance.*



## The Ghost Gum Lookout

Besides the short walk to the waterhole, there are two others that you should consider. The Ghost Gum Lookout walk leads up the side of a hill starting close by the kiosk. This works itself around the hill face to a large platform overlooking the Gorge and the main waterhole. The views are spectacular and worth the effort to climb up.

You can simply reverse your route to return to your vehicle. Or you can carry on following the track that slowly descends to the Gorge floor further in.



*The Ghost Gum Lookout overlooks the Gorge.*

## The Ormiston Pound Walk

A longer walk is the Ormiston Pound Walk which takes about 3 to 4 hours. This wanders into a huge amphitheatre area before returning along the creek through the Gorge. It is an excellent day walk that will provide you with great views and a real feel for the terrain.

Up until this point, all the places we had visited had been north of Namatjira Drive. Glen Helen Gorge and the nearby resort are on the southern side. Here the Finke River breaks through the Ranges on its way to the western edge of the Simpson Desert and Lake Eyre. It's then a short walk down to the Gorge and waterhole, which provides a haven for all the species of fish found in the Finke.

The Kings Canyon Resort is the only accommodation that you can find in the West Macs other than camping. It's also a source of fuel and where you buy the permit required to drive the Red Centre Way, formerly called the Mereenie Loop.



*Walking on the way to the lookout.*

## Redbank Gorge

The final gorge on this trail is Redbank Gorge. It provided us with a fabulous camping spot perched on a ridge top with views of Mount Sonder and the hills beyond. The road into the area is corrugated dirt and it passes two camping areas. Is it any wonder that the Dreaming story here involves the Euro, a type of hill kangaroo?

The first and largest is called Woodland Camp and it has plenty shade, toilets and free BBQ, while the smaller one is called Ridgetop Camp and it doesn't have BBQ's provided. It was here that we decided to spend the night. The road passes Ridgetop Camp and drops steeply down into a small valley. It then wanders over to the small parking area at the start of the walk into the gorge, or for those who want to tackle either Mount Sonder or the Larapinta Trail from the western direction.

The walk into this gorge is unmarked and will vary from really rocky through to soft sand. Take your time and you will enjoy the walk in. We didn't swim here but if you have a flotation device, the swim through the narrow gorge is supposed to be a great experience, albeit often very cold.



*A glimpse of the sunset from Ridgetop camp.*



The rugged landscape, wildlife, and cultural importance of the West MacDonnell Ranges will reward anyone travelling to this region with a very special experience. It's definitely a place that you need to see for yourself.

**Are the West Macs on your bucket list for places to visit in Australia?**