



TRAVELLERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EXPERIENCES

► Uluru, a 550-million-year-old sandstone monolith rising 348 metres above the desert floor, dramatically changes colour at sunset.



COURTESY OF TOURISM NT

Uluru Unveiled

What began as an escape into the Australian Outback for **Henna Shah** became a homecoming to herself.

CAUGHT THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF Uluru from my window seat, a solitary sandstone monolith rising majestically from the semi-arid expanse of Australia's Northern Territory. Resting my head on my husband Yash's shoulder and giving his hand a gentle squeeze, I took in the Martian landscape below. From high school sweethearts exchanging notes in geography class with doodles of faraway lands, to now flying towards one of those places as a married couple—it all felt surreal.

Uluru's stark remoteness from the rest of the world echoed the emotional distance we were yearning for from our everyday lives. Back home in Mumbai, life pulled us relentlessly in all directions: demanding careers, the unspoken obligations of living in a joint family, and the constant humdrum of a city that never truly rests. Over time, we had grown used to being the supporting characters in our own lives. Within that quiet surrender, as an introvert in a culture that celebrates constant togetherness, carving out solitude and uninterrupted time with Yash had begun to feel like a guilty indulgence. The hours slipped by quickly, and when they lingered, we were too worn out to make them count. Yet in the heart of the Outback, the pace shifted, and for once, time opened its arms to us.

Before It Slipped Away

Upon landing, we were transferred to the **Desert Gardens Hotel**, part of the **Ayers Rock Resort** (ayersrockresort.com.au) in **Yulara**. With the bushland stretching out before us, we sat on the balcony, resort map in hand, tracing our fingers across walking trails, sunset decks, and dining options. That evening, we found ourselves on a timber-floored deck, a glass of Australian wine in hand and a small platter of cheese we leisurely grazed on together, exchanging smiles with a father-daughter duo seated nearby. In front of us, Uluru had begun its metamorphosis, shifting hues from deep terracotta to a muted violet, completely capturing our gaze.

For a long time, no one spoke. Then the stillness was pierced by a message: a 34-year-old classmate of mine had passed away suddenly. A promising young father, gone without warning and a chance to say goodbye. As dusk deepened and Uluru disappeared into the shadows, his ambitions and imagined future melted away like the ephemeral light on the rock's surface. The news sat heavy in my chest—a sobering reminder of life's fragility as we continued to chase things that, in the end, mattered so little.



▲ Clockwise from here: Uluru's winter mornings offer a tranquil and cool start to the day in the Outback; the guided sunrise walk takes travellers through the dramatic landscapes of Walpa Gorge; the Native Australian High Tea showcases Indigenous ingredients in a modern culinary experience.

A Sky Alive With Tradition

Once night fell, the sky lit up with a drone and laser light performance called *Wintjiri Wiru*, which narrated an ancestral tale of the Anangu—traditional custodians of the land within the **Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park**. The Anangu live by *Tjukurpa*, a system of beliefs that encompasses their creation stories and connection to the land, passed down through oral tradition.

Wintjiri Wiru brought to life one such *Tjukurpa*, known as the Mala story. As the wind carried the sound of chanting in Pitjantjatjara, the local Indigenous language, hundreds of drones painted the

desert sky, forming emus, hunters, and spears. This theatrical retelling held up a mirror, reminding us that returning to timeless truths is not a step backwards, but a way to illuminate the path ahead.

Where Presence Is Enough

The next morning, we joined a small group to reach the base of Uluru before dawn, preparing to walk the 12-kilometre loop tracing the entire circumference of this ancient monolith. Our guide, Mondira—a single mother who had immigrated to Australia three decades earlier—told us, “You may have heard of *Tjukurpa*. Today, you will see the *Tjukuritja*, the evidence of the creation stories the Anangu hold sacred. They are like living archives.”

Up close, Uluru revealed its many folds, ridges, and caves once used by the Anangu for shelter, teaching, and ceremony. Mondira pointed out the desert's small miracles—tiny birds, resilient plants, and waterholes that sustained life through the harshest months.

As we approached a sign that read “Please don't climb,” a fellow American tourist asked if it was to protect the rock from erosion. “It's about respect,” Mondira replied. “Uluru is sacred to the Anangu, and they have fought for decades to have the climb closed. Today, it finally is.”

Walking the trail, I noticed how Uluru seemed to shift with each step, its colour

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HENNA SHAH; COURTESY OF TOURISM NT/HELEN ORR/VOYAGES; HENNA SHAH



▲ The Uluru base walk is a 12-kilometre trail that encircles the rock and passes significant Anangu sites. Right: The Wintjiri Wiru show uses drones and lights to narrate Anangu creation stories over Uluru's skies.

changing depending on whether I stood in sunlight or shade. Along the way, I felt fragments of myself returning: thoughts unburdened, emotions uncensored, and the persistent urge to do more dissolving. The rock didn't ask to be admired. It just existed. And in doing so, simply being present felt enough.

Gone With The Wind

Another morning took us to **Kata Tjuta (The Olgas)**, a cluster of ancient rock domes—lesser-known, yet no less a geological marvel. We began at a sunrise viewing deck, where the first light touched the domes, painting the sky in shades of peach and gold.

Soon after, we paused for an Outback-style breakfast, with our guide offering hot coffee and the most unexpectedly indulgent raisin toast. The scent of cinnamon drifting through the desert air felt like incense for the soul—offering a sacred comfort no five-star breakfast spread could rival.

From there, we entered **Walpa Gorge**, a wind-swept valley carved between towering rock walls. The path was uneven, but the experience felt meditative. Each burst of air seemed to reflect the churn of thoughts and expectations in my mind that was conditioned to please. Our guide's voice was swallowed by the roar, but the raw, elemental energy of the place felt deeply cleansing. With every gust that surged through the gorge, it was as if a layer of mental noise was being stripped away from within me.

Rooted In Revival

One of our most striking highlights in Uluru was the Native Australian High Tea experience at **Sails in the Desert**. The food was unlike anything I'd tasted before—scones paired with lemon myrtle cream and quandong jam, dark chocolate truffles with wattleseed, and sliders with warrigal greens. Savouring the native botanical-infused tea, I couldn't help but reflect on the deeper symbolism of the meal. The menu was designed to celebrate Indigenous ingredients—once foraged by the Anangu for sustenance—now introduced to travellers in a modern, familiar setting.

But this wasn't just about food. For centuries, the Anangu were pushed to the margins of Australian society. Their increasing presence in Uluru's cultural and tourism landscape—as guides, chefs, and artists—signals a revival of identity.

This resonated with my own experience as a woman negotiating traditional structures, particularly marriage. Fitting into someone else's world meant wearing new roles like second skins and recalibrating my own dreams to align with a collective framework. And while that adaptation can be beautiful, it is also undeniably exhausting.

Uluru bestowed me with an inherent freedom—to take up space as a woman in the desert, no longer required to blend in. I came here in search of stillness, but I left with something far deeper: the permission to reclaim myself. ☯



GETTING THERE

Fly to **Ayers Rock Airport** from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Cairns with **JetStar** (jetstar.com) or **Virgin Australia** (virginaustralia.com). Airport transfers to **Ayers Rock Resort** are complimentary.

WHEN TO VISIT

Visit during the Australian winter, from May to September. Enjoy hiking and outdoor activities with fewer flies and clear skies—perfect for stargazing.

STAY

Sails in the Desert is a luxurious stay with elegant desert-inspired design. *Doubles from ₹34,000*; ayersrockresort.com.au/accommodation/sails-in-the-desert

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

Book **Wintjiri Wiru**, **Field of Light**, and **Outback Sky Journey** experiences with **Ayers Rock Resort** (ayersrockresort.com.au/all-experiences)

For guided tours, including the **Uluru Base Walk** and **Kata Tjuta Sunrise Tour**, go with **SEIT Outback Australia** (seittours.com)