



# COOL BEAUTIES

When I entered a waterhole in Central Australia's West MacDonnell Ranges for the first time, in the middle of June almost 20 years ago, I did so very reluctantly. A daredevil guide leading our 8km Ormiston Pound walk knew when we started that the end of the trail was flooded. He'd advised us to wear our swimsuits and when we reached the submerged spot, we had to wade across holding our daypacks above our heads. The air temperature was about 18C and the freezing water came up to my chin.

Returning to the West MacDonnells, which stretch for 161km west of Alice Springs, in late April this year, my immersions are much more enjoyable. In fact, with daytime temperatures ranging from 28 to 35C, a dip in a refreshing waterhole is essential. Known as Tjoritja by the Arrernte people, the West MacDonnells contain many waterholes. On my list to visit are the three permanent ones at Ellery Creek Big Hole, Ormiston Gorge and Glen Helen Gorge and the almost permanent pool at Redbank Gorge. The permanent ones are easily accessed by regular cars but a high clearance vehicle is recommended to visit Redbank Gorge.

Our first destination, Ellery Creek Big Hole, is just over an hour's drive from Alice Springs along Larapinta and Namatjira Drives. In the Arrernte language, the waterhole is called Udepata and its Dreaming stories are about honey ants and a fish that travels through. Like the other waterholes on my trip, it was formed by many thousands of years of the erosive power of a watercourse, in this case Ellery Creek, scouring into the sandy bed just beyond the gorge.

When we arrive around 8am via the wheelchair-accessible path, most of the picturesque waterhole is in shade but, where the gorge divides, the blue sky and clouds reflect in a vivid inverted triangle down the middle of the pool. We are too early for the long-nosed dragon lizards that love to sunbake on the rocks but as I swim towards the gap in the gorge, pied butcher birds begin to sing. Known for having the coldest water of all the swimming spots, wearing a cap takes the chill off my head as I float on my back and look up at the gorge's striking orange quartzite rock. When I swim a slow breaststroke back to the sandy shore, the surrounding bush, gnarled river red gums, and apricot rock reflect in the water like an Albert Namatjira painting.

## Waterholes in the West MacDonnell Ranges are spectacular spots to swim

THERESE SPRUHAN



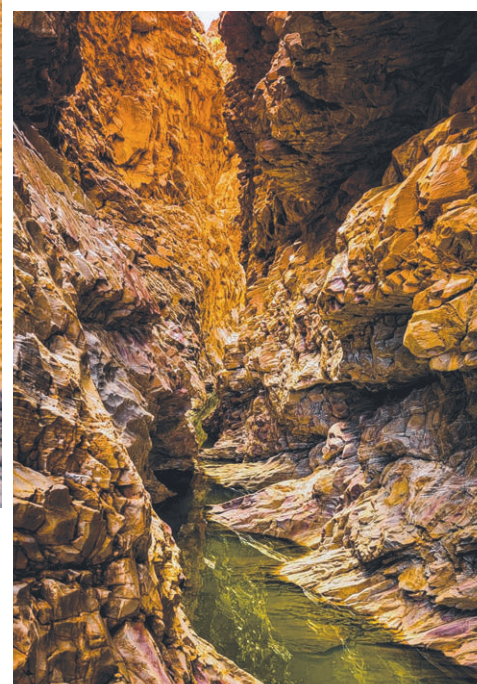
Refreshed after our dip in Ellery Creek Big Hole, we drive almost 50km further west to Ormiston Gorge where I decide to recreate my long-ago experience and walk the three to four-hour Ormiston Pound circuit before taking a swim. This time when I reach the spot where I waded through freezing water, the area isn't flooded. Instead we pass by shallow pools, white ghost gums and pink, purple and dark grey rocks revealing ripple patterns from the shallow inland sea that covered Central Australia many millions of years ago.

A few minutes later when we reach the waterhole, I pause to take in the beautiful surroundings of the majestic river red gums and towering orange-red rock encircling the waterhole like a natural amphitheatre. Estimated to be about 14m at its deepest point, when I plunge under, the texture of the water reminds me of rain. Voices of swimmers and people relaxing on the sandy beach echo around the pool known as Kwartatuma by the Arrernte people and home to a Dreaming story about a group of emus that came there from the east and the man who hunted them. Today, there are no emus but as I swim I spot

a few fish and, at dusk, rock wallabies often appear.

The next day we head 21km west of Ormiston Gorge to swim in the waterhole at Redbank Gorge which we reach after a 20-minute walk from the carpark up a dry creek bed, over rocks and by small, shallow pools. When we arrive at the waterhole surrounded by jagged walls of deep red rock, a group has just returned from exploring the series of pools that stretch for kilometres beyond the gap in the gorge. While I don't have a flotation device recommended for this adventure, I swim across the waterhole and climb through the gap and slide into a small pool. I scramble through another section trying not to fall on the slippery surface and into another little pool where the light flickers over a cavern of pale pink rock. In the quiet, I feel like I'm inside the "great pink sea snail shell", remembered clearly from the 1967 movie, *Doctor Dolittle*, I saw as a young child.

When my husband returns from exploring further up the gorge he says every time he went around a corner he expected a monster to appear. Known as Yarreyteke by the Ar-



ALAMY

Ormiston Gorge, main; Redbank Gorge, above; Glen Helen Gorge, left

rernte people, this waterhole's Dreaming stories are about the euro kangaroo. Like all the waterholes, this one can be quite cool even in the hotter months, so if you plan to explore the entire gorge, wear a wetsuit top or vest and footwear.

Our final swimming stop is at nearby Glen Helen Gorge, or Yapulpa in Arrernte, where there's a camping ground, tavern, restaurant and accommodation. There are also shower facilities we can use as long as we buy a drink at the bar. Home to the powerful rainbow serpent in Arrernte mythology, the waterhole is part of the Finke, considered the oldest river in the world. For hundreds of millions of years, the waterway has cut through 500-million-year-old Pacoota sandstone and formed this gorge and waterhole. Today it continues to bubble up through the sand replenishing the waterhole.

It's an easy walk from the carpark past tall river reeds to reach the waterhole, a spectacular sight with the afternoon sun lighting up one side of the magnificent sandstone gorge and casting a dramatic ochre colour over the water. This is the largest we've visited this trip and we swim for more than 100m to the far edge, where we spot a black-footed rock wallaby and watch a group of kids swing off a rope tied to a colossal river red gum overhanging the waterhole.

As I move in and out of the sunlight the water changes from navy blue to olive green and, in the shallows, fish leap and nip around my feet. When we reluctantly finish our swim, there's just one thing left to do. We drink a toast to the magical waterholes in the tavern's outdoor area overlooking spectacular Central Australian red rock and the ancient waters of the mighty Finke River.

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