



The Hale River & Ruby Gap

photo: Deborah Clarke

Ruby desert dreaming

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Take a small group of artists, painters, photographers and writers. Drive for about four hours east of Alice Springs in an 11-seater LandCruiser. Arm them with paints, brushes, paper and pencils, and set them loose among the craggy gorges that line the dry bed of Hale River in Ruby Gap Nature Park. Add swags, quilts, fine food and wine to enjoy by the campfire, cold beers, great coffee and a fully supported camp, and you have a seven-day outback adventure.

The East MacDonnell Ranges of Central Australia must be one of the most unforgiving, waterless terrains and yet it handsomely rewards all those who venture into its world of shifting colours, speckled river gums, spinifex, wildlife and desert sand. By day, the light washes the landscape with orange, ochre and red. By night, the skies explode with shooting stars and inter-galactic traffic. Who says we're alone in the universe?

A remote, little-known area of the Hale River, Ruby Gap is a misnomer. It was the site of a "ruby" rush in 1886 when hundreds of miners risked all in a fruitless search. By 1888, it was apparent that the stones were nothing more than high-grade garnets, beautiful but worthless.

Today, the dry riverbed and surrounding desert still glitter with garnets, infusing the sand with pinks and mauves, making the area an artists' dream and a pristine area to explore.

Ruby Gap's cliffs, steep outcrops and gentle undulations rise to a height of about 200 metres, lining the Hale River bed for about three kilometres and stretching north to the more closed-in, one-kilometre-long Glen Annie Gorge.

Thanks to the encyclopedic knowledge of Larapinta Creative Camps' operators, Deborah Clarke and Charlie Carter, the ecologically focused programs are a chance to immerse yourself in the botany, geology and fauna of the area, as well as picking up some creative skills, whether you're a starter or more experienced.

Clarke is an award-winning exhibited artist, art teacher and published writer. She teaches digital imaging at Charles Darwin University in Alice Springs. Her partner, Carter, has a PhD in biology and has worked for many years with arid-zone fauna and flora. He has first-hand experience of Aboriginal culture, history and heritage, including work for the Northern Territory Central Land Council. He is also a dab hand at campsite cuisine.

Both are experts in making everyone feel at ease in the wilds from sunrise, when you're roused by a recitation by Carter of verses from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, to sunset, when the "bar" opens and snacks are served around the campfire before dinner - fresh barramundi, stirfries, chicken tagines, tasty curries, chocolate puddings and fine wines.

Each morning we emerge from our "bedrooms" - sandy knolls with views of the gorge - and, after a hot breakfast, painting materials appear from Clarke's store of supplies and we set to work under her expert eye.

"I'm here to support you," says Clarke on our first day as we take part in an hour-long observation exercise walking quietly, scribble pads and pens in hand, as the mistletoe birds dive around, drunk on nectar from the mistletoes in the Victoria wattle trees, and the spiny-cheeked honey eaters feast on the hakea flowers of corkwood trees, and we feast our eyes.

"We'll look at the juncture of sky, rocks and trees, and try to reinvent ways of working with landscape," she says as we stroll around the bloodwoods, ghost gums, white woods, iron woods and acacias.

One morning we head off, picnic lunches of kangaroo salami, camembert and drinks in our day packs, armed with cameras, sketch pads and binoculars, to the enchanting Glen Annie Gorge, where nothing much has moved geologically for about 300 million years. It is another inspiring canvas, with its rocky ledges, precious waterholes lined with bull rushes and massive cliffs where callitris pines cling for life to the red-ochre coloured ledges.

The breeze plays in the mulga, wedge-tailed eagles and falcons soar overhead, and the silence weaves its spell. It all appears much the same as it must have to surveyor and explorer David Lindsay when he found his way here in the late 1880s, naming Glen Annie Gorge after his wife.

"He was the first white fella to cross the Simpson Desert, which he did on camels with the help of an Aboriginal guide who led him to a series of wells used by the Aboriginal desert inhabitants," says Carter.

"He visited and documented a series of nine Aboriginal wells, mikiri. He must have been a damn good surveyor. In 1980, a modern-day adventurer, Denis Bartell from Adelaide, found Lindsay's journals and, following his survey data, managed to find almost all of the Aboriginal wells."

The knowledge and survival skills of Lindsay's Aboriginal guide, "Paddy" from the Wangkangurru people of the Simpson Desert, meant the difference between life and death in this harsh country. Only the most highly trained and informed eye would know how to find hidden shallow wells and precious supplies of water.

These days, the area is subject to an indigenous land-use agreement requiring joint management with the traditional owners through the Central Land Council.

Lindsay also surveyed Stuart, now called Alice Springs but originally named after the explorer who established an overland route for the telegraph line in the mid-1800s.

It's a far cry from our lavishly equipped camp with its canopies, tables, tablecloths, folding chairs and standby tents (in case of rain) so, be warned - this is no "boot camp". But there are some risks - you might find yourself wielding a wild paint brush, mixing some mad colours or getting lost in some dingo and desert dreaming.

Indiana Jones types will just have to find another way to escape their comfort zone and tackle the wilds.