

Finke Gorge & Watarrka National Parks & More: 1-14 September 2024

List price - \$4795 For information about our advance purchase and other discounts, see our discount page, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/discounts and the additional information at the end of these notes.

Summary. We begin with a few of the highlights in the West Macdonnells before continuing to Finke Gorge & Watarrka. While Palm Valley and the Boggy Hole 4WD track are the best known parts of Finke Gorge National Park, they are far from all the park has to offer. Willis's Walkabouts is the only tour operator who will take you off the tracks to places that you can only reach on foot in this park. Similarly, Watarrka is far more than Kings Canyon. You'll see the best that can be reached on a relatively short walk.



Sunset camp, Boggy Hole Track

Updated Itinerary

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change.

Day 0 Pre-trip meeting at 6.30 p.m., venue to be advised. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 8 a.m. pick up as arranged at the pre-trip meeting. Drive to Standley Chasm. 3 km return walk & visit to chasm, entry fee payable. Great write up with photos at <https://traveloutbackaustralia.com/standley-chasm-views-tourists-never-see.html/>
Lunch at kiosk or bring your own. Be warned. There was a bushfire in the area in early August so the scenery may not be at its best.
Drive to Ellery Creek. Short 3 km loop walk. If time, visit the Ochre Pits or some other site near the road.
Camp near vehicle at free roadside stop. We stopped there in April. The views were much nicer than those in the paid campgrounds. Only one other vehicle there.



Late afternoon view from our camp

Day 2 Drive to Ormiston Gorge. Begin Ormiston Pound overnight walk. Choice of a lazy after noon at camp or a half-day walk from to Bowmans Gap & back.

Day 3 Return to vehicle via loop walk. Lunch at Ormiston Kiosk.
Quick stop at Glen Helen on the way out to Roma Gorge. This amazing little gorge is almost unknown to most tourist. It's an 8 km drive on a rough 4WD track each way but the rewards are a beautiful waterhole and some amazing petroglyphs. There is a good description on <https://outbacktravelsaustralia.com.au/destinations-travel-destinations/around-the-alice/>
It may be possible to camp along the track or we may need to continue to the Redbank Gorge campground.

Day 4 Drive to Palm Valley in Finke Gorge NP, stop at Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve for short walk (not far off the main road) and Hermannsburg on the way. <https://hermannsburg.com.au/>
Begin two night walk at Palm Valley. Bush camp.

Day 5 Continue up Palm Valley Creek and cross over to the next one. Bush camp.

- Day 6** Finish Palm Valley Walk. Drive back to Hermannsburg to replenish supplies. Begin Boggy Hole track. Camp near vehicle.
- Day 7** Either a day walk from vehicle up Finke River and camp near vehicle or drive to Boggy Hole. Day walk from Boggy Hole.
- Day 8** Drive to start of Circular Valley walk. Begin walk with full packs. Bush camp.
- Day 9** Finish Circular Valley walk. Camp near vehicle.



Easy walking upstream of Palm Valley

- Day 10** Finish drive to the main road and drive to Kings Creek Station. 4:00 PM Karrke Aboriginal cultural tour near the station. Continue to Kings Canyon Resort. Overnight in budget accom. Meal at restaurant.
- Day 11** Do Kings Canyon Rim walk. Return to car park and begin Giles Track Walk. Camp at Reedy Creek. Water was lower than normal but still good in late April. This will be the longest day's walk on the trip.
- Day 12** Morning day walk from Reedy Creek camp. Then follow Giles Track before slight detour to camp in the dunes or continue to Wanga Creek. Need to carry water for overnight if we camp in the dunes. There was good water there last April. Good rain in first three days of June, nothing since. On April trip, no one wanted to stop as we got there at 10 AM, so we finished the walk and camped on the road to Alice.



Sunset through the desert oaks near the Giles Track

- Day 13** Finish walk. Drive to Rainbow via the Henbury Meteorite Craters. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henbury_Meteorites_Conservation_Reserve Short walk at Henbury. Short walk at Rainbow Valley if we get there in time. <https://traveloutbackaustralia.com/rainbow-valley-ultimate-guide.html/>
- Day 14** Morning light at Rainbow Valley. Return to Alice Springs by lunch time.

Now for the details.

Thousands of people visit Central Australia's famous Palm Valley every year. Only a tiny handful take the time to hike more than a couple of kilometres from their vehicles. Still fewer put packs on their backs and walk back in time, away from all signs of our civilisation, back into a landscape which still hints at what the Centre was like long before the present arid conditions developed.

The same is true at Watarrka where tens of thousands visit Kings Canyon but only a few walk the Giles Track. Fewer still spend two nights so they can enjoy the experience to the full.

Given the restrictions on what is currently permitted in Watarrka and Finke Gorge, we decided to begin the trip with a leisurely warm up visiting some of the well known and less well known places in the West Macdonnell Ranges.

We begin at Standley Chasm where we do a spectacular short walk that takes us beyond the small area that most tourists see. Click the link in the itinerary to see what it's like.



Ellery Creek Big Hole

We then continue to Ellery Creek Big Hole where we do a lovely short walk that no more than 1% of those who visit would ever see.

Depending on how long we take, we may or may not visit some of the other tourist sites like the Ochre Pits. We finish the day at



View stop on the Ellery Creek Dolomite Walk

a roadside lookout where free camping is permitted.



Water tank and picnic area



Our camp, less than 100 m from the tank seepage



Zebra finches getting water from tank

First thing the next morning, we drive to Ormiston Gorge, park the car, put on our packs and head into Ormiston Pound for an overnight walk. As a large part of the walk is not on a marked trail, relatively few people do one of the nicest walks in the West Macdonnells. We should get to our camp by lunch time. We then have the choice of a 5 km return walk to the Bowmans Gap waterhole or simply relaxing.



View stop on the track in



Off-track campsite, Ormiston Pound



We sometimes need to do a wade near the end of the walk

The next morning we walk back to where we began finishing on the Ormiston Pound loop walk. This may require a wade as shown above right. We expect to be back at the Ormiston Kiosk (good coffee) by lunch time.

That afternoon, we will drive to Roma Gorge, a place I (Russell) have been meaning to visit for many years. The gorge contains some of the best petroglyphs to be found in the Centre. Camping is not permitted at the gorge itself, but we should be able to camp somewhere along the track in as shown in this YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vNLehljh_w

The next day, we drive to the Palm Valley section of Finke Gorge N.P. On the way we stop at the Tnorala (Gosse Bluff) Conservation Reserve for short walk. The NT Parks page says, "The reserve is a registered sacred site and traditional owners welcome visitors to experience Tnorala's magic, but you should respect the area and obey signs where access is not allowed.

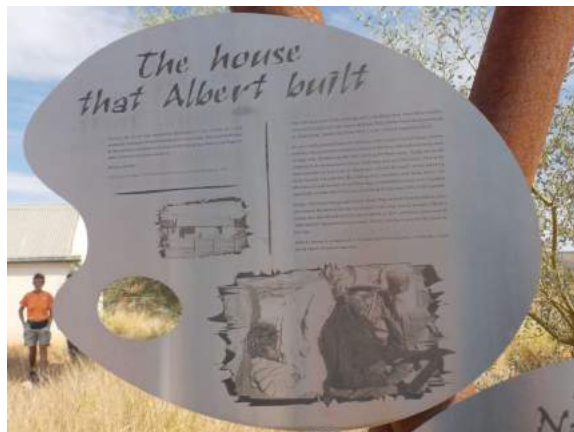
Scientists believe that around 142.5 million years ago an object from space, believed to be a comet about 600m wide, crashed to earth, blasting a crater roughly 20km across.

Today's land surface is about 2km lower than the original impact surface and the bluff is about 5km in diameter, reduced over time by erosion."

For more info including a downloadable park info sheet, see

<https://nt.gov.au/parks/find-a-park/tnorala-gosse-bluff-conservation-reserve>

From Tnorala, it's a relatively short drive to Hermannsburg where we spend an hour or two visiting the old mission. For anyone who has any interest in the history of early European settlement in the area, it's a must. Just before we get to Hermannsburg, we'll make a brief visit to Albert Namatjira's house. If you are looking at these notes on a big screen, you should be able to zoom in and read the info shown in the sign at right.



From Hermannsburg, we head into Finke Gorge N.P.



Campsite upstream of Palm Valley

Willis's Walkabouts

is the only tour operator who will take you off the tracks to places that you can only reach on foot on an overnight walk in this park. First stop, Palm Valley, where we plan to do a two night walk. This takes us through the palms and pools of Palm Valley and out into much more open country. From here, we cross to a deep gorge system and work our way back to where we began. Despite the lack of trails, the walking is relatively easy. We will have plenty of time to stop and explore some of the side gorges, climb the hills for the spectacular views and even to enjoy a

swim if the weather is warm enough. Unlike most of the relatively permanent pools in central Australia, the shallow spring fed pools along Palm Creek heat up in the sun and are quite pleasant for swimming.

It seems that the palms of Palm Valley aren't as ancient as was long assumed. Here's a link to the latest. <https://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2012/03/07/3447620.htm>

Palm Valley is only a tiny part of Finke Gorge National Park. We see much more as we drive south along the 4WD track which follows the Finke River, stopping here and there to do a number of interesting walks as we explore the small gorges and waterholes and enjoy the flowers and birds along the way.

We plan to do a fairly long day walk, either a loop along the Finke River starting from the Ellery Creek end or a walk up Deep Creek near Boggy Hole. The first takes us along the sandy bed Finke and up into the nearby hills. Waterholes, rugged cliffs, wildlife and spectacular views from the hills make this a particularly interesting and varied walk.



Driving the Boggy Hole Track in a wet year. Some years there is no water across the track anywhere .

In very dry years, Boggy Hole may be the only waterhole along this section of the Finke. As such it is a refuge for the fish which swim out to repopulate the more ephemeral waterholes in good years. Hidden behind Boggy Hole is Deep Gorge. Our loop walk up the gorge, onto the hills and back into the valley is one of the nicest day walks in the Centre. It does, however, include a challenging climb near the start.



Deep Creek climb

It has been many years since we did either of these walks. The Deep Creek photo at left was taken on a 2008 trip. The last reference to the Finke River walk I can find is from 1997, well before we started digital photos.

Our last walk will be the big one, overnight to Circular Valley. From the air, Circular Valley is one of the major landmarks of the region. From the 4WD track, it is nothing. In the past, we've done this as a day walk. The photo above shows one of our groups on one of those day walks. We plan to do more and spend a night near the top so we can get some spectacular sunset and sunrise views. Carrying water for an overnight camp is always a challenge, but less so on this walk as there is a reliable source between a third and half way up the climb.

Our drive along the 4WD track continues past Running Waters, the last of the Finke's major permanent waterholes, to Illumurta Springs and out to the Giles Road where we turn right and head toward Kings Canyon, stopping at Kings Creek Station where we plan to do the nearby late afternoon Karrke Aboriginal cultural tour. We were so impressed when we did it in April 2021 and 2022 that we felt we had to include it again. See <https://www.karrke.com.au/>



View over Circular Valley



Explaining a painting on the Karrke tour

After the tour, we drive another 40 km to the Kings Canyon Resort where we spend the night in budget accommodation.

Early the next morning, we drive to the Kings Canyon car park and do the spectacular Kings Canyon Rim Walk. The Giles Track where we'll spend two nights branches off this track fairly close to the end. We've carried packs the whole way to save the overlap and we've left them behind, done the walk, then carried them back up the trail. The latter is definitely the easier option.

The Giles Track is a little known gem. Most people take two days. A few walk it in one. We plan to spend three days so that we can take our time and appreciate all it has to offer. With two vehicles, two of the group will drop one at the far end while the others begin the Rim Walk. Here is a link to the official park information page about the track. Click the links to download PDF info sheets.

<https://nt.gov.au/parks/find-a-park/watarrka-national-park/giles-track>

The first bit of the track includes a number of steep climbs and some spectacular views. Once on the top, the walking is flat and easy until just before the track drops down to Reedy Creek.



Steep climb near the start of the Giles track



Once on top, the track is fairly flat

The area near the camp is one of the most interesting along the track so we'll probably do a short day walk to enjoy the views the next morning.



Reedy Creek campsite



Reedy Creek waterhole



Dunes near Reedy Creek



Wanga Creek waterholes



View over Kathleen Springs

After the short walk, we don our packs and continue along the creek. We may decide to carry water and stop in the dunes near the track or we may continue to Wanga Creek and the last fairly reliable water. On the final day, we follow the track to a point giving great views over Kathleen Springs where we have a break before continuing to the bottom. Most of the group can then

do the Kathleen Springs walk while the guide and one other go back to collect the second vehicle from where we began.

That walk may be finished, but our trip is not. We head back to the Stuart Highway, stopping to view the Henbury Meteorite Craters. After a brief stop, we continue to the highway and head north, turning off to visit Rainbow Valley. We'll do a short walk spend our final night in the camping area there so we can enjoy the sunset and sunrise views.

On the final morning we return to Alice Springs arriving in time for lunch.



Rainbow Valley walking track

Notes.

Although rain is infrequent in the Centre, rains can close the Boggy Hole track for weeks at a time. If the track should happen to be closed, those same rains will have filled every small waterhole in the park allowing us to explore the many fascinating gorges in the northern part of the park which are too dry to visit at other times.

Different parts of this itinerary can be closed with little notice so this itinerary is subject to change.

As we will be camping near the car on a number of occasions, you might want to bring something extra for car camping. If you can't bring a chair, let us know and we'll try to provide one. We'll have an esky but may not always be able to get ice.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall Overall we rate this as level 2+.

Climate Level 2. Average daytime max 27°C, average nighttime min 10°C. September day temperatures have been recorded as high as 39°C and nights as low -4°C. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely but possible. Be prepared for anything.

Terrain Level 3. The different walks offer very different terrain.

Palm Valley Area. Lots of flat rock for half of the trip. A bit of soft sand and rock hopping along creeks. While we have always found water, even in very dry years, at our intended second night's camp, it could be dry. If so, we'll need to make it a very long day and walk back to the vehicles.

Finke River walk. Lots of soft sand, some rock hopping and moderately steep climbs.

Deep Gorge. Lots of boulder scrambling and a very steep climb near the start, easier after that. Done without packs.

Circular Valley. Some moderately steep rock hopping up a dry creek combined with some fairly flat walking. If we do the overnight, we'll need to carry water for the last hour or two to the campsite.

Watarrka. Steep climb at the start (or finish), then relatively easy terrain.

Vegetation Level 1-2. Based on past experience, the scrub should seldom be a problem. This can, however, change from year to year and there may be some sections of fairly thick scrub or spinifex which will slow our progress. We strongly recommend you bring gaiters.

Hours Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer.

Packs **Pack weight** - level 2-3. You never need to carry more than 2 days food but you may need water for an overnight camp. You need both a sleeping bag and a tent. Although rain is unlikely, it is possible and if it comes, it will be cold. You need to carry rain gear. The group may need to carry a stove and fuel for some nights. (If conditions are not too dry, small campfires are permitted in many places.)

Art Minimal but there are a couple of petroglyph sites.

Campsites Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at most of the bush campsites.

Swims Swimming is likely to be possible but very cold at some camp sites.

Lowlights Tourist crowds at some of the popular spots.

Highlights Great variety of landscapes and vegetation. Spectacular views.

Wildlife Birds are always present. While you are unlikely to see many large animals, occasionally you get lucky as we were when we spotted the dingo shown at right.

Fishing Might be possible at Boggy Hole but not recommended.

Map 1:250 000 Henbury; 1:100,000 Watarrka



Special Price – \$4795 + expenses.

Our standard discounts apply. See www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/discounts

Running the trip on a share expense basis in April 2017, 2021 and 2022 worked well enough so that we are doing it again. **No expenses are included.**

You will have to pay camping and accommodation fees, a share of fuel, \$15 per evening meal cooked on the camping sections plus a share of 40 cents per km to cover some of the wear and tear on the vehicle or vehicles. The vehicle(s) has to come from and return to Darwin, so everyone pays the same whether or not they get off in Alice Springs.

If we need a second vehicle and can't hire it in Alice Springs, we will need at least two extra drivers for the drive from and back to Darwin.

Depending on how many nights we spend in accommodation and on your choices on those nights, our estimate of the total expenses is somewhere between \$900 and \$1100 per person. It was about \$900 on the 2022 trip but will probably be more this year. (The trip did not run in 2023.)

The costs are too variable to include everything. Depending on numbers and which insurance we choose, the vehicle cost per person could be anywhere from about \$500 to over \$1000. At Kings Canyon you have the choice of camping, budget accom or a fancy motel room. Different costs for different people. One person's dinner might cost twice someone else's. We'd rather be fair and keep the price as low as we can.

More Notes

Without knowing how many people will be on the trip, we'd have to budget for the worst case and charge substantially more.

There will be an opportunity to purchase snacks and souvenirs at Hermannsburg, Kings Creek and Kings Canyon Resort. Please make sure you keep some money with you in case you want to purchase something.

Please keep your water bottle and day pack with you during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your main pack.

We hired vehicles on the trip shown in our Finke 2008 Photo gallery. We recommend that you look at the gallery before booking. The vehicles are shown in several of the photos. Copy the link below into your browser and you'll go straight to the page. Click the photos for larger versions.
www.bushwalkingholidays.org/galleries/oldsite/finke08gal.shtml

The outline above is subject to change depending on the availability of water and the fitness and the interests of the group. Exceptional rains can make some roads impassable. Exceptionally dry conditions can make some walks almost impossible. Flood waters can deposit or remove sand, completely changing the nature of some camp sites. It is never possible for us to be 100% sure what we will find in a particular place until we get there.

Water supplies should be excellent this year. In dry years, we may find as little as one waterhole per day. In drought conditions, that water may be muddy or green with algae. Boiling makes it drinkable. If you are not prepared to drink this kind of water, this is not the trip for you.

As a safety measure, it may be necessary to carry 2–3 litres per person on some days. We will, however, plan to camp near water every night unless we decide to camp on a high point to enjoy the sunrise and sunset views.

Refillable wine bladders are a good way to carry extra water. They should be used as an addition to rather than as a replacement for your normal water bottles.

Centralian spinifex is particularly sharp and can penetrate most lightweight shoes. Strong boots and heavy gaiters are recommended.

As this trip will include at least one day-walk, you should bring a day pack or be prepared to use a full size pack on day-walks.

You will have to carry only what you need for each walk. Additional food and clothing can be left in the vehicle during the walks. Limited supplies are available at Hermannsburg between Palm Valley and the Boggy Hole Track. Takeaway drinks for the final night can be purchased at a roadhouse we will pass on the way to our final camp.

Central Australian weather is highly variable. Although rain is unlikely, it is possible. at this time of year, normal daytime temperatures reach the high 20's. Nighttime temperatures average 10°C but can drop well below freezing. You must be prepared for anything. If you want to see just how variable the weather can be, have a look at the Met Bureau Alice Springs climate averages page, http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_015590_All.shtml

You should keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you in the car during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the day.

The **only** maps available for some of the areas where we will be walking are at a scale of 1:250 000. This scale shows only major features making each trip more exploratory than would otherwise be the case.

Interested in birds? You can download a bird list written by one of our clients on this trip some years ago. Copy the link below into your browser and you'll go straight to the page.

www.bushwalkingholidays.org/pdf/finkwat97_birdlist.pdf



Spinifex pigeon

If anyone would like to share the drive between Darwin and Alice Springs in either direction, this should be possible at no extra cost.