

Watarrka National Park: June 19 - July 2, 2022

Note. *These notes are based on trips we have run in the past. We no longer have permission to run this walk. Unless we can re-obtain that permission, we will not be able to run this trip.*

Though many people have heard of Kings Canyon, relatively few have heard of Watarrka, the park which contains it. The park occupies a transition zone between three different landscapes and contains more than 600 species of plants, 60 of which are rare or relict, making it the most botanically rich area in Australia's arid centre.

No other area in central Australia gives you an experience of EVERY major habitat - and art sites as well. High ranges, desert dunes, riverine, gorge country and culture. This trip has all of it in one walk.

After years of trying different forms of transport, we are considering trying something new this year – self drive hire cars. This will give us some useful flexibility at the beginning and end of the trip and should cost no more than the bus we used to charter.

The drive from Alice Springs to Kings Canyon is so long that we won't try and begin the walk that day as the first possible campsite is a fair distance along. By spending the night in the budget accommodation at Kings Canyon Resort, we should be able to head off early the following morning.



Karrke Cultural Tour



The steep climb at the start

We hope to be able to include the Karrke cultural tour either the afternoon we arrive or in the morning before we begin the walk. On this short walk, one of the local Aboriginal people will tell us a bit about their traditional customs, bush tucker and a bit about one of the art sites out of bounds to the general public. Our new transport should allow us to do this.

We begin our walk by setting off along the marked tourist trail, climbing up through sandstone domes and beside deep gorges which bear a striking

resemblance to Bungle Bungles in the far off Kimberley. When we reach Kings Creek, we leave the tourists behind and begin the wilderness section of the longest single walk we do in the Centre. Our water supplies are guaranteed because we have been given permission to use helicopter water drops if we should have an exceptionally dry year. Even so, the route described below may have to be varied because of the availability or lack of water, park management requirements and the wishes and abilities of the members of the group.



Walking along upper Kings Creek

From the tourist trail, we move north along Kings Creek where there are normally a number of good waterholes, some deep in gorges, others almost in the open.



On the tourist trail, Kings Canyon



Upper Kings Creek campsite. We normally try to camp well away from the waterholes to allow the wildlife easy access, but this was such a wet year that it wasn't possible.

We plan to camp along the upper reaches of Kings Creek and walk to the northern or western edge of the range where steep cliffs drop down to the valley below. Range after rugged range marches along toward the distant horizon.

The views are incredible. There is so much to see that we may spend two or even three days in the area before moving on to Back Canyon, one of the major features of the northern side of the George Gill Range.



Looking down Back Canyon



Looking into Back Canyon from across the valley. If you can enlarge the page, you should see a local resident in the lower left.

From Back Canyon, we continue east toward the headwaters of Stokes Creek with its interesting rock formations and spectacular views. Exactly how we get there will depend on water supplies and the ability of the group.

We follow Stokes Creek downstream for some distance before cutting across to the upper reaches of Kathleen Creek. This allows us to avoid a culturally sensitive area.

From Stokes, we then turn east, heading back toward where we began. A half day brings us to the top of Kathleen Creek with its beautiful gorge and permanent water, a good spot for an afternoon walk.



Kathleen Creek campsite, dawn

From Kathleen Creek plan to continue along the bottom of the range via Wanga Gorge as we aim for Reedy Creek, perhaps doing an overnight walk out among the red sand dunes that cover the central part of the plateau. Camping in



Photographing a grevillea as we head into the dunes

the dunes requires carrying water overnight. It's an extra effort but you don't need to carry it very far. Everyone who has done it on our previous trips has thought it was one of the high points of the trip as it is so different to all our other camps. The sound of the breeze blowing through the desert sheoaks is something not to be missed.

The lower portion of Reedy Creek is one of the nicest places in the park, passing through a deep gorge containing a number of waterholes, often larger than those at Kings Canyon. We should have plenty of time to spend a day here, enjoying the scenery before moving on along a marked trail back to Kings Canyon where we began.



Looking down Wanga gorge



Reedy Creek waterholes downstream of our camp



Nearing the end on the Giles Track

At Kings Canyon, we collect our vehicles and begin the long drive back to Alice Springs. The trip is over, but the memories will last a lifetime.

Terrain and difficulty

- Overall** Overall we rate this as level 3.
- Climate** Level 2. Average daytime max 20°, average nighttime min 4-5°. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.
- Terrain** Level 3. The walk begins with a steep climb along a marked trail. Much of the walk is along flat rock ledges, but there is some rock hopping where you have to move over fairly broken country. Some climbs are steep, all are short.



Spinifex pigeon

Portions of the walk go over soft sand which is generally slower and more tiring than walking over rock. As part of the walk is exploratory, we can't say for sure exactly how much of this we will find. Although there are some moderately difficult sections, overall, the terrain is as easy as you can find on a long walk in the Centre.

- 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 3. You need to carry 7 days food. 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 will need to carry a stove and fuel for most nights. (If conditions are not too dry, small campfires may be permitted.)
- Art** Minimal but there are a couple of sites.
- Campsites** Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites.
- Swims** Swimming is prohibited in all the waterholes on our bushwalking route.
- Lowlights** Tourist crowds at Kings Canyon. Long drive from Alice Springs and back.
- Highlights** Greatest variety of landscapes and vegetation of any walk of the same length in the Red Centre.
- Wildlife** Birds and lizards are always present but you are unlikely to see many large animals.
- Fishing** Not possible.
- Map** 1:100 000 Watarrka National Park.



One of the many lizards we are likely to see

Notes

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 are limited. 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.

The Karrke Cultural Tour may be unavailable for a variety of reasons.

If the weather has been exceptionally dry, the guide may do a helicopter flight to check out water supplies at our proposed campsites and drop off extra supplies if needed. Anyone wishing to pay an extra fee is welcome to come along for a spectacular scenic flight.

As a safety measure, it will be necessary to carry 2-3 litres per person on most days. We will, however, plan to camp near water every night unless we decide to spend one night in the sand dunes to experience a very different environment.

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 a number of day-walks, you should bring a day pack or be prepared to use a full size pack on day-walks.

There is a shop at Kings Canyon. You should bring money for drinks and snacks at the beginning and end of the trip.

Central Australian weather is highly variable. Although rain is unlikely, it is possible. One of our groups even had a bit of snow. Normal daytime temperatures reach the mid to upper 20's, but extremes can go to the low 30's or not get out of the low teens. Nighttime temperatures can drop well below freezing. You must be prepared for anything.

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.

Helicopter water and food drop

The helicopter costs the same regardless of the group size so for a group of five, we will need offer the option of paying a surcharge for the helicopter drop or doing two one week loops. The surcharge would be \$150 per person for a group of five. We need at least five to run the trip at the advertised price.

Note. It should be possible to use the helicopter for transport and do either week on its own. One of our clients did this in 2007; another in 2012. Please contact us if you are interested in this.

Itinerary: Watarrka National Park

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, outside (weather permitting) at the Todd Tavern in the Todd Mall. 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 Kings Canyon, do Karrke tour if possible. Overnight in budget accommodation.

Day 2 Karrke tour if not done the day before. Begin walk. Bush camp.

Day 3-13 Bush camping. Carrying full packs some days, day packs on others.

Day 14 Return to vehicle and drive to Alice Springs. Drop off at your accommodation late afternoon.