

# DESTINATION

## East MacDonnell Ranges

CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

A tour through the East MacDonnells starts with a five-kilometre drive south on the Stuart Highway, through Heavitree Gap and as far as the signposted turnoff onto the Ross Highway. The bitumen-sealed Ross Highway leads to Ross River Station, which makes an ideal camping or cabin overnight stay.



**Although the best known sites around Alice Springs are in the West MacDonnells, there are many natural and historic wonders to the east of the town that are not so well visited.**

Only nine kilometres from the Stuart Highway intersection is Emily Gap Nature Park and a further eight-kilometre drive along the Ross Highway sees you at Jessie Gap Nature Park. These sites are close to the main road and have cool waterholes. They're both sacred sites, being associated with the Caterpillar Dreaming.

Twelve kilometres to the east is an intersection with the gravel Todd River Road that leads to Ringwood and Numery Stations, and subsequently, the Coulson Track, but the Coulson is strictly permit-only driving. The bitumen continues to the left of this intersection, passing the rocky ridge of Corroboree Rock another 12km further on.

The next turnoff is to the left, signposted Trepina Gorge and John Hayes Rockhole. The graded road to Trepina is an all-vehicle road, but the rocky high-clearance 4WD track into John Hayes Rockhole normally means fewer people taking a dip.

The Trepina and John Hayes sites have steep, red walls beside deep waterholes, contrasting with white-barked River Red Gums. Don't camp or picnic under the branches of the tree that has become known as the Widow Maker: branches are likely to break free and crash to the ground without warning. There's camping at both sites, but the drop dunny and drinking water facilities are at Trepina. From the Trepina Gorge intersection with the Ross Highway it's only 12km to Ross River Resort.



The establishment date of Ross River Homestead is shrouded in record-keeping confusion and is as early as 1898 or as late as 1909.

The Station was best known for its horses: initially Clydesdale horses for hauling wagons in southern markets and subsequently the swifter kind needed for the Indian Remount trade.

After World War I the horse trade diminished and the property switched to cattle and goat raising. In 1944, then-owner Harry Bloomfield gave Ross River Homestead to Gil and Doug Green, who were in the area cutting timber sleepers for the Ghan Railway Line. In 1958 the brothers applied for a Special Purpose Lease, to allow Ross River Homestead to be used as a tourist destination. It has remained in this role ever since, apart from a three-year shutdown in the early 2000s, following a tragic episode that saw a local helicopter mustering pilot augur into the dry creek bed quite close to the Homestead.

Today the Resort has comfy log cabins surrounding a salt-water pool and a large fully licensed dining area and bar. Fuel is available. There is also a shady, grassed campsite about 800 metres from the Homestead, with powered and unpowered sites, a laundry and a 48-bed bunkhouse, broken up into 12 four-bed units.

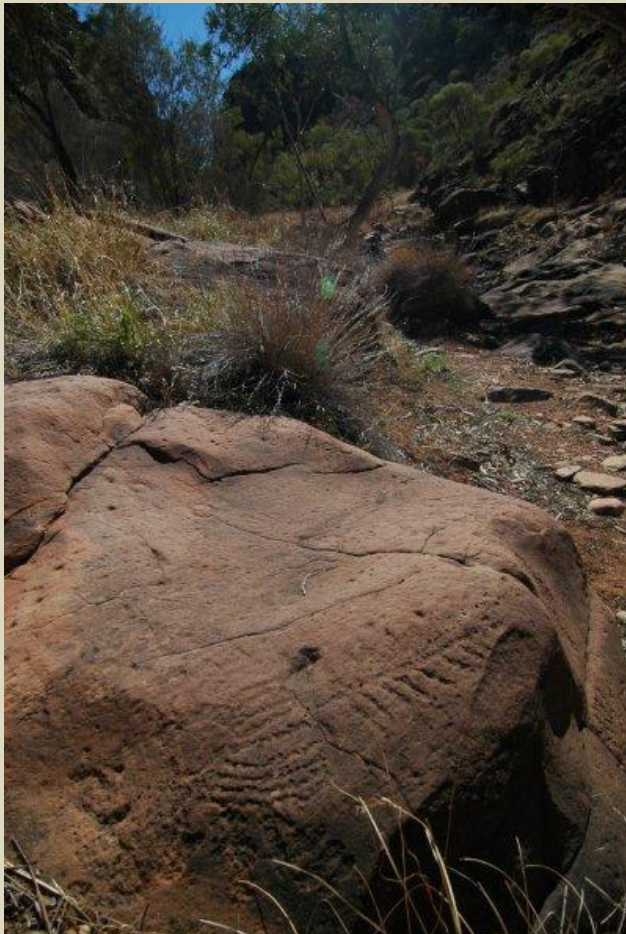


The East MacDonnells 4x4 Route runs north from Ross River, but before heading towards the Plenty Highway we'd suggest a short drive down the dry Ross River bed to N'Dhala Gorge, which is famous for its hundreds of Aboriginal petroglyphs - 'pecked' rock - carvings.

The walk through the Gorge is well graded and marked, and features plaques describing the different trees and shrubs along the walk.

The river bed road continues south from N'Dhala Gorge, winding through scrub and under River Red Gums that line dry creek beds.

It emerges onto the Todd River road, so it's an alternative route back to The Alice, via the Ross River Highway and Heavitree Gap.

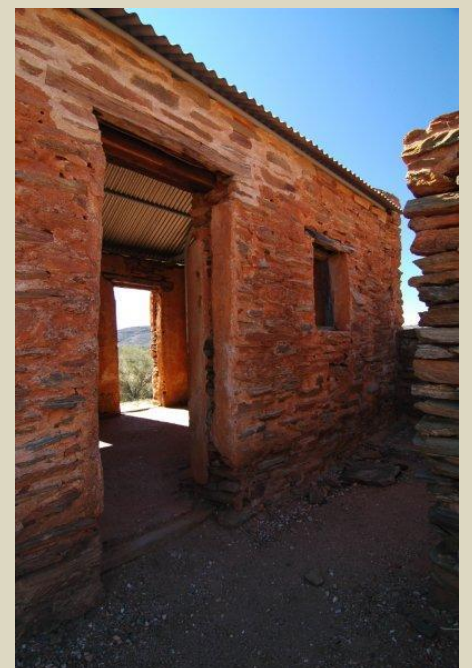


However, the northern route from Ross River takes in the remote Ruby Gap Nature Park and historic Arltunga.

The East MacDonnells 4x4 Route winds north east from Ross River, crossing the rocky ranges and passing through the Arltunga Crossroads some 40km further on.

'Arltunga' is thought to be a corruption of the aboriginal 'Annurra ntinga' – smelly water - the name for a nearby waterhole.

The discovery of alluvial gold at this place in 1887 sparked a rush to the spring-fed town of Stuart (now Alice Springs), which became the supply point for the expanding goldfields and the shipment hub for the processed gold to be railed south.





The later discovery of reef gold prompted building of a Government owned Battery and Cyanide Works, and a police station and barracks were built.

Frequent droughts and dwindling returns saw the Government Works close down in 1913.

The Arltunga area was declared an Historic Reserve in 1977 and since then there has been ongoing research and conservation work done.

The old buildings at Arltunga are in good condition, making it easy to relive the past. We parked at the Old Police Station carpark and walked, but it's a three-kilometre return walk, so the less-fit should drive to the Government Works carpark, from where it's an easy stroll around the Works ruins.

You can take a self-guided walk leaflet and mud-map from the pamphlet box at the carpark.



Ruby Gap is the most remote site in the East MacDonnells and has bush camping sites, without facilities or water. The 40km drive into this Nature Park is initially on graded gravel, but then there's a high-clearance, 5km stretch along a rocky, dry river bed. There's a 2km walk to the Gap itself. There's no way out of Ruby Gap other than returning to the Arltunga Crossroads. From there, the East MacDonnells 4x4 Route runs north, via Cattlewater Pass, to an intersection with the Plenty Highway. The entire track is well signposted and marked with an 'Explorer Territory' tyre symbol.

The Route is a relatively easy drive, although the washaways and sandy dry creek crossings may catch out low ground clearance vehicles. We wouldn't recommend doing the trip in a softroader. An alternative route from Arltunga is to drive north for 20km on the East MacDonnells 4x4 Route and then west, on Gardens Road, which intersects with the Stuart Highway, about 50km north of Alice Springs.





From Arltunga the East MacDonnells 4x4 Route traverses Ambalindum pastoral land to the next stage, which climbs through rocky ranges and features one very steep, uphill section that is best handled in low range. From this high point the Route winds down to lower ground, offering splendid views of the ranges behind.

The track cuts through shallow channel country, with eroded washaways that check out wheel travel, then across flat, scrubby ground, with rocky outcrops and several parking bays for fossickers. There's bush camping in this area, with the bonus of gidgee wood for camp oven cooking. You don't need much of this excellent wood: too much will burn your tucker or crack your oven!

The northern end of East MacDonnells 4x4 Route is a clearly signposted intersection with the Plenty Highway, 35 kilometres east of The Gemtree and about 45 kilometres west of Attitjere, near Harts Range Station.

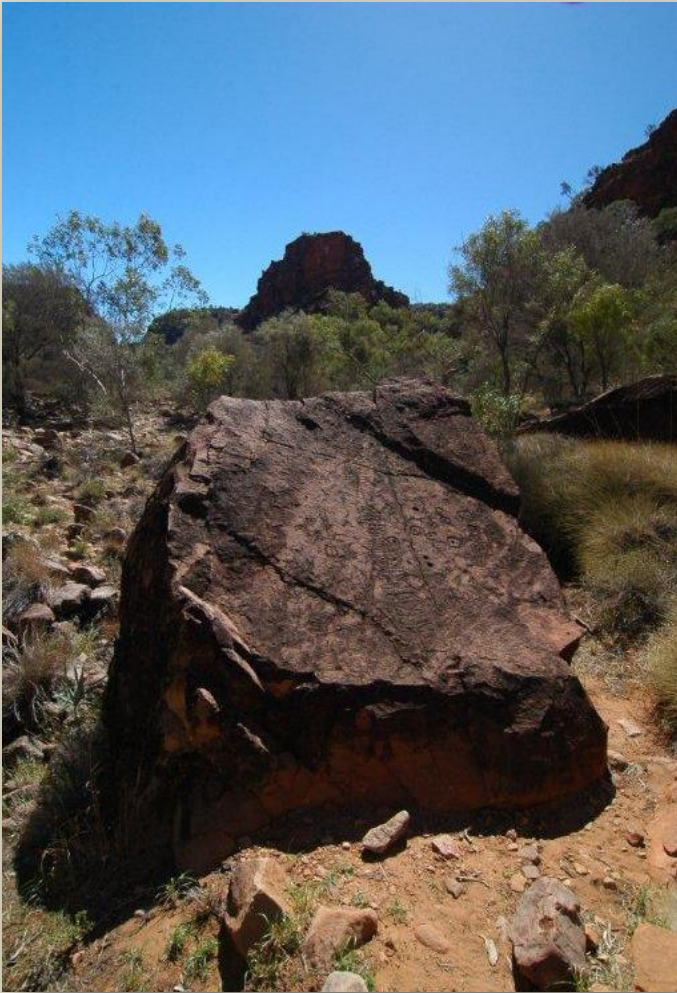


If you drive The Plenty eastbound, don't miss a visit to the art gallery in Attitjere.



We can't think of another destination in Australia that provides so many outstanding sites, so close together. Enjoy!

There's fuel, as well as camping and limited supplies at The Gemtree and at Attitjere.



## FACT FILE

### Where

The Red Centre

### Time required

Three weeks to a month to see the best of East and West MacDonnell's

### Best time to go

April to September is peak season, summer is too hot

### What to do

Walking, driving, fossicking, exploring, swimming, bird and animal watching, photography

### Maps

HEMAs Red Centre

### Camping

Gemtree, Alice Springs, Ross River, Trepkina Gorge, Ruby Gap, Arltunga

### Permits

No permits required

### Track closures

Heavy rain can close tracks temporarily

### Last fuel

Attitjere, Gem Tree, Alice Springs, Ross River

### Contact

Tourism Central Australia

Tel: 1800 645 199

(+61) 8 8952 5800

<http://www.centralaustralian tourism.com/Sights To See/East MacDonnell Ranges>

### Visitors Information

<http://www.centralaustralian tourism.com/Visitors Information>



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