

Hidden Outback Transcript

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● Let's get practical

Personal responses from seasoned travellers, a panel discussion with speakers including broadcaster and writer Sandy Gall, including his recent experience of the 'Ghan' train journey, *Sunday Times* travel writer Stephen Bleach and independent travel expert Alex Bentley.

Sandy Gall, broadcaster: People talk about the trip of a lifetime. I think possibly the ride on the Ghan Train across Australia is in that category. I really do recommend it. It is a fantastic way to see the country. It is in comfort too, that's the point. I started in Adelaide. You can go from Darwin south to Adelaide, or you can go from Adelaide to Darwin as I did with my wife. You can stop at Alice Springs and get off there if you want to, or you can stop for a couple of days and go to Ayers Rock, or Uluru as they now call it the aboriginal name, and that is a fantastic experience. I think that was one of the most exciting rocks and deserts that I have ever seen. You come across the desert and suddenly this rock emerges from the horizon and it's a breathtaking sight. It was explained to me by the guide that it is really vertical. It has these fissures in it, it is striated. Originally it was lying horizontally and these are the layers of sandstone that you now see as cracks. During some enormous geological eruption fifty million years ago, the rock was twisted around and now it's standing on its head, one might say. The geologists say it's only about 300-400ft high as you see it, but in fact it goes down about 3 or 4 miles. And as I say, it comes out of the desert from nowhere, as it were, so you can quite see why it was sacred to the aboriginals. They now feel very strongly about it, they've already felt strongly about it, but they're able to do something about it now. They've got good lawyers and have won all sorts of rights for themselves. They don't like people to climb it anymore. If you're a young traveller it's an exciting idea to climb the rock. I didn't climb the rock, as for one I'm getting a bit past climbing up steep rocks, but also the aboriginal elders who actually control the area don't like people to do it. I don't think you need to climb it to really experience it. You can drive or walk all around it, it's a fantastic experience. So, that for me was the highlight of the journey.

The train itself is very comfortable. I counted twenty-eight coaches. I'm told by the Ghan railway people that they only ever put on twenty-six but I'm sure I counted twenty-eight. Anyway, you can see it's a very long train and the smart bit at the front is called the Gold Kangaroo class, and that's very posh, and you have a very nice cabin. The bathroom's amazing – you have a shower in the tiny little bathroom, and a loo and everything else. And behind that comes the, not quite so smart but still very comfortable, Red Kangaroo. Each one has a buffet car. Everything's very well done, and you have very nice food onboard and there's a bar. You can really enjoy the journey and look at the landscape as it rolls past outside. The train doesn't go at breakneck speed, it's quite sedate. The desert changes dramatically as you get nearer Darwin, the scenery changes from Sahara-like conditions to tropical conditions. In fact it was pouring with rain when we woke up on the third day. It would take one day to get from Adelaide to Alice Springs and then we spent the night in Alice Springs which is actually a fascinating town. You would think Wild West, but it's not at all. It's very civilised, nice gardens and so on, very very hot though, terrifically hot. But an interesting town, and full of history too. And from there, we flew (but you can drive, of course) to Ayers Rock, Uluru. But I think if you want to be comfortable go on the plane, it only took half an hour, forty minutes on a plane, whereas it would take five hours to drive across the desert.

Stephen Bleach, *Times* journalist: I think like many people who are attracted to the Northern Territory I wanted to get out there in the wild, but that brought forth a dilemma because getting that far out into the wild and far from civilisation I think is often quite a lot of hard work. It's quite macho,

and it's quite dirty and it's quite arduous. I'm not particularly macho, I don't really like getting that dirty, and then I heard about the Katherine River. The great thing about the Katherine River is it does all the work for you. It's like a taxi ride. You get in a canoe, you're given a paddle, though I think it's more for form than anything else, and you dip it in every now and again to look like you're trying, but basically it just whisks you down to this extraordinary landscape tens, maybe a hundred miles away from human habitation, from human influence. You are completely out in the wild, and it's very accessible to a lot of people. Two weeks before I did it a group of four seventy-year-old couples had done it. It's very easy to do. But of course you have to be with people who know what they're doing. To get to the Katherine River you drive south from Darwin, you bear right at Humptydoo (they've got wonderful names for towns over there, that's one of the unsung pleasures of the Northern Territory I think) and to get to Katherine Gorge you turn left, but to get to the Katherine River you turn right and there human habitation completely fades away. You're in the middle of this incredible nature. They bring along the canoes, put you in and away you go for three, four, five days, a week if you like. It's all completely natural out there, of course there's a bit of a hitch. Just as we were put into the river my guide told me to look out for death adders which are twenty-eight times more venomous than a rattle snake; Huntsman spiders, which grow as big as your hand, I'm scared of spiders that are as big as my fingernail so that wasn't good; the paralysis ticks; brown snakes; but he said to me 'don't worry, nothing's probably going to hurt you, all you've got to remember to do is if you get up to pee in the night, check your sleeping bag when you get back because they're attracted to the warmth.' And I said 'well that's fine, I'll just zip the tent up securely when I go out.' Then he looked at me with a funny look and said, 'what tent?' and that was when I realised we were going to be sleeping in swags by the river. That brought home the fact that, never mind the creepy crawlies, we were going to be right out there with the crocs. There are two sorts of crocs in the Northern Territory, there are the salties and the freshies. The guide said 'don't worry about the freshies, they probably won't be more than two metres in there.' I didn't like two things about this sentence. I didn't like the 'probably' and I didn't like the 'two metres.' I'm not two metres. It made me a bit nervous. But the freshies are quite benign. The salties you need to worry about. They grow up to six metres and they do eat people (there are none in the Katherine River). Only twelve in the last twenty years, I was scared enough to look that up, but still. If you can forget all that, and you should do, it's well worth it. By the way, he was right to say 'probably' because it turned out there was something in there that wasn't all that benign. But it's an amazing place to be. It's a stunning landscape. It's completely wild. For somebody coming from Europe it's pristine in a way that we can't really connect with. It is like Eden. All our landscape here has been affected by man however long ago. This is completely untouched by man, or touched in the very lightest way by the aboriginals and native inhabitants there. Not trampled over, as we inevitably do with our own country. You're basically in a huge trough, because in the wet season the Katherine River is a vast torrent that gorges out this enormous bed. But in the dry, which is when you canoe it it's about fifteen yards across, a few feet deep, and it meanders through the bottom of this trough, going through this vast expanse of dry bush. It's stunningly beautiful, the archer fish, sting rays, sword fish, they're all just swimming around in this water. If you get thirsty, drink the river. It's utterly pure. If this was in the UK we'd wrap it up in National Park status and protect it and enshrine it but over there it's surplus to requirements. There's so much of this sort of pristine nature in the Northern Territory, it doesn't need extra protection. It's protected by its remoteness and lack of human habitation. It's a wonderful place to be. You also look up sometimes as you're canoeing and you see a tree trunk suspended, teetering in a treetop over you. Of course it's been left there by the floods and they do crash down with huge impacts sometimes, so it does concentrate the mind when you're paddling underneath them.

There was a particular moment that I do remember. We'd just gone past a hole, a big pool in the river and there was a flat spot by the side with some marks on it. I said to my guide 'what's that, Mick?' and he said, 'that's where a croc has been basking, it's about four metres long and it's in

here somewhere.' And I said, 'that's a bit worrying,' and he said, 'no, don't worry, you'll be fine.' Ten minutes later, he said, 'right, we'll camp here.' I was a bit scared but he had both his legs and an air of expertise, and I thought, 'shush, this is fine, here must be OK,' and I woke up in the middle of the night. There are huge noises there that can be really loud. Machine gun loud. I couldn't understand how my guide slept through it, it's like 'buh-buh-buh-buh!'. It's frogs, it's insects, but it's quite deafening sometimes. So I woke up, and had to answer a call of nature. It's the sort of call of nature that means you have to go a hundred yards from a water course (they're very strict about that sort of thing) and take a shovel and squat in a vulnerable position. I was very scared and I was running through this bush, and of course you run into lots of spiders' webs. There's a huge number of spiders. And you know how our spiders' webs are these gossamer, beautiful webs, well Australian spiders are much more utilitarian. They're just big stringy webs and you run through them, they're all over the place, the moonlight doesn't show them up. By the time I got to where I needed to be I was like a stick of candyfloss. I looked back in a distinctly nervous state, and just saw this thread of silver in the moonlight running across the savannah and it came home to me then how incredible and precious this place was. Funny place to be thinking it, but it's extraordinary. There are places that are harder to get to, and make you feel like more of an action man, but in fact in terms of sheer wilderness and sheer natural beauty and a sense of something precious and untouched I don't think you'd find a better place to go and a better place to be than the Northern Territory. I think that if most people here are looking for that sort of thing, you won't go wrong there. And I never saw the crocodile. Although it's very rare that one might get you, it's somehow thrilling to think you're paddling over one that might.

Alex Bentley, travel expert: I work for an organisation called Audley Travel, we're a tour operator up in Oxfordshire. Our expertise is in the design of personalised itineraries to a variety of parts of the world including Australia. I've had the good fortune to travel to Australia on numerous occasions over the last few years and have seen lots of different parts but I'm here to talk to you about the logistics and highlights of one of my favourite parts of the country, the Northern Territory of course. My first experience of the Northern Territory was a brief stopover in Darwin in the 90s with some friends as part of a big trip after university. We had the good fortune to time our visit with a Miss Northern Territory competition at the biggest nightclub in town, and duly went along to take a look. I remember distinctly one glamorous contestant, who, when asked what made the Territory better than all the other parts of the country, replied 'NT is the best region in Australia because you can wear a miniskirt all year round.' I'm here to tell you that's not the only highlight. As you've heard from Sab this morning and the two gentlemen here, the Northern Territory is a really unique place. It's the kind of place that best reflects that pioneering spirit that Australia is famous for. There are opportunities in the Northern Territory to discover not just a new land, but a bit about yourself as well.

So, to fine details. An itinerary into this Crocodile Dundee country could take several weeks. It can be difficult to know when to go and what to see, though. What I'm going to do is talk you through what would be a typical itinerary, hopefully give you some food for thought. Although you can visit the Northern Territory all year round, the best time would be our Spring, Summer and Autumn. The Northern Territory has two distinct climates: very tropical in the north, and a red desert-like climate in the south. Firstly, it's always bloomin' hot whenever you go. Darwin does attract tropical rains in January, February and March that can make access into certain areas quite difficult. That said, the national parks are buzzing with wildlife and the rivers and waterfalls are impressively full and fastflowing. The perception of the Northern Territory as a land with vast outdoor space with nothing for miles and miles, remote outback dwellings and infamously dangerous wildlife is of course true, but the reality is far more inspiring than it sounds. The vast outdoor space showcases some fantastic landscapes, some stupendous national parks. The rural remote dwellings provide unique accommodation, often extremely comfortable, luxurious, and offering memorable and authentic

outback experiences. This is Bullo River station (accompanying slide), where you might fancy having a go at being a ranger for the day, a cattle rancher, something like that, it's a fantastic experience. Wildlife too. There's wildlife in the Northern Territory that I never thought existed in Australia, from water buffalo to egrets, the birdlife in the Northern Territory is absolutely spectacular, to frilled-neck lizards, to thorny devils to name but a few. And, of course, in addition to all of this, the country's indigenous people, that make up a third of the Territory's population and whose influence can be seen throughout the entire Territory.

A trip into the Northern Territory will typically be through one of three different gateways. Darwin to the north, Alice Springs in the Red Centre, or the Yulara resort, which is on the edge of Uluru National Park. For the purposes of this itinerary we're going to use Darwin in the north. There are flights into Darwin from twenty-two different towns and cities, it is well served by domestic connections on Qantas, JetStar, Sky West or Air North and there's international connections through Bali and Singapore. It's the terminus for the magnificent Ghan railway and it's got a good road infrastructure as well. Darwin itself is a pleasant harbour-front city, much improved and developed over the last few years with modern facilities and amenities, a good selection of accommodation options to suit every budget, and it's well worth a couple of nights I think. I highly recommend you try to check out the Mindil Beach markets on a Thursday or Sunday if you can time your stay on one of those dates. They have amazing food outlets, it's always great for sunset, there's lots of indigenous arts and crafts and it's really nice to see how the locals live. Now, my recommendation heading out of Darwin would be to head to Kakadu National Park to start with. Kakadu is a vast wetland area, about three and a half hours to the east of Darwin. It's a real must-see. Not only is it home to some of the regions most remarkable wildlife, it's got a number of impressive waterfalls, rock formations and significant and ancient rock art sights, including those at Nourlangie and Ubirr Rock, many of them thousands of years old.

Access into this part of the Territory can be via your own four-wheel drive rented vehicle, you might want to do that out of Darwin; light aircraft, or perhaps with a supplier like Sab, who you all saw earlier this morning. The advantage of using someone like Sab is that he knows the region like the back of his hand. He's a real wildlife enthusiast, he knows the flora and fauna of the region extremely well and he's very well respected within the aboriginal community. He's always quite the comedian. We, as a company, use him frequently, and always get terrific feedback from our clients.

Now, where to stay. There are several different options in the park. My personal recommendation, and a bit of a treat, is Bamurru Plains on the edge of the National Park. Although it's technically tented accommodation, you can forget Glastonbury. This is true five-star camping. The owner, Charlie, has recreated a safari model, with elevated, raised tents, king-sized beds, en suite facilities and every modern amenity you can hope for. He refers to it in his marketing blurb as 'wild bush luxury' and I couldn't agree more. If you could stretch to it I'd recommend you spend at least two or three nights in Kakadu, simply because the journey time and access does take a little while and also there's just so much to see and do.

To the south of Kakadu there is the small town of Katherine, famous of course for the Katherine River and the Katherine Gorge. The highlight of a visit to this area is a gorge cruise, or paddling a canoe downriver as a wonderfully leisurely experience, the scenery is gorgeous, with these huge sandstone walls rising about seventy metres high either side of you. Katherine Gorge is actually made up of about thirteen different gorges, rapids, falls, tributaries, and the odd rock pool which make for a great spot to have a cooling swim. A real highlight for me was a helicopter flight over the area. It's a really exciting way to appreciate the vast outdoor spaces and landscapes of the Territory. Incidentally, because of the landscapes, some clients do request light aircraft transfers simply because it's a good way of getting from place to place and it's not quite the extravagance you might think. It's surprisingly affordable, especially if there's a few of you able to split the costs. Looking at it in a wider context, it is a way of life in the Territory with doctors, vets, postmen trying

to get out to all those remote communities use light aircraft transfers all the time, and particularly in the wet season when it's sometimes difficult to get in and out of certain places by road. After a couple of nights you can easily head back to Darwin, it's only about four hours or so. But what I would suggest is that you drive back to Katherine, drop off your four-wheel drive rented vehicle, or say goodbye to your guide, and take the Ghan southbound to Alice Springs. It operates on Wednesdays and Saturdays out of Katherine, and can be easily fitted into an itinerary and provides a nice alternative to flying or driving.

Now, Alice Springs itself. In the Red Centre it's the second largest community, though truthfully that's not saying a great deal. It's really just a nice small town, situated on the usually very dry Todd River, it's bordered by the majestic MacDonnell Ranges. It was the location of one of my more memorable birthdays several years ago which started with a very pleasant sunrise hot air balloon ride followed by a nice champagne breakfast, an afternoon game of desert golf, and an evening game of darts with a couple of aboriginal elders, which unfortunately I lost. I can highly recommend the balloon trip and the golf. Alice Springs is well worth a night or two, but the real draw for me and a lot of people is four and half hours to the south west. Uluru National Park is home to the Kata Tjuta rock domes, and of course the mighty Uluru, or Ayers Rock. Perhaps the most iconic sight in Australia and an absolute must in anyone's trip. This part of the Northern Territory is justified in spending three nights, in my opinion, aside from the visual beauty of the rock formations there's a number of different activities from interactions with the local Mutitjulu community, a really interesting cultural centre on sight, there's walking trails, and star gazing amongst a lot of other stuff as well. The rock itself is a twenty minute drive from Yulara, which is the resort community I mentioned earlier, and Yulara has a really good selection of accommodation depending on whatever budget you choose to work with. It has backpackers, three, four and five star, and best of the lot a property called Longitude 131 which may be technically tents, but not as we know it really, with comfy beds, en suite bathrooms and floor to ceiling windows all affording great views of the rock. Uluru provides a great conclusion to an itinerary to the Northern Territory, with regular daily domestic flights out from the small airport to different parts of Australia, numerous vehicle transfers back up to Alice, and down to South Australia and beyond.

The itinerary that I have just touched on will take about twelve to fourteen days to complete, those of you with less time might choose to take components or bits of it to include it into a wider trip to Australia. I hope that's helped to give you a bit of food for thought and whetted your appetite for a trip out there.

Questions:

Alasdair: Is it possible to travel on a medium budget for a shorter period of time?

Alex Bentley: It is perfectly possible to do it on a smaller budget, as there is a wide range of different accommodation standards to suit any kind of budget. It is very well catered for in that respect and has improved over the last few years. If you are looking at a wider Australia itinerary I'd say that the Northern Territory justifies at least a week, simply because there is so much to see and do and the distances do have to be considered. You can spend anything you wish from £50 to £100 a night upwards to £400 or £500 at some of the more expensive cattle stations where everything is included, so it very much depends on what you want to include, but the flexibility is there.

Question: How often does the Ghan train stop? Is it possible to use it to tour Australia getting on and off where you want?

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out of Katherine, drop you at a point of the river where there is road access and then at a designated point, however many miles further on, they will find another place where there is road access and come and get you and put the canoes back on the truck and drive you back. In the meantime, you're completely out in the wild and there's an enormous manual that they have of what to do in case of an emergency, which I leafed through, which wasn't comforting reading really. But they've got satellite phones and so on, and they're very hot on the safety of their clients and on having the right procedures in place. They really know what they're doing in terms of keeping you well and safe.

Simon Calder: I wanted to give a bit more background on the Ghan, this amazing train link. The information I'm taking is from the excellent Lonely Planet Guide to the Northern Territory, £15.99, and from what I understand, the line was first started in 1877. It was a narrow gauge line, they had all sorts of problems because they hadn't figured that it might occasionally rain, so they kept finding that the track was washed away from these dry river beds. Nevertheless, within a mere fifty-two years they built it all the way to Alice Springs, but it was still a tricky journey and on one occasion the train was ten days late. Then in the 1970s it was taken over by the federal government and they said, 'right, we're going to build a brand new line all the way from Tarcoola, which is this fascinating little railway junction in South Australia, all the way to Alice Springs, and they did that standard gauge and that's the line that it now uses. At the beginning of the 21st century they said 'we're finally going to extend it all the way to Darwin,' partly as a tourist thing, but partly because it's a great opportunity for bringing freight in. They decided that they were going to build 920 miles of line, and within three years the whole line had been built and that's what we're travelling on today. So a great journey, but of course the fantastic thing to do is to go one way by Ghan and the other way by road, only don't do what I did. I bought a car in Adelaide on the promise that I would be able to sell it for at least what I paid for it, but I lost in two weeks £1000. Other forms of transport are available.

Question: I travelled on the Ghan two years ago from Adelaide up to Alice Springs, travelling in the Red Kangaroo, the cheaper section. Very large carriages, double seats on either side of the aisle. Very comfortable seating, much bigger than aircraft seats. Huge amount of legroom. It took 25 hours, the most fascinating 25 hours. As Mr Gall said, you just look out and see the desert and it changes as you go along. The vegetation changes, the light changes. You see the odd kangaroo but not very often. The chair reclined, you could sleep on it quite comfortably during the night. I would recommend, though, an iPod because the in-train music is a bit dated, a bit 'muzak'ish, so if you don't like that, plug in your iPod. Very very comfortable journey, a very comfortable seat which I slept quite well on over night.

Question: Are there boat cruises down the Katherine Gorge?

Stephen Bleach: I must admit I don't know that part of the river that well, but I there are indeed powered boat cruises down there for a couple of hours or more. You can do canoeing trips down there as well. It is a bit more populated, a bit less wild than the stretch I did. It is, to be fair, very dramatic, having visited there very briefly. There is a series of gorges and the river is very wide there. Geologically it's fascinating. I believe there are pleasure boats you can go on that take you for just a few hours down stretches of that river. It's not the sort of place you can go on a long multi-day camping-out canoeing trip as I took.

Alex Bentley: Yes you can. There's a stretch of about 17 kilometres that typically most of the cruise boats will go along, a variety of different sizes. Quite a nice stretch of the gorge. It is a little

bit more populated. They [boats] vary in size and take anything up to a few hours to complete. But yes, you can do it by cruise.

Sandy Gall: Might I say, something that I forgot to mention earlier is that right beside Ayers Rock there's the Olgas, which are amazing mountains. They are about as old, one of them is 600 million and the other is 500 million years old, very very ancient, and they are great, huge rounded sandstone. You can go for a wonderful walk where you go up this very windy valley and up at the top you see these enormous towering things around you. The Olgas were named after some Russian princess who married someone... Wurstenberg or something. A curious connection, I don't know if he was governor and this was the wife of the governor or something like that. So hence, Olgas, named after a Russian princess, but nevertheless very very Australian. Called Kata Tjuta in Aboriginal. So, that's worth going to. If you go to Ayers Rock you go there too, so there's a lot to see apart from the Great Rock itself.

Question: Do seats on the Ghan have to be booked in advance?

Alex Bentley: Typically you'd pre-book to guarantee yourself a space. There's actually three different styles of accommodation: Red Kangaroo, Gold Kangaroo and a new Platinum cabin that is slightly more up-standard still. You would certainly need to pre-book for Platinum and Gold Kangaroo, but because of the number of seats on Red Kangaroo you could probably rock up. The train is big enough with so many different carriages. But you run the risk of not finding the availability. It only operates twice a week as well, so you could be waiting a while if you don't get a seat.

Question: Is there a standard fare for the Ghan or is there a possibility of cheap deals?

Alex Bentley: There's a lot of early-bird deals. Pre-booking does allow for a lot of early-bird specials and you usually find that it is a little bit more economical to book in advance than to turn up locally. Different operators have different rates, so shop around and see what you can find. Red Kangaroo is the most economical, with airline-style seats that recline, very comfortable with leg room and reasonable food and service. Gold Kangaroo is a style above that with private cabins. Platinum class is a slightly new cabin that they've introduced recently which is even more comfortable still, private cabins, private facilities and more expensive.

Question: Where do we find the kangaroos? What about aboriginal festivals and dances?

Alex Bentley: Kangaroos everywhere. There are plenty of them. If you were to take a hot-air balloon ride, for example, get above ground, that's quite a nice way of seeing them in their large numbers. You can see a lot of them, even just from the road. In terms of aboriginal festivals and dances, there's a number throughout the Northern Territory, they have a number of different festivals each year. They have dances, the corroboree, which is an aboriginal get together, and there are a number of these around the Territory each year. Your local guide or operator could advise you or have a look at the events section on australiasoutback.com.

Sandy Gall: You can even have a very nice kangaroo steak up there.

Question: I was there in January, February time and we couldn't go down the Katherine Gorge because presumably it was too wet. But if you go to Kakadu National Park at that time, in the wet it's absolutely fantastic because the trees are mirrored in the water and you go everywhere on a

flat-bottomed boats. There were wonderful fields of water lilies that were exquisite to see. You're talking about going in the dry, but the wet is very, very dramatic.

Alex Bentley: It is, yes. If you are travelling in January, February, March time you will find that the northern part of the Northern Territory, the tropics or Top End, is just a buzz of wildlife and growth, and certainly the rivers and the waterfalls are impressively full. The access can be a challenge, that can be one of the slight drawbacks of travelling at that time of year and you have to expect to get a little wet with 400 millimetres of rain in Darwin in January, so it does get a bit up there. It's a great time to go: it's off season, the prices are a little bit lower then as well but it's slightly more logistically challenging.

Question: What about hiring a camper van and travelling around the Northern Territory?

Alex Bentley: It can be done. There are vehicles that have four-wheel drive facilities that will enable you to get off road. A lot of the access into some of the parks is on unsealed roads so you would need to make sure you had sufficient vehicles. It's perfectly possible. Australia as a whole is quite well set up for that kind of travel and you'll find that on any weekend a lot of people will leave Darwin. It's that adventurous kind of population that do choose to do that sort of thing on weekends and holidays, so it's perfectly do-able. You could stop at any national park on the weekends and find a number of Territorians with their families having barbeques and staying overnight in a campervan. It can be done.

Stephen Bleach: I think it's a fantastic way. I'm quite an enthusiast for that sort of thing. Get a campervan, or maybe you don't need a campervan. Just get yourself a big family car and you can be prepared to sleep out. If it's the right time of year get yourself a swag and sleep out in the open. It's what the settlers did, it's part of what Australia's about. It's also incredibly cheap and there's many places where you can do it. If you want to travel independently and you've got time and it's your style of travelling then it's a wonderful place to do just that. It means you have to be aware that you may wake up and there are an awful lot of tracks around your swag and somebody's been having a party there during the night time but if you can live with that then it's a great way to go. If you're going to go on unsealed roads you have to make sure you've got the appropriate kind of vehicle. I actually drove about 1000 miles on unsealed roads in a broken down old station wagon and nearly became one of those people who the Australian authorities sigh about and say 'why do these idiot Brits come over here and do this?' so I just about got away with it but I wouldn't do it again. You need to have the right sort of car.

Question: What other tours are there around Uluru?

Alex Bentley: You still can climb the rock, although it is frowned upon by the local aboriginal community, the owners of the land, because it is such a sacred site. They would prefer you to take a base walk. There is a whole host of different activities that you can do, all out of Yulara, the community resort on the edge of the park. There's camel trekking, you can take a Harley Davidson, a helicopter flight, there's walking, there's a fantastic cultural centre. We have an arrangement with the local aboriginal community and have different experiences with them. There's a whole host of things you can do and it's very much set up for that sort of thing.

Question: There's a new viewing platform that they've recently opened at Uluru that you can also see Kata Tjuta from. So if the ban does come into force then you'll still be able to get great views of the Rock from that.



Alasdair: Thank you Stephen, Alex and Sandy.