

Riding the Ghan train through Australia's Red Center

The fabled Ghan, one of the world's great rail trips, threads its way through the Outback, where the wild things star. By Beverly Beyette, Times Staff Writer, January 7, 2007

The Red Center, Australia — TEN days, one wallaby, no kangaroos.

My fantasy — adorable 'roos galumphing around every bush in the Outback — was just that. Camels — wild ones, at that — were another matter. About 60,000 of the feral beasts roam the Outback that unfolded outside the picture window of my train compartment.

I had come to Australia to ride the Ghan, the legendary train that bisects the country, traveling from Adelaide in the south to Darwin in the north. It's sometimes called the "Hundred Year Dream"; the last track was laid just two years ago, capping nearly a century of struggle to connect one end of this great emptiness to the other.

All told, the trip takes 48 hours, two full days of slicing through a land that is Texas times five. It is rugged and it is real, an antidote to the too-well-trod territories that are beginning to crowd the planet.

And if it's an authentic experience you're after, throw in my ride on a camel whose castration was botched, and it hardly gets more real than that.

My 1,850-mile adventure, from which I detoured in the middle, began at Keswick station in Adelaide, South Australia, on a Sunday in August. Just before our 5:15 p.m. departure, the Ghan crew, decked out in red, white and blue, lined up on the platform and delivered a spirited "All aboard!"

The first surprise was my compartment. This was Gold Kangaroo Service, the top of three classes on the train, but my single redefined "compact." With the bed lowered, the door wouldn't fully open. The cabin had a tiny closet and a sink that folded into the wall. By day, though, I had a comfortable seat from which to gaze out the window.

The Ghan does not offer luxury sleeping accommodations. The cars date from the '60s and '70s and look it. (I sneaked a peek into a Red Kangaroo cabin, the next class down, and it was even smaller.) This journey is about adventure, not luxury, although our crew — 21 attending to 220 passengers — was top-notch.

As I settled in, trying to stash the large suitcase that I should have checked, we rolled out of Adelaide, passing squat brick bungalows and graffiti-covered warehouses.

First on the passengers' agenda was to choose a seating — sunset (6:30 p.m.) or moonlight (8:30) — in the Stuart Restaurant, the nicely appointed maroon-and-gold diner. I chose the late seating. Before dinner, travelers gathered in the Gold Kangaroo lounge to sip free Champagne and socialize.

Dinner in the diner was a happy surprise. Tables were laid with proper cloths, and we were served a three-course meal — choice of beef, duck, fish or vegetarian — cooked onboard.

When it was time to retire, I wondered whether I would be able to sleep. As the train chugged toward Alice Springs on the standard-gauge track, laid in the 1980s, it swayed a lot. Still, lulled by the motion, I easily nodded off.

At 5 a.m., I sat up, opened my blind and gazed at a sky full of crystal-clear stars. An hour later, the faintest pink glow crept over the desert, and I could make out scrubby trees. Just as our attendant brought coffee (instant), a blindingly bright sun popped over the horizon.

I propped myself up on my pillows, snuggling under the red comforter, and watched great stretches of nothingness, just red dirt and, now and then, a few cattle.

Later, as we ate breakfast, the Ghan crossed into the Northern Territory. I shared a table with a couple from Victoria; I was the only Yank among Aussies and Kiwis. My tablemates were barley farmers for whom this holiday was a break from double trouble: drought and an infestation of crop-damaging white snails.

Hours passed quickly. From the audio history of the Ghan and the Great Southern Railway piped into my room, I learned that the first steam train pulled out of Adelaide on Aug. 4, 1929, carrying supplies and 100 passengers to Stuart, now Alice Springs. The trip took two days, about twice as long as it does now, and was frequently the victim of Mother Nature's wrath. Australia has 30 species of termites, some as much as an inch long, and they found the wooden track supports exceptionally tasty. (The supports were ultimately replaced by concrete.) And strangely enough, on a continent that is among the driest on Earth, flash floods were such a problem that they frequently delayed the trip. A story, perhaps apocryphal, has it that the crew from one train that was stranded for two weeks had to shoot wild goats to feed the passengers.

The old Ghan, the narrator said, was "rich in folklore but poor in timekeeping, but few guests on this train are interested in speed records."

That's still true. The Ghan makes the two-day trip at an average speed of 53 mph. If you're a Type A personality, consider this instead: A flight from Adelaide to Darwin is less than four hours.

The Alice

"ONE cannot long remain so absorbed in contemplation of emptiness without being increasingly attracted to it," French sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote in the 19th century. "In vain one bestows on it the name of infinity; this does not change its nature."

In this stretch of Australia, its nature is nothingness. North of Adelaide, the Ghan leaves behind most of Australia's population. The land is flat, punctuated only with shrubs that have adapted to the mercilessly arid climate, and its vastness is mesmerizing.

Around noon on our second day, the Ghan pulled into the little station at Alice Springs, known here as "The Alice." Locals had parked alongside the tracks to wave a welcome.

I had been reading Nevil Shute's 1950 novel, "A Town Like Alice," which isn't really about Alice, but still, I expected a place like the sleepy, isolated Outback town in the book. But Alice has boomed since the '40s, when it became reachable by paved road.

Heading into town, we encountered a Kmart, a Blockbuster and a KFC. There's even a casino.

So much for the isolated Outback.

Indeed, Alice Springs is a modern town of about 30,000 bisected by the Todd River, which is almost always dry. The highlight each year is fall's Henley-on-Todd Regatta, when townspeople in bottomless boats "sail" the parched riverbed. It's been canceled only twice in 44 years because of too much water.

Our town tour took us to Anzac Hill for a panoramic view of Alice and the mushroom-like white radomes at nearby Pine Gap, a facility that, locals say somewhat conspiratorially, is a not-so-secret CIA ground station for a worldwide satellite communications network.

The Alice has a Ghan museum and a few other attractions to keep visitors occupied for a day. In pedestrian-friendly Todd Mall, restaurants dish up camel burgers, and shops sell Aboriginal art, didgeridoos and boomerangs. At the reptile center, I came face to face with an inland taipan. Eyeing me from behind glass, it looked like a harmless khaki-colored loop. But it is said to be the most venomous snake in the world.

That's the only vile creature I discovered in Alice Springs, where I stopped off for a few days to explore nearby Uluru, or Ayers Rock, and Kings Canyon before continuing north to Darwin.

I'd booked my hotels and tours with Voyages, an Australian travel company that's dominant in the Red Center, and my trip was glitch free. I spent my first night at Voyage's Alice Springs Resort, a perfectly OK if not exciting upscale motel a short walk from the town center.

Early the next morning, a comfortable bus operated by AAT Kings picked me up for the 289-mile drive to Uluru. The trip included a stop at Mt. Ebenezer Roadhouse, where Aborigines from the nearby Imanpa community operate a cafe and a gallery selling native art.

We had our first glimpse of the monolith from the bus. From a distance, it looked like one big, smooth hunk of sandstone; later, on a walking tour around the base, I could see that it has giant pockmarks, caves and black streaks left by rain.

Uluru — the restored Aboriginal name for Ayers Rock — is a symbol of the country's changing politics. In October 1985, the rock and the land — the 311,000-acre Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park on which it sits — were returned to the Anangu people, who, in turn, leased it to the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service for 99 years.

Climbing the 1,143-foot rock is popular, but the Aborigines discourage this because it is, for them, a spiritual place. At the nearby Kata Tjuta Cultural Center, a free-form mud brick structure shaped like a pair of ancestral snakes, there's a "sorry book" with letters from people who took a piece of the rock but returned it after having bad luck.

Except for camping, options for staying overnight near Uluru are limited to the ultra-deluxe Longitude 131? or Ayers Rock Resort, where there are four hotels, one apartment complex, numerous restaurants, a few shops and a visitors center. Voyages owns and operates all of them. I chose the contemporary Lost Camel Hotel (\$268), nice but not ultra-fancy, next to the shopping center and tour office. At the high end is Sails in the Desert (doubles from \$346); at the low end is the family-friendly Outback Pioneer Hotel and Lodge (dorm beds from \$26 per person, doubles from \$150).

You can choose from a variety of tours, as diverse as riding a camel or a Harley. I skipped the Hog and chose the sunset camel trek (\$75), where I met the unfortunate and aforementioned Leo, whose gelding apparently was fumbled and presumably accounted for what was said to be his erratic temperament.

I went from slightly fearful to fond of the surprisingly gentle Leo, with whom I had bonded by the time our little caravan paused to watch the sun's setting rays dance on Kata Tjuta, the cluster of 36 red rock domes formerly called the Olgas.

In the desert

THE next morning, it was still dark and very cold when I joined a small group for the Desert Awakenings tour (\$101). A four-wheel-drive vehicle took us down bush tracks into the desert. We climbed a dune to a lookout where a welcome fire crackled.

We ate damper, an Australian bread cooked over the open fire, and fried egg sandwiches as we watched the sun rise over the rock.

But the *pièce de résistance* was still to come. That night at sunset, the Sounds of Silence tour (\$114) took us to a desert clearing where we listened to the low-pitched music of an Aboriginal didgeridoo. We sipped Champagne and drank in the head-on view of Uluru.

The touted "gourmet buffet" included barramundi (a local fish), kangaroo, emu and crocodile and was pretty awful, but the wine was fine and the candle-lighting tables were elegant. After dinner, a stargazer gave us an armchair tour of the stars and constellations.

After that bit of heaven, I visited another: Longitude 131?, a luxury "camp" with 15 tents that are tents in name only. They do have canopy ceilings, but the similarity ends there, because they also have air conditioning, minibars, posh bathrooms and a wall of windows with unobstructed views of the rock. There's also a small swimming pool.

At its elegantly low-key Dune House, guests share communal gourmet meals. The tab: \$706 per person per night for a double, \$1,146 for a single, two-night minimum, with meals. Included are tours, which are timed to protect guests from sightseeing hoi polloi.

Back on terra firma, I finished out my two nights at Ayers Rock Resort and then took an ATT Kings bus the 190 miles to Watarrka National Park and Kings Canyon.

You can take the leisurely 1.2-mile Kings Creek Walk (my choice) or the more demanding 3.7-mile Kings Canyon Rim Walk, but in either case, you must not leave without seeing the lovely canyon with its towering sandstone walls. It's peaceful, but it's a long drive with little to see on the way. And accommodations at Voyage's Kings Canyon Resort are basic, the restaurants pricey and the flies horrendous.

I took a bus back to the Alice the next day and, after an overnight, reboarded the Ghan to Darwin. Smaller train, same amenities. I ate and slept well and was awakened early by our steward, Georgina, tapping on my door and announcing, "Brekkie!" She had brought a box breakfast because we would be arriving early in the town of Katherine, "where the Outback meets the tropics."

This part of the trip was smoother, partly because this section of track was newer. The scenery, too, is different. We saw palm trees and mangoes and, on the way to Nitmiluk (Katherine) Gorge for a river cruise, a wallaby.

Our open-sided boat sailed through the gorge to a landing where we hiked over rocks and sand dunes to a second jetty to board another boat taking us deeper into the gorge. We saw no crocodiles but were told that rangers regularly make "croc spots" by helicopter, later trapping their prey and sending them to a croc farm in Darwin.

And soon enough, Darwin loomed in the distance as the Ghan trip wound down. I had fulfilled my wish to do the land Down Under by train and was still amazed at how [Australia](#)'s huge piece of nothing could be quite something, even if I never saw that 'roo.

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GETTING THERE: From LAX, Qantas has connecting service (change of plane) to Adelaide. Restricted round-trip fares begin \$1,952. Qantas has direct flights (stop, no change of planes) into Ayers Rock airport from Perth, [Sydney](#), Cairns, [Melbourne](#) and Alice Springs, and connecting flights from Darwin and Brisbane through Alice Springs.

AAT Kings, (800) 353-4525, <http://www.aatkings.com>, operates comfortable buses between Alice Springs, Ayers Rock and Kings Canyon.

TELEPHONES: To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international dialing code), 61 (country code for [Australia](#)) and the local number.

BOOKING THE GHAN: Great Southern Railway, 422 King William St., Adelaide; 8-8213-4592 or 8-8213-4444, <http://www.trainways.com.au>, operates the Ghan, which departs twice a week from Darwin and Adelaide, stopping at Alice Springs. Three classes of service are available: Gold Kangaroo, Red Kangaroo and Daynighter. Fare from Adelaide to Darwin is \$1,513 per person in Gold, \$903 in Red and \$437 in a Daynighter seat. Meals are included only in Gold.

TO LEARN MORE: **Australian Tourist Commission**, (800) 333-0262, <http://www.australia.com>.