

LONGITUDE 131°

WORDS BY SUE WALLACE

Glamping in the desert

Thousands of stars are twinkling and the Milky Way is looking sensational from my cosy canvas swag that comes with a hot water bottle, popcorn and a warming tippie.

Camping under the stars has never been so appealing and stargazing has become an obsession since returning from a night sky dinner lecture. Maybe this isn't strictly camping but it is just one of the treats during an indulgent stay at the boutique luxury lodge, Longitude 131, nestled in Australia's red heart. Earlier at a starlit four-course dinner at Table 131, where we dine on twice-baked cheese soufflé, tender lamb and the most delicious pavlova, Caroline, the resident astronomer takes the stage.

"It's easy to spot stars in such clear skies out here at Uluru," says Caroline, as she waves her bright green laser towards the Southern Cross and other well-known constellations.

Most don the cosy hooded ponchos as the temperature plunges to zero as we are escorted back to our tented suites while the sounds of the desert play out and the winds pick up. Some guests last the night under the stars on their deck while others head inside when their hot water bottle cools. But regardless where you lay your head, it's those magnificent night skies that take centre stage in the evening. Dreams are filled with stories about mystical Aboriginal legends gleaned from a 10km base walk around Uluru in the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.

Our excellent guide, Rick Petersen is passionate about the area and loves to share stories of the land's traditional custodians as we stop at water holes and rock art along the way.

"This is such a unique place I have seen people shed tears as they experience the rock in all its glory," he says.

Rick shows us a men's cave where Mala elders once made fires for ceremonies and repaired tools. There's also a women's kitchen cave where older females prepared meals. You can run your hand over smooth rocks where they once pounded seeds. After our walk, we return to the lodge to be greeted with warm towels and cool drinks.

Longitude 131 has long led the way in premium Outback accommodation under the guidance of Hayley and James Baillie, who also own Kangaroo Island's Southern Ocean Lodge and Lord Howe Island's Capella Lodge. A recent \$8 million dollar refurbishment is impressive and features a new two-bedroom Dune Pavilion that overlooks two World-heritage listed natural icons - Uluru is in the foreground and the 36-domed Kata Tjuta in the distance. It's a breathtaking view that can even be seen from the king-sized beds, as you skim over sweeping red sand dotted with feathery Desert Oaks, flowering shrubs and hardy wildflowers that come and go in season. Inspired by iconic Australian homesteads, the showcase suite features floor to ceiling glass walls, bespoke decor, large lounge, extended deck and vibrant artwork from South Australia's Tjala Arts Centre.

Eclectic indigenous art stars throughout the lodge and in the other 15 white topped safari style suites that are named after explorers. They feature a king-size bed, comfortable lounge, ensuite bathroom with generous rain-shower and private deck complete with an Eco-Smart fire set in a stone and timber bench. The new Dune Top area is perfect for a dip in a small plunge pool, sundowner and intimate starlit dining in four heated curved pods.

Meals are served in the main lodge, the Dune House, with floor to ceiling windows where the splendour of that 600-year-old monolith leaves many speechless on first sight. Dining is a culinary adventure with chef Jon Bryant creating dishes with fresh flavours and bush tucker nuances such as the smoked beef brisket with Old Man Saltbush.

There's also a boutique, slick bar with 500 hand painted tiles depicting desert spinifex done by 26 artists from Ernabella Arts Community and an expanded dining area and outdoor terrace. For pampering head to the new Spa Kinara (that means moon) located in two bronzed iron clad retreats inspired by the shape of traditional indigenous shelters. Signature treatments include a Sacred Earth massage using Australian LI'TYA products and local outback ingredients including imangka-imanka or salted emu bush.

After a day of exploring take a dip in the main pool with a help-yourself- bar with a marble top that resembles the Outback's salt lakes. Wilderness experiences on offer include the Uluru Base walk, Walpa Gorge trek, helicopter Adventures that circle Uluru and a visit to Bruce Munro's spectacular illuminated Field of Light installation that has been extended to March 2018.

Glamping has never been so good, but it's still that rock in all its glory that's the star of the show



THE LOW DOWN:

Rates at Longitude 131 start at \$1400 per person and include all dining, open bar with French Champagne, premium wines and spirits (cellarmasters list additional), in-suite bar, signature experiences and return Ayers Rock Airport transfers. www.longitude131.com.au

