

Third Rock

FROM THE SUN

DEBORAH CICUREL gets on board The Ghan Expedition for a unique and unforgettable train journey through Australia



I'M ON THE MOON. The red, arid land stretches out in front of me and there's no life to be seen. The silence is deafening. It must be the moon. Or at least, that's what it looks like. I am, in fact, in Coober Pedy, the utterly remote opal mining capital of the world in the heart of the Australian outback. It's not exactly picturesque or charming, but there's an eerie, fascinating feel to it.

Ever since a 14-year-old boy, Willie Hutchison, first discovered opals here in 1915 while traversing the wilderness with his father, the remote, peculiar town has been a favourite with tourists keen to see 'the true Australia', before the manicured suburbs of Melbourne or the cosmopolitan streets of Sydney came into being. There's a strange, junkyard feel to the place, with old cars, discarded film props and unsightly debris lining the streets.

When soldiers came to Coober Pedy after WW1 – keen to make their fortunes from opal mining after all they had lost – they brought with them the knowledge and experience of living in the trenches. The new residents dug their homes underground to escape the searing heats of summer and the cool winds of winter.

And that is how this unique place got its name. In 1920, it was christened Coober Pedy, an anglicised version of the Aboriginal term 'kupa piti', meaning 'boys' waterhole'.

Nowadays, more than half of its population continue to live underground, with escorted tours showing visitors not only how the miners still track down valuable opals from the land, but also the cavernous dugout homes in which they live.

I am not staying in this uncanny, unfamiliar place though. Coober Pedy is just one of the stops on the Ghan Expedition – the Australian cross-continental rail journey that hurtles from the top of the enormous country to the bottom in four days and three nights, with jaunts and adventures in between – on which I have embarked.

Train journeys have lost their romance; their sense of intrigue. The days of glamorous dining carriages and panoramic vistas seen from one's window are a distant memory and the majority of us are now used to cramped commuter carriages, stale sandwiches and constant delays.

Not the Ghan, which harks back to an age when trains were not just about getting from A to B, but enjoying the experience on the way. Covering nearly 3,000km of the most remote but fascinating parts of Australia, it takes passengers from Darwin – the tropical capital city of the Northern Territory – all the way to Adelaide, the cosmopolitan, quirky capital of South Australia.

While the normal Ghan service runs all year (compromising two nights and three days with limited touring), this special expedition is a one-of-a-kind, extended journey that gives passengers more time to spend both on board the luxury train and in the curious world beyond, getting to grips with the country's most remote parts.

Previously a three-month service, next year it will be extended to six months, such is its popularity. While the journey is a favourite among older Aussies looking for an unusual staycation, I generally found there to be a mix of people on board, from solo flashpackers and honeymooning couples, to families after a holiday that offers more than a hotel room and swimming pool.

The friendly, warm dining carriage, with barely-there phone signal and no garish 'Free Wi-Fi' signs, means travelling on the train recalls a bygone era: a time when people used to talk, really talk, and listen to each other, and when journeying together was a shared experience rather than something merely to be endured. You eat with people you've never met before – daunting at first, no doubt – but you soon realise this is no place to worry

about emails or signal.

This is about new friends, unfamiliar scenery, and indelible experiences.

Boarding the train in laid-back Darwin the very same day, you're dropped in the town of Katherine, where

you can pick from a number of excursions. I choose the breathtaking Nitmiluk Gorge cruise, where, on a boat drifting between serene gorges, you learn about the history of the indigenous Jawoyn people, and while clambering over rocks, you can see for yourself the ancient artwork etched into the vertiginous sandstone cliffs. You might also spot crocodiles, indolently sprawled across branches and regarding you with icy eyes.

Another interesting stop is Alice Springs, where you can either explore the remote rural town, or, if you're feeling brave, opt for a scenic flight of Uluru, or Ayers Rock – the gargantuan Australian landmark that's millions upon millions of years old. Just getting to Uluru is a feat in itself, with the pocket-sized plane terrifyingly light and fragile in the air, and the endless desert scenes outside the dusty windows of the aircraft feeling almost uncomfortably close.

But once you're there, Uluru is even more magnificent in real life than the brochures promise. It's over 860m above sea level, with a circumference of 9.4km – to put into perspective, that's higher than the Eiffel Tower (which is 324m). But it's not just the sheer size of the World Heritage-listed, famous red rock that is so affecting, but the spiritual significance it holds to the Anangu ▶

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► people, the traditional owners of Uluru. As we walk around the monolith, not even coming close to seeing enough of it, our guide regales us with traditional Anangu stories, each groove, crack and crevice in the rock having its own symbolic and poignant explanation.

The wonderful thing about covering this far-off land by train is the comfort of it all. As anyone who has been to Australia before will know, connecting the dots between each city takes a bit of logistical planning, to say the least, whether you want to save on time and fly, or save on money and take a bus or car journey for days on end.

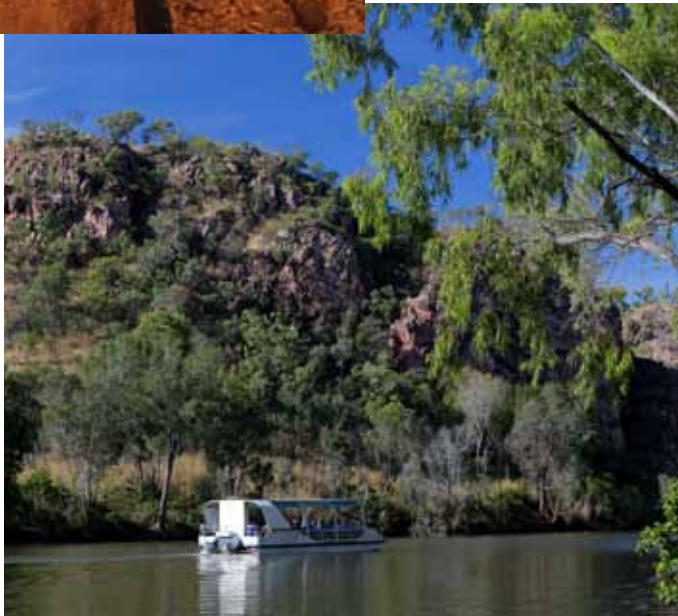
It is a luxury to be able to snuggle down into my comfortable bed each night, the vast desert flashing past my window, after enjoying an authentic Australian meal (typical fare includes saltwater barramundi and kangaroo sausage), without planning anything at all. We simply wake up and enjoy a hearty breakfast before being transported as if by magic to the most special parts of the outback, not having to partake in any of the organisation that travelling across such an enormous country would normally involve.

However, it's not just excursions and touring on board the Ghan Expedition. There are extra touches the whole way through to make you feel like it's more than a train trip from one capital city to the other, that you're being taken care of. The outback dinner at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, partaking in a traditional Aussie barbecue under the stars, to the sound of live music. The postcards, with free postage, left on your pillow so you can write to your family about how your trip is going. The knock on your door in the morning, not just to wake you up, but with a restorative hot cup of tea in bed. The canapés at an obscure, sun-scorched train station, while catching up

with other passengers who you've only known for hours, but who feel like old friends.

Arriving at the penultimate stop, Coober Pedy, I think, if this isn't the moon, this must be the set of *Mad Max*. Hours later, as we stop to snap pictures of the desolate wasteland and grab yet another glass of South Australian wine, our guide tells us it was indeed the set of the post-apocalyptic film. Where else could the filmmakers so effectively portray the end of the world? I wouldn't like to live in this peculiar moonscape, I think to myself, but there surely can't be a better way to experience the heart of Australia than this: the dreamy, lost art of travelling by train. ■





MORE INFORMATION

Freedom Australia (freedomaustralia.co.uk, 0333 234 2859) can book an eight-day holiday to Australia, which includes the Ghan Expedition experience from £2,749 per person.

This includes international flights with Singapore Airlines from London Heathrow to Darwin, returning from Adelaide, including all airport taxes, one night's accommodation at the Travelodge Mirambeena Resort Darwin, three nights/four days aboard the Ghan in Gold Service, including all meals, beverages and off train excursions, including: Katherine Gorge Cruises, Alice Springs Desert Park or landmarks tour, Outback BBQ dinner and Underground lunch at Coober Pedy, and one night's accommodation at the Majestic Roof Garden Hotel in Adelaide.

For further information on The Ghan and other train journeys across Australia, visit: greatsouthernrail.com.au