

■ Last light on the Larapinta Trail

WEST OF ALICE

Scenic trips into the West MacDonnell Ranges were once regarded as the realm of 4WDs only. Like many places in the Northern Territory, a few good roads have made stunning scenery open to regular cars and coaches. While we don't recommend you tackle Finke Gorge National Park in a rented Corolla, there's plenty of stunning scenery to be enjoyed as you roam west of Alice along Namatjira Drive. By **Ewen Bell**.

FINKE GORGE NP

This is perhaps more fun for drivers than photographers, but there are some lovely spots to shoot as you get into Palm Valley, especially if some of the water courses are offering reflections off flat water. Note that most 4WD rentals out of Alice Springs specifically exclude access to these roads, and in sections they're genuinely challenging, requiring experience dealing with soft sand and boulder crawling. There are plenty of other highlights you can access without going this far "off-road".



“As you head further west, the landscape grows ever more grand in scale”

■ Sunrise at Finke Gorge NP

“For just a few minutes each day the sun rises directly over head and lights up the entire chasm”



■ The Milky Way above sand banks at Finke Two Mile

DRIVING RANGE

- Alice Springs to Standley Chasm **50kms (1hr 20mins)**
- Alice Springs to Ellery Creek Big Hole **88km (1hr 50mins)**
- Alice Springs to Ochre Pits **111km (2hrs 15mins)**
- Alice Springs to Glen Helen Gorge **132km (2hrs 40mins)**
- Alice Springs to Ormiston Gorge **135km (2hrs 50mins)**
- Alice Springs to Tnorala Conservation Reserve **195km (4hrs)**

Spinifex grass and the bold ridge lines in red make for inspiring landscape photography in the late afternoon and early morning. There’s no shortage of places to park the 4WD so you can go for a walk while you’re there.

Just over 100km west of Alice Springs, the Ochre Pits are a colourful diversion from the red rocks and ghost gums. Ranging in tones from crimson to white to orange, the soft beds of ochre are a cultural treasure for the traditional land owners of the region. Even without an Indigenous guide to walk you through the site, there’s plenty to take in. You’re not allowed to touch the ochre, but the bizarre formations and hues of the rock are themselves like a massive painting created by the forces of nature.

Gorgeous gorge

Glen Helen Gorge is the next stop down the highway, now a little over 130km from Alice Springs. The gorge itself is spectacular and the first sighting from the highway is worth a roadside stop. Looking out across the flood plains, the intense »

Travel Tip

Find out more

The best source of information when planning a trip into the West MacDonnells is nt.gov.au/westmacs



■ Red dirt at Silver Box

Sandley Chasm is one of the easiest-to-reach highlights in the West MacDonnell Ranges and offers a good introduction to the natural charms of this landscape. Brilliant orange and red rocks have split apart to reveal the geology that lies deep within the ranges; quartzite and sandstone pushed up from what was once a prehistoric inland sea.

The walking trail takes just 20 minutes and winds through seasonal creek beds and stands of cycads. At any time of year there are wildflowers in bloom, either close to ground level or cascading off flowering gums. The route is signposted by graceful old ghost gums, their pasty white trunks mottled with streaks of green and brown.

Ringneck Parrots love to get amongst the high branches and fresh flowers. They bicker gently between themselves over who gets first nibble. A trail of broken blossoms cover the ground whenever these parrots have finished a feed, sometimes biting off more than they can chew as a chunk of fresh leaves and buds tumble down to earth.

Peak hour at Standley Chasm is around noon, as for just a few minutes each day the sun rises directly over head and lights up the entire chasm. Only then does the full intensity of the earthy-red colours emerge from the stone. Hordes of travellers also emerge at noon, mostly stepping out of coaches on a day trip from Alice Springs.

Ellery Creek

Another 30 minutes west along Namatjira Drive is Ellery Creek Big Hole, a larger version of Standley Chasm where the orange quartzite plunges into a deep dark lake. Gorges and gaps like this one are especially important as they create microclimates that retain water and are far wetter than the surrounding area. The geology of the gorges is the foundation for species diversity in the region, with 65% of plants in the Northern Territory found in these modest-sized ranges.

Ellery Creek is one of the best places in the West MacDonnells to take a swim, but as you move from the sun-soaked shallow edges the water becomes dramatically colder and goes deeper. Some parts of the hole are more than 25 metres deep and can be too cold even for the native fish in Ellery Creek.

Native birds also flock to this watering hole in great numbers and you can get your own bird’s-eye view by following the rocky trails. Within a few minutes you’re looking down on the tops of River Red Gums, watching the busy life of Rainbow Bee-eaters, Budgerigars and Honeyeaters as they dart about the rocky landscape.

As you head further west, the landscape grows ever more grand in scale. Namatjira Drive follows the geological lines with outcrops of deep red rock climbing on the south side of the highway, and the hidden treasures of the Larapinta Trail to the north.



■ Ellery Creek Hole at Noon



» IMAGES

WAITING FOR THE STARS NEAR TNORALA
» (LEFT, TOP) Shot on 1D MkIV; 24mm; 10 sec; f/3.2; ISO 1600

ON LOCATION WEST OF ALICE
» (LEFT, INSET) Shot on 1D MkIV; 24mm; f/13; 1/80sec; ISO 400

FLOWERING GUMS IN WINTER
» (LEFT) Shot on 1D MkIV; 70-200mm; f/2.8; ISO 200

MILKY WAY
» (ABOVE) Shot on 1D MkIV; 24mm; f/2; ISO 3200; >1024 sec



PRO TIP

Infra-red

If you enjoy infra-red photography then the combination of clear skies and rocky landscapes offer plenty of opportunities in the non-visible spectrum.



“In the late afternoon the light is bright and vivid”



Grasshoppers in the spinifex

FOOD AND WATER

There are very few services west of Alice Springs along Namatjira Drive, with a tea shop at Standley Chasm carpark and a general store at Glen Helen Gorge. Make sure you carry water and provisions before leaving town. Glen Helen Gorge also boasts a restaurant in the evenings, so if you don't mind getting home after dark you can enjoy a fine meal to cap off a day of bush walking at Ormiston Pound.

orange of the ranges dips low to the horizon to make way for the Finke River. Up close the gorge is almost too large to fully appreciate, a massive wall of quartzite and granite.

Helicopter flights are possible here so you can see the geological setting from up high. Only then can you fully appreciate the dramatic folding and reshaping of the landscape that has taken place over many millions of years. From the air you can also get great views of Mt Sonder to the far west of the ranges, and Ormiston Gorge just a little further down the road.

A 20-minute walk from Ormiston Gorge car park gets you up above the spinifex and ghost gums to look down on Ormiston Creek as it cuts a path through the ranges. In the late afternoon the light is bright and vivid, highlighting the Ghost Gums, but don't wait too long or the gorge itself is plunged into shadows.

If you have all day, the Pound Walk offers four hours of terrain along the surrounding ridge line, and this alone is worth the drive from Alice Springs. The Ghost Gum Walk takes less than half that time, dipping down into the gorge to follow the creek and getting up close to the water hole.

The wildflowers and flora start to vary here as the wide-open spaces west of Ormiston Pound retain far less water than the gorge itself. Ormiston is a continuation of the dramatic scenery and abundant bird life you find closer to Alice Springs, but on a grander scale and yet still easy to reach without a 4WD.

Two miles

A sunset lookout spot has been built between Ormiston and Glen Helen Gorge, where you can watch the sun retreat behind the peaks of Mt Sonder. It's an epic sight as the last rays of light drift across the spinifex and light up the gums along Finke River. Nearby is a modest turn-off called "Finke Two Mile" and this represents the iconic camping experience for visitors to the region. Sandy river banks are lined with massive gum trees and smooth rocks, worn down by centuries of flooding.

At night under the empty sky this patch of the West MacDonell Ranges is very quiet and the ideal place to practice some star trails. With the

campfire barely more than red embers, we tried a few shots of the Milky Way, our camper van and sheltering trees brightly illuminated by the glow.

The best of Finke Two Mile happens the next morning, with the early light offering reflections over the water and down the river. Glen Helen Gorge comes into view as you shoot to the south, throwing bright red cliffs into the compositions. If you're lucky birds will provide some interest for the long lens as well, and we enjoyed a few hours watching a White-necked Heron hunting for a snack in the reeds of Finke River.

The powered campsites at Glen Helen Gorge are handy when you need to recharge the batteries, or if you just need a hot shower, but the photographic charms of Finke Two Mile make it an essential stop for your visit. Converting remote locations like this into photographic inspiration is exactly what makes a 4WD camper van option worth the extra effort.

» IMAGES

SCENIC WALK AT TNORALA

» (FAR LEFT, TOP) Shot on 5D MkII; 24mm; f/13; 1/64 sec; ISO 400

WILD FLOWERS IN THE DESERT

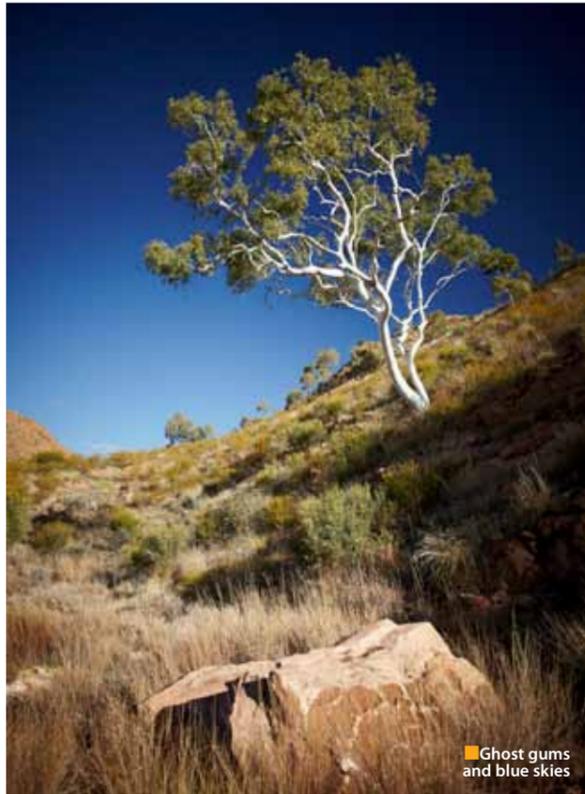
» (LEFT INSET) Shot on 1D MkIV; 70-200mm; f/2.8; 1/800 sec; ISO 100

GRASSHOPPER IN THE SPINFEX

» (BOTTOM LEFT) Shot on 1D MkIV; 70-200mm; f/2.8; 1/200 sec; ISO 200

SUNSET AT FINKE TWO MILE

» (ABOVE) Shot on 5D MkII; 24mm; f/13; 1/80 sec; ISO 400



■ Ghost gums and blue skies



Driving Tnorala

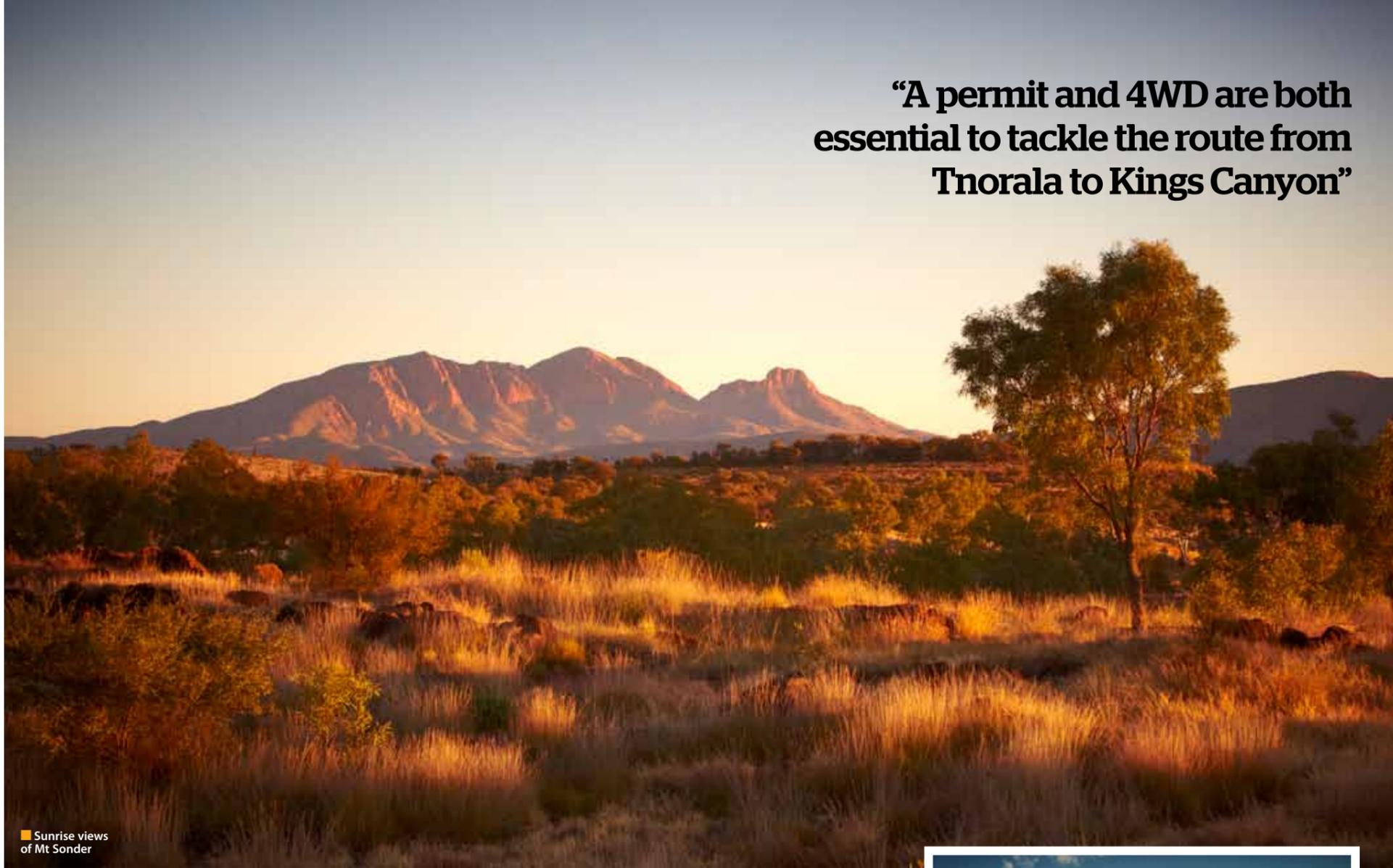
At the very western end of the West MacDonnells is a small nature reserve of immense charm. Tnorala Conservation Reserve is an isolated pocket of reserve easily accessed from the main road, but contained inside a naturally formed crater. From inside the reserve you can see the rim in all directions, and a few spots along the walking trails offer some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere west of Alice Springs.

Just getting to Tnorala Conservation Reserve is a joy, with winding sections of road hugging the landscape. Tylers Pass Lookout is a great spot for late afternoon viewing.

The trouble when you visit Tnorala is that overnight camping isn't permitted, and the site is a long drive from any campsites. Be prepared for some serious night driving if you want to capture sunset from the eastern edge of the crater. If you do decide to stay around for the last light, then you're going to be tempted to stay a little longer and take advantage of the pure isolation to shoot more stars.

Rock formations and dead trees are abundant to add interest when composing the night sky.

A few kilometres past the Tnorala turn off, the highway hits a junction, with Kings Canyon in one direction



■ Sunrise views of Mt Sonder

“A permit and 4WD are both essential to tackle the route from Tnorala to Kings Canyon”

and Finke Gorge National Park in the other. Finke takes you back to Alice Springs while the King Canyon option leads further south to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. If you have more than a week to spare then the big loop is one of Australia's truly great experiences, but note that a permit and 4WD are both essential to tackle the route from Tnorala to Kings Canyon.

The route back to Alice Springs goes via Hermannsburg and the home of the late Albert Namatjira, now turned into a museum site. This cultural element is something to treasure, not only for the man himself but the other artists who live near the historic part of Hermannsburg and share their artwork as well.

Hopping home

On our drive the absence of wildlife was palpable. By travelling in winter the weather conditions are very mild and you avoid most of the reptiles. You still see plenty of bird life, especially at the watering holes, plus the continued arrival of winter rains in recent years has led to plenty of mice and an abundance of Barn Owls. After dark the owls gather along the roadside and prey on small marsupials and mice. Driving at speed in the dark we

often had to slow down to avoid ghostly and motionless owls sitting in the middle of the road.

The recent greening of the desert has also meant that Kangaroos are doing well, but staying far away from people. Your chances of spotting wallabies and roos are surprisingly slim. Only on the very last afternoon before returning to Alice Springs did we see any macropods, a few kangaroos hopping away as we drive through the Owen Springs Reserve in search of a campsite. This little patch of wilderness is very

close to Alice Springs and often overlooked by travellers. Dry river beds and grassy plains are as enjoyable here as in the Finke Gorge National Park, and it's worth a stop if you want somewhere close to town for the first night of camping in a new 4WD rental. Keep an eye out for kangaroos in the early light – it might be the best opportunity to spot one for your entire West MacDonnell adventure.

To see more of Ewen's work, check out photographyfortravellers.com



» IMAGES

GHOST GUMS AND BLUE SKIES

» (ABOVE) Shot on 5D MkII; 24mm; f/13; 1/100 sec; ISO 400

SUBTLE TONES OF DESERT GECKOS

» (ABOVE) Shot on 1D MkIV; 70-200mm; f/4; 1/400 sec; ISO 1600

SUNRISE VIEWS OF MT SONDER

» (TOP RIGHT) Shot on 5D MkII; 70-200mm; f/13; 1/80 sec; ISO 800

■ Spinifex grass and red rocks



BRITZ CAMPER VAN

Our exploration of the Red Centre on this occasion was sponsored by Britz, who provided us with a camper van for a week to explore the ranges. Having visited this part of Australia many times, I can honestly say that this is easily my favourite way to travel West of Alice to shoot photos. Our vehicle was a modified Landcruiser with the rear cabin converted for sleeping, cooking and dining, plus an AC converter to recharge our electronics while driving. It's a digital darkroom on wheels. britz.com.au