

West Macdonnell Ranges: June 11-24, 2017

Section 1: Larapinta East and More: June 11-17

Brinkley Bluff, Spencer Gorge, Hugh Gorge — these are the main places we have been visiting on our Larapinta East trips for the past ten years. There are so many possible variations that no two of our groups have ever followed the exact same route. The recently opened sections of the Larapinta Trail allowed us to do a through walk for the first time in 2003. That worked so well that we made it our regular route. **See the note at the end for a new variation.**

We begin with a short drive from Alice Springs to a place the locals call Birthday Waterhole. From there we walk to Spencer Gorge where we make our first camp.



Birthday Waterhole campsite.

We then walk to and through Hugh Gorge with its huge cliffs, pretty pools, and pleasant camp sites. Although well known to local bushwalkers, Hugh Gorge remains almost untouched by the masses of tourists that visit the more accessible gorges in the Macdonnells. From Hugh Gorge move to a campsite at the north end of Spencer Gorge followed by a spectacular ridge top walk before descending into Paisley Gorge, one of the narrowest and most spectacular cycad gorges in the centre. From Paisley, we head for Brinkley Bluff, where, weather and water

permitting, we will have a dry but incredibly spectacular camp. Sometimes we will be on the Larapinta Trail, but sometimes we will be off-trail, visiting places that those who stick to the trail will never see.



Enjoying an off-trail view.

On the final full day, we hike out to the campground at Standley Chasm where you will almost certainly see lots of wallabies grazing around the tents in the evening; they're not tame, but bold enough for you to get a good photo.

The next morning, we meet the vehicle which brings us back to Alice Springs for lunch before taking us to the start of our walk on section two.



The drive to Birthday Waterhole isn't long, but it is slow.



On the Larapinta Trail.



Studying the map on Brinkley Bluff.

Maps. 1:50 000 orthophoto: Brinkley. (The Chewings map covers the area immediately west of the area around Hugh Gorge. You might walk onto it briefly.) 1:100 000 000: West Macdonnell National Park, map 2.

Notes on section 1. Water supplies and/or the fitness and interests of the group may be such that we decide to do a loop walk as we have done in previous years. This is a less strenuous option where a portion of the walking is done without full packs.

We may do the walk in the reverse direction.

Section 2: Larapinta West and More: June 17-24

Those joining this section meet the group in front of the Visitor Centre on Gregory Terrace about 11 am.



Ormiston Creek campsite.

Unless there is a severe drought, we will do this walk as a single through walk from Ormiston Gorge to Serpentine Chalet.

After lunch and a resupply in Alice Springs, we are driven to Ormiston Gorge where we put on our packs and walk through the gorge heading for Bowmans Gap. Here, if the weather is warm, we can enjoy a swim in one of the



Sunrise, Bowmans Gap.

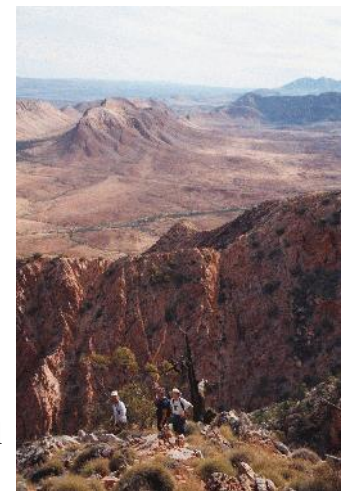
largest and warmest semi-permanent waterholes in the Macdonnells. Hidden away nearby is a deep gorge cutting through the range, a perfect spot for a day walk, or, if the group is very ambitious, a hilltop overnight walk to the top of Mount Giles.



Hilltop view near Bowmans Gap.

From Bowmans, we leave tracks behind as we trek west toward Mt Giles. We camp near a small spring close to the base of Mt Giles. If the

weather permits, a day walk without full packs gets us to the top of Giles for what may be the best views in the ranges.



Approaching the summit of Mount Giles.



Permanent water, ferns & cycads, a wonderful oasis in the arid zone.

From here, we head east to a hidden spring — one of the wonders of the Centre. A small creek which flows permanently about a kilometre through a small gorge lined with ferns and sundews. It's too nice to leave without a good look so we spend the next day exploring the gorge and the surrounding ranges without full packs.

The final full day is the longest and most strenuous of the trip as we head roughly south up and over several ridges as we cross the Alice Valley heading to Inarlanga Pass. There we rejoin the Larapinta Trail and make our way to the campsite at Serpentine Chalet. A short walk on the final morning brings us to the track where we are met by the vehicle which brings us back to Alice Springs.

Maps. 1:100 000 West Macdonnell National Park, map 1.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall Level 3. As described, section one is more strenuous than section two.

Climate Average daytime max 20°C, average nighttime min 4-5°C. Night temperatures can drop below freezing. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.

Terrain	Level 3. Section 1. Even if we choose the easiest possible routes, the pack carrying portion of this section will include several moderately steep climbs and a substantial amount of rock hopping along creek beds. Most groups prefer to take a more strenuous and steeper path in order to enjoy the better views from on high. In some areas the spinifex is dense enough to make heavy gaiters and long trousers essential. Section 2. The pack carrying portion of this section normally includes only moderate climbs without much thick spinifex. However, the walk across the Alice Valley contains several of these climbs and is long and rugged. Day walks can be quite long and quite steep.
Vegetation	Level 1-2. Varies from year to year depending on when last burnt. Vegetation presents very little problem. In some areas the spinifex may be dense enough to make heavy gaiters and long trousers essential.
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 7 days food. You need both a sleeping bag and a tent. You should also carry rain gear. The popularity of some of the campsites on section one means that firewood may be scarce so we will carry a stove and fuel. In exceptionally dry conditions, we may have to do this on section two as well. Many groups choose to spend one or two nights camped on high spots so they can enjoy the incredible sunset and sunrise views. The extra water necessary for this means that your pack may be extra heavy for a short period.
Art	Little or none.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are good to excellent. There is likely to be an option to camp on a highpoint for sunrise and sunset views. You are unlikely to see anyone else at many of the campsites.
Swims	Swimming is likely to be possible but very cold at some camp sites.
Lowlights	You are likely to see other walkers on parts of section one and will almost certainly meet some fairly large groups at the more popular spots like Standley Chasm and Ormiston Gorge.
Highlights	Spectacular mountain views. Deep gorges.
Wildlife	Birds are always present but you are unlikely to see many large animals. You will almost certainly see wallabies at Standley Chasm and, if you keep your eyes open, you have a good chance to see rock wallabies in some of the other gorges.
Fishing	No.

Notes for both sections

The outline above is subject to change depending on the availability of water and the fitness and the interests of the group. Exceptional rains can make some roads impassable. Exceptionally dry conditions can make some walks almost impossible. Flood waters can deposit or remove sand, completely changing the nature of some camp sites. It is never possible for us to be 100% sure what we will find in a particular place until we get there.

Water supplies are limited. We may find as little as one waterhole per day. In drought conditions, that water may be muddy or green with algae. Boiling makes it drinkable. If you are not prepared to drink this kind of water, this is not the trip for you.

As a safety measure, it will be necessary to carry 2–3 litres per person on most days. We will, however, plan to camp near water every night unless we decide to camp on a high point to enjoy the sunrise and sunset views.

Refillable wine bladders are a good way to carry extra water. They should be used as an addition to rather than as a replacement for your normal water bottles.

Centralian spinifex is particularly sharp and can penetrate most lightweight shoes. Strong boots and heavy gaiters are recommended.

As both sections of the trip may include a number of day-walks, you should bring a day pack or be prepared to use a full size pack on day-walks.

Those doing more than one section of the trip will have to carry only what they need for each section. Additional food and clothing can be left in Alice Springs during the walks.

Central Australian weather is highly variable. Although rain is unlikely, it is possible. One of our groups even had a bit of snow. Normal daytime temperatures reach the mid to upper 20's, but extremes can go to the low 30's or not get out of the low teens. Nighttime temperatures can drop well below freezing. You must be prepared for anything.

It will be possible to do some shopping in Alice Springs between sections. If you want to do some shopping before the trip, Coles and Woolies are both open late.

You should keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you in the car during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the day. This is especially important between sections when you go back to Alice Springs to resupply for section two.

The recently issued 1:100 000 West Macdonnell National Park maps are the best available maps of some of the areas where we will be walking. One side is a standard topographic map; the other is an aerial photo. The combination is far better than anything that was available before.

Special Note. Because of transport problems, section one will now begin at Standley Chasm and finish at Ellery Creek Big Hole. Rather than returning to Alice Springs between sections, our transport will bring those joining along with the food for section two to Ellery Creek. We will then drive to Ormiston Gorge to begin section two. Those doing section one only will then be driven back to Alice Springs.

Itinerary: West Macdonnell Ranges

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change.

Section 1 Larapinta East and More

Day 0 Pre-trip meeting at 6.30 p.m, outside (weather permitting) at the Todd Tavern in the Todd Mall. This meeting is important. If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 8 a.m. pick up from your accommodation if you notified us where you are staying a week or more before departure or if you made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from in front of the Visitor Centre.
Drive to start, begin walk. Vehicle returns to Alice Springs.
Bush camp.

Day 2–6 Bush camping. Carrying full packs most days, possibly day packs on others.

Day 7 Return to vehicle and drive to Alice Springs. Lunch and shopping for those continuing. Those finishing at the end of this section can be dropped off anywhere in town.

Section 2 Larapinta West and More

Day 7 Those joining this meet the group at the Visitor Centre in Alice Springs at about 11 am. Drive to start of walk. Drop off and walk to campsite. Vehicle returns to Alice Springs. Bush camp.

Day 8-13 Bush camping. Carrying full packs some days, day packs on others.

Day 14 Finish walk and meet vehicle. Return to Alice Springs. Drop off at your accommodation late, afternoon.