

Finke Gorge & Watarrka National Parks: September 6-26, 2009

Section 1: Finke Gorge National Park: September 6-16

Thousands of people visit Central Australia's famous Palm Valley every year. Only a tiny handful take the time to walk more than a couple of kilometres from their vehicles. Still fewer put packs on their backs and walk back in time, away from all signs of our civilisation, back into a landscape which still hints at what the Centre was like long before the present arid conditions developed.

We have a number of choices in the Palm Valley area. Some are day walks which take us through a variety of interesting rock formations. One is a longer loop lasting two or three days. This takes us through the palms and pools of Palm Valley and out into much more open country. From here, we cross to a deep gorge system and work our way back to where we began. It may be necessary to carry water for a day and a half on one part of the trip. Despite the lack of trails, the walking is relatively easy. We will have plenty of time to stop and explore some of the side gorges, climb the hills for the spectacular views and even to enjoy a swim if the weather is warm enough. Unlike most of the relatively permanent pools in central Australia, the shallow spring fed pools along Palm Creek heat up in the sun and are quite pleasant for swimming.

Palm Valley is only a tiny part of Finke Gorge National Park. We see much more as we drive south along the 4WD track which follows the Finke River, stopping here and there to do a number of interesting day walks as we explore the small gorges and waterholes and enjoy the flowers and birds along the way. Three of the many possibilities are a walk along the Finke River, a walk up Deep Creek near Boggy Hole and a walk to Circular Valley.

If we have two vehicles, we may do a two to four day walk along the Finke River between Palm and Ellery Creeks. If not we will walk in from the Ellery Creek end and do a loop along the sandy bed Finke and up into the nearby hills. Waterholes, rugged cliffs, wildlife and spectacular views from the hills make this a particularly interesting and varied walk.

In very dry years, Boggy Hole may be the only waterhole along this section of the Finke. As such it is a refuge for the fish which swim out to repopulate the more ephemeral waterholes in good years. Hidden behind Boggy Hole is a deep, rocky gorge. Our loop walk up the gorge, onto the hills and back into the valley is one of the nicest day walks in the Centre.

From the air, Circular Valley is one of the major landmarks of the region. From the 4WD track, it is nothing. From our campsite, a day walk up to the rim for sunrise gives one of the most magnificent views in the region.

Our drive along the 4WD track ends at a main road where we turn west toward Kings Canyon and Watarrka National Park where this section finishes.

Note. Although rain is infrequent in the Centre, rains can close the Finke River track for weeks at a time. If the track should happen to be closed, those same rains will have filled every small waterhole in the park allowing us to explore the many fascinating gorges in the northern part of the park which are too dry to visit at other times. If this should happen, we plan to drive to Watarrka via the Mereenie Loop Road through Aboriginal land.

Map. 1:250 000 Henbury.

Terrain and difficulty. *Palm Valley Area.* Lots of flat rock for half of the trip. A bit of soft sand and rock hopping along creeks. *Finke River walk.* Lots of soft sand, some rock hopping and moderately steep climbs. *Other walks.* A few steep climbs and some rock hopping. The scrub usually isn't bad on any of the walks.

Watarrka National Park: September 16-26

Our first night in the park will be spent in budget accommodation at the Kings Canyon Lodge. Here we bid farewell to anyone only doing the first section and welcome anyone doing only the second.

Just as Finke Gorge National Park is much more than Palm Valley, Watarrka is much more than Kings Canyon. The park occupies a transition zone between three different landscapes making it the most botanically rich area in Australia's arid centre.

Tourist hordes or no, Kings Canyon is well worth a visit so we begin with the tourists, climbing up the marked trail through sandstone domes and beside deep gorges which bear a striking resemblance to Bungle Bungles in the far off Kimberley. When we reach Kings Creek, we leave the tourists behind and begin the wilderness section of the longest single walk we have ever done in the Centre. Our water supplies are guaranteed because we have been given permission to use helicopter water drops if we should have an exceptionally dry year. Even so, the route described below may be varied because of the availability or lack of water, park management requirements and the wishes and abilities of the members of the group.

From the tourist trail, we move north along Kings Creek where there are normally a number of good waterholes, some deep in gorges, others almost in the open. We plan to camp along the upper reaches of Kings Creek and walk to the northern or western edge of the range where steep cliffs drop down to the valley below. Range after rugged range marches along toward the distant horizon. The views are incredible. There is so much to see that we may spend two or even three days in the area before moving south to Reedy Creek.

On the lower portion of Reedy Creek, we find a deep gorge containing a number of waterholes, often larger than those we see at Kings Canyon itself. Here, we may fill our water containers and head out for a dry camp in the red sand dune country in the centre of the range, a fascinating landscape that few visitors to the park get to see.

Another half day brings us to the top of Kathleen Creek with its beautiful gorge and permanent water, a good spot for an afternoon walk. From Kathleen Creek, we might do a long day walk across to the upper reaches of Stokes Creek or we might carry our packs and camp somewhere on the lower section of the creek where we should find water. Depending on how we are going for time, we may return along the bottom of the range via Wanga Gorge and the Aboriginal owned area at Lilla or we may finish at Kathleen Springs while the guide returns to collect the vehicle from the start of the walk.

Map. 1:250 000 Lake Amadeus.

Terrain and difficulty. Begins with a steep climb along a marked trail. Much of the walk is along flat rock ledges. Some climbs are steep, all are short. The dune walk goes over soft sand for a morning when packs are heavy with extra water. The scrub is seldom a problem. Overall, the terrain is as easy as you can find on a long walk in the Centre.

Notes

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.

We can, if necessary, use a helicopter to put out water drops on the Watarrka walk. The cost of a possible helicopter water drop has not been included in the cost of the trip. This could cost anywhere from \$100 to \$300 per person. If the guide thinks that this would make for a better trip, he or she will discuss it with the group before making a final decision.

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 the vehicle during the walks. Limited supplies are available at Kings Canyon between sections.

Central Australian weather is highly variable. Although rain is unlikely, it is possible. at this time of year, normal daytime temperatures reach the mid 20's to low 30's, but extremes can go over 40°C or not get out of the teens. Nighttime temperatures average 10-15°C but can drop below freezing. You must be prepared for anything.

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.

The **only** maps available for some of the areas where we will be walking are at a scale of 1:250 000. This scale shows only major features making each trip more exploratory than would otherwise be the case.

Interested in birds? You can download a bird list written by one of our clients on this trip some years ago. Go to www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/pdf/finkwat97_birdlist.pdf

Itinerary: Finke Gorge and Watarrka National Parks

Note 1 **Day 0 is the day before departure**

Note 2 **This itinerary is subject to change.**

Section 1 Finke Gorge National Park

Day 0 Pre-trip meeting at Melanka Lodge at 6.30 p.m. 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 Melanka Lodge.
Drive to Finke Gorge, begin walk, carrying full packs.
Bush camp.

Day 2–10 Bush camping. Carrying full packs some days, day packs on others.
Includes long drives in a 4WD vehicle some days.

Day 11 Finish drive to Watarrka, end of section one. If we arrive early enough, there will be an opportunity to do the Kings Canyon walk in the afternoon. Those ending here can catch a tour bus or flight to Alice Springs the next morning. This should be arranged well in advance. We can assist if we have at least two weeks notice before departure.
Overnight in budget accommodation at Kings Canyon Lodge. The cost of the accommodation and a bistro meal is included for everyone doing either section of the trip.
Opportunity to do laundry and have hot showers. Bring towel and toiletries plus money for drinks.

Section 2 Watarrka National Park

Day 11 Those beginning with this section meet group at the bistro at Kings Canyon Lodge about lunch time. As those doing section one are finishing a walk, this could be anywhere between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. If we arrive early enough, there will be an opportunity to do the Kings Canyon walk with the group. As we cannot say what time we will arrive at Kings Canyon Lodge, we recommend that those joining this section check in at reception and get a key for one of the rooms in which we will be staying.
To make the connection, you can catch tour bus (takes all day via Curtin Springs) or charter flight (needs a group to be viable) from Alice Springs to Kings Canyon. This should be arranged well in advance. We can assist if we have at least two weeks notice before section one departs. The cost of the connection is not included in the price of the trip. (Connection details can change. Please ask us for an update.)
Accommodation and meal at Kings Canyon Lodge as above.

Day 12–20 Bush camping, carrying full packs. There will probably be a number of half day or full day walks without full packs.

Day 21 Return to vehicle and drive to Alice Springs. Drop off at your accommodation late afternoon.