



Chapter Four: Songlines

One day walking across the Todd, I spotted a small mob of Aboriginal women who'd probably made the dry river bed their home. Many lived in the Todd, under the stars. It had also become quite unsafe for homeless Aboriginal people, since drunkenness and violence had become a fact of life. A few hundred metres away I saw a dorky tourist, in khaki shorts and Akubra hat, attempting to throw a boomerang - looking like a real fool.

In town I soon discovered a wonderful café, *Bar Doppio*, just off the Todd Mall in a little finger lane, where the caffeine-addicted and transplanted Southerners spent their free time enjoying a good espresso coffee. One of the waitresses, Naomi, had ridden her bicycle from Melbourne and got as far as the Alice and decided to stay. Having the opportunity to work at the best café for 1500KM on either side would have been a good incentive for almost anyone to stop here.

My last day in Alice Springs was spent with my parents, before their train journey back to Melbourne. We took a walk along Todd Mall visiting the historic Adelaide House, the former Alice Springs Hospital, now a museum. It had been established in the 1920s by the remarkable John Flynn, founder of the Royal Flying Doctors Service. The building boasted a unique water and air cooling system. Another pioneer, at the same time as Flynn, had been the radio technician Traeger. Here he had developed a pre-computer

device for sending and decoding text messages sent via wireless Morse code. Sending texted messages was not such a new thing after all!

On the morning of the 24th July, a five-and-a-half hour's bus trip from Alice Springs to Yalara was made. The first stop was at Stuarts Well, where we had the opportunity to take a five minutes ride on a camel, at a fee. I vouched to take some pictures and search out a coffee instead. The first shot of caffeine for the day, much required, came tepid and in a stylofoam cup. There was more taste of cup than coffee. No more *Bar Doppio*.

Pleasure at last came when at the *Yalara Resort* I could once and for all relieve myself from bus travel. Here at the *YHA* reception I was given a key, to a 4-bed dorm, complete with a fridge, which I was to share for the four nights stay. The first night there was a woman from Sydney and a giant toddler of a bankteller from Melbourne.

On my first morning at Yalara I was up early to view the sunrise. From a hillock overlooking the resort there was the distant rock - Uluru (Ayers Rock), bathed in a morning glow. My only company, a young Polish traveller from Zakopané.

After five days rest, I was back on my bike for some semi-serious cycling, although without panniers. I made my way out to Uluru. It had been over 18 years since my last vist to the "rock". Then like many people it had been my objective to climb it, however this time around I was not at all interested. These days many travellers and tourists alike are starting to listen to the advice from the local Anangu people, to show a sign of respect by not climbing the rock. And, quite franky it is better to stand back, contemplate a little and observe this wonderous monolith from some viewable distance. Nonetheless like honey ants could be seen a slow line of people, which the Anangu refer to as the "Mingka Mob", making their way up the steep face of Uluru to its summit.

A short distance from the base of Uluru is the harmoniously designed Anangu Cultural Centre. Here I picked up a little folding brochure with superb diagrams illustrating and explaining the *Mala* and *Mutitjula* walks. Easily accessible to anyone, they are on different sides of the Rock, which has a base radius of approximately 9KM. Taking these leisurely walks, the Rock's enormous size became evident, while something of the spiritual significance of place and country could be experienced. I'd travelled across this land, making my own particular *songline* to appreciate a deeply special place.

The 10KM ride back to *Yalara Resort* was soon joined by a "Mingka Motor Mob" hurrying back for their evening meal. When I returned to my room, the Sydney woman had left and been replaced with a young American traveller named Jill, from Connecticut. Although she lived in Washington DC she spent much of her time on the Caribbean island of St Martin. A year before I'd read Patrick Leigh Fermor's classic *The Travellers Tree*, and been intrigued by a little-known island called Saba, which he'd visited in 1949. I mentioned this to Jill and asked if she'd been there. Her eyes lit up and a big smile swept across her face. "As you happen to know..." she went on in her high New England accent, "I've got a little present for you". She dug into her rucksack. Out came an orange T-shirt all neatly folded, which she flapped and before me were the words displayed "Hike Saba - Netherlands Antilles". Wow! This really made my day. Although a size too