

Desert Caravan in the Heart

by Arjuna

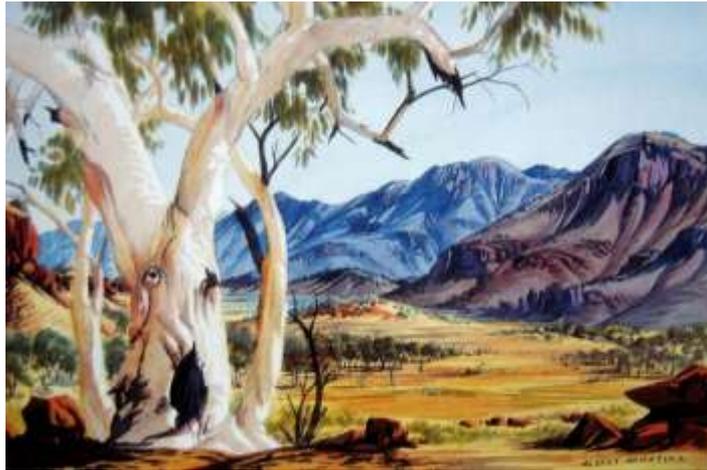
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My journey began in Alice. It was the 4th time I'd been there and each time it's been different. We stayed in the heart of town at the Diplomat Motel, which was just near the Todd Mall where all the action seems to be. The town is an interesting mix of locals, who are both Aboriginal and of European descent, and tourists who come there in large numbers to see the Red Centre. Flying over this stunning landscape was a very moving experience. The land there felt really alive!



Photo from the plane

In Alice we hired a campervan and drove to Hermannsburg, 130k west of Alice. We had visited this Lutheran Mission community some 30 years earlier, as it was famous for being the birthplace of Albert Namatjira, the Aboriginal artist who put this place on the map. This began the modern Aboriginal art movement. Namatjira taught his European style watercolour painting techniques to his 7 children and they in turn taught it to their children, developing a whole tradition of painting. It brought this region to life for many Australians who had previously called it the 'dead centre.' It seems that Australians of European descent found this desert country very challenging until they saw spirit of the land in his art works.



Albert Namatjira - Ghost Gums in the West Macdonald Ranges

This time we went there so Karen could work with the Aboriginal ceramic artists, who she had connected with previously and now wanted to interview for her PhD. Because of this personal connection and because we were staying there for 2 weeks, it was a very different experience. One of the artists she interviewed is even a descendant of Namatjira's and Karen ended up working in the pottery as a volunteer for much of the time we were there.

This gave me the time to tune into the landscape and connect to the country as well as the community. By staying in the campground and spending time down by the Finke River and touring around the countryside, I felt a deepening connection with this very powerful Red Centre of Australia.



My meditation place by the Finke River near Hermannsburg

The West Macdonald Ranges

driving beside the caterpillar dreaming tracks
blessed by an eagle flying low
azure blue sky above
painted with streaks of white clouds
the red earth glimmering in the morning sun
how magnificent this beauty
Ya Jamil!
ancient creation stretching forth
to the distant horizon –
how spacious and open
is this heart centre of our land –
how full of spirit
no wonder prophets come from here!



After 2 weeks we returned to Alice and then hired a car and drove down to Uluru to meet up with the Desert Caravan and with Allaudin and the mob of 18 dervishes. Initially we stayed in cabins at the Ayer's Rock Campground in Yulara, the tourist village at Uluru. With 6 people to a cabin it was very cosy and as Allaudin shared in a Sufi quote: 'While you may not get 2 kings to stay in the same room, you can get 9 dervishes under one blanket.' The whole pilgrimage was inspired by Allaudin's desire to see Central Australia and connect with Aboriginal people, which was our intention as well. He also wanted to connect with his mureeds in New Zealand and Australia. So the Australian and New Zealand dance networks coordinated this journey for Allaudin and Yasmin. We also had Robert, now Selik, who was his mureed from the UK and who also wanted to see the Red Centre.



On our first day at Yulara we did a dot painting class with an artist from the Mutitjulu community, who are the custodians of the rock. Our teacher drew images in the sand as is the traditional way of teaching in the desert. Below is the image of the three monoliths in the area: Uluru, Kata Juta and Mt Connor. The latter was separated off by a line on the right because it was still privately owned, while the other two had been returned to the traditional owners in 1985 and were now jointly managed with National Parks.



Our works were colourful and varied as it presented our journey to the centre from where we'd come from. Mine was the second from the bottom and symbolically showed Bondi Beach, Hermannsburg and Uluru and our journey across the country crossing many rivers.



Each morning we would gather at 7am in the freezing cold on a green patch in the campground near our cabins and do some Sufi practices – Zikr, element breaths and a dance or two. We would do this very quietly because people were still sleeping around us. Then we went to see the sunrise on the rock, a truly magical moment.



During the days there we saw some dreaming stories acted out, attended talks on the ecology of the country, learnt about bush tucker and Aboriginal art, walked around the rock beginning with an Aboriginal guided Mala Walk, visited the Cultural Centre and in the evenings we'd watch the sun set on the rock.

Sunset on the Rock

red brown sandstone glowing
in the setting sun
shadows deepening
carving out shapes
till finally

he's all black
against the twilight sky
this is the heart of Australia
this is the naval chakra of
mother Gaia -
what an energy!



One day we visited Kata Juta, an equally powerful experience. She had a very different energy, much more feminine in feeling.



Then the whole caravan went to Kings Canyon for one day and night. A very different energy again:



Every now and then we did a dance in one of these magnificent places:



In the film *Kanyini*, a must see film for all Australians according to the journalist George Negus, Uncle Bob Randall talks about the world he grew up in, as a world without walls or ceilings. An open world that desert mystics have sought throughout human history. In his book *Desert Wisdom*, Murshid Saadi has collected so many prayers, poems and practices, which as he said in his subtitle are from the Goddess traditions and the Sufis. The Jewish story is also one that goes back to the desert as the place where the divine can be experienced, without all our preconceptions and conditioning. In the city we have the illusion that we can control nature, in the desert these illusions can fall away.

On the final part of our journey we went to Alice and stayed in a Mystical Christian Community retreat centre, called *Campfire in the Heart*. It was a fitting place to end our pilgrimage as we found when we went into their meditation room, where they had a diorama of the desert with Aboriginal artworks and a river of red sand on the floor. From there we visited the Araluen Art Centre, with its excellent collection of indigenous art, the Botanical Gardens and the Desert Park, full of birds, reptiles, marsupial mammals and a great variety of plant species set up as whole ecosystems.



Staying near the Alice Springs Steiner School, we led dances for the children of the school as well as using their hall for an evening of dances for the local community.

Along with the openness of our pilgrimage I need to mention the extraordinary synchronicity that marked our experience. Due to my previous connections with matters Aboriginal, I was assigned the task of making Aboriginal connections for Allaudin and the mob. Part of this was to connect with the Mutitjulu community where Uncle Bob had been the health worker and where I'd visited previously as part of our Jewish Desert Dreaming Journey. However Uncle was no longer with us, I tried on a number of occasions to connect with Barbara Randall, his last wife, who I'd met at Chapel by the Sea in Bondi a few years earlier, when she spoke there as part of an evening performance by Uncle Bob. I was hoping that through her we could visit the community.

Finally on the second last night at the campground we connected, only to discover that she was not at the community any longer, but that she was actually at the same campground as we were with a group of year 11 Steiner students from Noosa where her son or grandson taught. We offered them an evening of dances and indeed they wanted to dance with us, so on the following evening the 30 of them and 19 of us and a few random campers all did Dances of Universal Peace in the Desert.

Then on the last night in Alice we had a camp fire gathering, with music, songs dances and stories, only to discover that one of the local people present was Robyn Manly, who had been Uncle Bob's wife in the 90s.



Our closing circle in Alice reflects much of the colour and movement of our whole pilgrimage.