

Travel

Australia

Tourist adventures in the Outback

By LINDA REED
ALICE SPRINGS, Australia — He was the blackest man in the world — almost a bluish-black — and he was eating thick, white grubs with gusto.

Central Australia — the outback — is laced with culture shock for Canadian visitors.

The earth is a blazing red desert, full of dry creek beds, sand, burs, brush and thick with flies. Once outdoors, the flies plaster themselves to your clothing and try to crawl into your mouth and eyes — seeking moisture of any kind.

It's difficult for an Ontario resident to comprehend the severity of an Australian drought. The reality of this red desert is driven home at the sight of a dead cow at the road side, as our bus (laden with cold drinks and water) speeds down a straight and lonely road to the Tropic of Capricorn. The animal died with its mouth gaping; the bones are bleached white.

This business of eating

grubs — witchetty grubs — is part of the tourist industry of Alice Springs, a cow town smack dab in the middle of Australia.

This aspect of tourism is handled by a few aborigines who live in the creek beds and bush near Alice Springs. Our tour guide points out that the aborigines prefer to live in the bush even though the government builds homes for them. Sometimes they use the doors of their subsidized housing for fire wood.

"Old Barney" is our witchetty grub expert, leading us on a hike through the bush. We watch as he breaks open a dry root and pulls out a grub. Interest turns to amazement as he puts it on his tongue and lets it crawl down his throat.

COOKED GRUBS

We follow him to a camp site where he cooks half a dozen grubs in a pit of ashes. They taste a bit like scrambled egg but only a few visitors have seconds.

The grubs are followed



Old Barney, a guide, eats a thick, white grub found in the brush land outside Alice Springs, Northern Territory. Visitors can also sample the grubs after they are cooked in a pit of ashes.

by "bush brownies," steak, sausages and salads prepared in the campground. Flies cover our clothes and food — people in Alice Springs swear you get used to it. Novelist Nevil Shute

writes of the fly problem in A Town Called Alice, but you really have to be in the open without insect repellent to understand how bad it is out there.

Some farmers get temporary relief by wearing a wide hat, strung with dangling cords to ward off the flies.

Our hardness is tested again at the camel farm in Alice Springs. More than 20,000 camels roam the Northern Territory, descendants of the early camels brought to Australia by Afghans.

Half-a-dozen camels are spitting and groaning as teenage boys lead them around a paddock. They walk the animal to the far end of the field, slap it with a stick and it thunders back to the hitching post. The ride is rough, not at all like the rolling rhythm of Peter O'Toole in Lawrence of Arabia.

RAMPAGE

A bull camel is on the rampage, turning one of our group pale with fright as it tries to scrape him off against the fence. The saddle swings to the side but he hangs on; don't ever think you're safe on a domestic camel.

Afterwards, the owner of the camel farm tells us

horror stories — how a camel can swing back its neck and kill you. He proves so knowledgeable that a 90-minute tape is filled with camel lore and the dangers of the mating season.

Tourists to Alice Springs can take a seven-day camel safari around the southern part of the Gibson Desert and Lake Amadeus. Ten passengers are taken on the tours which runs from March to August at a cost of \$334 per person.

The Lake Amadeus is an area seldom visited by man and provides an opportunity to see wild camels, dingoes and kangaroos. Another day is spent looking at 30,000-year-old carvings and paintings in King's Canyon. The tour also gives you an idea of some of the pioneers in the area — people like those in the fast-selling book, Thorn Birds.

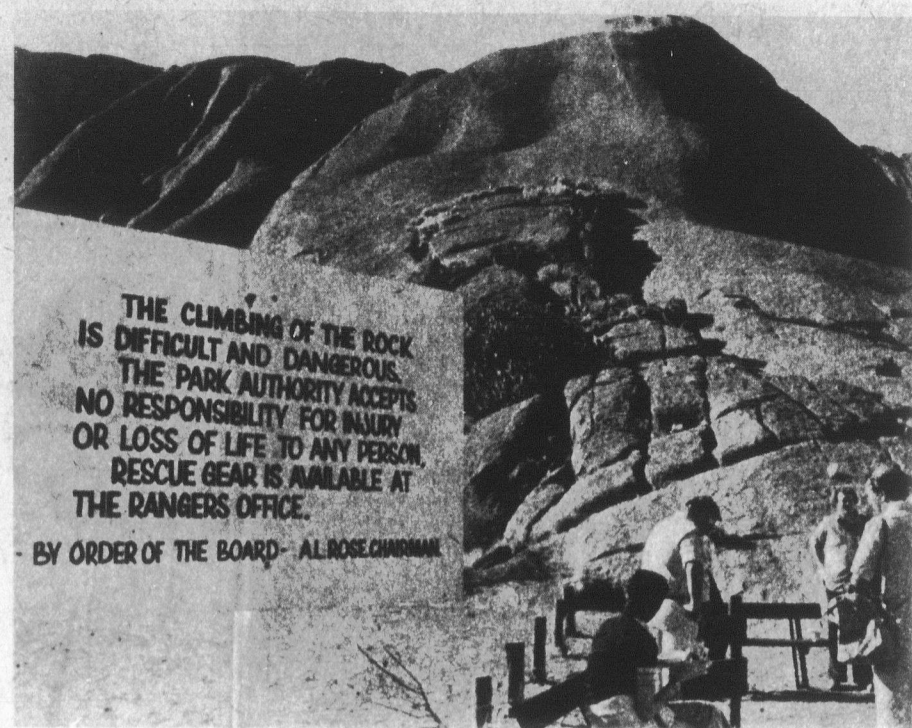
You can get more information on the camel safaris by writing to Breakaway Safari Tours, P.O. Box 1306, Alice Springs, N.T. Australia, 5750.

ALICE SPRINGS
Alice Springs — one of the first towns in the outback to have a swimming pool and ice cream parlor — has festivals which are a once-in-a-lifetime experience for visitors.

One of the most popular is The Camel Cup, a big race for camel drivers which is held every August.

Another winner — mainly for its buffoonery — is a regatta on the dried up bed of the Todd River. All yachts are bottomless so the crews can stand inside and carry them through the mud.

Alice is a modern town



Ayers Rock attracts tourists from all over the world. Tour guides get you up early so you can watch the

sunrise effects on the rock. The rock rises at an 80 degree angle from a flat plain.

with new buildings, stores, crafts, art galleries, opal stores (90 per cent of the precious opal mined annually comes from Australia), restaurants and motels.

Our hurried, two-day visit to Alice left little time for shopping, but we managed to spend 15 minutes at the Centre for Aboriginal Artists and Craftsmen.

Items for sale included burial poles, didgeridoo (a musical instrument), weapons, boomerangs, bark buckets, batik, sand paintings and music sticks. Back on the tour bus we used some of our musical purchases to accompany a group of Malaysian students who were singing Waltzing Matilda and Home on the Range.

During our visit we stayed at the Oasis Motel, an air-conditioned lowrise with pool, restaurant, aviary, gardens and zoo.

COLOR CHANGES

Most visitors to Alice Springs make a side trip to Ayres Rock, the world's largest monolith which is noted for spectacular color changes. Color film is a fast-selling item in the Alice Springs pharmacy as hundreds of tourists attempt to capture the fluorescent orange tinges of this kidney-shaped rock. Local art galleries have an abundance of paintings by artists who do the same thing on canvas.

Ayers Rock is a major tourist attraction, on par

with Niagara Falls in Ontario. Recently, an Australian magazine carried a story about a woman with a terminal illness who yearned to visit Ayres Rock before she died.

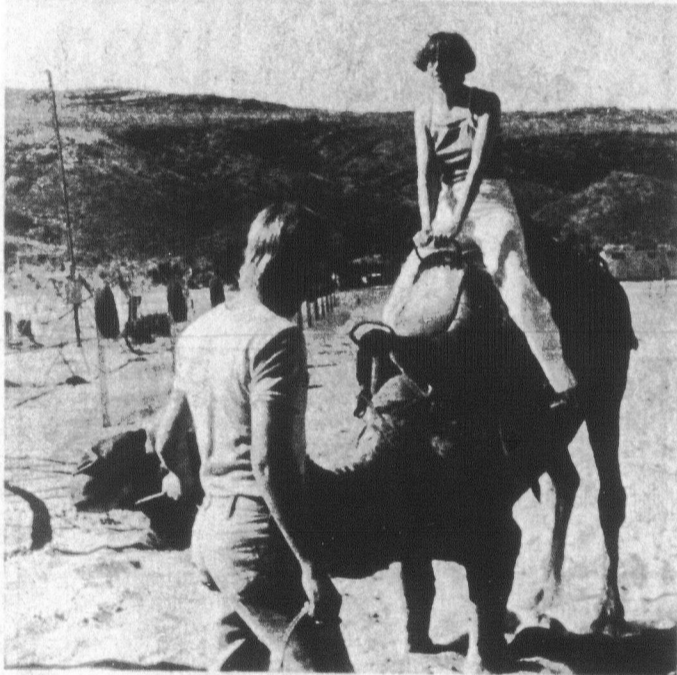
The rock is one hour and 15 minutes by air from Alice Springs. Day trips are available which include overnight accommodation, tour of the rock, sightseeing and lunch.

Our group arrived in time to join hundreds of tourists watching the rock

at sunset. People gazed at a distance about five miles from the kidney-shaped sandstone which rises at 80 degrees from a flat plain.

We stayed in cabins equipped with a washroom and air-conditioning at Ayres Rock Chalet, a resort not unlike a fishing or hunting lodge in Northern Ontario.

During the night we piled on extra blankets in the cabin as the temperature dropped. There was lots of insect repellent to help cope with the flies.



Writer Linda Reed keeps a wary eye on this camel as a farm worker at Alice Springs coaxes him to his feet. Visitors to Australia can take a seven-day camel safari into the Gibson desert in search of wild camels, dingoes and kangaroos.

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