



Carbon Conscious

AUSTRALIA

Australia represents the very definition of long haul travel. The perception that such a trip generates a significant carbon footprint cannot be disputed but as a destination, Australia is environmentally forward thinking and offers a variety of sustainable travel experiences to satisfy the responsible traveller. The cost to the environment therefore can be limited through planning an itinerary that takes advantage of such experiences, ultimately proving that a trip to this part of the world can be considered at least as, if not more, culturally sensitive and environmentally sustainable as destinations much closer to home. Alex Bentley reports.





Red Centre – Kata Tjuta (The Olgas)

A responsible travel itinerary to Australia could really include any number of locations. The Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales are, however, three very different states well served by options for the responsible traveller including carbon neutral accommodation and excursions, culturally sensitive and eco-accredited bodies (Eco-Tourism Australia being the mainstay). They all showcase the variety of landscape, diversity of peoples and difference in climate that makes Australia such a unique and special place.

The Northern Territory, from the tropical coast in the north to the red desert in the south, is renowned for its indigenous culture, dramatic scenery and wonderful outback experiences. The National Parks throughout the Territory are perhaps the best places to start. They are all carefully managed and preserved for the benefit of the local indigenous communities and strict guidelines exist for tour operators that visit them. One such operator, the Lord family, have run tours in and around Kakadu National Park for over 12 years and are one of the most respected and experienced operators in the Northern Territory. Their focus is on providing personalised, interpretative experiences that highlight in particular, aboriginal culture and the environment. A typical tour involves visiting Kakadu's ancient rock art galleries and bushwalking in unspoilt country, marvelling at the clear waters at the base of towering red ochre escarpment cliffs and perhaps even cruising on a tranquil billabong looking out for the infamous saltwater crocodile!

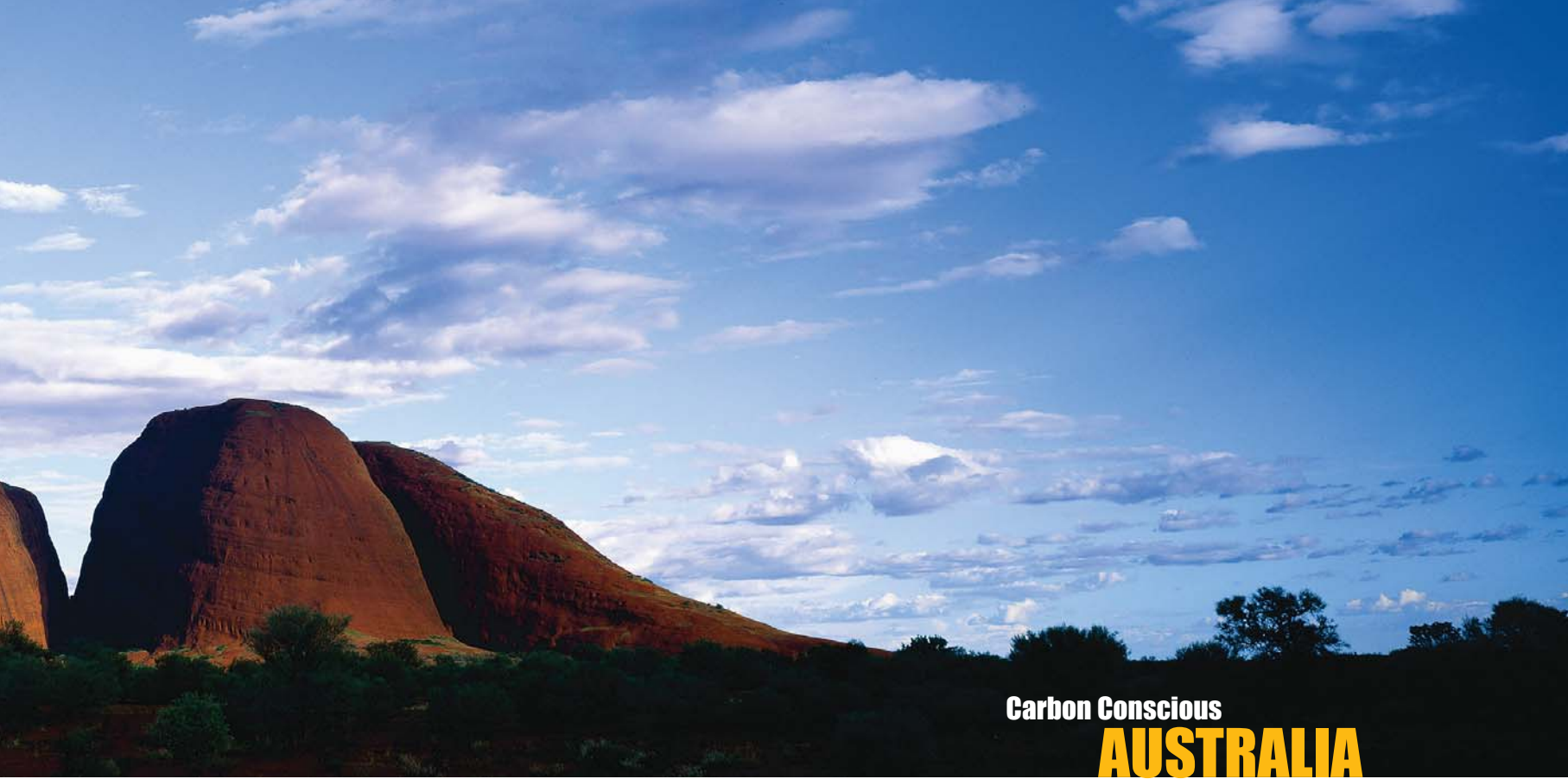
Located on the western edge of the UNESCO World Heritage Kakadu National Park is Bamurru Plains, a 300 square kilometre buffalo pastoral property encompassing coastal floodplains, savannah woodland, paperbark swamps and unique luxury safari style accommodation. The attraction here is in the extraordinary variety and volume of birdlife and wildlife available. Underpinning the natural experience is the camp, remote and solar powered and yet providing a supremely comfortable stay. Activities from the camp focus on exploring the surrounding country, with airboat trips on the wetlands, river cruises and guided walks with an emphasis on environmental awareness and wildlife protection. A strong ecological philosophy of reconnecting people with nature and an understated luxury that is very much in tune with the environment.

Head south from Kakadu toward the very heart of Australia and the landscape changes dramatically. The lush tropical scenery of the Top End is replaced by the fiery red outback desert. Different landscapes but equally engaging. The Ghan train service provides the perfect opportunity to sit back and take it all in. Operating twice a week in both a southbound and northbound direction The Ghan traverses the continent from coast to coast taking a leisurely two nights. At almost halfway sits the town of Alice Springs, the gateway to the Red Centre and the incredible rock formations of the area. The most famous of them all is of course Uluru, the iconic and sacred monolith that has come to symbolise the entire country. The eco-accredited accommodation at the adjacent Ayers Rock Resort and the small group excursions available offer an excellent combination

for those seeking the best of the natural and cultural environment. The spirituality and significance of the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park is clearly outlined in the excellent local cultural centre that blends education with art, history and a little fun!

Settling back on board The Ghan for the journey south makes for a nice, green alternative to catching a flight, though you could be forgiven for not noticing as the train crosses into South Australia with no immediate change in the scenery. The ochre red desert outback remains for mile after mile reinforcing the sense of space and the vastness of the Australian landscape. The spinifex grasslands, dry clay lakes and rusty sand do eventually give way to fertile countryside as the train glides through the hills surrounding Adelaide and drops down to the coast.

The state of South Australia offers a wide number of eco-tourism experiences all within easy access of the picturesque regional capital, Adelaide. Perhaps highest on the list of reasons to visit the state however are the amazing opportunities to see wildlife. The conservation and management of wildlife across the state is best seen on Kangaroo Island, 112 kilometres from Adelaide in the Southern Ocean and readily accessible from the mainland via ferry. Kangaroo Island's detached location has proved a real blessing and helped create an environment that has sustained an incredible variety of wildlife. On any guided tour, seals, kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, whales, dolphins and an amazing collection of birdlife can all be seen in their natural habitat. The island and state authorities, keen to protect this sanctuary, carefully manage the touring groups that visit the



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island and minimise any commercial development. As a destination it provides an excellent example of eco-tourism at its best with a focus on minimising the impact on the environment and building environmental awareness and respect.

Further along the South Australian coastline and a little distance away from Adelaide there are opportunities to interact with more marine life. You can swim with sea lions and dolphins in waters near Baird Bay on the Eyre Peninsula or meet up with thousands of fairy penguins on Granite Island off the Fleurieu Peninsula coast. There may also be the odd shark or two! Private tours can easily be arranged to visit these areas and take advantage of some of Australia's least developed and lesser known locations.

South Australia has a selection of very special wineries and a visit to the state is surely not complete without a trip out to at least one of them. A number of these wineries are now implementing conservation practices to protect the local environment and maintain, of course, a production of good quality wines. Banrock Station, approximately two hours from Adelaide, have for more than a decade been restoring their surrounding landscape so that a once dry and dusty cattle station has been transformed into wetlands and woodland and a flourishing wildlife sanctuary. An excursion out to the winery offers an excellent opportunity to experience more than just good wine and exquisite locally produced food. The adjacent wetland reserve has a variety of self-guided walking trails that feature story centres, information huts and bird hides where you can watch black swans, pelicans, swamp hens, many species of ducks, ibis, spoonbills, herons, cockatoos and egrets. A bird and wine lovers paradise.

Another of Australia's famous train journeys, The Indian Pacific, provides our final mode of transport as the itinerary heads northeast from Adelaide, passing through regional country towns, the Blue Mountains and into the city of Sydney, New South Wales. Sydney's visual appeal is immediately obvious with an abundance of national parks, gardens and beaches and the spectacular harbour, a national park in itself. With so much to see, how do you best explore it all? Fortunately there are a variety of excursions available from guided walking or bike tours to kayaking on the harbour. All provide a fabulous insight into this beautiful city surrounded by nature.

New South Wales may well be Australia's most populated state but there remain plenty of open spaces to enjoy, a glorious coastline to explore and rugged national parks and UNESCO World Heritage listed wilderness sites worthy of a visit. To the south of Sydney is the stunning Jervis Bay, one of New South Wales' coastal treasures and home to Hyams Beach, renowned for having some of the whitest sand in the world. With its secluded bays, stunning unspoilt beaches, wildlife and charming small towns, Jervis Bay is a popular retreat for many wishing to get away from it all. The area offers an abundance of attractions including dolphin and whale watching cruises. Close to the town of Huskisson, within a short bike ride of the many natural attractions of the area, is Paperbark Camp, a safari styled eco-accredited property. Set within a paperbark forest, the camp employs solar powered energy and a strict water conservation policy and is another example of how eco-principles do not have to compromise comfort. ▶



Banrock Wetlands



Sydney Botanical Gardens



The Ghan



Jervis Bay

You could be excused for not wanting to leave the New South Wales coast, such is the beauty of the scenery but you would be missing out. Inland from Sydney are a variety of spectacular locations just waiting to be explored. The UNESCO World Heritage listed Blue Mountains, just 90 minutes from Sydney is one such area and offers some of the best bushwalking in Australia, not to mention a number of outstanding nature-based experiences. Well-marked walking trails criss-cross the park, passing streams and waterfalls, descending into cool gorges and snaking around sheer cliffs where views are endless and dimensions enormous. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service conducts walks, as do specialist eco-tour operators.

In addition, there are a good variety of accommodation options throughout the Blue Mountains which make the most of the spectacular surroundings. A recently developed swag camp in the southern section of the park offers a fabulous natural setting for an authentic Australian bush experience.

The camp features a wealth of activities including nature walks, fly fishing and canoeing and a level of comfort not normally associated with the outdoors. Deluxe swags are mounted on timber platforms with cotton sheets, comfortable soft pillows and duvets for the cooler evenings. Meals are taken care of by your resident guide, environmentalist and chef, leaving you to take a cold drink, relax and enjoy your own private wilderness.

To conclude the itinerary a tour of the historic origins of Sydney and Australia would seem appropriate. Small group touring programmes exist that blend the historic charm of Sydney's

Rocks district where the first emigrants settled, with a trip out to the rugged northern coastline and national parks that fringe the city. These tours, operated by eco-accredited suppliers, place an emphasis on conservation, lifestyle, nature and wildlife whilst committing to carbon offsetting and responsible business practice.

In recent years, as local operators have become more conscious of environmental issues, different excursions have developed that provide opportunities to enjoy all that Australia has to offer in a sustainable way. If, however, you feel like getting more involved, a volunteer-based conservation programme is now connecting volunteers to environmental projects. These conservation experiences offer a fun and friendly opportunity to contribute in a practical way to the conservation of the unique Australian environment. The types of projects you can assist in include tree-planting, erosion and salinity control, seed collection, construction and maintenance of walking tracks, endangered flora and fauna surveys, weed control, habitat restoration and heritage protection and vary in length from a few hours to several days.

Australia is blessed with a fabulous landscape and a remarkably diverse environment providing tremendous opportunities for those with both a passive and active interest in responsible travel. The long flight apart, Australia is an ideal location for those seeking to travel whilst limiting the impact on the environment and there can be few destinations with such a well established and sustainable infrastructure.

Alex Bentley
Australia Regional Manager



Kakadu National Park



Rare yellow-footed rock wallaby

WEB PLUS

www.audley.co.uk/traveller/summer08
For an interactive map of the best places to visit and accommodation options in the Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales

FACT FILE

A three week trip to the Northern Territory, South Australia and New South Wales including return flights, accommodation, rail travel and touring starts from £4,995 per person. For further details please contact our Australia specialists on 01993 838 800.



