



Crossing Oz on the Ghan Philip Nolan

reaches a higher
consciousness
gazing on a vast,
empty wilderness

It is 9.58am and the sirens have just started to go off in loud, insistent peals. The drone of incoming aircraft fills the air and, just as I look in to the skies to establish what the hell is going on, there is the distant sound of shellfire.

This is not, I have to say, the sort of thing you expect to hear when you're hanging your hand-washed smalls out to dry on the patio of a holiday villa, but then Darwin – sultry, sweaty, tropical Darwin – is nothing if not surprising.

For starters, no one has told me this is the 66th anniversary of the World War II attack on the naval base by the same Japanese fleet that had attacked Pearl Harbor two months before. Indeed, the bombing here was even more intense and left 243 people dead and most of the downtown area flattened.

Of course, the string of DNA that governs doggedness is as indelible in the Australian genetic make-up as that which controls the love of beer and a fondness for soap opera, and Darwin was rebuilt, only to be destroyed again by Cyclone Tracey on Christmas Day 1974. A fantastic exhibit at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory tells the story of that calamity, through a sealed, pitch-black booth where a tape of the screeching 250km/h-plus winds is endlessly replayed is almost too intensely claustrophobic for comfort and I bolted from it in seconds.

Many here remember Tracey vividly; one taxi driver told me he had made his peace with God and, when the roof was taken from his house, resolved himself to the death that, mercifully, he was spared. Sixty-five others were not so lucky, only 400 of the 14,000 homes were undamaged and the women and children were evacuated for months while the men set about the reconstruction.

The new city has been built to a much stricter code, and there are shelters everywhere, though there are many new gleaming skyscrapers clad in glass from which the view of an incoming storm would rather ruin a decent Sunday brunch.

Some parts of the old town remain, and the best way to see them is by taking a walking tour with a young and enthusiastic guide called Steve Noble, who meets clients at the memorably named Ducks Nuts bar and takes them to sites associated with the Aboriginal Larrakeah people, the telegraph station that linked Australia to Europe, a small Chinatown and the bars and restaurants on the main Mitchell Street drag.

Though his claim that there is enough history to detain you in Darwin for three weeks

errs on the side of extravagant, there certainly is enough for a few lazy days. Sadly, after the first afternoon it started to rain non-stop in great monsoon downpours, leading to floods that dominated the newspaper front pages, so I shored myself up at Moonshadow Villas, an award-winning development of five Balinese-influenced holiday homes set in a small rainforest and arranged around a series of cascading pools. The atmosphere was very Zen and, frankly, if the Japanese had returned in waves of Zeros, they couldn't have stirred me from my reverie.

Dinner was an altogether different affair. Mining is a huge industry in the Northern Territory and attracts

workers who give the place a frontier feel. Shenannigan's Irish Pub is its epicentre, and a beef-and-Guinness pie topped with pastry and mashed potato was the justifiable star attraction.

But Darwin was just a prelude to the real reason for my trip, the epic 2,979km journey on the Ghan train all the way to Adelaide, passing through the red centre of this astonishingly sparsely populated region. The Northern Territory occupies one-sixth of the Australian landmass but it is home to just one per cent of the population. That's a density of just 0.16 of a person per square kilometre or, conversely, over nine square kilo-

metres for every resident. If you ever want to get a feel for a post-apocalyptic world, look no further.

Of course, the Ghan is the most civilised way to see it, though anyone expecting the Orient Express is in for a shock, because the décor is more 1970s hotel on the Costas than it is palace on wheels. The train takes its name from the Afghan Express, a camel train once run along the same route, and the line was completed as recently as 2004, finally making a complete journey from top to bottom possible.

Though there are two classes – Red and Gold Kangaroo – neither is dressy, and jeans and casual clothing are acceptable throughout. The dining and bar cars are the centre of social life for the two-and-a-half-day

BUSH TUCKER:

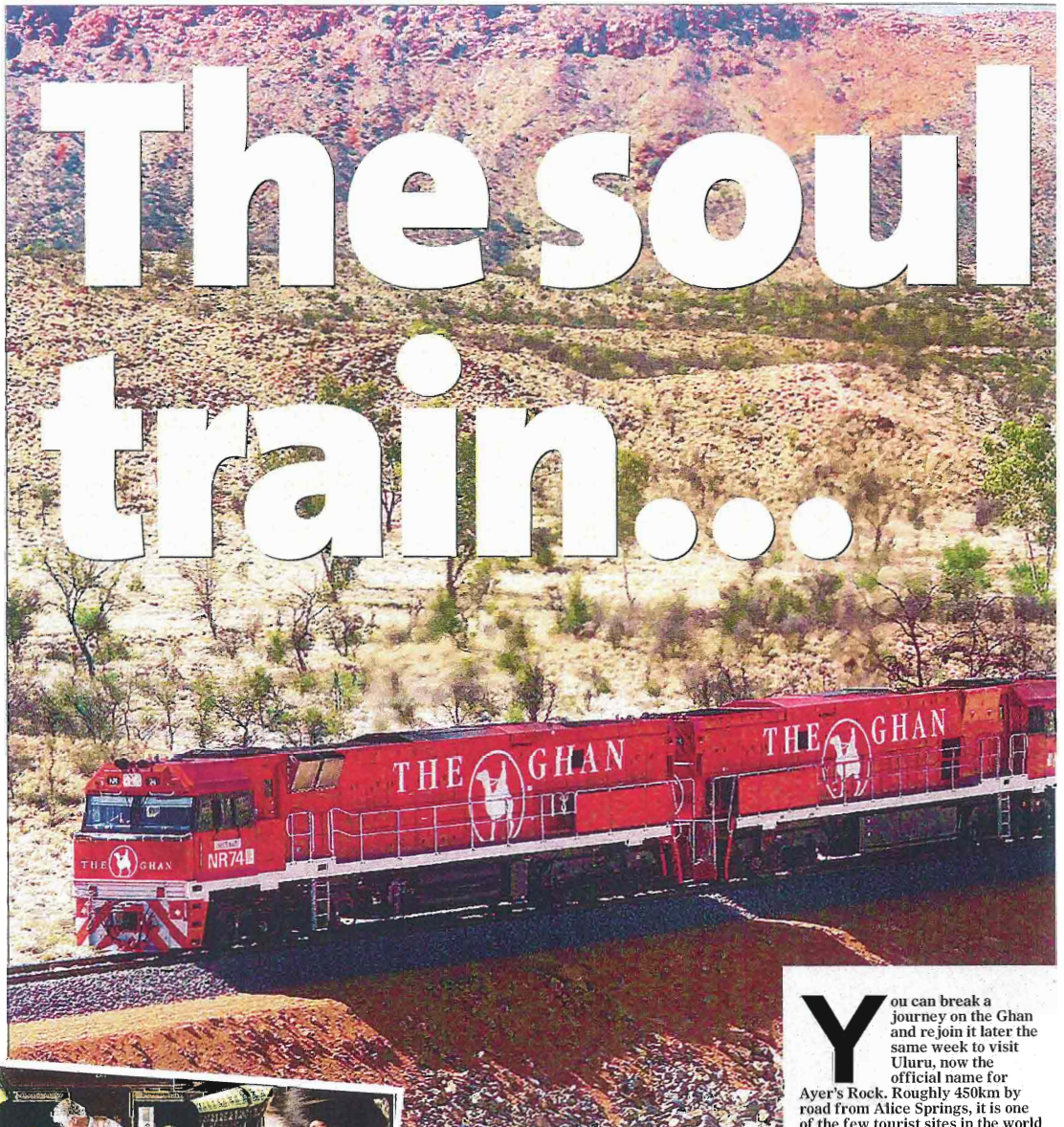
Sharing meals in the dining car, which offers exotic Outback fare such as emu pie and camel steak, is all part of the fun

trip and, as all the tables seat four people, you will have to share. Wangling a seat with the interesting people and avoiding the bores is all part of the fun as you settle in for the like of emu, pumpkin and mountain pepper pie or grilled camel steak with Outback lamb sausage (and no, don't panic, you don't have to eat the local wildlife as there's always a more palatable alternative on offer).

The first stop is Nitmiluk National Park, the Aboriginal – and now official – name for Katherine Gorge, which, in fact, is a series of 13 deep gorges carved out by the Katherine River. I still don't know how, but I was persuaded to view it all from above, in a Robinson R44 helicopter, and would love to have asked more questions of the pilot if only my tongue hadn't experienced so many problems brushing up against my heart.

That said, to see the vast plain stretch to infinity was a humbling reminder of just how little man has tamed this wilderness, and I'm glad I conquered my fear for the 20-minute flight. As for Katherine itself, well, it is easily the least exceptional town I have ever visited in my life.

Soon after we left, a power failure halted the train for two hours in the desert. The air-conditioning failed, so blinds were pulled to protect against the 40-degree heat. Everyone was pumping Niagaras of sweat until the steward came up with the altogether brilliant idea of dispensing free drink; I have never heard grumbling subsided with quite such grace or speed.



The soul train...

You can break a journey on the Ghan and rejoin it later the same week to visit Uluru, now the official name for

Ayer's Rock. Roughly 450km by road from Alice Springs, it is one of the few tourist sites in the world that lives up to expectations as the sun, at various parts of the day, paints it different colours and reveals or hides its many fissures.

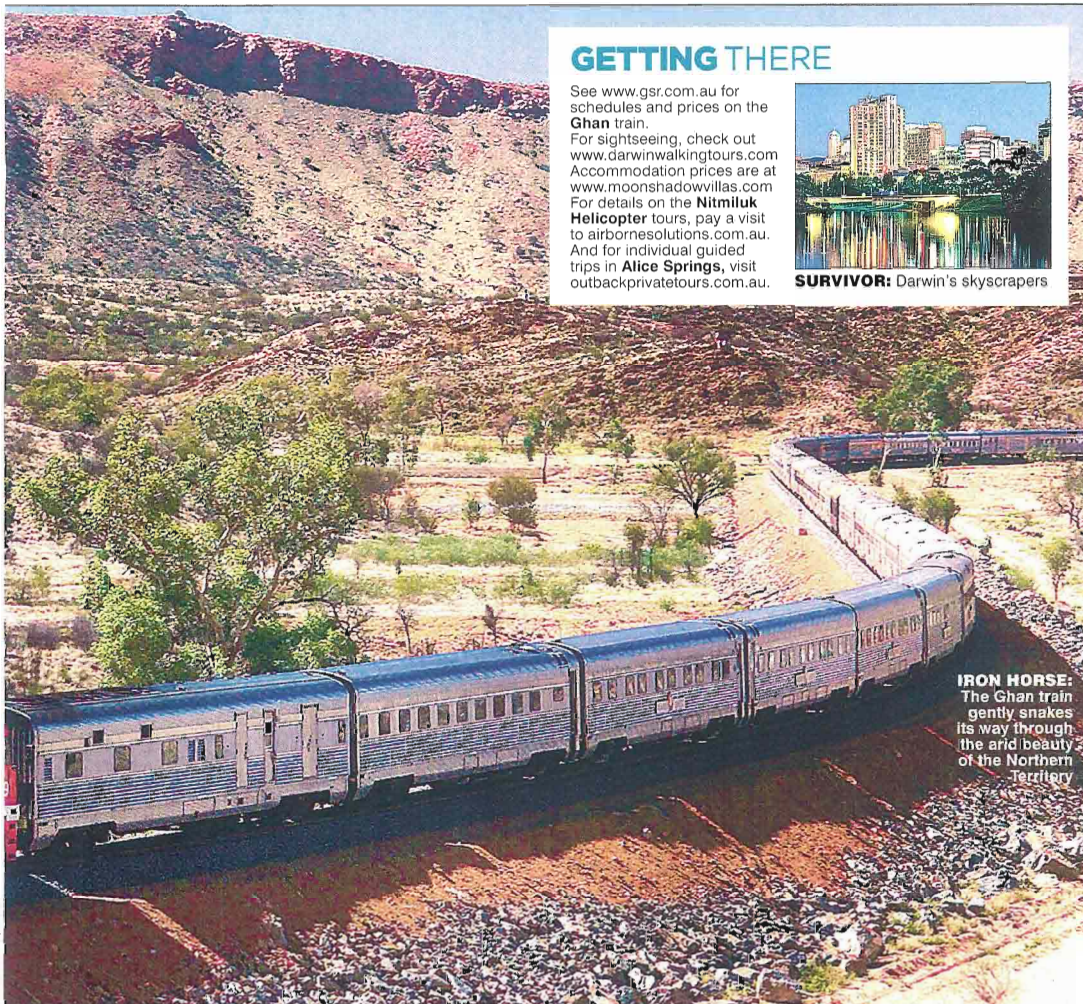
Sacred to the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal people, it is held in trust by them and operated as a national park. An airstrip beside the rock, and the motel it spawned, were moved in 1984 to protect the fragile environment and tourists now stay in Yulara, a purpose-built resort 15km away. The hotels are all operated by Voyages (www.voyages.com.au), so don't expect competition on prices.

Longitude 131 is an award-winning development of individual luxury 'tents' with the best views,

With everyone in an advanced state of mellowness when the problem was fixed, conversation eventually quieted as the dying sun turned the landscape from fiery red to amber to an ethereal burgundy.

There is something primal about this landscape, something that talks to the soul and not the brain, and there are times when it feels like you are looking out on Creation itself. There were some on board who found it all dull beyond words, but to me, every vista was as thrilling as the previous one, even when they all looked the same.

Eventually, at around noon on the second day, a pip-pip announced I had a new message on my phone and civilisation was drawing close again.



GETTING THERE

See www.gsr.com.au for schedules and prices on the Ghan train. For sightseeing, check out www.darwinwalkingtours.com. Accommodation prices are at www.moonshadowvillas.com. For details on the Nitmiluk Helicopter tours, pay a visit to airbornesolutions.com.au. And for individual guided trips in Alice Springs, visit outbackprivatetours.com.au.



SURVIVOR: Darwin's skyscrapers

IRON HORSE: The Ghan train gently snakes its way through the arid beauty of the Northern Territory

GREAT ESCAPES

HIDDEN TREASURES:

White-knuckle rides and adventures with Captain Jack Sparrow will always top the kids' list of dream holidays but with the dollar taking a big dipper dive, flying the family to the theme park capital of the world need not be just a fantasy.



There's a treasure trove of all-in packages to Orlando to choose from. A fortnight's Disney break for a family of four is available from €3,400 at www.e-travel.ie, and Panorama is offering two-week packages at Disney's Pop Century resort for €1,072pps as part of its Florida sale. Call 0818 202 020 or visit www.panoramaholidays.ie.

The DIY approach can save you a packet, too. Keith Prowse offers Walt Disney World's 14-Day Ultimate Ticket for €250 per adult and €220 for children aged from three to nine. The ticket allows unlimited visits to all four Disney theme parks, as well as Disney's waterparks and Downtown Disney Pleasure Island. This offer runs for this month only. Call 0818 300 178 or see www.keithprorowse.com.

YOUNG BUCCANERS:

For self-catering deals, try Sunway which has a family 14-night Orlando special from €3,785. The price includes flights (departing Dublin on June 19) and car hire, and is based on two-adults and two children staying in a three-bed home. Call (01) 288 6828 or www.sunway.ie. Check out American Holidays, too, for three-bed Orlando homes with a pool from €60 per night. See www.americanholidays.com or call (01) 673 3840 for details.



SHIVER ME TIMBERS: Alton Towers might lack the glitz of Disneyland but you can't fault rides like Nemesis or the 100km/h bungee drop to Oblivion for thrills. A Stena Line package costs from €360 for two adults and includes return sailing and two nights' accommodation. Children under 12 go free. Call (01) 204 7733 or see www.stenaline.ie.

FIRST MAGIC KINGDOM:

Did you know Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens inspired Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom? The Danish park is best known for its wooden rollercoaster, built in 1914. It also boasts the world's tallest carousel, the Starflyer. Best of all though, is the price – less than €12 for an adult day pass and half that for children. Once in, the rides, shooting galleries, parades and fireworks are all free. Visit www.tivoli.dk for daily events. Scandinavian Airlines fly twice daily from Dublin to Copenhagen, with fares from €48 each way, including taxes. This offer is available until the end of May on www.flysas.ie.

CROW'S NEST:

It's up, up and away... with two new observation wheels joining the London Eye this summer there are plenty of chances to reach for the stars. The first is in Greenwich (www.greenwichwhs.org.uk), where the wheel is taller than Nelson's Column. The floating gondolas take 15 minutes to rotate and the ride costs €8.60 for adults and €5.60 for children. Windsor has a similar big wheel offering impressive views of Windsor Castle right across to Eton. Check out windsor.gov.uk.



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Aborigines' sacred rock of ages



but costs upwards of €1,200 a night in high season. Better value is Sails in the Desert, a passable four-star with good bars and restaurants. There are also self-catering and camping options.

You should not miss the trip to nearby Kata Tjuta, an even more dramatic series of rock formations also known as the Olgas.

But, be warned, both sites are full of flies and you are strongly advised to wear a protective net unless you want

RED EARTH: Uluru, formerly known as Ayer's Rock, lives up to expectations and changes colour through the day, glowing red at sunset

to be driven insane. The sun is another problem – an average Irish skin should be protected with Factor 50 at least.

Two days is plenty to explore the immediate area and, while a sunrise breakfast of 'damper' bread in the bush is very enjoyable, the one unmissable excursion is the Sounds of Silence dinner. A restaurant is set up nightly in the desert and, after the buffet-style meal, there is an enthralling tour of the night sky, with

individual stars highlighted by a guide holding a high-powered torch. You really will see the stars in a completely new light.

As for climbing the rock, you are still allowed to do so but the Aboriginal people ask that, out of respect for their traditions, you do not.

For packages on the Ghan with visits to Uluru, see www.gsr.com.au.

Philip Nolan

When I rang home to check in and say I was in Alice, my wife got to deliver a joke she had been cooking for weeks and asked: 'Alice, Alice, where the f*** is Alice?' Then proceeded to use up €2.76 worth of call time laughing at her own joke.

The city is isolated but contains two real gems: the School of the Air, which is the biggest 'classroom' in the world, educating via the internet the 74 pupils spread over a million square kilometres, and the headquarters of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, where you can watch a brilliant short film featuring testimonials from patients for whom the drone of an incoming aeroplane literally

meant the difference between life and death.

The historic telegraph station is another must-see and is located beside the freshwater spring an operator named after his wife. Though he dubbed it Alice's Spring, a corruption gave the town the name Alice Springs and it has stuck ever since.

By the time you have breakfast

next morning, the terrain starts to change, becoming greener and more undulating. Small pockets of civilisation spring up in south Australia, before you finally arrive at the suburbs of Adelaide and pull into Keswick Terminal. I've been to Adelaide before and it was as gracious as I remembered, with a strip of great bars and cafés on Rundle Street and the delights of

the Barossa Valley and its many wineries just up the road.

But beautiful as it is, it is still a city. The real Australia lies elsewhere, timeless, parched and gloriously empty, a landscape that exerts a hypnotic hold on even the least vivid imagination, a place where even the white fella can understand precisely what the Aboriginal Dreamtime is all about.

'I've crossed the River Liffey and am headed for Fingal – which is weird, because I'm still over 17,000 kilometres from Dublin...'

Don't miss Travel Writer of the Year Philip Nolan next week in Tasmania and Melbourne