

SERPENTINE GORGE – WEST MACDONNELL RANGES



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Serpentine Gorge & Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area

Serpentine Gorge and Serpentine Chalet are two of the lesser known places in the West MacDonnell Ranges



These places are often overlooked by visitors in favour of other nearby destinations. In fact, you could say that Serpentine Gorge and Serpentine Chalet are outback secrets.

Both are located roughly half way between Ellery Creek Big Hole and Ormiston Gorge and are easily accessible to anyone taking a trip through the West MacDonnell ranges.

Unlike the much bigger, better known places like Ormiston Gorge, **Serpentine Gorge's** beauty is sublime.

Serpentine Chalet, on the other hand, is a historic site that marks the very beginnings of tourism in central Australia, and you can still camp there today for free.

What's So Special About Serpentine Gorge?

Serpentine Gorge is a sacred site to Western Arrernte Aboriginal people. It's name in Western Arrernte is Ulpma (uhlp-Mah).

The Dreaming Story for this place is associated with an Eaglehawk ancestor, and the full story can only be told to initiated Aboriginal men.

Play the clip below, and we'll take you on a short tour.

Tucked away from the main road between Glen Helen and Alice Springs, Serpentine Gorge is reached via a short, easy walk (1.3km/30min) that takes you into a sheltered gorge and waterhole.

The Gorge is less visited than some of the other locations in the West Mac's, so it's a great opportunity to sit, relax and observe many of the animals that come to drink at this life-preserving waterhole.

The Gorge is also home to several rare and endemic plant species like the Centralian flannel flower and MacDonnell Ranges cycad.

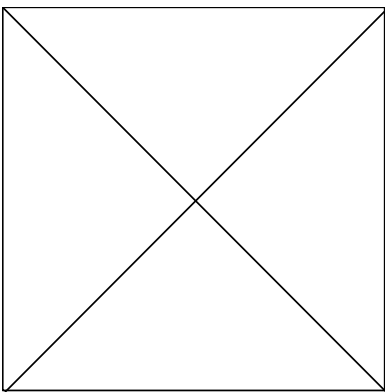
We were last there in November 2011, and whilst it was quite warm, the walk to the waterhole is easy. It's great for a quick paddle or swim to escape the summer heat.

Walks at Serpentine Gorge



If you're feeling like an opportunity to stretch your legs but don't want to do a long hike, then take the **Lookout Walk** just on the right before reaching the Gorge itself.

This short, sharp walk takes you up to a great lookout that not only enables you to see up the gorge but also at the surrounding parts of the range country.



(If you watch the video clip we've made above, you'll see the Lookout and part of the view).

The walk up to the Lookout takes about 20 minutes and is quite steep in some parts. Again, you'll get to see some of the geology of the area close up, but for me it really is just the great view from up there that makes the climb worthwhile.

Serpentine Gorge also has two other hiking options.



The gorge is situated on the Larapinta Trail, with section 7 heading back towards [Ellery Creek](#) [Big Hole](#) and section 8 heading off to Serpentine Chalet west of the gorge.

If you really want something special, then take the 45 minute climb up onto the western ridge of the gorge, following Section 8 of the Larapinta Trail.

This is a challenging walk, but the reward at the top is absolutely worth the effort.

We won't spoil the secret completely (after all, we'd rather you actually do the hike!), but if you take the time to do this climb, you'll be treated to what we think is the outback's very best view.

Facilities:

There aren't a lot of facilities at Serpentine Gorge, but then, that's part of the appeal of finding a place where you can get away from the crowds and experience some peace and quiet.

At the carpark area there are shade shelters, picnic tables and a pit toilet should you need one.

There is no camping permitted here, but just a little further to the west are Serpentine Chalet bush camping area and [Ormiston Gorge](#).

Serpentine Gorge is a trackhead between sections 7 and 8 of the Larapinta Trail so you can also find info about the Trail [here](#).

Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area:

A further 8 kilometres west of Serpentine Gorge is Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area, the site of an important part of central Australian tourism history.

Most people just drive right on by Serpentine Chalet, unaware of the historic ruins or the significance of the site.



This photo shows Palm Valley Chalet, but gives you an idea of what Serpentine Chalet looked like.

If you visit the Chalet now, all that remains are the very unimpressive foundations and few sheets of tin and various other remnants.

It's a place that few locals even know about – so it really is one of those little secrets we love to share.

The Serpentine Chalet Bush Camp was built in 1958 as a joint venture between early Alice Springs tourism entrepreneur, Len Tuit and the Ansett-Pioneer company.

Yet, in its hey-day, the Chalet had 5 cabins (considered luxurious for their time), a kitchen and staff quarters on-site.

In the 1950s, the journey to Serpentine Chalet took all day in a big old Blitz truck. Serpentine Chalet was where people stayed when they did tours of Ormiston and Glen Helen Gorges.

In those days, all tours through the West MacDonnells were at least two days in duration, with Serpentine Chalet the overnight stop.

Unfortunately, Serpentine Chalet suffered from problems from the outset.

Water was very hard to get, and despite a dam being built, water still needed to be carted from Ellery Creek and stored in drums.

The dam itself was a failure as it leaked, with the underlying rock being too porous to hold water.

When the Glen Helen Homestead was opened to tourists in the early 1960s, Serpentine Chalet was doomed. It closed in 1963, when the Ansett company pulled out of the venture and bought the nearby Glen Helen lodge instead.

Facilities

Today, Serpentine Chalet is a free bush camping area.



Driving along the road towards the Chalet, you'll pass a number of free camping areas with wood BBQs and some with tables.

This is true bush camping, so you will need to be prepared and bring all of your own water and equipment.

After 2 km, the road becomes a 4WD track, and remains that way until you reach what's left of Serpentine Chalet itself.

We do recommend a visit to Chalet and a climb up into the narrow gorge behind it. It's a part of central Australia's history and a testament to the difficulties of establishing a tourism enterprise in a remote area.

How to Get There:

Serpentine Gorge and Serpentine Chalet are located 100km west of Alice Springs via Larapinta and Namatjira Drives in the [West MacDonnell National Park](#).

Serpentine Gorge is accessed by a sealed road (Namatjira Drive) initially, then an unsealed 3km road into the day use area. From there it is a 1.3km walk into the Gorge.

The unsealed road is generally accessible all year round except in times of heavy rain and subsequent flooding although it is recommended that vehicles should have high clearance.

Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping area is also accessed from Namatjira Drive, and again is a good 2 km unsealed road that winds past a number of bush campsites. The drive into the Chalet is another few kilometres and is most definitely a 4WD ONLY track.

View [Serpentine Gorge](#) in a larger map

Directions: From Alice Springs, travel west along Larapinta Drive for 50 km, until you reach the intersection with Namatjira Drive. Turn right onto Namatjira Drive and keep heading west another 50 km until you see the sign into Serpentine Gorge.

The turn-off to Serpentine Chalet is about 8 kilometres further west from Serpentine Gorge and is clearly signposted.

Remember if you're travelling the Red Centre Way to get to [Kings Canyon](#) or [Ayers Rock](#) you can also stop in at Ochre Pits, [Ormiston Gorge](#), Glen Helen, and [Redbank Gorge](#) before continuing on via Tyler's Pass to get there.

When to Go:

Serpentine Gorge and Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area are places that you can go anytime of the year, but are far better visited in the cooler months between April-October.

Both are an easy day trip from Alice Springs but if you're going to stop at many of the places along the way you'll need most of the day if you're planning a visit.

It simply comes down to how much time you have to visit, but for my money these are couple of secret places that not everyone goes into.

If you've enjoyed reading about **Serpentine Gorge and Serpentine Chalet Bush Camping Area**, please share this page via Facebook, Twitter or Stumbleupon, using the 'Share it' button below.