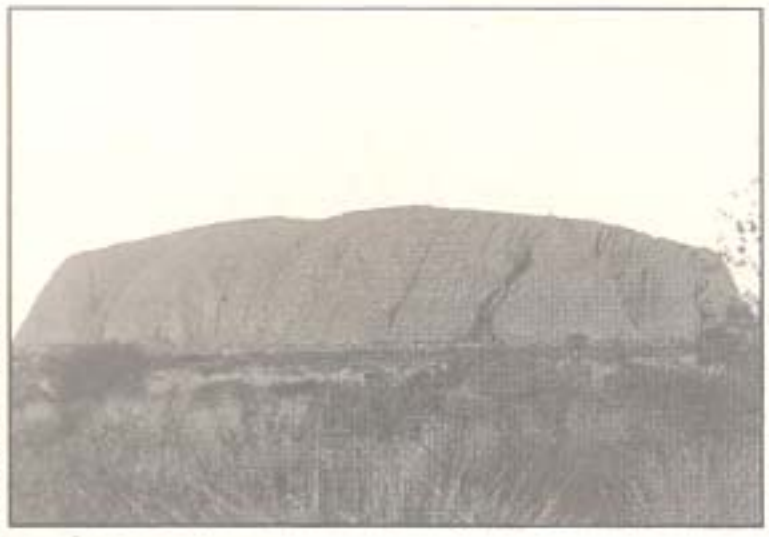
In 1985 control of Ayers Rock (right) was handed back to its traditional Aboriginal owners. Reclaiming this sacred site has meant changes for visitors, as Australian journalist Tanya Dewhurst reports



Pukuḻpa Pitjama Aṉanguka

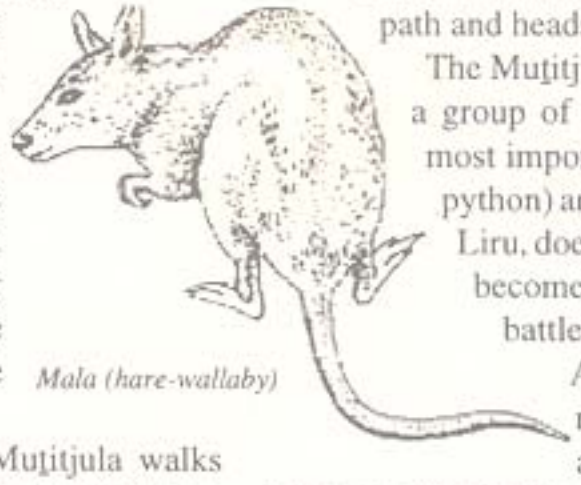
Welcome to Aboriginal Land

Fifteen years ago the sign at the base of Ayers Rock proudly announced the record times of those who had scaled up it - the shortest being about twelve minutes. The thin rusting piece of tin also gave information on the *longest* known climb time and other patronising Western anecdotes.

Today the sign reads very differently. Visitors to Uluṟu - the name by which the traditional owners, Aṉangu, have always known Ayers Rock - are asked not to make the climb. Instead, Aṉangu suggest the Mala Walk and The Muṯitjula Walk, both of which are incorporated into the nine kilometre walk around Uluṟu's base.

According to Tjukurpa (traditional Aṉangu Law that explains existence and guides daily life), early Mala (hare-wallaby) people travelled far to reach Uluṟu. The ascending pathway is the route taken by Mala men to plant a ceremonial pole which marked the beginning of Inma (religious ceremony). From this moment, all activities became part of the ceremony.

Thus the spiritual significance the Aboriginal people of the area place on the pathway relates to their religion and ancient knowledge, and only select Aṉangu elders may make the journey up Uluṟu. When the traditional owners see Westerners climbing Ayers Rock, they see people walking on Aṉangu ancestors and spirits.



Mala (hare-wallaby)

The significant sites along the Mala and Muṯitjula walks explain stories of ceremonies and creation, and Aṉangu are pleased to share their living traditions with visitors. Both walks include the chance to see Rock Art, water holes and a variety of plant and birdlife. A guide written by Aṉangu in English explains Tjukurpa and is available from the Visitor's Centre, situated one kilometre south of Uluṟu. However, no guides are available for the entire base walk.

Uluṟu's base is flat and even and a walk around the well-marked pathway should take a good five hours. The desert is always hot and full of flies, so it is essential to carry plenty of water and a fly net. One litre per person per hour is recommended during the height of summer. Also snakes may bask on the path so wear boots!

My lover and I set off at the best time to experience Uluṟu: sunrise. It is cool, the flies aren't out yet and the shifting sunlight, shadow and colour on the rock face are spectacular. Luckily, recent rain had brought out many wild flowers and we walked amidst lush grasses, carpets of purple plants and a variety of blossoming trees. The brilliant yellow and green of the native wattle tree is what gives Australia its national colours. A wild flower identification booklet is also available from the Visitor's Centre.

We started from the southern face, by the Muṯitjula walk car park and went east or anti-clockwise, which meant we actually did the Mala walk backwards. The Muṯitjula walk, however, can be done from either direction as it breaks from the orbital path and heads inwards.

The Muṯitjula story tells of the creation activities of a group of closely connected ancestral beings, the most important of which are two snakes, Kuniya (a python) and Liru (poisonous). Because her nephew, Liru, does not show Kuniya the proper respect, she becomes very angry, attacks him and a disastrous battle ensues.

As Kuniya approaches him, she performs a ritual dance to make it publicly known that a woman of power is punishing the person who has offended her. In an attempt to control the dark forces she is unleashing, so that no harm will come to others, she picks up a handful of sand and lets it fall to the ground. However, Kuniya's rage is too strong, and a great battle takes place. After two blows Liru is killed. Kuniya has avenged her honour, but in her fury every plant near the battle has become poisoned. The spearwood bush here is especially poisonous.

Ngurakutu

Evidence of the battle is clear in features along the walk, for instance a thick, wriggling, horizontal band of rock marks Kuniya approaching Liru. A deep gash shows the sand Kuniya dropped. Other lines signify the fight and fatal blow.

Further along the walk is a Rock Art site, not directly connected to Kuniya and Liru Tjukurpa, and a cave where Anangu sheltered. At the end of the walk is Uluru's most reliable waterhole; a beautifully tranquil place where Aboriginal people once drank, hunted and played. A waterfall which flows only after rain has sculpted a spectacular long dark vertical groove.

The southern track hugs sheer slopes towering upwards which feature water bores and a series of caves. Many trees and plants thrive along this sheltered face. The eastern path veers away from the rock, crossing flat pavement which is actually the same rock eroded to ground level. A fallen boulder is known as Taputji or Little Ayers Rock.

The northern tip passes the men's sacred site, fenced off and not accessible to visitors. People are also asked not to photograph the area.

The north-eastern facade is the Mala walk which begins further around from the walk or "climb" car park. The Mala Tjukurpa tells of the first ceremony, and sites along the walk are where these Inma preparations took place. Windbreaks and caves created by native animals for Anangu to shelter dot the path. Vegetation is very thick here and many sources of food - the wild fig and bush plum, for example - were gathered by the Aboriginal people. A cool, quiet waterhole at the base of Kantju Gorge ripples eerie and serene very close to the men's sacred site.

Continuing anti-clockwise from the Mala walk car park the path follows through low grasslands, at points hugging the steep western facade. By now, the sun has reached its zenith and the harsh light flattens the burning red ochre colour of the rock. There is little shade along here and a hat and sunglasses are vital.

Just before the last bend on the south-western tip is the fenced-off women's sacred site. Birds do not squawk here and the air seems still: testimony to the spiritual resonance of the place. The car park is not much further and can be reached by road or the more pleasant stroll along a Mutitjula walk side-track.

Large boulders on either side of the side-track are associated with Lungkata, the blue tongue lizard, who, because he kept for himself an emu that had been wounded by other hunters and lied to them about its whereabouts, was chased and finally caught. The boulders are the pieces of cooked emu meat which he dropped whilst being pursued.

Western version of the history of Uluru differs greatly from Anangu dreaming. Geological history books explaining the millions of years of erosion and uplift are available from the Visitor's Centre. However, the ugly language of pressure fractures and topographic joints pales besides the beautiful stories of Tjukurpa, and it is much thanks to Anangu for sharing them with us.

The uneasy compromise between traditional owners' preservation of their culture and Western demands to visit "one of the world's seven wonders" has meant that Anangu still allow people to climb Uluru. Many people who live in the area (mainly in Alice Springs) actively discourage visiting hikers from making "the climb". Eventually it is hoped that no tourist will wish to ascend Uluru and the sign at its base can simply read **Pukulpa Pitjama Ananguka Ngurakutu** -*Welcome to Aboriginal Land.*