



Mutawintji National Park - Ancient Landscape, Ancient Human History

Punishing Roads

You set out from White Cliffs with a plan to stay at Mutawintji National Park. It's only about 150km away - an easy day. Or maybe not...

The road snakes around and over harsh rocky range country. Red sand, red rock, white rock and reefs of rock across the road. Hundreds of small watercourses make their way down the sides of the ranges and you have to cross every one of them. Of course, each one is different - some you don't slow down for but most you treat with utmost respect.

Click here for a video of the [White Cliffs To Broken Hill Road](#).

The road hadn't been graded for a long time either, so we were kept on our toes by the corrugations mixed with large rocks. Trying to drive along the edge of the road was a failure too. Recent rain had created thousands of small wash-aways on the edges.

The turn-off to Mutawintji National Park was a welcome site.

The Campground

You'd be hard-pressed not to find a great camp spot here. Lots of camping sites and plenty of shade under young river red gums. They are nicknamed "widow makers" for a good reason, so use your commonsense. Occasionally they'll decide they have one too many branches and will drop one without warning.

In fact, you're spoilt at Mutawintji camp ground. Hot showers and flushing toilets. Who could ask for more?



MUTAWINTJI CAMPGROUND. LOTS OF CAMP SITES AND PLENTY OF SHADE.



WE FOUND A SHADY SPOT, AWAY FROM EVERYONE ELSE.



CLEAN AND TIDY SHOWER BLOCK WITH HOT SHOWERS. CANT ASK FOR MORE THAN THIS!

If you're still not satisfied, wait for the sunset.



SUNSET FROM THE CAMPGROUND.

In The Time Before The White Man

The Bynguano Ranges within Mutawintji National Park are the traditional lands of the Malyankapa and Pandjikali people. These people sustainably managed the water and natural food supplies for at least 8,000 years.

It's incredible to see the contrast between the lands in Mutawintji compared to the surrounding arid desert country... even now, after sheep and rabbits irreparably damaged the local environment. The valleys and gullies are thick with river red gums - a tree better known along the banks of the Murray and Darling River systems. You can only imagine what it must have been like before the White Man. Mutawintji means "green grass and waterholes" - it's easy to see why it was named so.



THE GORGE COUNTRY PROVIDES SHELTER, FOOD AND WATER. A STARK CONTRAST TO THE SURROUNDING DESERT COUNTRY.



THIS GUM IS JUST HOLDING ON AFTER BEING UNDERMINED DURING A RECENT FLOOD.

What's now known as the Mutawintji Historical Site was a special ceremonial place. Over 1,000 people would travel to this site from places afar, joining in these special occasions. Access to

Mutawintji Historical Site is strictly controlled - the only access for tourists is with licenced tour guides. For more information, contact [Broken Hill Information Centre](#).

White Colonisation

Unfortunately Mutawintji's colonisation by the whitefella is a familiar tale of dispossession and takeover. Burke and Wills inadvertently opened up the area in 1860. Wills considered it to be "a place of gloomy gullies". Did he actually have his eyes open?

Squatters appeared in the 1870s and basically plundered the place. They sunk tanks, dug bores and used the permanent waterholes to run huge mobs of sheep. A combination of sheep, rabbits and the massive drought at the turn of the century meant this country was decimated. Once the fragile topsoil was exposed it simply blew away.

Traditional owners were treated harshly, forced to rely on paltry rations. Their kids were often taken away to work on distant stations and white-man diseases took a heavy toll. It's a heart breaking story, repeated all around Australia. Thousands of years of continual occupation and sustainable land management destroyed in a few short years.

The sheep and rabbits are gone but the area is now thick with goats. These "carp of the cliffs" eat everything - everything from ground level, up to the height that a goat can reach standing on its hind legs.



GOATS ARE EVERYWHERE. THEY STRIP THE GROUND BARE AND FOUL THE WATER.

Rockholes Hotel, A Remote Bush Pub

Drive North past the campground and follow the road to the end. The road becomes a dirt track. This was once a busy road, the Old Coach Road between Broken Hill and White Cliffs.

Miners seeking their fortune either rode, walked or caught a lift on the Mail Coach. In the 1890s, enterprising local grazier Charles Raven opened a pub. It became known as the Rockholes Hotel. Now a ruin, it stood on the edge of the road on a hot and rocky ridge. Can't imagine living there in the middle of summer, let alone walking from Broken Hill to White Cliffs!



ROCKHOLES HOTEL. NOT EXACTLY MY FIRST CHOICE OF LOCATIONS TO BUILD A PUB...



RANDOM MEMORABILIA FOUND BY CURIOUS TOURISTS.



THE OLD COACH ROAD HEADING TO WHITE CLIFFS. WOULD HAVE BEEN A LONG JOURNEY ON FOOT.



THERE'S NOT MUCH LEFT OF THE PUB. IT BURNT DOWN IN 1915.

These Boots Are Made For Walking

The only way to really appreciate this place is on foot. Some fantastic walks branch out from the campground. They're all clearly signposted and frequent markers clearly show you the way. Of course, take plenty of water, sunscreen, hat and decent footwear. It can be very hot on open ground... or cold, as we discovered. More on this later.



WE'VE SOLVED THE MYSTERY OF WHY BURKE AND WILLS PERISHED. THEY SPENT TOO LONG AT THIS SIGN, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHICH WAY TO GO.

We awoke before dawn and set out at first light. After a short walk across open ground, you're drawn into the magnificent gorges and gullies. You're soon looking at an area where the original inhabitants used hard rock to create stone tips for spears and knives. It's littered with fine chips of white stone. A painstaking and highly skilled profession.



THE FIRST SHORT SECTION OF THE GORGE WALK IS WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE FROM THE CARPARK.

A little further on is Indigenous rock art. Signs explain the meaning of the paintings. One particular painting signifies this as a culturally significant area.



ROCK ART IN THE GORGE. THE VERTICAL STRIPES ARE TALLY MARKS - A RECORD OF THE NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES OF A SIGNIFICANT EVENT. HAND STENCILS ARE HIGHER UP.

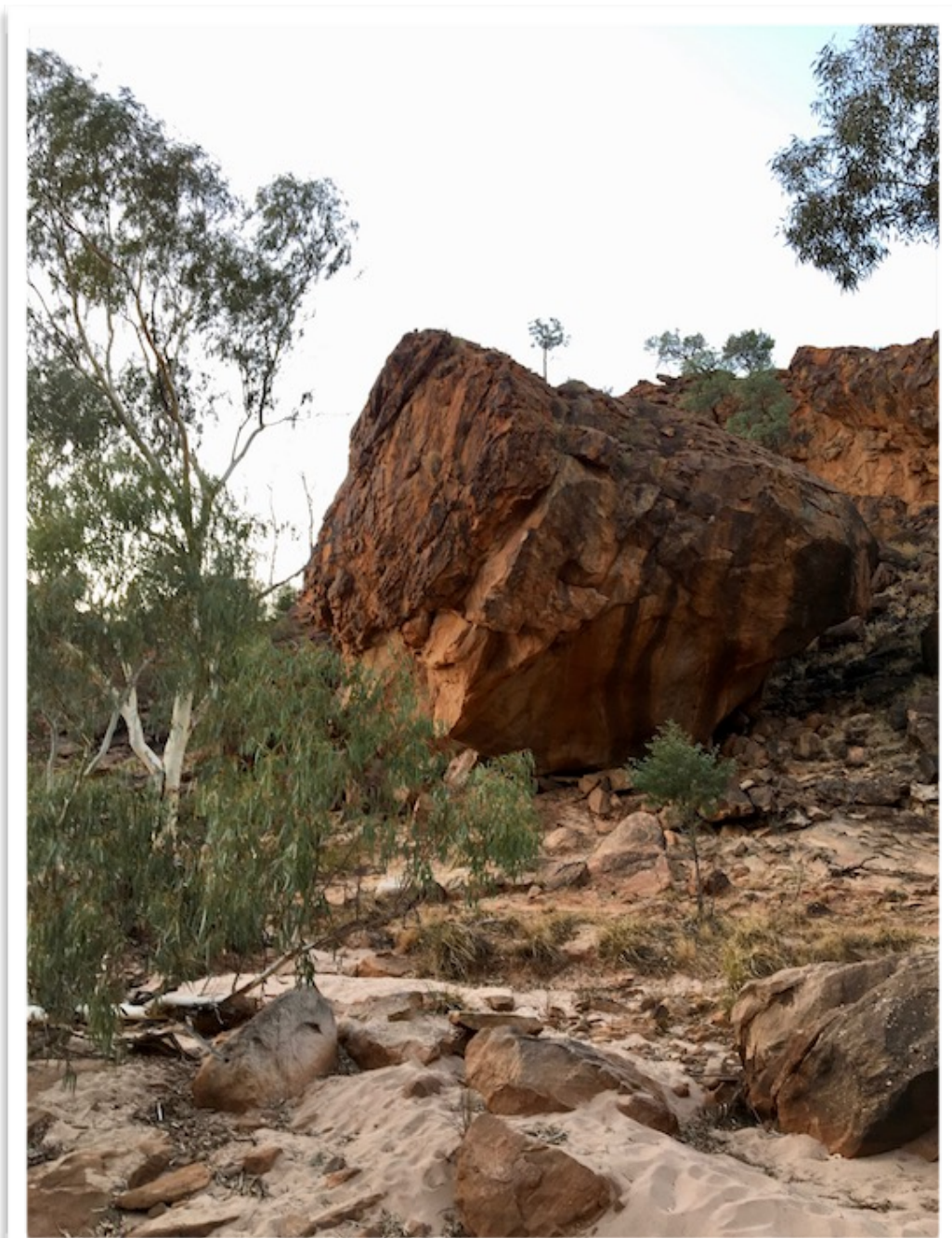


THE BRUSH ON THE LEFT IS A YARRA. THE CLEVER MAN (MIKIKI) USED THIS TO BEAT BAD SPIRITS FROM THE SICK. IN THE MIDDLE (LARGE PAINTING) IS A GROONKI MARK, WHICH IDENTIFIES THIS AREA TO BE SPIRITUALLY SIGNIFICANT.

At odds with the rock art are blue triangles with “WW LIX” and “WW LX11”, markers made by William Wright in 1859 and 1862. Wright was support group leader for the 1860 Burke and Wills expedition and managed a property at Menindee (south of Mutawintji). It was Wright who returned in 1862 to explore the area for grazing country.

Nature’s Light Show

Early morning sunlight began to light the tops of the rock walls as we moved deeper into the gorge. Dull walls were transformed into brilliant orange. This seemed to be a signal for enormous wedge-tailed eagles to commence pre-flight checks. We watched one huge wedgie give his wings a test flap, then launch off a gnarled cypress pine at the top of a cliff. Pretty soon four wedgies had joined forces and were taking advantage of the early morning thermals. Spectacular.



SUNRISE HASN'T YET REACHED THE BOTTOM OF THE GORGE.



AN ENORMOUS WEDGE TAILED EAGLE PERCHED ON A GNARLED TREE GROWING OUT OF THE ROCKS.

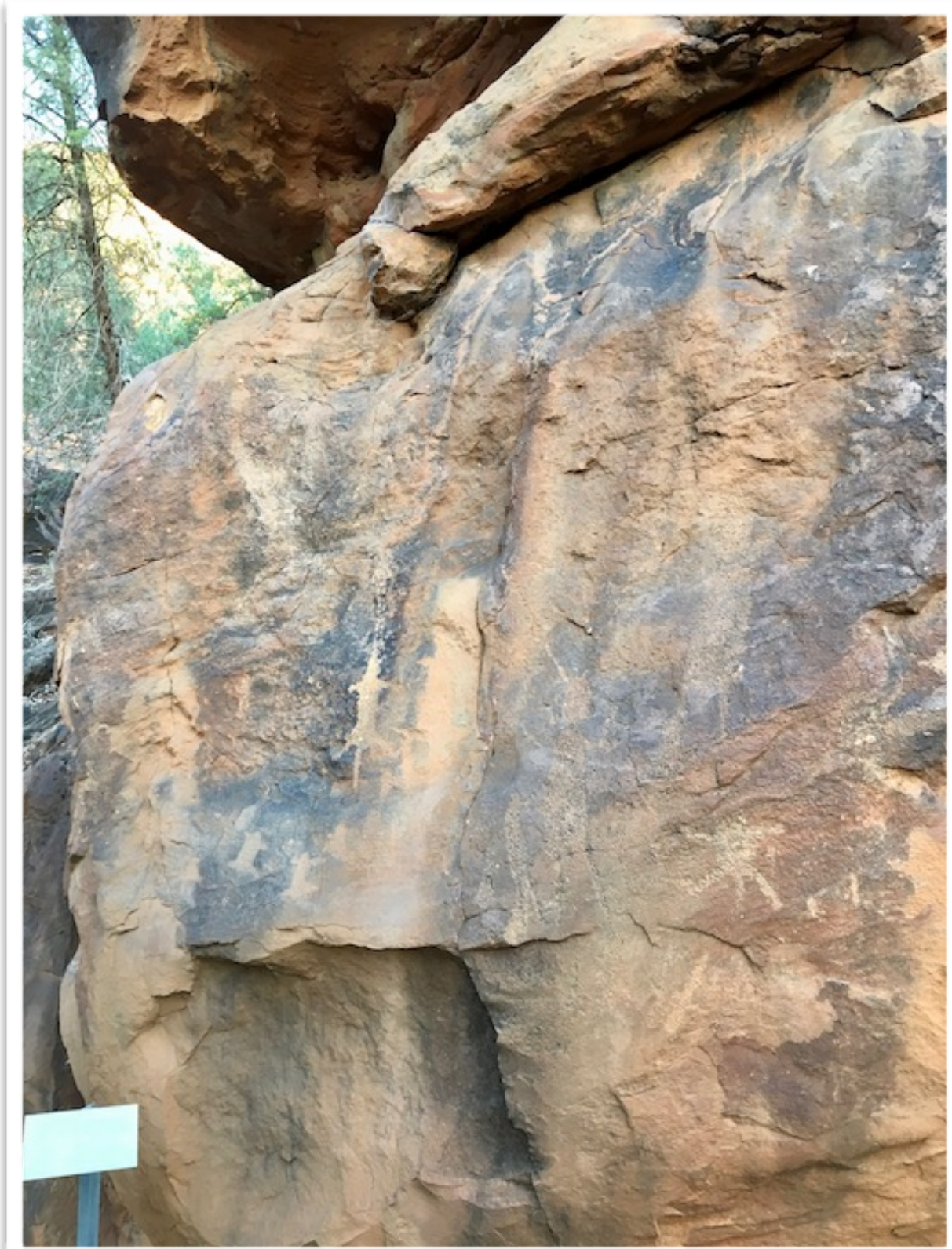


SUNRISE BRINGING THE CLIFFS TO LIFE.



THIS IS CLEARLY THE DOMAIN OF WEDGE TAILED EAGLES. THEY GET TO ENJOY THESE SUNRISES EVERY MORNING!

A little further on are stone etchings. These depict food sources - frogs, kangaroos and goannas. Stone etching requires special skills and is downright difficult. I often marvel at these artisans from thousands of years ago and wonder how much they'd have in common with modern artists. Quite a lot, I suspect...



ROCK ETCHINGS.



A SAND GOANNA OR THAAKURLU.



FROGS OR MARTA MARA.

A Choice To Make

At this point, you can branch off and take different walks. Of course, we chose the longest one... but what a walk! It's called the Bynguano Range Walk and is about 8km long. You rise out of the gorge, up a sloped rock face. While ascending, you follow a creek bed carved into solid rock. I'm guessing this creek took a while to form - like hundreds of thousands of years. Small rock pools periodically arrest the flow of water as it descends the rock slope.



WATER HAS FORMED A DEEP CHANNEL THROUGH SOLID ROCK OVER HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS.



THESE ROCK POOLS WOULD BE LIKE NATURAL SPAS WHEN THE WATER WAS FLOWING.

Once you crest the ridge, a magnificent panorama unfolds. The ridge drops away sharply to yet more deep gorges. It seems like Mutawintji goes on forever. And look back over your shoulder - those beautiful gorges you walked through earlier now seem tiny and insignificant.



SEE THE GULLY IN THE FOREGROUND AND SNAKING AWAY TO THE LEFT? WELL THAT'S THE MAGNIFICENT GORGE YOU'VE JUST WALKED THROUGH. SEEMS TINY FROM UP HERE.

The track follows the ridgeline for a kilometre or so. It's quite exposed - in fact, we were actually cold along this stretch and kept moving to keep warm. However you'd be cooked alive on a hot day.



IT'S REALLY EXPOSED UP HERE. THE VIEWS ARE FANTASTIC - A 360 DEGREE PANORAMA.

You descend into another gorge and follow a creek all the way back to the start of the loop. Along the way you'll see magnificent waterholes, rock formations, stark rock faces, even a short descent

by rope! Evidence of a recent flood was everywhere. Flood rubbish was piled up against river red gums and banks were eroded. Even so, we saw no surface water at all. No doubt water would be available if you knew where to dig into the sand.



THIS TREE IS GROWING STRAIGHT OUT OF ROCK. TALK ABOUT DOING THINGS THE HARD WAY!



WATER HAS MADE THESE ROCKS AS SMOOTH AS GLASS.



STRANGE SHAPES AND PATTERNS IN THE ROCK.



ONE OF THE LARGER ROCK POOLS.



PETA DESCENDING THE ROPE. THIS WAS FUN!



THIS PHOTO IS NOT CROOKED - THIS IS THE ACTUAL ANGLE. HAVING FUN SQUEEZING THROUGH ROCK CHASMS.



BACK INTO THE GORGES. FOLLOWING THIS BEAUTIFUL CREEK TAKES YOU BACK TO THE START OF THE WALK.

Coming Back For More

We'll be coming back here, for sure. We missed the Mutawintji Historic Site guided tour and there's several other walks on offer.

Mutawintji is one of those places that keeps calling you back. This was our second visit. Once you come here, you'll be back again. It's a spiritual place - a gentle heart in an unforgiving landscape.

