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Discovery of the Painted Hills



The Painted Hills.

Photo: *Rosamund Burton*

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Rosamund Burton joins the ranks of the few to have seen this outback wonder.

THE FOUR-SEATER Cessna rolls along the airstrip and into the air. We circle over the tiny township of William Creek with its population of 10, and in front of us the red dusty outback stretches as far as the eye can see.

Trevor Wright, the pilot, who has lived at William Creek for the past 15 years, conducts scenic flights over this remote part of South Australia. He is taking three of us to see what are known as the Painted Hills. We are wearing headphones and mouthpieces, which with a little adjusting means we can hear what Trevor is saying and ask questions.

William Creek is the smallest town in South Australia and is situated between Marree and Oodnadatta on the historic Oodnadatta Track.

This is the route that Aborigines used for thousands of years to travel into the interior of Australia. John McDouall Stuart came this way when he succeeded in the first south-north crossing of the continent in 1861-62. The Overland Telegraph Line was built along the same track and also the original Ghan railway.

Initially we fly over Anna Creek Station, the largest cattle station in the world and, at 24,000 square kilometres, bigger than Belgium. The station is leased by S. Kidman & Co, which was established by Sidney Kidman, the cattle king and pastoral entrepreneur who, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, bought vast tracts of land throughout Australia.

The exact location of the Painted Hills, and on which property they are, is a secret. Trevor says the pastoral leaseholders are keenly aware of the need to preserve these delicate rock formations.

"They are incredibly fragile, but due to the fact they are highly protected, they are in pristine condition," he says.

Unlike the Painted Desert, near Oodnadatta, a couple of hundred kilometres further west, the hills are not accessible by four-wheel-drive, and can only be seen from the air.

To date they have only been seen by 300 people and Trevor is the only person taking people to look at them.

We fly at 500 feet, so are able to see the landscape clearly below us. Dry creek beds snake through the red sand, which is speckled with saltbush and the bright yellow flowering desert wattle. Occasionally this natural landscape is interrupted by the straight line of a vehicle track or a square-shaped waterhole.

A wedge-tailed eagle soars below us, and on the ground a lone grey kangaroo sits up on its back legs and looks around.

Rising out of the red sand ahead is the range of hills. We fly low over the crest of the first one and as we drop down over mauve caves and into a sea of red mounds, it is like entering another world. The plane swoops into the valleys. Chasms of ochre and white contrast with the more prominent red and orange rock.

The Painted Hills cover an area of 20 kilometres by 10 kilometres. Geologist Marg Sprigg says these richly coloured natural sculptures have formed over millions of years. The land was originally flat then lifted up by tectonic movement, and rivers have cut through the tabletop forms, leaving the hills.

The water from the rivers also dissolved minerals, such as iron and manganese, which have oxidised into the stunning reds, yellows and whites that can be seen today.

"You never lose interest in them," Trevor says. "You can see them once or a 100 times. I was looking at the bottom of a creek the other day and there were four different colours embedded in the stone."

Eons of wind and erosion have left an impressive red monolith on top of pale ochre slopes. Elsewhere it looks as if an impetuous artist has painted broad red brush strokes over an undulating yellow canvas.

"Quite a number of people who have seen them describe them as the coloured Bungle Bungles," Trevor comments, as we circle rock formations that resemble brightly painted pyramids.

The flight back to William Creek is over the gibber plains. The stones polished by millenniums of wind and rain create batik-like patterns below, and from this height the earth looks like an Aboriginal dot painting.

Then in the distance Lake Eyre comes into view. This is Australia's largest lake, which only fills with water about once every eight years, and has only filled to capacity three times in the past 150 years. Today it is dry and the white salt-crusted lake bed extends to the horizon.

The plane touches down on the airstrip behind the William Creek Hotel. The 1887 pub was originally a support station for camel drivers working on the Overland Telegraph Line. Inside the walls are covered with business cards and the ceiling is festooned with inscribed caps, bras and boxer shorts. Sitting here I reflect on the breathtaking beauty of the newly discovered Painted Hills.

TRIP NOTES

* The best time of year to travel to this area is between May and October.

* Wrightsair, a division of Freycinet Air, offers one-hour flights to the Painted Hills for \$170. To book phone Wrightsair on (08) 8670 7962 or see <http://www.wrightsair.com.au>.

* William Creek is two hours drive from Coober Pedy on the Stuart Highway, or 2 1/2 hours from Olympic Dam. Wrightsair can organise transfers by plane or car to William Creek, or you can hire a vehicle.

* Regional Express (Rex) Airlines has four flights a day from Monday to Friday (fewer at the weekend) from Adelaide to Olympic Dam. Flights start from \$128 one way. For more information see <http://www.regionalexpress.com.au>.

* Budget rents four-wheel-drives for \$125 a day. To book phone 1300 362 848 or see www.budget.com.au.

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