



# No climbing

The famous rock draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to Alice Springs every year. Climbing it is no longer allowed. ANNABELLE LIANG tells us more.

Alice Springs is a town in Australia. It is surrounded by parks, hiking trails, and stretches of desert. From there, most visitors drive to Ayers Rock that is five hours away. The rock is hard to miss. At 348m, it is the height of a 95-storey building.

The rock is not an ordinary tourist attraction. It is special to the Anangu people. The tribe's culture and beliefs are not known to many outsiders. So, visitors are encouraged to learn. They

are asked to walk around the rock, which is sacred to the Anangu, instead of climbing it. The climb is very dangerous. At least 37 visitors have died attempting it. Some people do it anyway because it is on their **bucket list**.

Climbing was finally banned last October. It was a big moment for Sammy Wilson, a member of the tribe. "If I travel to another country and there is a **sacred** site, an area of restricted access, I don't enter or

climb it. I respect it," Mr Wilson said. "It is the same here for Anangu. We welcome tourists here. We are not stopping tourism, just this activity."

## Stories of Uluru

Ayers Rock has an aboriginal name, Uluru. It has no specific meaning, but there many stories about Ayers Rock. Anangu families pass down these stories through the generations. Anangu people believe that the world was empty in the beginning. Then, ancestral beings emerged. They created living things and natural wonders such as Uluru.

Pamela Taylor holds the story of Lungkata, a blue-tongued lizard that stole meat. The lizard was hunted down and burnt. Its body left a blue mark on Uluru. "That's why we tell the children not to go around stealing things, because they will get punishment like Lungkata. I tell (the) story about that to my grandsons, so they learn," Ms Taylor said.

Anangu ceremonies are still held in the caves around Uluru. "That place is a very sacred place, that's like our church," said Rameth Thomas. "All of our stories are on the rock. People right around the world... they just come and climb it. They've got no respect," Mr Thomas stressed.

Not everyone understands the



Anangu children preparing to perform a welcome dance for visitors to their school.

Anangu people's request that nobody should climb Ayers Rock.

Jana Johnson, 32, climbed before the ban was in place. She drove to Uluru from another part of Australia, with her family in tow. "We've been planning this for 12 months," she said.

"It's difficult to see what that significance is. It's a rock. It's supposed to be climbed," another climber told the *BBC*.

## Why I did not climb

I visited Ayers Rock on a backpacking tour in 2012. At the Singapore university I attended, students had the option of spending a semester overseas. I chose Adelaide, a city in Australia. From there, it was a two-hour flight to Alice Springs. I thought to myself — if not now, when?

We spent the first night in town, and the next at a campsite. I remember admiring the stars, and turning my head to see how far they stretched. The beauty was unending.

I was undecided about climbing, like most of my tour group. We were young, fit, and searching for an adventure. The Anangu convinced me. Strangely, it wasn't the handwritten signs at the base of the rock, or their troubled past. I simply accepted that I would not understand it all. Rather, I wanted to respect their culture in the best way I could.

None of us climbed that day. We **initialled** in the "I have not climbed" register and went on our way.

## VOCAB BUILDER

**bucket list** (say "ba-ket list"; noun) = a list of things a person hopes to do during her lifetime. The term comes from "kicks the bucket" which is a figure of speech for dying.

**sacred** (say "say-kred"; adjective) = considered holy and dedicated to a religious purpose.

**representation** (say "re-pri-zen-tay-shen"; noun) = speaking or acting on behalf of a community.

**initialled** (say "ee-nee-shel'd"; verb) = signed with the first letters (initials) of one's name.

## CORRECTING PAST WRONGS

The Anangu is an Aboriginal tribe. Such tribes were in Australia before it was colonised by the British. The colonisers killed many of the Aboriginal people. A number of them caught diseases and died.

When the country became independent, Aboriginal people were made to feel like they did not belong. Children were forcibly taken from their families to distance them from their culture. Today, Aboriginal people make up only about 2% of the population. They are likely to be poorer, less educated, and have shorter lives than the average Australian.

The country is trying to change this. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has called the struggles of Aboriginal people a "national shame". Some Aboriginal people were only granted

the right to vote in 1962. The Australian government was allowed to make laws to help them five years later.

Mr Morrison's government has set seven targets to improve the lives of the Aboriginal peoples. It is only on track with two: now more Aboriginal children have access to early education and are completing high school.

Lidia Thorpe thinks **representation** will help. She was the first Aboriginal woman to be elected into Parliament, in the state of Victoria. "It really makes a difference, I believe, having Aboriginal people in Parliament," Ms Thrope said, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*. "We need Aboriginal people with lived experience. We need Aboriginal people who understand our fight and our struggle."