




THE SAVIOURS

The big bet on the Uluru resort has paid off, showing the potential of tourism for the indigenous business sector

Story by: **Paige Taylor**

Tourism came to Uluru after Alice Springs truck driver Len Tuit led a school group from Knox Grammar there in 1950. Tuit then established a base camp west of the soon-to-close rock climb. His guests drank water carted 100km from Curtin Springs Station.

Back then it was sometimes a 12-hour trek from Alice Springs through dust or mud to get to Uluru. Still, the first official visitor numbers recorded in 1958 show 2296 people made the trip that year.

Today Ayers Rock Resort is virtually a town with 10 restaurants, six hotels, a camp ground, a spa, art galleries and an airport under its management. Three road trains a week bring the resort's supplies from Adelaide and a workforce of 864 lives on site. Today 38 per cent of those workers are indigenous.

The resort has become a model of indigenous excellence in tourism since 2011 when it was purchased by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, the federal entity established by the Keating government to build "the indigenous estate".

Borrowing heavily, the ILSC controversially paid more than \$300 million for the resort when occupancy rates were barely above 50 per cent. "It had lost its standing as a must-visit destination for both international visitors and Australians," the corporation told a Senate inquiry into tourism in northern Australia in 2017.

The turnaround has been extraordinary. The ILSC spent some \$90 million on upgrades and established Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia to run the resort. Within six years, occupancy rates climbed to the high 80s.

The core purpose of Voyages is to create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in tourism, and it is doing this partly through the National Indigenous Training Academy where indigenous people earn qualifications in tourism and hospitality before starting work at the resort. Just two indigenous people worked there in 2011 but by the end of 2017, there were 377 indigenous employees, including 70 trainees.

The resort sets itself apart by showcasing Anangu culture in a variety of ways, including with a daily suite of indigenous activities for guests. Typically 52 per cent of people who stay at the resort are domestic tourists and 48 per cent are international. The resort's surveys tell it the tourists love these interactions with indigenous Australians and learning about indigenous culture.

The daily options include guided bush tucker journeys through native gardens, didgeridoo lessons, weapons demonstrations and talks on women's business. These are free for all visitors, whether they stay at the camp ground or the luxury Sails in the Desert hotel.

Voyages chief executive Grant Hunt says Ayers Rock Resort is ideally placed to be an incubator of indigenous hospitality expertise, given its strong cultural connection for Aboriginal people. A central part of ILSC's existence is a commitment to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. "The strong presence of indigenous staff certainly makes for a more authentic and culturally uplifting experience for our guests," Hunt says.

There is an indigenous influence on the food and drinks menu throughout the resort. Mangata Bistro – it's the Pitjantjatjara word for desert quandong – offers a breakfast martini made with green ant gin and bush marmalade.

The most recent ILSC annual report indicates it can be a viable business as well as a jewel of indigenous tourism. Voyages generated \$35.9 million in earnings in 2017-18 before interest, taxation, depreciation and amortisation, up from \$29.3 million a year earlier. Most encouraging is that net profit before tax for 2017-18 was \$5.8 million, achieving a significant surplus for the first time since ILSC purchased the resort in 2011. The report also shows Voyages has paid back \$19 million in interest and principal on the loans secured against the resort.

Asked about the key to the resort's rejuvenation, Hunt says ILSC invested heavily in refurbishments and new product development after a period of prolonged under-investment by previous owners. This investment occurred before the current strong cyclical upturn and enabled the resort to build strongly to current levels.

Hunt says innovative projects such as Field of Light, Bruce Munro's immersive installation on display at the resort until December next year, have had an accelerator effect.

He feels the resort plays a significant role in the way Australians and the world see Uluru, which he describes as "legitimately our spiritual heartland".

"(The resort) plays a key role in international visitation to Australia and in the way the travel trade puts itineraries together," Hunt says. "Uluru has never been more relevant. The Anangu and the National Park board have taken the tough decision, the right decision, to close the climb and amplify the cultural importance of the place.

"We at Voyages have continued our innovative push through new product and experience development, interior design and refurbishment. And we continue to make the place more relevant with our commitment to improving the lives of indigenous staff through training and employment and to enriching the lives of our guests through the provision of authentic cultural experiences."