Visiting Uluru

One day in 1874, an explorer, Ernest Giles, struggled up a small hill and was confronted with a sight such as he could never have dreamed of finding. Before him, impossibly imposing, stood the most singular monolith on earth, the great red rock now known as Uluru. Hastening to report the find, he was informed that a man named William Gosse had chanced upon it a few days ahead of him and had already named it Ayers Rock after the South Australia governor.

So you are aware, as you drive to the park entrance, that you have driven 1,300 miles to look at something you have seen portrayed a thousand times already. In consequence, your mood as you approach this famous monolith is restrained, unexpected – pessimistic even. And then you see it, and you are instantly transfixed. There, in the middle of a memorable and imposing emptiness, stands an eminence of exceptional nobility and grandeur, 1,150 feet high, a mile and a half long, five and a half miles around.

It’s not that Uluru is bigger than you had supposed or more perfectly formed or in any way different from the impression you had created in your mind, but the very opposite. It is exactly what you expected it to be. You know this rock. You know it in a way that has nothing to do with calendars and the covers of souvenir books.

It is a motion much too faint to be understood or interpreted, but somehow you sense that this large, brooding, hypnotic presence has an importance to you at the species level – perhaps even at a sort of tadpole level – and that in some way your visit here is more than happenstance.

I’m suggesting nothing here, but I will say that if you were an intergalactic traveller who had broken down in our solar system, the obvious directions to rescuers would be: ‘Go to the third planet and fly around till you see the big red rock. You can’t miss it.’ If ever on earth they dig up a 150,000-year-old rocket ship from the Galaxy Zog, this is where it will be. I’m not saying I expect it to happen; not saying that at all. I’m just observing that if I were looking for an ancient starship, this is where I would start digging.

You realize that you could spend quite a lot of time – possibly a worryingly large amount of time; possibly a sell-your-house-and-move-here-to-live-in-a-tent amount of time – just looking at the rock, gazing at it from many angles, never tiring of it. You can see yourself hanging out with much younger visitors and telling them: ‘And the amazing thing is that every day it’s different, you know what I’m saying? It’s never the same rock twice. That’s right, my friend – you put your finger on it there. It’s awesome. It’s an awesome thing.’

Instead, we stopped at the visitors’ centre for a cup of coffee and to look at the displays, which were all to do with interpretations of the Dreamtime – the Aborigines’ traditional conception of how the earth was formed and operates. There was nothing instructive in a historical or geological sense, which was disappointing because I was curious to know what Uluru is doing there. How do you get the biggest rock in existence onto the middle of an empty plain?

Afterwards we had one last drive around the rock before heading back to the lonely highway. We had been at the site for barely two hours, obviously not nearly enough time, but I realized as I turned around in my seat to watch it shrinking into the background behind us that there never could be enough, and I felt moderately comforted by that thought.
A It is less red than photographs have led you to expect but in every other way more arresting than you could ever have supposed. I have discussed this since with many other people, nearly all of whom agreed that they approached Uluru with a kind of fatigue, and were left amazed in a way they could not adequately explain.

B By the time you finally get there you are already a little sick of it. You can’t go a day in Australia without seeing it four or five or six times – on postcards, on travel posters, on the cover of picture books – and as you get nearer, the frequency of exposure increases.

C Climbing up takes several hours and much exertion. Even when it’s not too hot, lots of people get in trouble. Just the day before a Canadian had had to be rescued off a ledge from which he could not get either up or down. Fortunately, they close it to climbers when the weather is really warm, as it was this day.

D It is grounded in something much more elemental. In some odd way that you don’t understand and can’t begin to articulate you feel an acquaintance with it – a familiarity on an unfamiliar level. Somewhere in the deep sediment of your being some long-dormant fragment of memory has twitched or stirred.

E In fact, it is almost 300 miles across a largely featureless tract. Uluru’s glory is that it stands alone in a boundless emptiness, but it does mean that you have to really want to see it; it’s not something you’re going to pass on the way to the beach.

F It turns out that Uluru is what is known as a bornhardt: a hunk of weather-resistant rock left standing when all else around it has worn away; but nowhere else on earth has one hunk of rock been left in such dramatic and solitary splendour or assumed such a pleasing smooth symmetry.

G I’m not saying that any of this is so. I’m just saying that this is how you feel. The other thought that strikes you – that struck me anyway – is that Uluru is not merely a splendid and mighty monolith, but also an extremely distinctive one.

H Quite apart from that initial shock of indefinable recognition, there is also the fact that Uluru is totally arresting. You cannot and don’t want to stop looking at it. As you draw closer, it becomes even more interesting. It is less regular than you had imagined. There are more curves and more irregularities than are evident from even a couple of hundred yards away.