Devils Marbles

A SYMBOL OF AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK

The Devils Marbles – a collection of ancient smooth granite boulders, some of which balance delicately on top of each other – are one of Australia’s great natural wonders. The boulders vary in size, from 50 centimetres to six metres in diameter, and appear to have been scattered across the wide, open valley. Located within Devils Marbles Conservation Reserve, they have become a familiar symbol of Australia’s Outback.

The Devils Marbles reportedly got their name from John Ross, who, when leading a survey for the Overland Telegraph in 1870, commented: ‘This is devil’s country; he’s even emptied his bag of marbles around the place!’ To the Aboriginal groups who have inhabited this country for thousands of years – the Warumungu, Kaytetye, Alyawarra and Warlpiri people – the boulders are known as Karlu Karlu (which means ‘round boulders’).

THE FORMATION OF THE ‘MARBLES’

The ‘marbles’ were formed when magma, from deep within the Earth, cooled, producing a solid mass of granite. Originally, the granite sat beneath a sandstone layer, but this was broken down and eventually the granite was revealed. The granite cracked and split into both vertical and horizontal blocks. Over millions of years, those blocks were shaped by spheroidal weathering – a process which still continues – into the smooth rounded boulders that are seen today.

A SACRED SITE

The site is extremely sacred – in fact, the majority of the conservation reserve is protected under the Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act. In 2008 the land was returned to the traditional owners. The reserve is now leased to the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory and is jointly managed by the commission and the traditional owners.

Approximately 100 kilometres to the south is Tennant Creek, the location of Australia’s last gold rush, in 1932.