

ROCKS



Bill Bottomley

Introduction

Look, I might as well come clean from the outset: I'm a rock perve. A petriphile. A good-looking rock can turn my head the way a well-formed buttock does. I've always been drawn to rocks. The first Box Brownie picture that I took when I was very young was of a lump of weathered sandstone on the water's edge at Iron Cove, (long lost, of course) and my fascination with rocks has not diminished with time.

When my mate Lorraine and I decided to explore Australia by camper-trailer some fifteen years ago we were both pleased to find that we shared this tendency to find rocks interesting and noteworthy, and rocks feature quite often in our travel photos. Most of the time we shared the one camera, and we didn't keep track of just who took what. Suffice it to say that all the rock shots in this little homage were taken by one or the other of us on our various travels.

It doesn't matter what their provenance is (igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic) it's the sculptural aspects of these natural phenomena that grab us. Rocks are Mother Nature's sculptures, and they are always works in progress. What we photographed is unfinished. Further down the track they won't look quite the same because they will be eroded by the weather into quite different shapes. It'll take a helluva long time though.

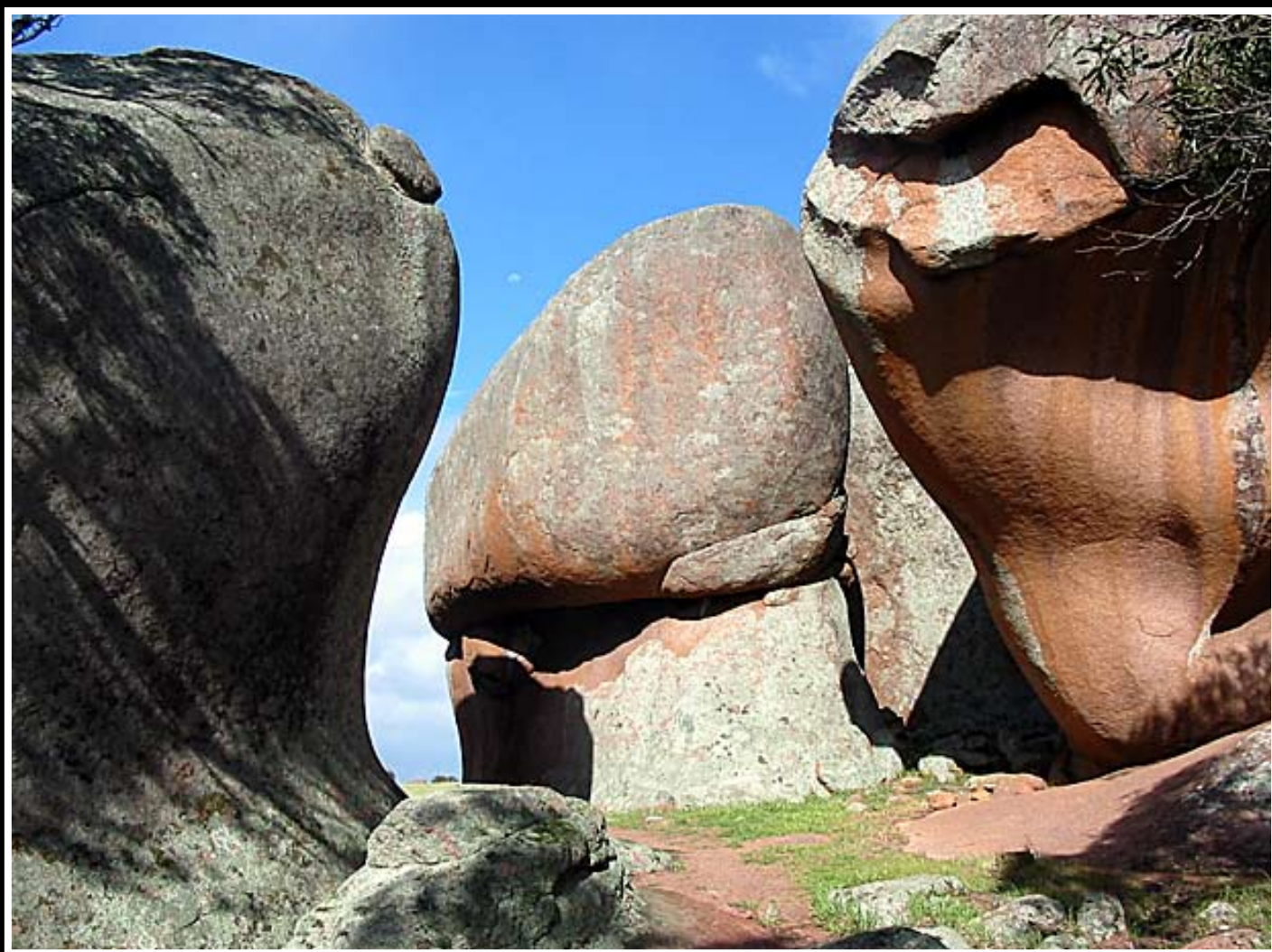
One of the hardest things to do when putting this little oeuvre together was deciding what to leave out. The pics chosen are only a tiny percentage of those we took. But as Voltaire said: "The best way to be boring is to leave nothing out" and I hope I have left enough out to avoid that pitfall. (Still, if you're not a rock nut you mightn't get past page 3. Oh well, a *chacon son gout*).

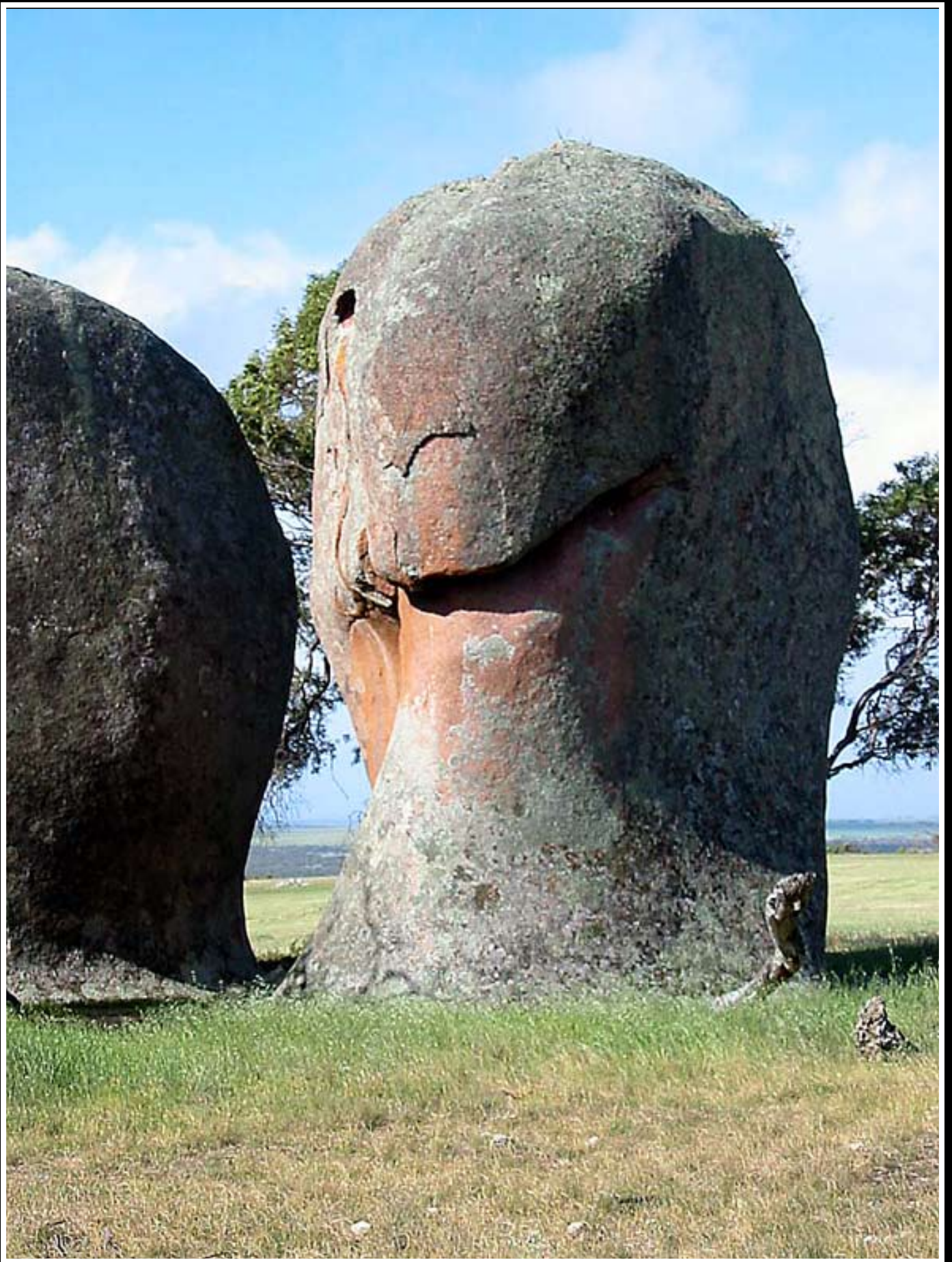
Murphy's Haystacks

The first group of monoliths I've chosen for your delectation are to be found on the Eyre Peninsular in South Australia. I've chosen these to start with because they had such a profound impact on me when I first saw them. I think they are truly one of Australia's lesser known treasures. They're pink granite, and have gradually assumed their present shape as the soil around them eroded and exposed them in all their sculptural glory. Geologists think that they have been weathering away for something like 100,000 years -- one estimate reckons 1500 million years. Whatever, they've been sitting serenely on their grassy hill for a bloody long time. I found them absolutely stunning, and can't quite understand why everyone doesn't know of them the way we know of the Devil's Marbles, for instance (which we didn't get to photograph).

Their resemblance to much of Henry Moore's work (cf "Helmet Head" particularly) is quite remarkable, but I assume he had no knowledge of them. It's almost as though Ma Nature was saying "Henry, look. This is how it's done."

They were named after an Irish farmer called Murphy (appropriately enough). In the early years of settlement an agricultural expert saw them in the distance and mistook them for actual haystacks, and the misnomer stuck.







The phallic pillars of the Marquesas

A group of volcanic islands in French Polynesia, in the remote Pacific some 1000 kms north of Tahiti, the Marquesas were the archetypical "south sea islands" of Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stephenson and Jack London. A land of plentiful food, a balmy climate and a very relaxed attitude to sex brought about many a defection by visiting sailors. In time, unfortunately, it also brought the God-botherers, who set about doing their self-righteous best to bugger up Paradise.

Here's an example of their ideological colonisation, and it involves the pillars of basalt that are scattered all over the islands: On Fatu Hiva, the southernmost island of the Marquesas, there is a picturesque bay adorned with several rock pillars of impressive height. The local name for this was *La Baie des Verges*, literally *Bay of Penises*. The religiousi were scandalised by this nomenclature, so they inserted an "i" to the main word, and it was re-named *La Baie des Vierges* -- *the Bay of Virgins*! And Baie des Vierges it remains, to this day. Just about every high point in the islands today sports a white cross - testimony to the efficacy of the religious brainwashing that went on, but at least the story of how the Bay of Virgins got its name is told to tourists these days with a touch of derision.





Ball's Pyramid

Twenty kms south east of Lord Howe Island, Balls Pyramid is a volcanic remnant that formed about 7 million years ago. It's the tallest volcanic stack in the world. The day we circumnavigated Lord Howe Island in a smallish fishing boat there was a three metre swell running, and the best shot we could get of the rock is on the next page. There are plenty more really good ones to be found on the Net, though.

It wasn't climbed until 1965, though several attempts had been made before this. The successful climbers were from the Sydney Rock Climbing Club. Apparently, one of the earlier unsuccessful expeditions were struggling in vain to reach the summit, and they began to sing a bawdy folk song over and over, like a negro work song, to keep their spirits up. The choice of song came from a none-too-subtle verbal connection with the name of the rock itself, and goes like this:

*Balls to Mr Winklestein, Winklestein, Winklestein,
Balls to Mr Winklestein, dirty old man.
He keeps us waiting while he's masturbating,
Balls to Mr Winklestein, dirty old man.*

As a consequence, a particularly steep needle-like rock outcrop on the rock now officially bears the name *Winklesteins Steeple*.



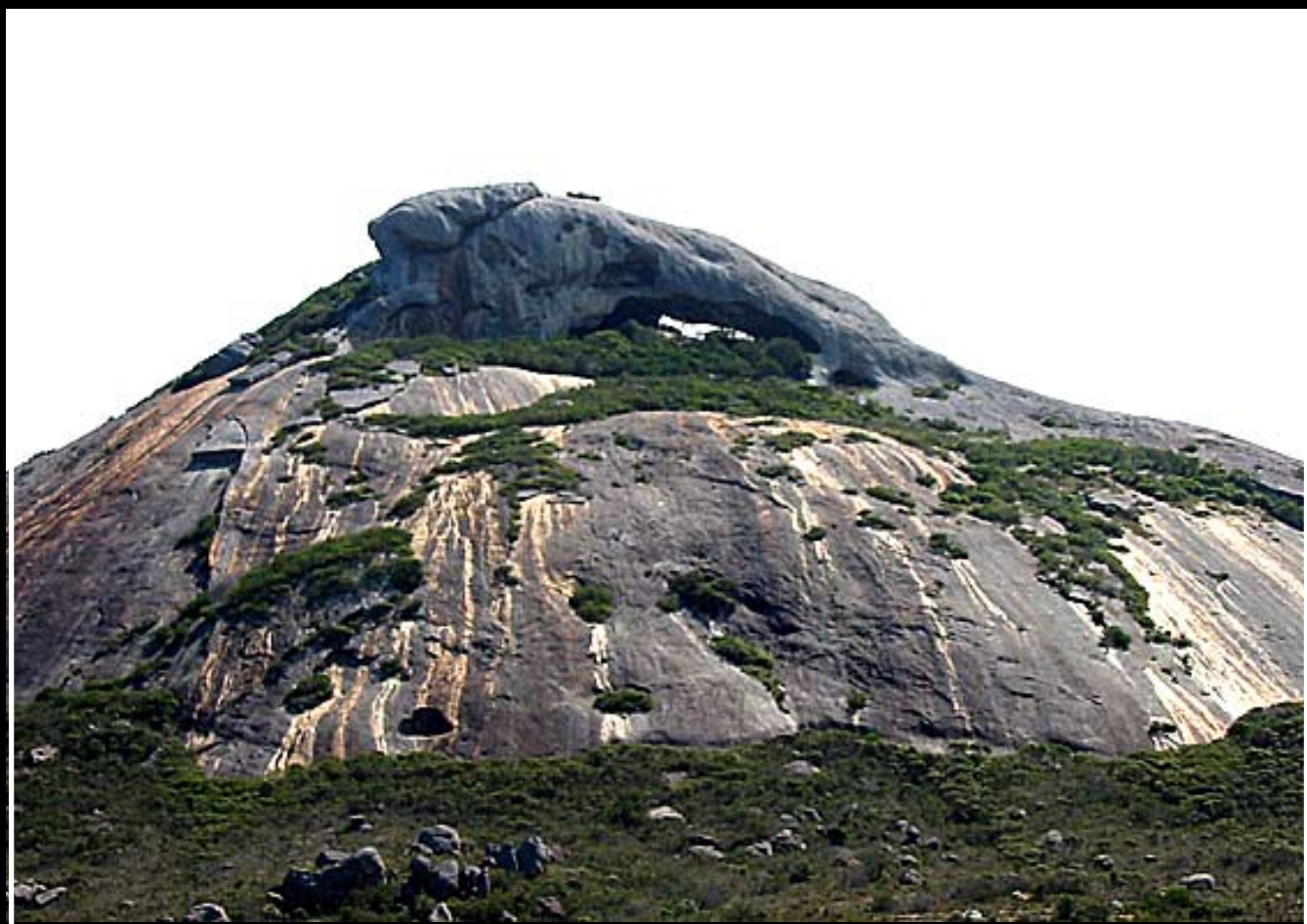
South Western Australian coast

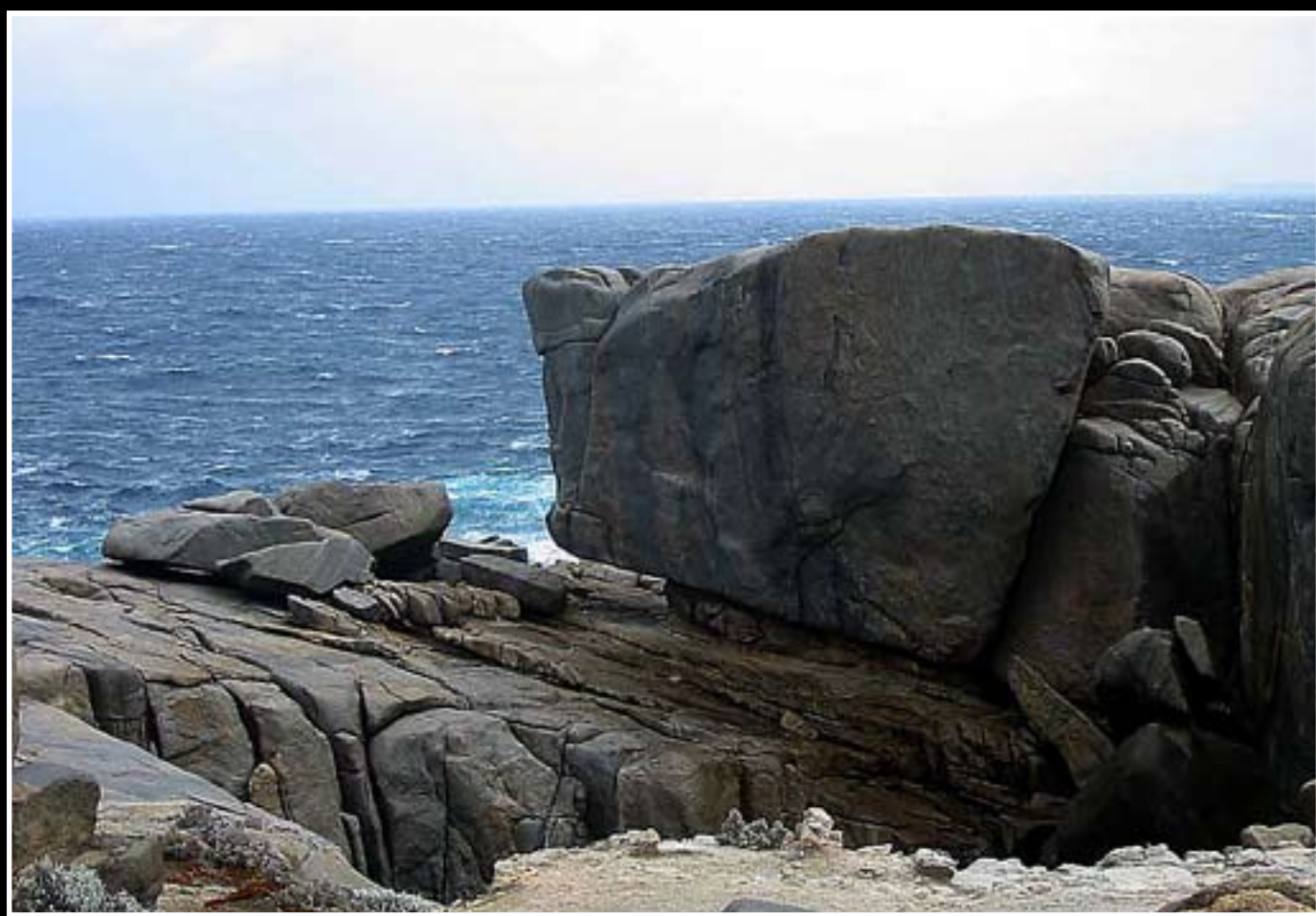
I'm not sure what I expected of this area, but was most pleasantly surprised by its white beaches, limpid waters, and surprisingly, a quite tropical feel to it, a lot of the time. Mind you, we weren't there in winter.

Seaside towns like Esperance, Denmark and Albany were of considerable historical interest and beguiling to wander through.

This is granite country, and is home to some quite famous rock formations, such as Frenchmans Cap near Esperance (next page, top, and not to be confused with the challenge to climbers of the same name in northern NSW), and the Natural Bridge near Albany in Torndirrup National Park (next page,, bottom). A little further inland the landscape features many free-standing inselbergs (like Murphys Haystacks).

When we were there it was very windy and the sea was up, and the confrontation between the rocks and the crashing waves along the coast were, literally, quite an awe-inspiring example of the vast power of nature. and its capacity to shape rocks and hard places.







The Pinnacles

About a couple of hundred clicks north from Perth on the West Australian coast, not far from a small fishing village called Cervantes, is a wierd example of weathering and erosion. Unknown to most Australians until the 1960s, they are made of limestone whose source was seashells from an earlier epoch when the area was inundated by the sea. They're not unlike similar pillars at Lake Mungo in south west NSW, but rather more arresting, I think.

As we approached them on a good road through part of Nambung National Park we could see small examples of these pinnacles, and I was somewhat under-impressed. When we found out there was an entry fee I began to wonder if it was going to be worth continuing. But Lorraine talked me into driving in to see them, and I am so glad we did, as they are nothing like the midget ones we saw on the approach road.

When you get in amongst them, it is as though you are seeing everything through an orange/tan filter. Some of them are over five metres high, and they come in a wide range of shapes. Worth every penny of the admission price.





New Caledonia

The rocks of New Caledonia are not so much free-standing sculptural monoliths as large, impressive outcroppings, such as in the rather hazy photo below (known as “the chook”) and over the page. The geology of New Caledonia is quite complex, but most of the outcroppings that we wanted to photograph were, I think, basalt. There is a spine running down the island -- a massif composed largely of nickel. Since the 1960s, when mining of the nickel began in earnest, the French have pretty well levelled large areas of this massif in their ravenous appetite to exploit the nickel deposits.







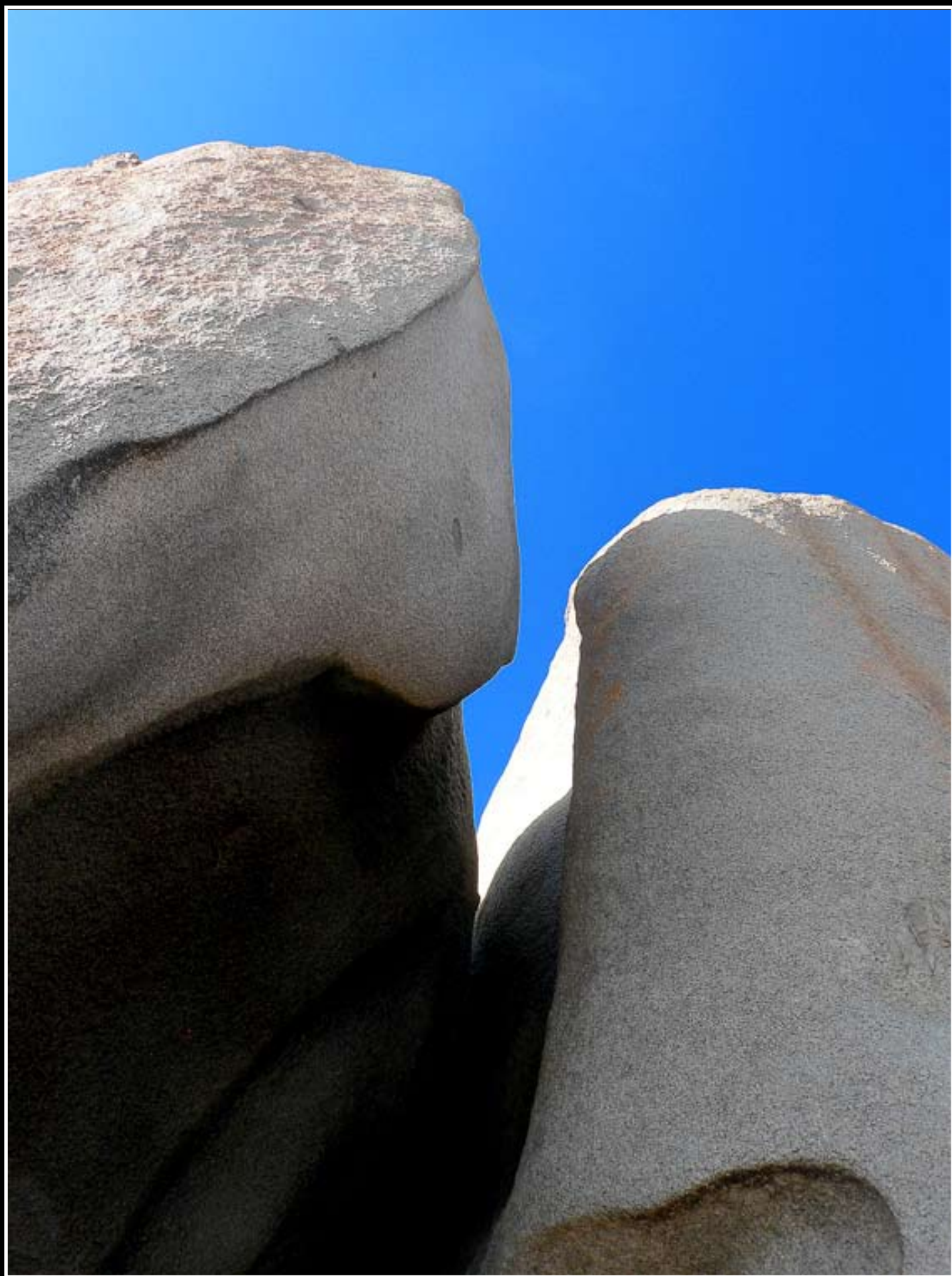
The Remarkable Rocks of Kangaroo Island

And their name is no exaggeration. They truly are remarkable. They're in Flinders Chase National Park, on the western side of Kangaroo Island. From a distance they look like they've been haphazardly dumped on the huge granite dome that they're perched on, but once you get up close almost any way you want to frame bits of them results in a pleasing abstract sculptural shape.

I'm at a bit of a loss for words to describe the impact they had on me. I think I'll just let the pictures speak for themselves



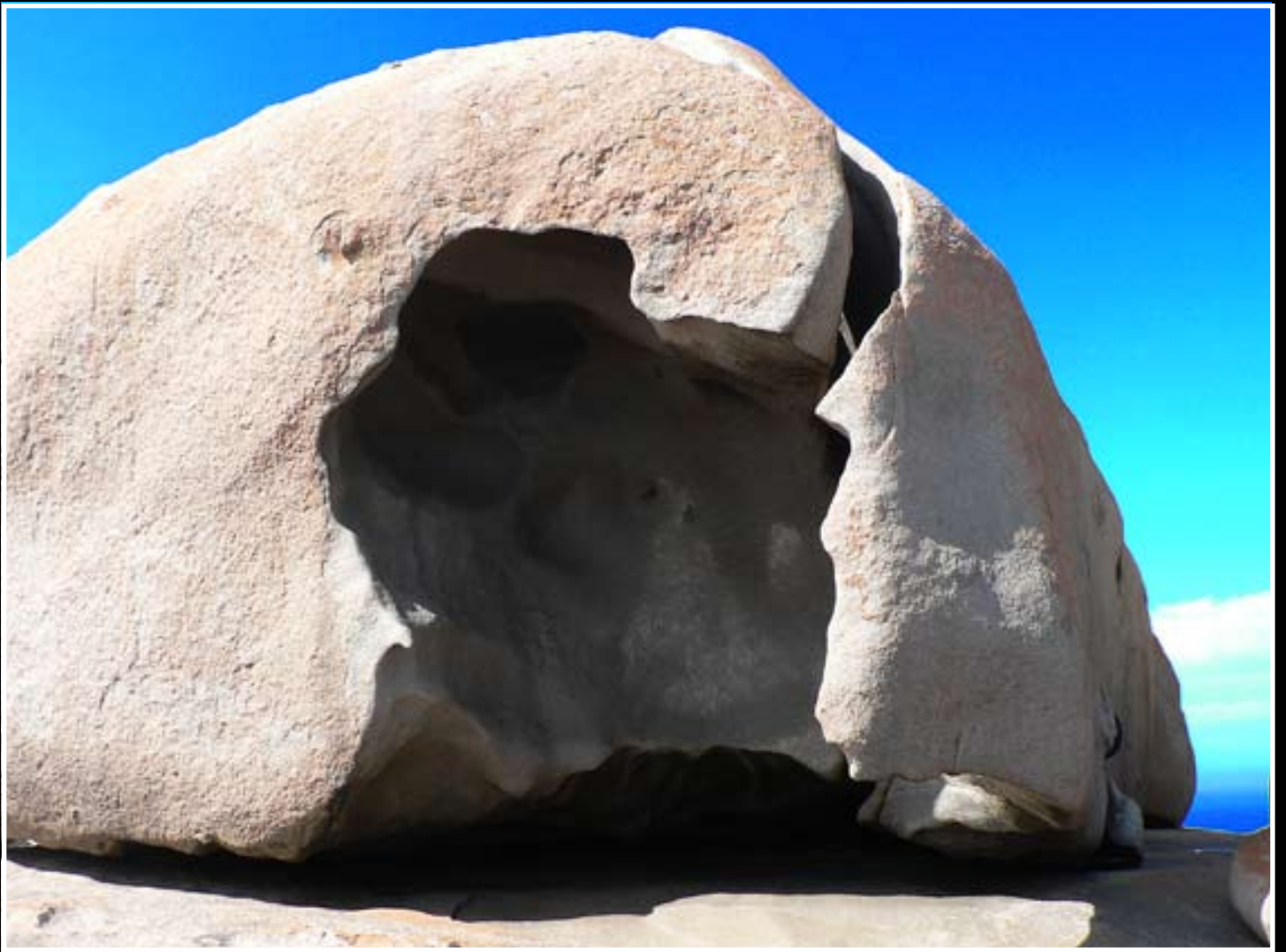


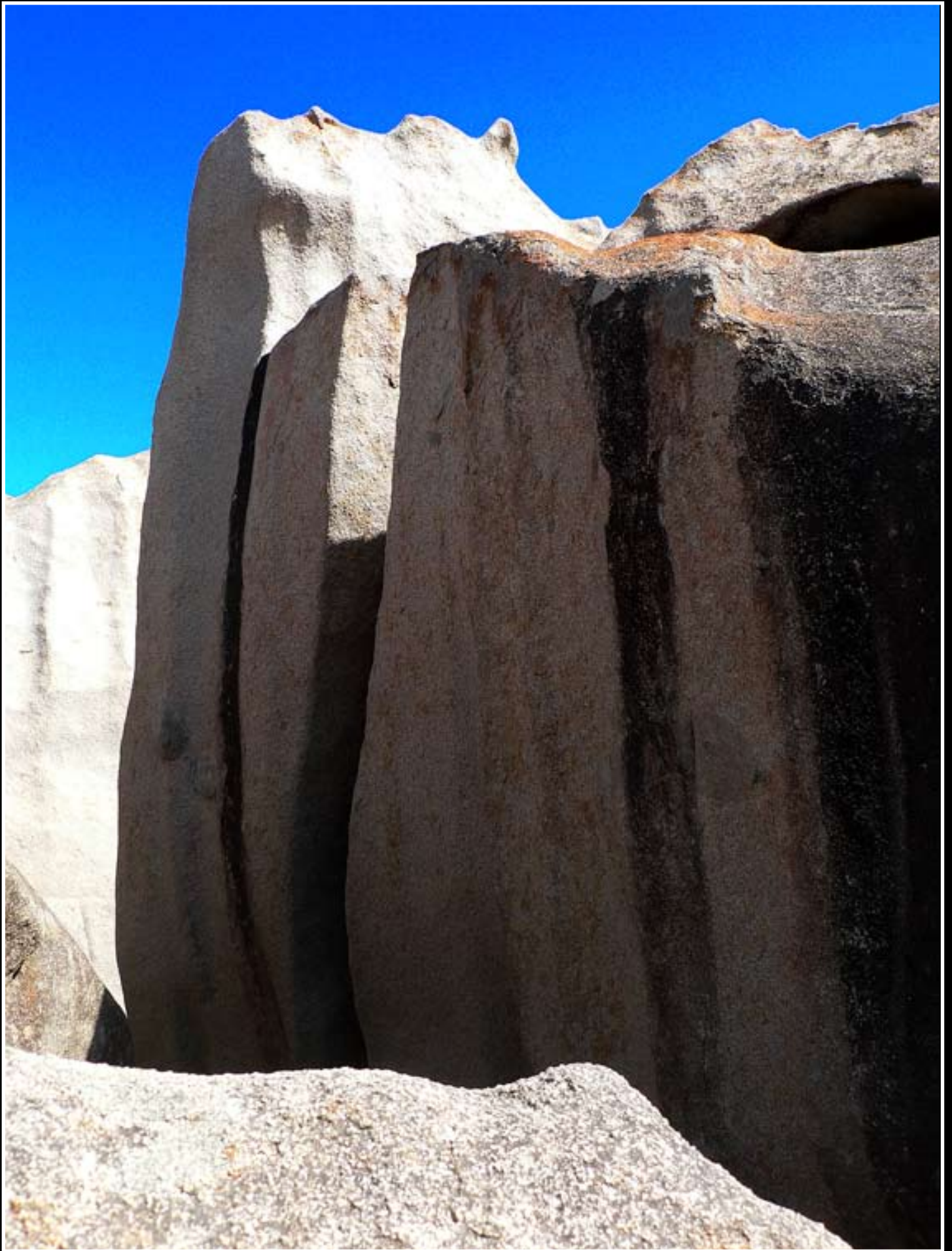














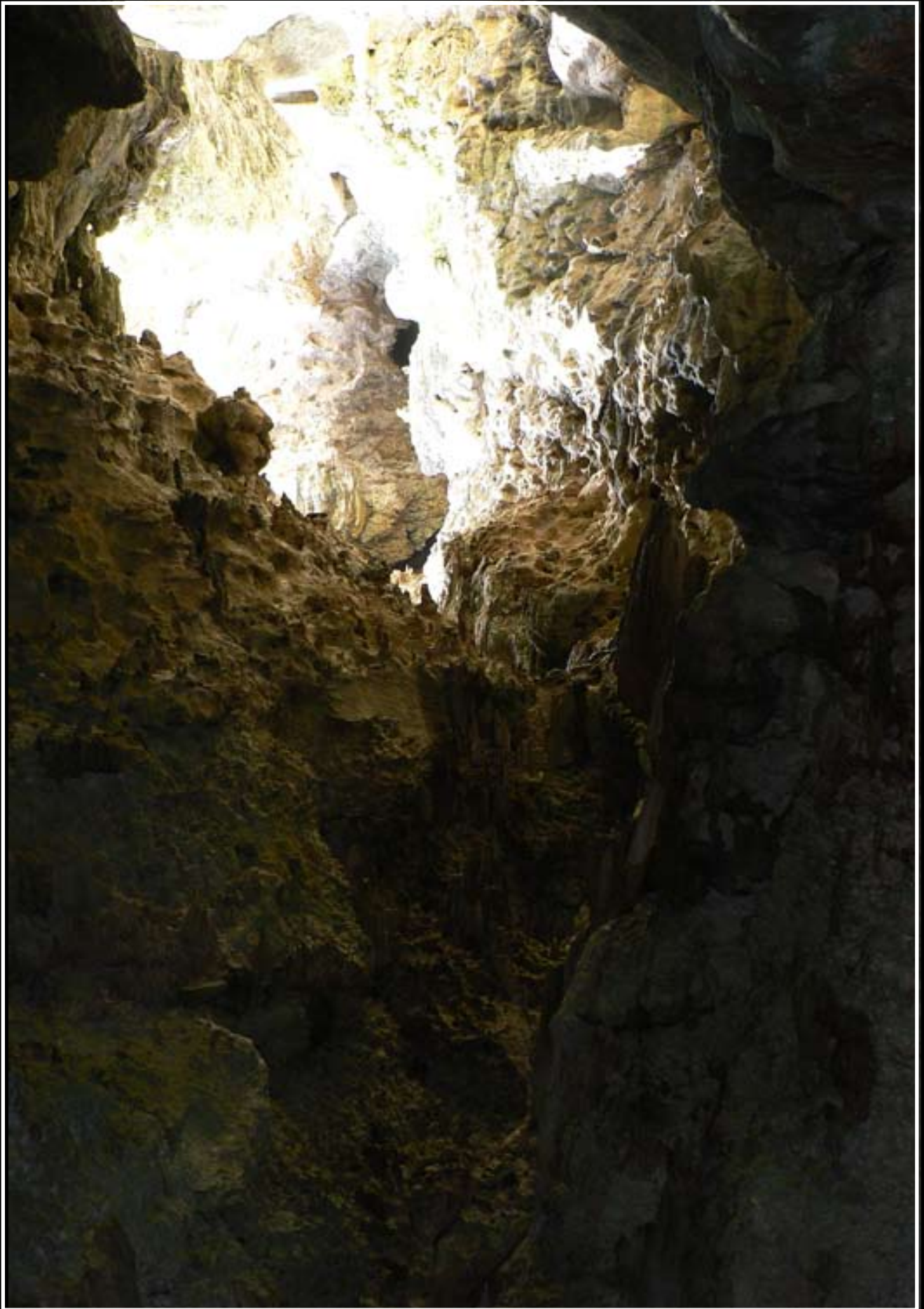


The limestone labyrinths of Niue

Niue is a raised coral atoll smack in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, just across the International date line and somewhat north of Tonga. It is one of the world's largest coral islands. It has steep limestone cliffs, and erosion by often heavy seas has created many breathtaking limestone caves, which are the main geological feature of this quite tiny island (18kms diameter). It is often referred to as "the rock of the Pacific", and (appropriately enough for this essay) the locals refer to it just as "The Rock". On a hot day, it is wonderfully refreshing to go into one of these elaborate caves and cool off in the super-clear seawater ponds which are a feature of many of them.

Captain Cook was the first European we know of to clap eyes on the island, and although he attempted to land there on three occasions the locals weren't having any of it, and drove him off each time. Cook consequently named it *Savage Island*, which name survived into the twentieth century, when it reverted to the original appellation, *Niu e* (with an acute accent on the "e"). Translated, it means "behold the coconut". I wonder if I'm the only one who finds this name somewhat risible. To me, it's a bit like saying that Tasmania can be translated as "Lo, the apple".









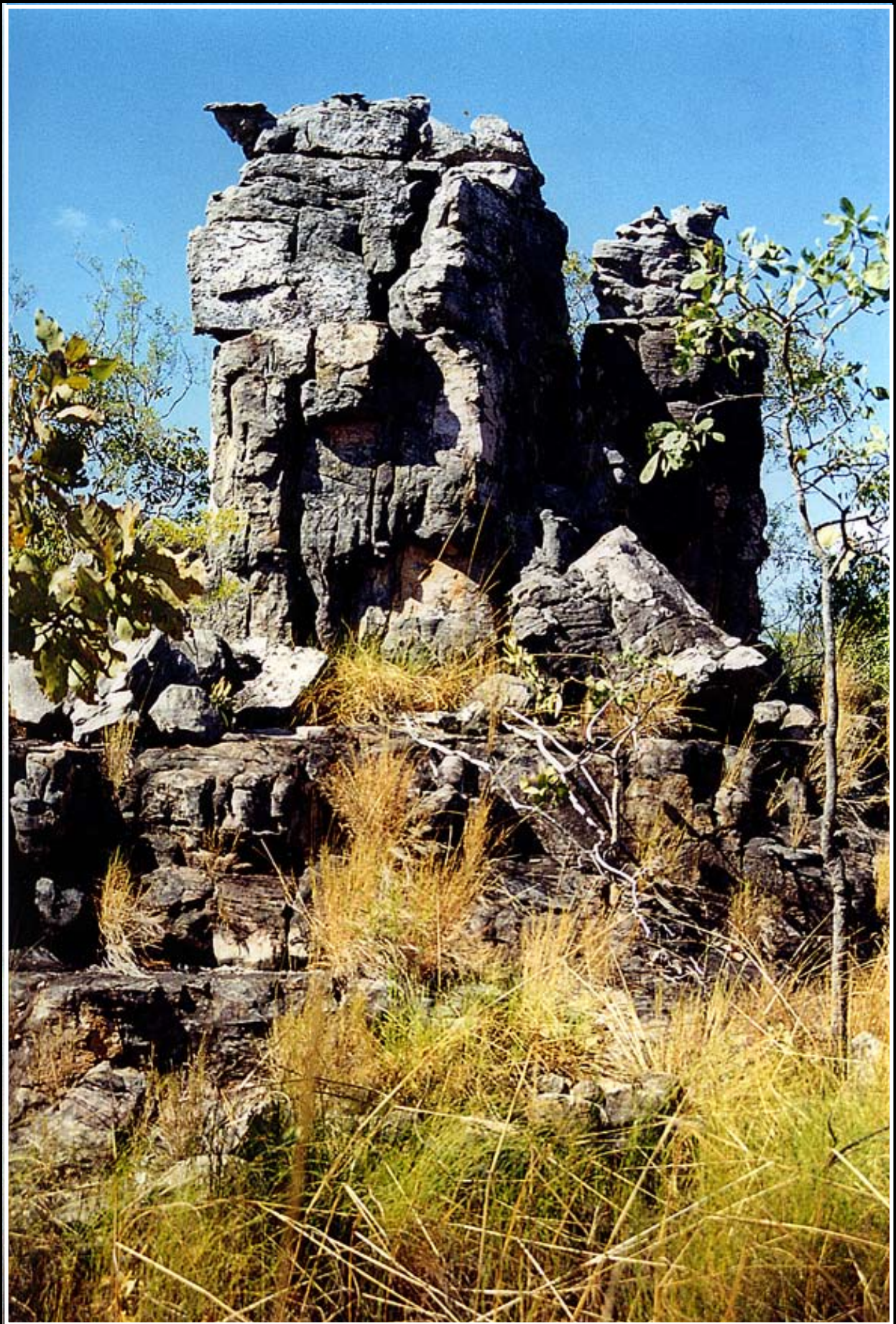




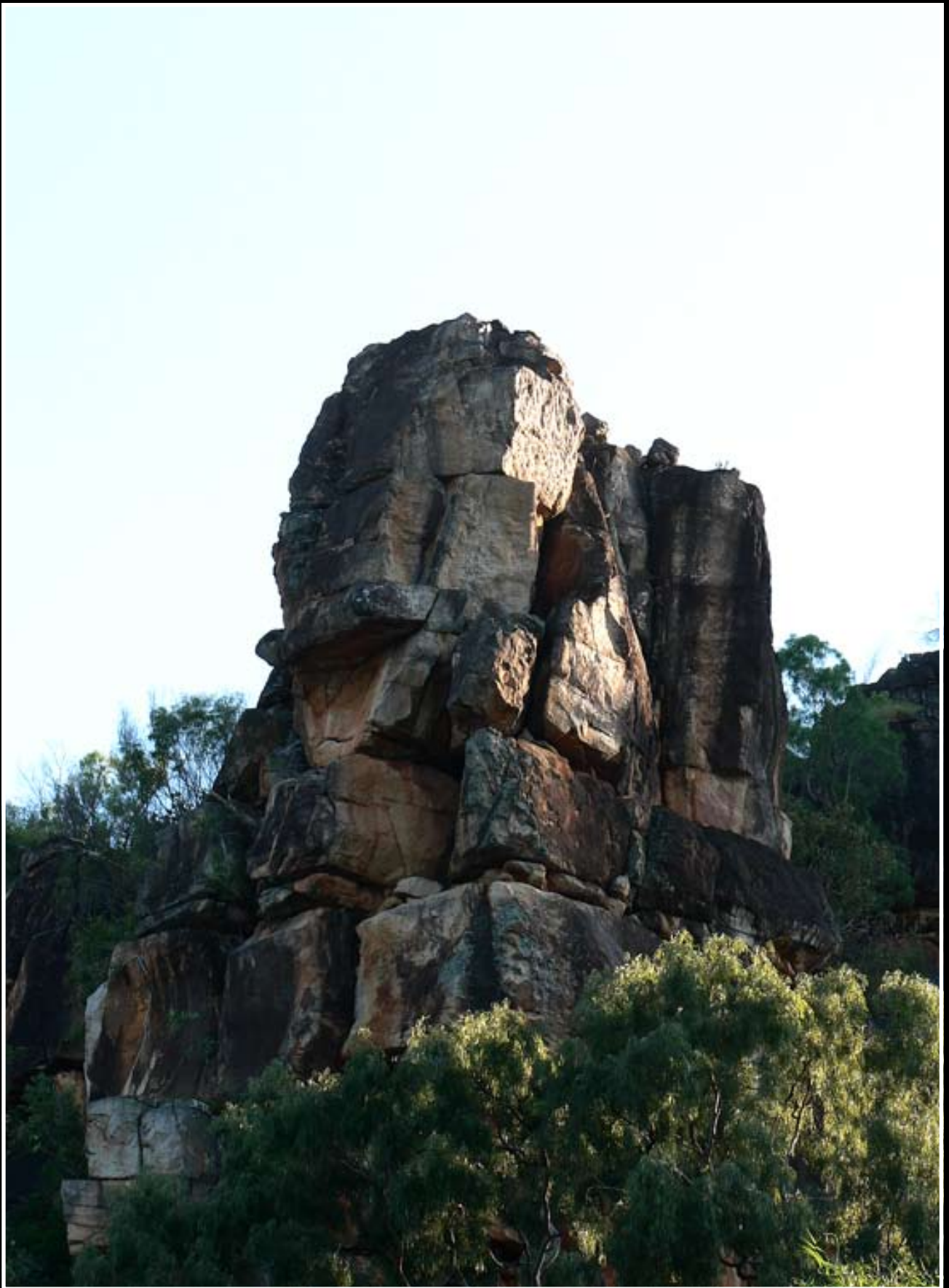
The Top End

For a card-carrying petriphile like me, going to the Top End made me feel a bit like a Muslim martyr in houri heaven. Talk about rocks! It's Rock Central. I found the experience quite overwhelming.

The following shots are but a tiny fraction of what I had to choose from. They were taken in Kakadu, Litchfield National Park, the Kimberley coast and along the Gibb River Road. As with the Remarkable Rocks of Kangaroo Island, I think I'll just leave it at that and let them speak for themselves

















New Zealand

You'd probably agree with me that New Zealand is one of the most picturesque countries around the place. Oddly, we didn't return from our trip there with much in the way of stunning rock shots. I think this is because most of the impressive rocks there are full-on bloody mountains (like the last pic which is of Milford Sound). Or else we just didn't have our "rock eyes" peeled, which happens occasionally.







Central OZ

You could hardly talk about rocks in the Australian landscape without mention of the biggest rock of them all -- Uluru. It would be gratuitous to include many of the pictures we took of it and Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) as they are so well-known.

I would like to comment though on the outer surface of The Rock. It's as though it is made of rusted ferrous platelets, and is unlike anything I might have expected. (Note also the tiny figures panting their way up the rock climb that the traditional owners ask us not to do. Quite a few climbers have suffered heart attacks and died attempting this climb. Serves them right, I say).





I'll bring this pictorial essay to a close with this lovely pile of boulders from Magnetic Island.

I hope I've succeeded in conveying to you with these photographs some idea of the almost mystical/spiritual effect that such beautiful natural phenomena hold for the dedicated petriphile. I'm pretty much in their thrall. It's a nice feeling.

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