



Go North Down Under

Australia's Northern Territory is where visitors discover the beauty of a diverse ecosystem in a setting that has hardly changed over thousands of years. **By Geoffrey Eu**

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HERE are no traffic jams at Swim Creek Station in Australia's Northern Territory, but there's still a whole lot of honking going on – generated not by irate motorists but by thousands of noisy Magpie Geese that populate the coastal floodplains on the 75,000-acre property, especially during the tail end of the wet season (October to March) when the water levels are high and wildlife is in abundance.

Here, in a pristine natural environment on the edge of Kakadu National Park about 200 kilometres from Darwin, visitors will encounter the special beauty of a diverse ecosystem in a setting that has hardly changed over thousands of years. Dawn, when temperatures are relatively cool and the mosquitoes less belligerent, is a good time to head out onto the wetlands – preferably in the comfort of an airboat that skims effortlessly over tall grasses and along swollen billabongs – in search of birdlife (over 280 species) and reptilian representatives (Estuarine Crocodiles, snapping turtles, water pythons and the like).

Bamurru Plains is a luxury lodge located within Swim Creek Station, a working buffalo farm that has a ringside seat to animal activity and plant life on the flood plains. Guests at each of the nine well-appointed, eco-friendly cabins will head out on safaris in the early mornings and late afternoons with guides who will reveal everything you need to know about this remote place in Northern Territory's Top End.



You probably won't meet anyone like Crocodile Dundee, the reptile-wrestling character on which a popular 1986 movie and a series of memorable Australian tourism ads were based. He was modelled on an actual personality from Northern Territory, although your guide is more likely to resemble someone like Katherine Mee, an

easy-going, engaging employee of the company that runs Bamurru Plains and three other similar properties in the Australian Outback (www.wildbushluxury.com).

Mee will cheerfully rouse guests from their slumber at 5 am and fire up the engine on an airboat while they sleepwalk through a pre-dawn breakfast before taking them on a fascinating discovery tour of the wetlands. The one thing that might possibly top this experience is a late-afternoon drive in an open-sided Land Rover through other parts of the property, which is studded with giant termite mounds and home to a variety of wallabies, wild pigs and wild horses – plus a herd of about 4,500 free-roaming water buffalo. There's certainly something memorable about a scene with grazing animals and solitary trees on the floodplain, framed against a flame-red sunset. Later, the night sky will burst to life with the light from thousands of stars.

There is a small airstrip at Bamurru Plains and guests can fly there from Darwin in less than 30 minutes but if they choose to drive there instead they will be able to make a detour just off the Arnhem Highway for a cruise on the Adelaide River where – bizarrely enough – resident crocodiles are baited into leaping out of the water in the hopes of snagging a tasty snack. (www.jumpingcrocodile.com.au)

Wranglers dangle a piece of raw buffalo meat on a string at the end of a long pole and Estuarine crocodiles up to six metres long will duly oblige by gliding up to your boat and "performing" for the cameras. Don't lean too far over the railing because crocs – which haven't evolved much in two million years and are aptly described as "the perfect predator" – are not too fussy about what they eat. As if to reinforce the point, the walls of the cruise centre are pasted over with a series of old newspapers with attention-grabbing headlines such as "Crocs Attack Drunk Locals" and "Crocs Stalk Man Up Tree for a Week".

PRISTINE WILDERNESS

Below: Guide Katherine Mee takes guests on an air boat safari through Bamurru Plains, which at the end of the wet season, resembles an Impressionist painting (right)



There appears to be ample opportunity for imaginative headline writers to hone their craft in the Northern Territory News, a local tabloid that is owned almost inevitably, by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. For example, one recent headline described efforts by scientists to reduce greenhouse gases in the agriculture sector: "Plan to Stop Cows Farting".

To state the obvious, any visit to the Northern Territory comes equipped with rural charm and local landscapes that are far removed from anything you will experience at home. On a drive to Kakadu from Darwin for instance, you will pass through areas with

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quaint-sounding names like Coolalinga, although there is also one small town whose name has no apparent link to the local aborigine language.

Our driver Nick informs us that Humpty Doo, about 47 kilometres outside Darwin, is famous for three things: being saddled with a silly name, lying at the centre of the largest mango plantation in the southern hemisphere and having an annual beer-drinking competition that was invariably won by a uniquely-talented cow which could quaff a schooner of beer in less than five seconds. Nick says it is a cautionary tale because sadly, the cow eventually died of liver failure and the competition has since been scrapped.

Northern Territory covers about 1.5 million square kilometres and takes up a significant amount of the land area in central and northern Australia but it is home to a population of just 225,000 peo-



RUSTIC CHARMS
Left: On a cruise along the Adelaide River, wranglers dangle a piece of raw buffalo meat on a string at the end of a long pole to bait Estuarine crocodiles up to six metres long to leap out of the water. Below: Florence Falls in Litchfield National Park. Bottom: An attention-grabbing headline describing efforts by scientists to reduce greenhouse gases in the agriculture sector

ple, with over half of them in Darwin. Kakadu National Park and Uluru – the sandstone monolith in the arid southern part of the Territory – are the two most popular destinations among visitors.

Darwin is the gateway to Kakadu and other nearby nature areas like Litchfield National Park, with its spring-fed waterfalls and natural swimming holes, and getting there from Singapore has just become a little easier. Last week, Silk Air started a direct service to Darwin – officials are hoping that the natural attractions of the Top End, along with its balmy tropical weather, will put Darwin on the radar of travellers in search of an interesting adventure-tinged alternative to the usual regional destinations.

The most significant events in the city's recent history involve destruction – first by Japanese bombs during World War Two (an event depicted in the epic movie "Australia"), followed by a devastating cyclone in 1974 – and subsequent rebuilding. Out of necessity, Darwin is one of the more modern capitals Down Under, and it has the look and feel of a compact urban centre driven by a casual lifestyle and a newly-developed waterfront area. It is also a major centre for the pearl industry and aborigine culture.

In a rocky cove next to Lameroo Beach in downtown Darwin, Robbie Mills conducts a welcome ceremony by dipping his hands in the seawater and placing them gently on a visitor's head and face. He belongs to the Larrakia, an aborigine tribe whose members are traditional owners of the land in Northern Territory. "On behalf of the Larrakia people, bataji," he says. "I'm proud to welcome you to my grandfather's country – when you're here you can pick up the spirit of the land and when you leave, we hope you take a bit of Larrakia with you." Visitors to the Top End can expect to do just that.

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Silkair flies to Darwin four times weekly, on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. For more information on travel to Northern Territory, visit www.australiaoutback.com.

