



Northern Territory, Australia

Photograph by Johnathan A. Esper, Wildernesscapes Photography/Getty Images

A New View From the Top

“Wildly and unreasonably happy.” That’s how author Nevil Shute’s heroine felt as she arrived in Darwin in his postwar classic, *A Town Like Alice*. Today, Darwin feels even better.

Australia’s “Top End” wears colors that sing: rust red earth, deep blue skies, and the golden eyes of watchful crocodiles in the flower-tangled waterways of Kakadu National Park.

But it’s the people here who make the place come alive.

“We are older than the Pyramids and older than the Bible. We have had no dictators. No caste systems. And no concept of money,” says Robert Mills, spokesman for the Larrakia people, on his walks around Lameroo Beach.

More than 50 Aboriginal tribes still live in the “NT,” and new government partnerships have created a respectful balance in the outback. Visitors can gaze at Rainbow Serpent rock art from one of the longest existing societies on Earth, while the artists can live on the land in peace. Frontier town Darwin sports an energetic face-lift, with an interactive history museum, a redeveloped waterfront, a deck chair cinema, and a flurry of cosmopolitan markets.

One oldie remains, though: the annual Beer Can Regatta with boats fashioned from leftover “tinnies” of Melbourne Bitter and other brews. Like everything else, the event runs on “NT time.” Not today, not tomorrow. Next Tuesday... maybe. —*Abigail King*

Travel Tips

When to Go: May-July (early dry season) and August-September (late dry season) are the best times to visit, with clear skies and lower humidity. March to May is rainy, yet ideal for viewing aquatic birds (such as pelicans, egrets, and herons) and water lilies and other perennial water plants. Barramundi fishing is best February to April.

How to Get Around: Fly into Alice Springs or Darwin, rent a car, and follow a designated self-drive tour. The Northern Territory encompasses 548,265 square miles (more than Texas, California, and Colorado combined), and 95 percent of the roads are paved. Download helpful travel apps, including maps, GPS-triggered audio guides, and podcasts before you set out.

Where to Stay: Exclusive Bamurru Plains offers safari-style accommodations (nine elevated, screened-in suites with private baths) in a remote bush setting (you can hear the buffalo splashing in the floodplains). The camp is located on a coastal buffalo station (a 25-minute flight from Darwin) and named for the local magpie geese, tens of thousands of which serenade guests each morning. Rates cover all meals.

Where to Eat or Drink: The Northern Territory is known for its fresh seafood—mud crabs, saltwater barramundi, and banana prawns—and Pee Wee’s at the Point in Darwin serves some of the best. Pee Wee’s is a bit out of the way in East Point Reserve, but the secluded waterfront setting adds to the allure. Sit on the covered deck and wash down some wild-caught, coconut-crusting crocodile tail with a glass of NT Draught,

the pale liquid gold that fills the Northern Territory's iconic "Darwin Stubby" 2.25-liter bottles.

What to Buy: Sales at not-for-profit Aboriginal Bush Traders in Darwin support community initiatives in indigenous communities throughout the Northern Territory. Shop for fair trade art and craftwork, such as silkscreen sea turtle prints and traditional, hand-carved didgeridoos.

Cultural Tip: When charting a self-drive tour, check to see if your travels will bring you through an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). Many IPA communities or lands require tourist permits to enter. When visiting, follow the Australian government's IPA visitor guidelines, designed to protect and respect the privacy, environment, and cultural traditions of indigenous people.

What to Read or Watch Before You Go: Nevil Shute's timeless World War II love story, *A Town Like Alice* (Vintage International, 2010), captures the essence of life in the remote and rugged Australian outback.

Helpful Links: Australia's Outback and Tourism Top End

Fun Fact: Even if you can't see crocodiles in a Territory waterway, they likely can see you. Northern Australia is home to approximately 150,000 saltwater crocodiles and at least 100,000 freshwater crocodiles. The Mary River has the highest concentration, with nearly 15 saltwater crocs per half mile.

Insider Tip From Abigail King: Drive to Anbangbang Gallery via the Nawurlandja lookout for a spectacular view without the crowds.

Navigate the northwest coast of Australia's Kimberley region aboard the National Geographic Orion.

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