

Your great Australian journey starts here

NATURE'S WAY



Length: 4–7 days Fly/drive option: Darwin

Nature has indeed had its almost unimpeded way in Australia's Top End, a land where wildlife and waterfalls play before a backdrop of the Arnhem escarpment. This tour loops through Kakadu National Park, crossing rivers where you'll probably have one eye alert for crocodiles and the other for barramundi. As well as Kakadu's wetlands, watery delights include the 13 connected gorges along the Katherine River, the steaming springs of Tjuwalyin (Douglas) Hot Springs Park and the rare swimming holes of Litchfield National Park.



Travel tip

For ease of travel and the most comfortable conditions, we recommend travelling in the dry season (April–October), but the area can be spectacular at other times – such as the lightning storms at the end of the year – and some areas look their best in the Wet.

Websites

- www.travelnt.com/itinerary_ideas/itinerary_ideas_nature.htm
- www.tourismtopend.com.au
- www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks
- www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu

Nature's Way – Travel Times		
Route	Distance	Duration
Darwin - Jabiru	249 km	3hrs 20mins
Jabiru - Pine Creek	205 km	2hrs 50mins
Pine Creek - Katherine	90 km	1hr 10mins
Katherine - Darwin	452 km	6hrs

A to B Darwin to Djukbinj National Park

To explore the best of the Top End, begin near its top, Darwin, taking the chance to wander among the smells, tastes and sights of the Mindil Beach Sunset **Market** on a Thursday evening (April–October). www.mindil.com.au

Heading out of Darwin on the Stuart Highway, add a tropical flavour to the drive ahead with a stop at Palmerston's Kakadu **Winery** (www.kakaduwinery.com.au), famed for its mango wine, before turning onto the Arnhem Highway, 35 km south of Darwin.

Pass through the delightfully named Humpty Doo – you can't miss the big crocodile in the boxing gloves – before learning about the floodplains ahead at the Window on the Wetlands Visitor Centre, perched above the Adelaide River wetlands.

Just a couple of kilometres on, the road crosses the Adelaide River. Here, you can join a **cruise** to witness crocodiles leaping from the water, one of the Top End's most spectacular wildlife sights (www.jumpingcrocodilecruises.com.au; www.jumpingcrocodile.com.au).

B to **C** Djukbinj National Park to Kakadu National Park

The road now skirts the southern edge of Djukbinj National Park, an important bird roosting and nesting site, while to the other side of the road there's plenty more bird life in Leaning Tree Lagoon to ready you for the avian spectacular ahead in Kakadu.

There's **accommodation** and **camping** ahead at the Corroboree Park Tavern and the historic Bark Hut Tourism Centre. The latter is situated beside the proposed Mary River National Park, which can be reached via Point Stuart Road about 20 km on.

Inside the park you'll find great sunset views across the Mary River floodplain at Couzens Lookout, or you can try to reel in a barramundi at Shady Camp, Rockhole or Corroboree Billabong. Accommodation is available inside the park at the Wildman Wilderness Lodge or just outside it at Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge. There are also several campgrounds and, if you want to stay a few days you can hire a **houseboat** on Corroboree Billabong from Mary River Houseboats.

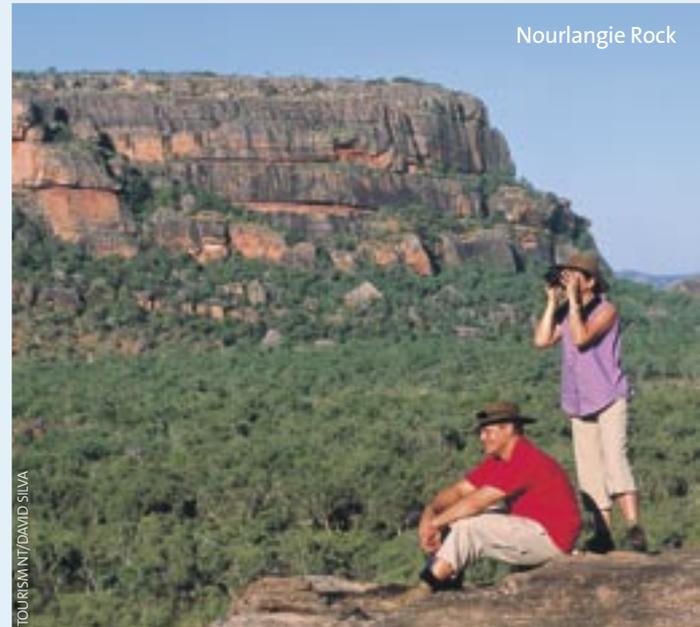
C Kakadu National Park

The Arnhem Highway soon enters Kakadu National Park, Australia's largest national park and one of its great natural treasures – a place of wildlife, waterfalls and wetlands. One-third of all Australian bird species have been recorded here, along with 60 mammal and more than 100 reptile species.

Not far from the wide South Alligator River is the Aurora Kakadu (www.auroraresorts.com.au) resort and a couple of short **walking tracks** to acquaint yourself with the Kakadu landscape: Gu-ngarre monsoon rainforest walk (3.6 km) and the Mamukala wetlands walk (3 km). In September and October Mamukala is crowded with magpie geese, which honk overhead each dawn.

About 40 km ahead is the township of Jabiru and, nearby, the Bowali Visitor Centre, offering a fascinating insight into the indigenous peoples' connection to this land. From Jabiru you can also take a **scenic flight** with Kakadu Air (www.kakaduai.com.au) or North Australian Helicopters (www.northernaustralianhelicopters.com.au) for a magpie goose's view of the park. **Accommodation** is available at Kakadu Lodge (www.auroraresorts.com.au) or the Gagudju Crocodile (www.holidayinn.com.au), a hotel shaped like a 250 m croc.

One of Kakadu's greatest attractions warrants a detour north of Jabiru. The **rock art** of Ubirr – arguably the most famous of Kakadu's 5000 recorded art sites – is not to be missed. This outcrop is noted for its painting of the Rainbow Serpent, as well as for its 'contact' art showing the first white men in the area, complete with pipes. There's even a painting of a Tasmanian tiger, an extinct predator that once



Nourlangie Rock



Jim Jim Falls



Yellow Water billabong

the Bowali Visitor Centre. A loop walk leads past several art sites to the main Anbangbang rock shelter. Look for the image of Namarrgon, the lightning man. It's also worth visiting Anbangbang Billabong. Set beneath the hulking Nourlangie Rock it's one of Kakadu's signature scenes. You can camp nearby at Muirella Park.

South of Nourlangie Rock the Kakadu Highway passes the turnoff to Jim Jim Falls (Barrkmalam) and Twin Falls (Gungkurdul), among the most spectacular natural sights in the Top End but accessible only by 4WD. It's worth taking a day tour to the falls if you're not travelling by 4WD. Tour operators include Kakadu Gorge and Waterfall Tours and Lord's Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris (www.lords-safaris.com). The road is closed in the wet season, when the only way to view the falls is on a **scenic flight** out of Jabiru. **Camping** is available near the falls at Garnamarr.

For a close look at Kakadu's wetlands, turn into Cooinda, famed for its **cruises** on Yellow Water billabong (www.yellowwatercruises.com). A 90-minute or two-hour cruise will get you close and personal with white-bellied sea-eagles, jabiru (black-necked storks), brolgas and saltwater crocodiles. Near Cooinda you'll also find the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre. There's accommodation and camping at Gagudju Lodge Cooinda (www.gagudjulodgecooinda.com.au).

The Kakadu Highway continues south, where 4WDers can veer away to the pool beneath Maguk (Barramundie Gorge) waterfall, and all visitors can make the journey along unsealed roads to another waterfall and plunge pool at Gunlom (Waterfall Creek Falls).

C to **D** Kakadu National Park to Katherine

Crossing Mary River once more you leave the park, heading back to the Stuart Highway and Pine Creek, proudly displaying its gold-rush heritage. South-west from town is Umbrawarra Gorge, where you can follow a walking track into divine **swimming holes** within the gorge. **Rock-climbers** will find around 20 routes on the gorge walls.

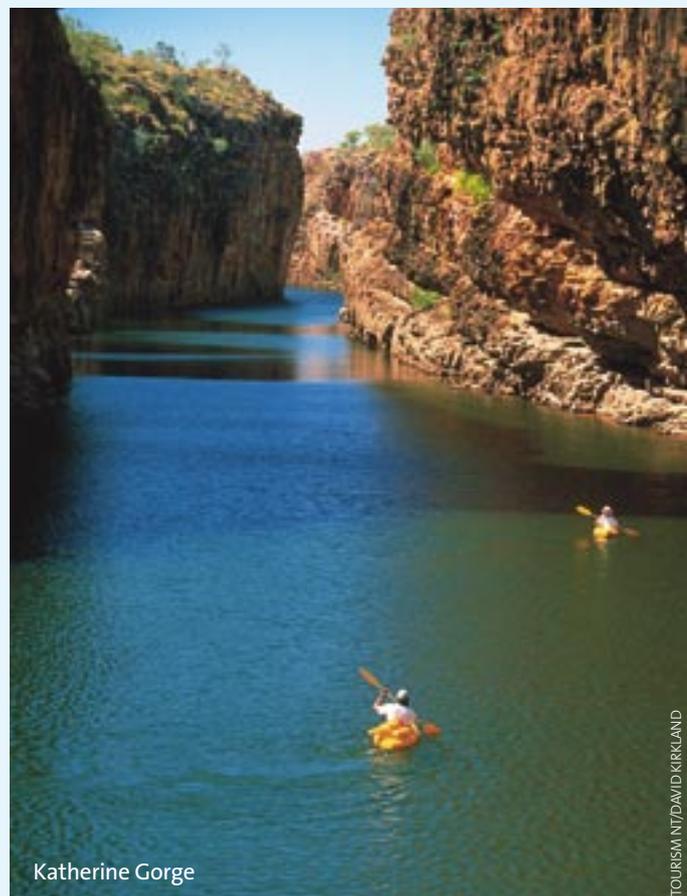
Katherine is 90 km south of Pine Creek, and it's well worth making the out-and-back journey. Along the way, stop in at Leliyn (Edith Falls), the lesser known of Nitmiluk National Park's two great water features, but a great spot for a cooling swim.

In Katherine check out the Katherine Museum and the restored railway station before heading back into Nitmiluk National Park and the mighty Katherine Gorge, a series of 13 connected gorges. Boat tours and **scenic helicopter flights** are operated by Nitmiluk Tours (www.nitmiluktours.com.au). The full-day **cruise** takes in five of the gorges. Nitmiluk Tours also hires out **canoes**. Upper gorges can be reached by canoe, but require strenuous portages.

roamed the area. Come at sunset for the best views across the floodplain. While at Ubirr you can wander the boardwalk through the Manngarre monsoon rainforest, or join Aboriginal guides for the Guluyambi Cruise (www.guluyambi.com.au) on the East Alligator River.

From Ubirr a causeway across the East Alligator links to Arnhem Land. Permits are required to enter Arnhem Land, though day trips to the settlement of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) can be arranged with Lord's Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris (www.lords-safaris.com).

Kakadu's second great art site is Nourlangie Rock, around 30 km south of



Katherine Gorge

Dedicated **bushwalkers** might want to spend a few days along the 66 km Jatbula Trail between Katherine Gorge and Leliyn (Edith Falls). Allow 4–5 days for the full trip. There's **camping** at the gorge and a selection of accommodation in Katherine (www.krta.com.au).

It's worth venturing further south to the limestone Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park, the NT's only cave system open to the public, or to Manyallaluk for a culture tour led by the Jawoyn people, the traditional owners of Nitmiluk National Park.

E to **F** Pine Creek to Adelaide River

Return to Pine Creek and continue north along the Stuart Highway, swinging west onto the old highway after 60 km. Before turning you might want to make a short detour east to the Grove Hill Heritage Hotel (www.travelnt.com), a classic piece of DIY **outback pub** construction, built during the Great Depression from recycled materials. Inside you'll find a wealth of Territory memorabilia. Have a beer or stay the night.

From the old Stuart Highway, there's the opportunity for a heated soak at Tjuwaliyn (Douglas) **Hot Springs** Park. At 60°C the springs can be too hot for bathing, so head about 200 m downstream where a cool creek meets the hot water. 4WDers can continue along this road to Butterfly Gorge Nature Park, one of the NT's best **swimming holes** and home to, unsurprisingly, a large population of common crow butterflies. **Camping** is available at Tjuwaliyn Hot Springs.

The old highway rolls through rocky hillsides of pandanus and palms to Robin Falls – beckoning travellers for another swim – before returning to the main highway near Adelaide River, where it's all but compulsory to enjoy a plate of barramundi and chips in the Adelaide River Inn (www.adelaideriverinn.com). The stuffed buffalo in the bar is Charlie, the bovine star from the *Crocodile Dundee* films. Pay a visit to Adelaide River War Cemetery, one of the largest in Australia.

G Litchfield National Park

Turn off the highway 27 km north of Adelaide River, passing Batchelor and into Litchfield National Park, where you can pack away your compass and rely on the termite mounds, which are aligned north–south to maximise their use of the sun. Equally amazing are the cathedral termite mounds, standing up to 6 m high. Built by humans to the same scale, an equivalent structure would be more than 1 km high – about twice the size of the world's tallest building.

Litchfield's major feature is its four permanent waterfalls, with good **swimming holes** beneath Wangi and Florence falls. 4WDers can bump south to The Lost City with its sandstone towers and bluffs like the ruins of a Mayan town. **Campers** prepared to do a little walking will find one of the country's great sites at Walker Creek, at the park's northern edge. These walk-in sites along the creek all but guarantee a private plunge pool.

Continue north on the unsealed Litchfield Park Road, turning east at its end to the Territory Wildlife Park (www.territorywildlifepark.com.au). Walk beneath its aquarium to finally glimpse those elusive barramundi or watch birds of prey displaying their hunting prowess at the Eagle Flight Deck. Nearby is the Berry Springs Nature Park, where there's good swimming, walking and camping.

Return to the highway, turning north. If you want a final look at crocodiles, stop in at the Darwin Crocodile Farm (www.crocfarm.com.au/aboutus.asp), home to around 36,000 saltwater crocodiles; or for a last cooling swim before your return to Darwin, detour east to Howard Springs. ■



The Lost City

TOURISM/NT/DON SKIRROW