



YOUR TOUR
Northern Territory



MAUI
2x2



DURATION
14 days



WHEN
October



**Tropical rainforest, stunning scenery
and some really spectacular wildlife**



Left Injalak Hill guide Roland shows visitors the rock art sites

This page, top row L-R Darwin is the territorial capital; close encounters with the residents at Crocosaurus Cove

Bottom row L-R Gary does a bit of research at Kakadu Lodge Camping Ground; the road trains carry many kinds of freight all over the country



The return

TO OZ

A brief visit to Australia's beautiful Northern Territory some years ago left **Wendy Johnson** and **Gary Blake** keen to return and explore in more depth

The large saltwater crocodile slipped silently away among the lotus lilies as we watched in fascinated horror from our boat on the billabong. All we could see was a dual stream of bubbles emerging from its nostrils as it swam off underwater.

But at long last, here we were back in Australia's Northern Territory, and

this time hitting the road in a 7.2m Maui 2x2 motorhome. Our previous trip, 10 years ago, had been just a brief touchdown, when we'd only scratched the surface of this vast area.

Australia's tropical northern region has a different climate to the rest of the continent, with only two seasons: the Dry, from April to September, and the

Wet, from October to March. Arriving at the end of October, pre-monsoon season, we knew we'd be coping with heat and high humidity.

Normally, the main rains start in January, when rivers break their banks, creating huge wetlands – providing a home for marauding crocodiles and millions of waterbirds, and making

many roads impassable. But we were combining our northern tour with a trip to south-western Australia, where it would be spring-time.

After a night flight from Singapore to Darwin, we stayed at the Mantra on the Esplanade for a couple of days, to get over jet lag before taking the wheel.

To make best use of our time in the territorial capital, we went sightseeing via the hop-on, hop-off bus service, visiting the George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens and the Royal Flying Doctor Darwin Tourist Facility.

Here we saw a realistic re-creation of the Bombing of Darwin in 1942, while at the local museum, we learnt how Cyclone Tracy devastated the city during Christmas 1974.

Just across the road from our hotel, we eyeballed the crocs at Crocosaurus Cove (we decided to give the Cage of Death a miss) and finally, to cool off, we joined a Sea Darwin sunset cruise around the impressive natural harbour.

Over 10 days and eventually covering 1500km, our tour began at Kakadu, Australia's largest National Park. Here you can explore Aboriginal rock art

and stunning landscapes teeming with wildlife. Then we would head to Arnhem Land, an unspoiled wilderness larger than Portugal, with a population of only 16,000.

Next, we planned to visit Katherine, 320km south of Darwin: the ideal base for seeing the Nitmiluk National Park, with its wonderful network of gorges. Finally, we would return via Litchfield National Park, which is a 'must' if you are in the Top End – the northernmost region of the Northern Territory.

Collecting the 'van

Picking up the motorhome from Maui was a bit rushed – we were keen to get on our way. Instead of watching their informative video, we decided to rely on the manuals on our Tom Tom. With hindsight, this was a mistake – we should have stayed in their air-conditioned office to be sure of everything beforehand!

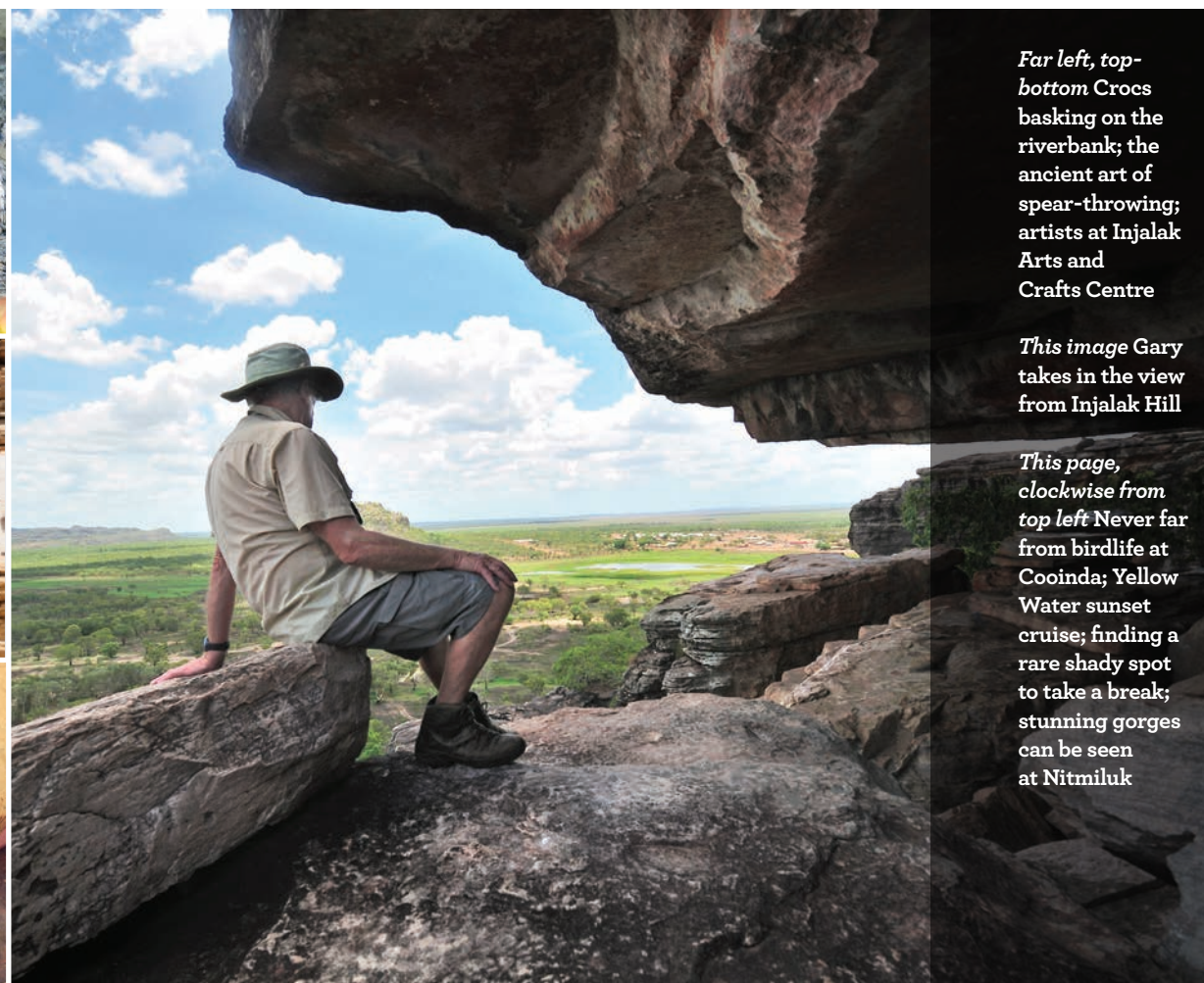
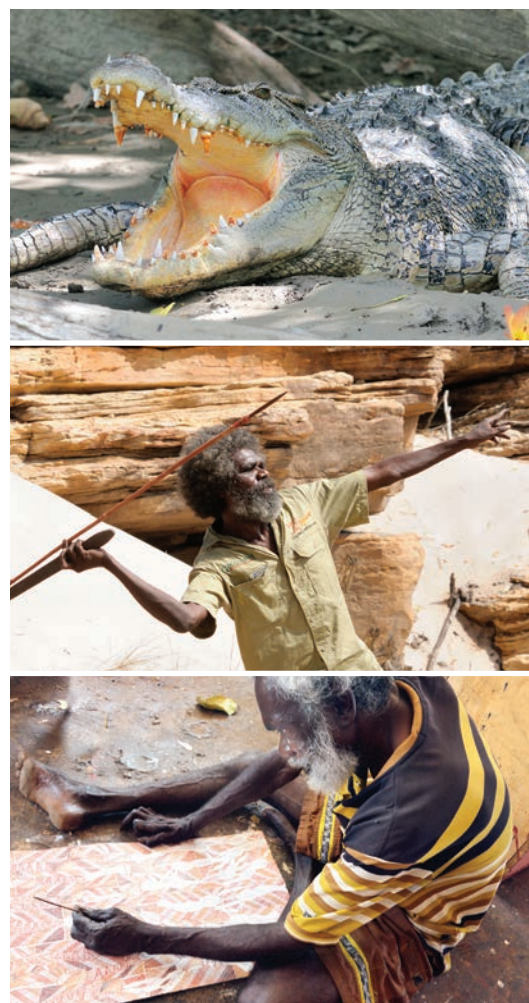
At our first stop, the Corroboree Park Tavern camping grounds, we were picked up by Chrissie from Wetland Cruises and driven 20km to Corroboree Billabong, for a sunset wildlife cruise.

Here, we meandered along small waterways edged with pink lotus flowers and inhabited by abundant birdlife, including sea eagles, jabiru, ibis, brolga and jacana, and of course, crocodiles. Then, with the sun setting at 6.30pm, we headed back to the site – to find no electrics in the vehicle.

We called Maui's hotline, to be told "Try the microwave", to see if we had the electrics hooked up correctly. We hadn't, and a simple flick up of the switch at the site box (not down as in the UK) got the air-con working and quickly reduced the temperature to a more bearable 22°C.

The intense heat was confusing us and, although we had stocked up with 24 litres of bottled water, we were getting through them fast.

But next day, an easy run took us to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park, where we were making for the notorious Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River, and the Guluyambi Cultural Cruise. Many a vehicle has got stuck in the rushing waters over the causeway here, in this crocodile-infested river. ☛



Far left, top-bottom Crocs basking on the riverbank; the ancient art of spear-throwing; artists at Injalak Arts and Crafts Centre

This image Gary takes in the view from Injalak Hill

This page, clockwise from top left Never far from birdlife at Cooinda; Yellow Water sunset cruise; finding a rare shady spot to take a break; stunning gorges can be seen at Nitmiluk



The river trip was as good as we remembered from our previous visit, with experienced Aboriginal cultural guides providing fascinating insights.

Many big estuarine or saltwater crocodiles lazed on the banks, waiting for food on the incoming tide, and we got some great photographs of these magnificent reptiles.

'Salties', an ancient species, thrive in fresh and salt water, growing up to 6m long and living for up to 80 years. Very dangerous, they should be treated with the utmost respect.

One of the main attractions of this unique reserve is the superb indigenous rock art and, at Ubirr, it's possible to view cave paintings from a circular walking track, starting at the car park.

Here and in Arnhem Land, a wide range of styles have been used over thousands of years, depicting human figures and identifiable animal species.

Few sights are better than watching the sun set across the vast landscape of the Nadab floodplain. We scrambled up to the outlook on top of Ubirr Rock and settled down to enjoy this really beautiful evening show.

On this tour, we wanted to explore more of Aboriginal-owned Arnhem Land, where visitors are restricted by the traditional owners; so we decided the only practical way was a day trip in a heavy-duty 4x4 vehicle, which could ford Cahill's Crossing and cope with the rough roads. A reasonable level of fitness is also required if you plan to make this journey.

Early next morning, Lauren from Top End Day Tours duly collected us from Jabiru's Kakadu Lodge.

Into the wilderness

Venturing into this remote region, travelling on bone-shaking dirt roads, we met up with Roland, our Aboriginal guide. He escorted us to the top of Injalak Hill, to see some of the most important ancient rock art galleries, with spectacular views over this stunning escarpment.

A visit to the Injalak Arts and Crafts Centre gave us the opportunity to meet and watch artists producing their very intricate paintings, some on eucalyptus bark, and women weaving baskets from dyed pandanus leaves. I chatted

to one of the artists, Joe Guymala, while he painted a Lorrkon, or hollow log coffin. He explained that these were originally used to contain the bones of the dead – they were taken into the countryside and placed upright.

The centre sells stunning paintings, screen-printed fabrics and many other items produced by local people.

Yellow Water Billabong was our next stop, with a detour to Nourlangie Rock, where we took a 1.5km circular walk passing important art galleries in rock shelters, with paintings of Namarrgon, the famous Lightning Man.

In 38°C heat, we arrived for the noon Yellow Water cruise and were pleased to find a canopied boat with only five people on board. This was a highlight of our last trip – we took lots of photos.

It was so enjoyable, we decided to take the two-hour sunset cruise as well. Catching the courtesy bus from Cooinda Camping Ground, we watched vast flocks of magpie geese flying home to roost, against the backdrop of a spectacular electric storm.

This camping ground is in the lush setting of the Cooinda Lodge resort,

with access to its restaurants, shops, swimming pools and filling station.

The route to Katherine, along the Kakadu and Stuart Highways, was long and relentless – 260km, to be exact – during which time, we saw no more than 50 other vehicles. But if you think that sounds boring, you'd be wrong.

This dry, inhospitable landscape was filled with stringybark trees, a type of eucalyptus; although the most striking feature was the huge termite mounds by the roadside.

Katherine is considered a big town in this part of Australia, with a large Aboriginal community; but it is best known as the gateway to the magnificent Nitmiluk National Park, where the red sand of the outback meets the lush tropics.

We were staying 30km outside Katherine, at Nitmiluk Camping Ground, the only site within the park. This is an ideal location for

exploring the area – the Katherine Gorge boat cruise and walking tracks are only five minutes away.

Katherine is 'ten-gallon hat' country and, curious about rural life here, we visited the Katherine Outback Experience, presented by Tom Curtain. We enjoyed watching Tom show off his skills as a horse whisperer and singing cowboy. He gave an authentic and entertaining insight into breaking horses, training working dogs

and cutting out cattle, before his musical grand finale: standing on his horse.

Katherine Gorge is a chain of red sandstone gorges strung along 15km of the Katherine River. You can explore here by plane, canoe or on foot, but we took the boat trip operated by the local Jawoyn people, who own the park. The cruise went through two of these dramatic gorges, with the bonus of a cooling swim on the way back.

We were very pleased with our comfortable

'van, but the fridge door had become unhinged and we weren't able to keep it in place. Maui told us that repairs could be carried out at Katherine.

We finally caught up with their very busy local mechanic, who had our fridge repaired in 20 minutes. At last we could have an ice-cold beer!

Waterfalls and springs

Now homeward bound, we took the Stuart Highway for an uneventful drive of 300km to Litchfield National Park, best known for its spectacular waterfalls and bubbling springs.

Searching for a pit stop, we headed for Pine Creek – on our map, it looked like a large town, but all we found was a small, dusty settlement. It did have an interesting history, though.

Gold was discovered here in 1871, during construction of the Overland Telegraph Line from Adelaide to Darwin. The railway from Darwin was built in 1886 and today, several of the original buildings, engines and rolling stock survive.

Luckily for us, the small goldmining museum was open. This documents the

Tom Curtain ends his show with a musical grand finale



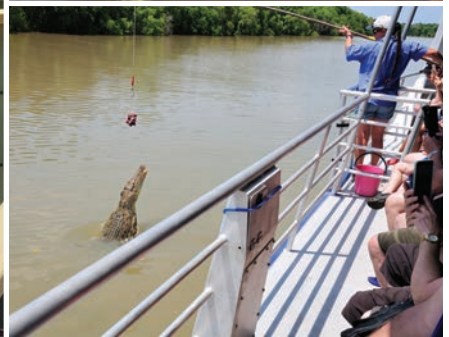


Main Amazing cathedral termite mounds can be up to 4m high

Right, from top
Water tumbles into the pools at Buley Rockhole;

fearsome 'salties' can grow to 6m long; crocs jump for food on the Adelaide River

Bottom Feeding the wild birds at Batchelor Park



extremely hard life that the miners, including several thousand Chinese immigrants, had to endure.

Overnighting at Batchelor Holiday Park, we were entertained by amiable owner Jim; he was very knowledgeable about 'everything countryside' and presented wild bird-feeding sessions morning and evening.

Termite cathedrals

At Litchfield National Park, our first stop was the boardwalk, to view what appeared to be a field of tombstones, but which were in fact 100-year-old mounds made by magnetic termites.

The mounds are built with thin edges facing north/south, so the termites stay cool during the heat of the day. Close by are 4m-high cathedral termite mounds. Quite surreal.

The park features numerous waterfalls cascading from the sandstone plateau known as Tabletop

Range. To cool off, we visited Florence Falls, walking down the 135 steps of a zig-zag gantry to the beautiful pool at the base of the waterfall.

Next, to Buley Rockhole, where the waters tumble into pools big enough to lounge in, and finally, Wangi Falls, cascading either side of a rock outcrop, with a large lake at the base.

A popular spot for locals, it's beside an attractive campsite, which sadly didn't have any power for the air-con; so we chose to return to Batchelor and made it back just in time to watch the evening bird feeding.

We couldn't get enough of the area's wildlife and were interested to learn of the government-run

Territory Wildlife Park at Berry Springs, a short distance away. This is home to hundreds of indigenous species, and gave us the chance to see many of the birds and animals that are native to the Top End. There

are presentations throughout the day – we managed to catch feeding time for the river rays.

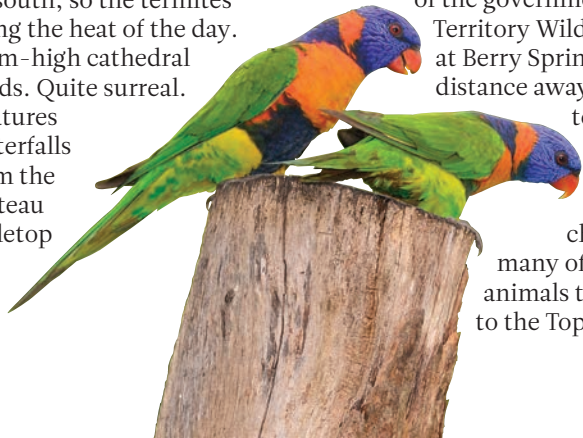
Wildlife wonders

We'd heard about Tumbling Waters Holiday Park, five minutes from the wildlife park, and this turned out to be another great find.

Set among palm trees and tropical gardens, with many wild birds on site, an outdoor cinema and croc feeding sessions, this is a great site. Owners Darren and Jenny did warn us that in high season, you need to book ahead.

As a final treat, we couldn't resist the Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise on the Adelaide River. Each crocodile is known to the guides by name, and can be enticed to jump for some meat attached to a long pole. This is normal crocodile behaviour, we discovered, when they are taking birds and animals from overhanging branches.

Sadly, it was time for us to hand our motorhome back to Maui, with a full tank of fuel and a refilled gas bottle. Then we were off to catch our flight to Perth, to begin our next adventure. ➡



TOUR ESSENTIALS

Way to go

Flying Singapore Airlines for the 30kg luggage allowance, we stayed for three nights in Darwin at the Mantra on the Esplanade (www.mantra.com.au).

Our 10-day motorhome trip started at the end of October; but mid-May to mid-June or late August to late September are the best times to visit, when day- and night-time temperatures are normally 28°C and 20°C respectively.

Where we stayed

All sites had electric. Prices are for motorhome and two people per night.

• Corroboree Park Tavern and Caravan Park

Web www.corroboreeparktavern.com.au
Charge A\$25

Basic campsite. Shuttle bus for wetland cruise costs A\$5.

• Kakadu Lodge Campground and Caravan Park

Web www.auroresorts.com.au
Charge A\$46

Spacious, with wild birds, large pool and bistro. No booking ahead, but there are 200 pitches. Close to supermarket.

• Cooinda Campground and Caravan Park

Web www.kakadutourism.com/accommodation/cooinda-camping-ground
Charge A\$46

Free bus to Yellow Water cruise. Pools and restaurants on site.

• Nitmiluk Caravan Park

Web <https://northernterritory.com>
Charge A\$50

Next to Katherine Gorge. Pool and bar.

• Batchelor Holiday Park

Web www.batchelorholidaypark.com.au
Charge A\$36

Country setting, close to Litchfield Park.

• Tumbling Waters Holiday Park

Berry Springs **Web** www.tumblingwatersholidaypark.com.au
Charge A\$42

Good base for many local activities; visitors must book ahead.



Parked up in the shade at Nitmiluk Caravan Park

Tours we took

• Big Bus Darwin Explorer

Hop-on, hop-off bus service

Web www.bigbustours.com/en/darwin/darwin-bus-tours

• Royal Flying Doctor Darwin Tourist Facility

Web www.rfdsdarwin.com.au

• Crocosaurus Cove, Darwin

Home to the Cage of Death
Web www.crocosauruscove.com

• Sea Darwin Cruises

Web <https://seadarwin.com/darwin-tours>

• Wetland Cruises

Sunset and wildlife-watching cruises

Web www.wetlandcruises.com.au

• Gulyambi Cultural Cruises

Web www.kakaduculturaltours.com.au

• Top End Day Tour – Arnhem Land

Web www.topenddaytours.com.au

• Yellow Water Cruises

Web www.kakadutourism.com/tours-activities/yellow-water-cruises

• Outback Experience

Horse trainer and country singer Tom Curtain puts on a very entertaining show

Web katherineoutbackexperience.com.au

• Nitmiluk Tours

Web www.nitmiluktours.com.au

• Jumping Crocodile Cruise

Magnificent reptiles in action

Web www.jumpingcrocodile.com.au

Find out more

• British citizens require a visa to visit Australia. There is no application fee for an electronic visa.

• Food is more expensive than in the UK. We shopped at Coles in Darwin and other supermarkets in Jabiru and Katherine. Few shops were our route.

• A wide-brimmed hat, high-protection sunscreen and insect repellent are vital, as is a plentiful supply of bottled water.

• Wear stout, closed-toe shoes and long trousers if there is any possibility of snakes in the area. Beware of spiders and carry a torch at night.

• **Northern Territory Tourist Board** www.northernterritory.com

• **Lonely Planet** *South Australia & Northern Territory Guide*, £15.99

• **SIM cards** Telstra has best coverage. www.telstra.com.au

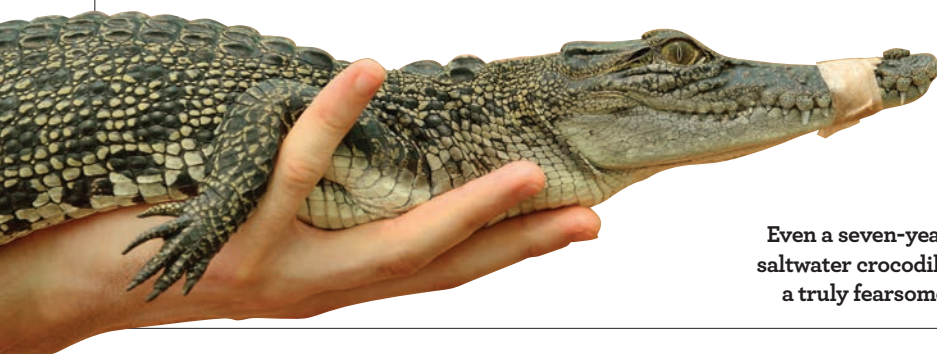
They also have a shop in central Darwin.

• **Maui Rentals** www.maui-rentals.com/au/en

Check their website for promotional, seasonal, or early-booking offers.

Costs

Three nights, one-bed apartment, Mantra on the Esplanade.....	£247
Hire of vehicle for 10 days at A\$243 per day.....	£1314
Maui Inclusive Pack, 10 days at A\$55 per day	£297
Fuel – 208 litres at A\$1.33 to \$1.41 per litre	£167
Gas	£4
Australian SIM card	£12
Kakadu National Park Pass x 2 ...	£44
Groceries	£132
Eating out.....	£117
Tours.....	£986
TOTAL	£3320



Even a seven-year-old saltwater crocodile has a truly fearsome bite