

# History

## ROCK ART, SEA SLUGS & EUNUCHS: EARLY SETTLEMENT

The first human contact with Australia began around 60,000 years ago, when Aboriginal people from what we know today as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea made the journey across the straits, signalling the beginning of the world's longest continuous cultural history. Some theories suggest that as few as three to five couples made the initial journey.

The first visitors found a relatively non-threatening environment, inhabited by just a handful of carnivorous predators. Within a few thousand years, Aboriginal people were able to populate much of Australia, although the central regions were not occupied until about 24,000 years ago.

The physical landscape tells the story through archaeological evidence, including artefact scatters, rock-art sites and shell middens. At Kakadu (p108) and Uluru (p253) national parks, there are camp sites and rock quarries where stone tools were made. Kakadu also has some spectacular rock art, dating back thousands of years and presenting a graphic insight into past societies.

The Chinese eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He) may have been the first non-Aboriginal visitor to northern Australia. He reached Timor in the 15th century and the theory goes that it's plausible he also made it to Australia – although some say he may not have had enough seamen to make two stops.

In 1879, a small, carved figure of the Chinese god Shao Lao was found lodged in the roots of a banyan tree in Darwin. That's the 'smoking gun', the pro-Zheng camp says: the carving apparently dates from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

There's evidence to suggest that the Portuguese were the first Europeans to sight Australia's northern coast, sometime during the 16th century. Then, we know for sure, the Dutch came along, sailing north-west from the foot of the Gulf of Carpentaria to make landfall at Groote Eylandt and Cape Arnhem. The storied Dutch navigator Abel Tasman sailed the entire north coast from Cape York to beyond the Kimberley in Western Australia.

Other visitors to the north were Macassan traders from the island of Celebes (now called Sulawesi), who came for trepang (sea cucumber) in the 17th century. The Macassans were from a parallel universe to your typical plundering European, setting up camps for three months at a time, gathering and curing trepang, and trading dugout canoes, metal items, food, tobacco and glass objects with the Aboriginal people. There were many interracial relationships, and some Aboriginal people even journeyed to Macassar (on Celebes) to live.

In 1906, government regulations banned the Macassans from further trading, but as a model for international relations the nature of the symbiosis between Macassans and Aboriginal people is certainly due for a revival. Until then, rock art from the era gives you the picture (see p36).

Two very different, intelligent introductions to Australian history are Stuart Macintyre's *A Concise History of Australia* and Geoffrey Blainey's *A Shorter History of Australia*.

Two excellent accounts of the Territory's history are the wide-reaching *Far Country* (1982) by Alan Powell, featuring absorbing accounts and anecdotes from the early days, and Ernestine Hill's *The Territory* (1951), which is out of print but worth trying to track down for its warts-and-all look at a region in transition.

## THE 'WILD WEST' OF THE NORTH

The 18th century saw the establishment of the British colony at Botany Bay. After that the rest of the land was ripe for the plundering – except for the Territory, which wasn't even fit for convicts. In 1824 the Brits established a military settlement on Melville Island, but it lasted just over a year. A second garrison settlement, Fort Wellington, was set up on the mainland near Croker Island at Raffles Bay, but by 1829 it, too, had been abandoned. In 1838 a third party gave it another go at Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, but isolation, disease, death, white ants and a cruel climate battered the Poms yet again.

Across the country, settlers (known as 'squatters') were pushing deeper into Aboriginal territories in search of pasture and water for their stock. Aboriginal people defended their lands with desperate guerrilla tactics, spearing cattle (often for food, as squatters had destroyed much of their traditional 'bush tucker') and attacking isolated stations, led by resistance fighters such as Nemarluk, who was well known in the Territory. In return,

### ABORIGINAL LAND RIGHTS

Britain settled Australia on the legal principle of *terra nullius*, which meant that the country was legally unoccupied. Settlers could therefore take land from Aboriginal people without signing treaties or providing compensation.

After WWII Aboriginal people became more organised and better educated, and a political movement for land rights developed. In 1962 a bark petition was presented to the Federal government by the Yolngu people of Yirrakala, in northeast Arnhem Land, demanding that the government recognise Aboriginal peoples' occupation and ownership of Australia since time immemorial. The petition was ignored, so the Yolngu people took the matter to court – and lost. In the famous Yirrakala Land Case in 1971, Australian courts accepted the government's claim that Aboriginal people had no meaningful economic, legal or political relationship to land. The case upheld the principle of *terra nullius* and the position that Australia was unoccupied in 1788.

The Yirrakala Land Case was based on an inaccurate (if not outright racist) assessment of Aboriginal society, and the Federal government came under increasing pressure to legislate for Aboriginal land rights. It eventually passed the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976, establishing three Aboriginal Land Councils, empowered to claim land on behalf of traditional Aboriginal owners.

Under the Act, the only claimable land is 'unalienated' – that is, land outside town boundaries that no-one else owns or leases, which usually means semi-desert or desert. So when the Anangu, Uluru's traditional owners, claimed ownership of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, their claim was disallowed because the land was within a national park. It was only by amending two acts of parliament that Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park was handed back to its traditional owners on the condition that it was immediately leased back to the Federal government as a national park.

Around half of the Northern Territory has been claimed, or is under claim. The process is tedious in the extreme and can take years to complete: almost all claims are opposed by the Territory's government, and claimants are required to prove that they are responsible under Aboriginal law for the sacred sites. Many claimants die of old age before the matter is resolved.

Once a claim is successful, Aboriginal people have the right to negotiate with mining companies and ultimately accept or reject exploration and mining proposals. This right is strongly opposed by the mining lobby, despite the fact that traditional Aboriginal owners in the Territory only reject about a third of these proposals outright.

## TIMELINE 60,000 BC

Most experts say that Aboriginal people settled in Australia around this time.

## 1821

Philip King makes his last voyage. His charts were so accurate that they still form the basis of modern navigational charts.

## 1862

John McDouall Stuart makes the last of his famous expeditions into the Territory, earmarking the area for future development.

## 1872

The Overland Telegraph Line is completed, slashing communication times between Australia and England from six months to seven hours.

the poisoning of traditional waterholes and savage reprisal raids saw many of them killed, until a compromise was eventually reached: Aboriginal people took low-paid jobs on sheep and cattle stations as drovers and domestics, and in return they remained on their traditional lands, adapting their cultures to their changing circumstances. This arrangement continued in outback pastoral regions until after WWII.

By the early 1900s, laws designed to segregate and 'protect' Aboriginal peoples were passed in all states, restricting on Aboriginal peoples' rights to own property and seek employment. The *Aboriginals Ordinance* 1918 even allowed the state to remove children from Aboriginal mothers if it was suspected that the father was non-Aboriginal. Parents were considered to have no rights over the children, who were placed in foster homes or childcare institutions. This practice continued until the 1970s and the psychological wounds borne by the 'Stolen Generations' remain an open sore.

And yet the Ordinance gave a degree of protection for 'full-blood' Aboriginal people living on reserves, as non-Aboriginal people could enter only with a permit, and mineral exploration was forbidden. Arnhem Land was declared an Aboriginal reserve in 1931, though Aboriginal people were still murdered on their land by 'police patrols'.

## TAMING THE UNTAMEABLE

In the early 1840s there was great demand by squatters in New South Wales for cheap Asian labour, and pressure was put on the colonial government to find an overland route to the Port Essington settlement. It was hoped this would not only provide an easy route in for labourers, but also a route out for exports of horses and cattle.

In 1844 the government refused to fund an expedition, but a Prussian scientist by the name of Ludwig Leichhardt raised the ready by private subscription and set off from the Darling Downs in Queensland. The party reached the Gulf of Carpentaria after nine months, and then headed northwest along the coast, discovering and naming a number of major rivers, including the McArthur, Roper, Limmen and Wickham.

They entered a world of pain: horses were drowned in the Roper River, members were killed in Aboriginal attacks, and food was limited to bush tucker. They eventually crossed the Arnhem Land escarpment and struggled into Victoria on 17 December 1845, 14 months after setting out. Although Leichhardt became something of a hero, the trip itself was largely a failure as the route was far too difficult for regular use and no promising grazing areas were discovered.

During the 1850s two South Australian speculators, James Chambers and William Finke, employed a young Scottish surveyor, John McDouall Stuart, to head north and find new grazing lands. In March 1858 Stuart's small party reached Central Mount Sturt (later renamed Stuart), and tried, unsuccessfully, to cross the inhospitable country northwest to the Victoria River. Already weakened by disease and short on supplies, the party eventually turned back after a hostile encounter with a group of Warramungu Aboriginal men at a place Stuart named Attack Creek (p162).

Stuart, now a hero, was soon back on the trail north. With a party of 11 men and 45 horses he returned to Attack Creek and managed to continue for a further 250km before being forced once again to return south.

Within a month of returning, the foolhardy Scotsman was heading north again and this time he reached the mangrove-lined shores of the north coast at Point Stuart on 24 July 1862.

Partly as a result of Stuart's reports, South Australian governors annexed the Northern Territory in 1863 with an eye to development, but by the time of Federation in 1901 the Territory was in debt.

## GOLD & OTHER PIPE DREAMS

In 1851 prospectors discovered gold in New South Wales and in central Victoria. The colonies were suddenly awash with prospectors, entertainers, publicans, sly-groggers, prostitutes and quacks from overseas.

The Territory was opened up with the discovery of gold at Yam Creek, about 160km south of Palmerston (now Darwin). The find spurred on prospectors, and it wasn't long before other finds had been made at nearby Pine Creek, sparking a minor rush and the hope that this would finally be the economic hurry-up that the South Australian government so desperately needed.

While the finds in the Territory were puny compared with those in Victoria and Western Australia, they generated activity in an economically unattractive area. To encourage more people to the area, the South Australian government built a railway line in 1883 from Palmerston (Darwin) to Pine Creek.

Soon after Federation, the South Australian government threw in the towel, offering its ugly duckling back to the Federal government. Most projects (like sugar, tobacco and coffee plantations) had failed completely or provided only minimal returns, which meant that speculators and investors got cold feet and the Territory remained an economic backwater.

The 1930s saw peanuts become the newest agricultural experiment, but competition from Queensland nuts (the dry, one-seeded indehiscent fruit variety, rather than the state's politicians), combined with marketing problems and poor Territory soils, meant that decent profits were in short supply. A fledgling pearl industry developed from Darwin, but it relied on cheap Asian labour and was severely nobbled by competition from the Japanese. Crocodiles and snakes were hunted for their skins but this, too, failed to survive the severe depression of the early 1930s.

The Territory might have struggled to pay its way but advances in technology and communications meant that it wasn't shunned entirely: passenger flights operated by Qantas had to make an overnight refuelling stop in Darwin; Tennant Creek became a minor boom town thanks to mining; and Alice Springs had a rail connection to Adelaide in 1929.

## WWII & BEYOND

At 9.57am on 19 February 1942, nearly 200 Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin's harbour and the RAAF base at Larrakeyah, not far from the city centre. Darwin was attacked 64 times during the war and 243 people lost their lives; it was the only place in Australia to suffer prolonged attacks.

In March 1942, the entire Territory north of Alice Springs was placed under military control and by December there were 32,000 men stationed in the Top End. Many reminders of this era can still be seen along or just off the Stuart Hwy between Alice Springs and Darwin.

In 2005 the Northern Territory government released declassified files that detailed masses of UFO sightings across the Top End over the previous 30 years, including unexplained sightings by air-force pilots.

**'They entered a world of pain: horses were drowned in the Roper River, members were killed in Aboriginal attacks, and food was limited to bush tucker'**

1888

The Territory's European population is outnumbered four to one by Chinese immigrants, who dominate the goldfields.

1942

Darwin is bombed by the Japanese during WWII.

1974

Cyclone Tracy hits Darwin on Christmas Eve, killing 65 people.

1978

The Northern Territory is granted self-government.

As the war ended, the Australian government embarked on an ambitious scheme to attract thousands of immigrants. People flocked from Britain and non-English-speaking European countries, with large numbers of Greeks, Italians, Slavs, Serbs, Croatians, Dutch, Poles, Turks, Maltese and Lebanese taking up the offer of government-assisted passage.

Although this immigration boom led to high growth in the urban areas of Darwin and Alice Springs, a shortage of Federal funds for the Territory meant there was little development and the rebuilding of Darwin proceeded at a snail's pace.

By contrast, the mining industry belted along. Copper and gold from Tennant Creek, oil and gas from the Amadeus basin in the Centre, gold from the Tanami, bauxite from Gove, manganese from Groote Eylandt and uranium from Batchelor (and more recently Kakadu) have all played an important role in the economic development of the Territory.

But the big success story is tourism. At the end of WWII the population of Alice Springs was around 1000; today it's over 28,000, a direct result of the selling of the outback as 'the real-deal Aussie experience', with Uluru the main attraction. The rise in environmental awareness and ecotourism has also boosted the popularity of Kakadu National Park; Uluru and Kakadu each receive over half a million visitors per year.

The 1970s were optimistic times in the Territory, but that heady mood was severely tested by Australia's worst natural disaster. On Christmas Eve 1974, Cyclone Tracy ripped through Darwin, killing 65 people and destroying 95% of the city's dwellings. Within four years the city was largely rebuilt and it has never looked back.

During 1999 and 2000 there was national outrage over the so-called 'mandatory sentencing laws' in the Territory (which means, to give an extreme example, that a life sentence means life with no exceptions, despite any extenuating circumstances or new evidence). 'Zero-tolerance' policing was also promoted, increasing the jailing of Aboriginal people for trivial offences (given that people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to come into contact with the legal system). In 2001, the Northern Territory repealed the laws when a young Aboriginal man committed suicide in prison after stealing a small amount of stationery.

In 1996, the Northern Territory government became the first in the world to legalise voluntary euthanasia. Although the legislation was soon overturned by the Federal government, by then three people had voluntarily died.

## 1980

Baby Azaria Chamberlain is taken by a dingo at Uluru. Her mother Lindy is jailed for Azaria's murder in 1982, but is later exonerated.

## 2004

After a 70-year wait, the *Ghan* passenger train runs from Adelaide to Darwin, finally linking the Top End with the southern states.

# The Culture

## REGIONAL IDENTITY

To the outside world, the Northern Territory has never really had a proper identity. First, it was considered too tough to settle; then it was annexed by South Australia and eventually ditched like some kind of ugly duckling; then it was under military control; then the Federal government, in the immediate postwar period, ignored it. It only became self-governing in 1978. On top of that, it's not even a 'state' – it's a territory (an 'in-between state') and that seems a bit wishy-washy. Doesn't it?

Well, no. Territorians are proud of their rugged individualism, and proud of their ability to make a go of it in Australia's harshest terrain, where generations before have failed. Territorians point to the struggles of the past as a badge of honour, and there's a palpable sense that the place is remarkably different from the mainstream of Australian society. Some Territorians go further, seeing themselves as a separate nation from the rest of Australia.

In fact, Darwin is closer to Jakarta than Sydney and has consequently developed a distinctive cultural hybrid of Australian, Indigenous and Asian influences. Whereas the term 'Territorian' may have excluded ethnic groups in the past, now it's being reclaimed to embrace the Territory's diverse multiculturalism: 17% of the Territory's population was born overseas, and many of this sector's children and grandchildren continue to identify with their forebears' tradition. The local politicians are even starting to talk of how the Territory is more a part of Southeast Asia than Australia – a model that's held up as the way forward for the rest of the country.

The Northern Territory also has Australia's largest Indigenous population – 28% are of Aboriginal heritage. There's been cautious recognition by white Territorians of the importance of this heritage, and tribal law – which had been outlawed by white-Australian laws – has begun to be reinstated in some areas.

## LIFESTYLE

As you can imagine, there's not a great deal of urban living here (except for Darwin); if you're coming from Melbourne don't expect your coffee to be a macchiato and, if arriving from Sydney, get ready for more of a tan than even the hottest Double Bay solarium could ever provide.

In the outback, some station properties are about 500km from the nearest doctor, supermarket and school; children might have to sit down in front of a high-frequency (HF) radio transceiver to receive an education. But the strain of outback life has eased somewhat, with developments such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the School of the Air and the expanding national telephone network softening the tyranny of distance.

Despite the population being spread over such a huge area, community spirit still binds the land, reflected in the turn-out for social functions and for more esoteric pursuits like beer-can regattas and dry-river racing, activities that can only thrive in a place used to making its own fun.

## Aboriginal Society

Many Aboriginal people living an urban life still speak their Indigenous language (or a mix), while retaining knowledge of the environment, bush medicine and food ('bush tucker'). Across the region traditional rites and ceremonies are being revived.

**'Territorians point to the struggles of the past as a badge of honour, and there's a palpable sense that the place is remarkably different from the mainstream of Australian society'**

Indigenous ceremonies revolve around the activities of ancestral beings, prescribing codes of behaviour and responsibilities for looking after the land and all living things. The links between the people and their spirit ancestors are totems; each person has their own totem, or Dreaming, and these take many forms – caterpillars, snakes, fish, birds and so

#### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL: DOS & DON'TS

Experiencing Aboriginal culture is a highlight of any trip to the Territory. There is some basic protocol, but the best thing you can do is to always ask when in doubt. For more information on responsible tourism, see the Aboriginal Tourism Australia website ([www.ataust.org.au](http://www.ataust.org.au)).

- Do remember that Indigenous people's lives do not necessarily revolve around your visit.
- Do understand that certain Indigenous behaviour is culturally influenced and is not intended to offend: the phrases 'thank you', 'hello' or 'goodbye' may not be used in some areas, or direct eye contact may be avoided.
- Do take your time. Begin with a few pleasantries to establish your interest in the person you are talking to, and see if they're interested in talking to you.
- Do remember that, in general, if you want to learn something, give something in return: tell a story or anecdote to hear a story.
- Do learn to appreciate difference. In some remote communities women dress modestly and it may not be appropriate for a woman to approach a group of males or socialise with them by herself. A firm handshake can signal aggression; a soft clasp of hands is usually better.
- Do respect the wishes of custodians when visiting Indigenous sites: read signs carefully, keep to dedicated camping areas, and don't wander into unauthorised areas.
- Do take care not to casually kick ant beds or stones, break twigs from (or deface) trees or souvenir earth, leaves or cultural artefacts.
- Do resist the temptation to touch artworks and motifs; your skin's natural oils can cause considerable deterioration. Dust also causes problems – move thoughtfully at rock-art sites and leave your vehicle some distance away.
- Do check whether alcohol rules apply when visiting a community. Permit conditions might include rules relating to the purchase and consumption of alcohol, or forbid any alcohol in the area at all, even if it remains unopened in the boot of your car, with fines for non-compliance.
- Don't raise your voice and labour over each word in the hope that you will be understood. You will feel foolish when someone responds to you in fluent English.
- Don't be too forceful when approaching a group of Indigenous people: stand a little way off and approach slowly. In remote communities, try making some movement or noise; coughing is a typical way by which Indigenous Australians announce their presence.
- Don't use the names of deceased people; in some Indigenous cultures this is unacceptable.
- Don't feel compelled to fill gaps in conversation with idle chit-chat. Aboriginal people tolerate more silence in communication than the average Westerner, so just wait and listen.
- Don't be overly loud: shame is a very important emotional force in Indigenous lives, and you could cause Indigenous Australians to be shamed if your behaviour is extroverted.
- Don't be too inquisitive. Access to ritual and cultural knowledge may be restricted to specific individuals or groups. Senior individuals may volunteer information as they see fit, perhaps about cultural practices and rituals already in the public eye.
- Don't wear out your welcome by taking excessive photos or video. Always ask permission and offer to send copies of photographs or footage (make sure you get an address). If you have permission to use photographs in reports or publications, acknowledge the names of the individuals in the shots.

on. Songs tell of how these powerful creator ancestors exert benign or malevolent influences, the best places and times to hunt, where to find water in drought years, and of specific kinship relations and identification of correct marriage partners.

Some areas feature Aboriginal community schools, where pupils are taught in English and their tribal language. Larger towns also have residential colleges for Aboriginal students.

#### POPULATION

The Northern Territory accounts for about 17% of Australian's landmass but only 1% of the population. Of the Territory's 198,500 inhabitants, 56,900 are of Aboriginal descent; the remainder is a multicultural mix entrenched in the cities.

The entire eastern half of the Top End comprises the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, and major settlements are at Nhulunbuy (Gove), on the peninsula at the northeastern corner, Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) just across the East Alligator River from Ubirr in Kakadu National Park, and Maningrida on the Liverpool River estuary.

Northern Territory Aboriginal people generally define themselves by their 'nation' (or tribe), skin group or language group. Some examples include the Eastern Arrernte people (around Alice Springs), the Warlangu people (around Tennant Creek) and the Jawoyn people (around Katherine).

One of the most widespread Aboriginal languages in Australia today is Kriol, with more than 20,000 speakers throughout most of the Katherine region and the neighbouring Kimberley region in Western Australia. Kriol, although based on English, is heavily influenced by traditional Aboriginal language in its vocabulary and structure.

#### SPORT Football

The biff and bash of the hybrid game, Australian Rules football (like a cross between Gaelic football and Greco-Roman wrestling), is the spectacle of choice. However, unlike down south where footy is played in winter, here they put boot to ball during the Wet. In late March, the Tiwi Islands' football Grand Final is a very popular event.

Footy is a particular source of pride among young Aboriginal men, and the Aboriginal All-Stars regularly play against top-level AFL opposition. After being recruited by an AFL club, 80% of Aboriginal footballers go on to play a substantial amount of AFL games, compared with 40% for non-Aboriginal players.

Football is a centrepiece of the Yuendumu Sports Weekend, the 'Aboriginal Olympics' that draws people from as far as 1500km away to compete (Yuendumu is a desert Aboriginal community hundreds of kilometres from Alice Springs). The footy at Yuendumu is certainly different: players are often barefoot and the ground is red and rock hard. Community rivalry is such that the winner needs to get away in a hurry or else suffer retribution, while offensive on-field behaviour is dealt with, bush-style, by a tribunal of Aboriginal Elders.

#### Other Sports

During the Dry, creams, pads, boxes, stumps, flippers and googlies are the weapons of choice; translated, this means cricket is played at club level. The Territory has no representative in the nationwide Pura Cup competition, although interstate teams pop up here for out-of-season

The Northern Territory has Australia's highest male-to-female sex ratio (111.1 males per 100 females) and the lowest median age (30.3 years).

match practice. Recently Darwin has begun to host international test cricket matches.

Tennis, triathlons and swimming meets are held in Darwin and Alice Springs, and Alice hosts the Masters Games, a mature-age event held biennially in October.

Every second year in May, Darwin hosts the Arafura Games (p75), a major event for developing athletes in the Asia-Pacific region.

Racing carnivals and rodeos are held in every major centre, and draw people from hundreds of kilometres around.

And now for something completely different: Alice Springs plays host to the Camel Cup (camel racing), the Finke Desert Race (with charging motorcycles and buggies) and the Henley-on-Todd Regatta (boat race on a dry river bed) – see p191 for details of these events – while Darwin has the Beer Can Regatta (featuring boats made from beer cans; p75).

## ARTS

See p36 for information on Aboriginal visual art.

## Literature

The Territory can mean all things to all people, especially when channelled through the metaphors and similes of wordsmiths. In her short piece, *My Australian Girlhood* (1902), Rosa Praed draws on her outback experience to portray her affectionate childhood relationship with Aboriginal people, while Jeannie Gunn's well-known *We of the Never Never* (1908), a story of the life and trials on Elsey Station, includes a patronising depiction of Aboriginal people, along with this description of the Territory: a 'land that bewitches her people with its strange spells'.

Catherine Martin's 1923 novel, *The Incredible Journey*, follows the trail of two black women, Iliapo and Polde, through the harsh desert environment they traverse in search of a little boy who had been kidnapped by a white man.

Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) is an outback epic, with sweeping descriptions of the northern country, while Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) tells the fortunes of a northern station owner, and voices bitter regret at the failure of white people to reconcile with the Indigenous population.

The English novelist Nevil Shute was a bit of an outback fetishist. His *A Town Like Alice* (1950) was a popular novel that was later made into a film. The main character, Joe Harmon, describes Alice as a 'bonza place with plenty of water'. Shute's *In the Wet* (1953) is a bizarre, borderline sci-fi novel, filled with opium-induced dreams about a future society where a mixed-race Aboriginal man saves the monarchy and ends a looming political crisis.

*The Children* (1959), by another English writer, James Vance Marshall, concerns two white siblings, a boy and a girl, lost in the Northern Territory after their plane crashes; they meet an Aboriginal boy who has gone 'walkabout' and a clash of cultures ensues. The book was later made into the film *Walkabout* (see Cinema opposite).

Sara Henderson's autobiographical trilogy, *From Strength to Strength* (1993), *The Strength in Us All* (1994) and *The Strength of Our Dreams* (1998), draws on the triumphs and tragedies of life on Bullo River Station, in the far northwest of the Territory past Timber Creek.

Contemporary literary stars in the Territory include Nicolas Rothwell, whose award-winning *Wings of the Kite Hawk* (2003) recasts the desert as a field of dreams, and Stephen Gray, who wrote *The Artist is a Thief* (2000), a 'philosophical detective novel' set in a fictional Aboriginal community.

For an excellent introduction to the latest writing coming out of the Territory, try *True North: Contemporary Writing from the Northern Territory* (2004), edited by Marian Devitt.

Northern Territory Writers' Centre (www.ntwriters.com.au) produces a number of interesting poetry collections, including *Landmark* (1999) and *Living Room: Poems from the Centre* (2003).

## Song & Narrative

The unifying factor in Aboriginal oral traditions is the Dreaming (see p29). Traditional renderings include the sounds of clapsticks and the didgeridoo, as the rhythm of dancers accompanies each poetic line; naturally, much organic power is lost in the transition to the printed word.

TGH Strehlow was one of the first methodical translators, and his written works include *Aranda Traditions* (1947) and *Songs of Central Australia* (1971). Catherine and Ronald Berndt compiled 188 songs in the collection *Djanggawul* (1952) and 129 sacred and 47 secular songs in *Kunapipi* (1951), while *The Land of the Rainbow Snake* (1979) focuses on children's stories from western Arnhem Land.

Many stories from the Dreaming have appeared in translation, illustrated and published by Aboriginal artists, including *Joe Nangan's Dreaming: Aboriginal Legends of the North-West* (1976) by Joe Nangan and Hugh Edwards; *Visions of Mowanjurn: Aboriginal Writings from the Kimberley* (1980) by Kormilda Community College, Darwin; and *Gular-abulu* (1983) by Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke.

## Cinema

Many films have exploited the Territory's landscape for all kinds of effects: mystical, psychological, symbolic, aesthetic.

*Walkabout* (1971), by English experimental director Nicolas Roeg, is a hallucinatory tale based on a novel by James Vance Marshall (see Literature opposite) and starring David Gulpilil, the Territory's most famous and recognisable actor.

*A Town Like Alice* (1956) and *We of the Never Never* (1982) have a languid appeal, while *Jedda* (1955) is a compelling, bleak story of Aboriginal life, with some scenes filmed at Katherine Gorge.

Paul Hogan's *Crocodile Dundee* (1985) is a phenomenally successful film that did much to boost tourism in the Top End, particularly in Kakadu where parts of it are set. The clownish adventures of Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee, a bush Everyman who wanders into the urban jungle with predictable results, spilled over into two sequels, a host of look-alike tour guides, and a (thankfully short-lived) craze for Akubra hats.

CAAMA, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (www.caama.com.au), began 25 years ago and has since built up an impressive folio of Indigenous media production and broadcasting. Filmmakers from CAAMA Productions, the Association's film and TV branch, have enjoyed success at overseas film festivals including Cannes.

### TOP ABORIGINAL CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

- Combining a wildlife safari, Aboriginal cultural tour and bush-tucker tasting in Kakadu National Park, led by an Indigenous guide (p118)
- Getting a true insight into the land and cultural significance of Uluru through the eyes of the traditional owners (p251)
- Sampling bush tucker, walking a bush-medicine trail and trying your hand at traditional painting at Manyallaluk, near Katherine (p138)
- Travelling by 4WD from Uluru to the Cave Hill Aboriginal community, to learn about their creation stories and traditions, and see rock-art sites (p251)
- Meeting local Aboriginal people in Alice Springs, taking in a bushwalk, dance performance and a didgeridoo lesson (p191)
- Flying to the Tiwi Islands to meet locals, attend a craft workshop and visit mission buildings, a museum and pukumani burial site (p92)
- Overnighting at the Arrernte community at Wallace Rockhole, near Hermannsburg, for rock art, bush medicine and bush-tucker tours (p226)

*Evil Angels* (1987), released overseas as *A Cry in the Dark*, stars Meryl Streep and depicts the infamous story of Lindy Chamberlain, whose baby was snatched by a dingo at Uluru.

The cult Aussie drag-queen film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) made prominent use of the Territory's rugged, exotic charm, as did *Japanese Story* (2003), about a white tour guide and the Japanese businessman she falls in love with.

*Dead Heart* (1996), set against the backdrop of an outstation near Alice Springs examines the collision of white and tribal laws. *Yolngu Boy* (2001) is a rites-of-passage movie, uncompromising in its depiction of the problems faced by Aboriginal youth torn between traditional and modern Western culture.

The documentary *Beyond Sorry* (2003) tracks the lives of two Arrernte Aboriginal women: Zita, who was brought up to live as a white person, and Aggie, who became a tribal Elder. The contrast between the two women's lives provides poignant commentary on the Stolen Generations (p26).

Greg McLean's super-vicious, ultra-sadistic slasher film *Wolf Creek* (2005) takes a hunting knife to the Crocodile Dundee myth with its skilful exploitation of urban folk's fear of the outback. Although set in Western Australia, it's partly based on the case of backpacker Peter Falconio, who went missing in the Northern Territory.

## Music

The basic instruments of Aboriginal culture in historical times included hitting the ground with hunting sticks, clapping boomerangs together or using hands or the stomping of feet to keep the beat or time. Today Aboriginal tribes still use percussion, hitting together different shaped clapsticks or message sticks to make different pitches – high or low.

The most famous Aboriginal instrument is the didgeridoo (see p39), which comes from the top end of the Northern Territory – its Yolngu name is *yidaki*. Today it has become a recognised Aboriginal instrument throughout Australia and has been incorporated into contemporary music by Aboriginal artists including the group Yothu Yindi, whose Aboriginal members are among the traditional owners of northeast Arnhem Land. Yothu Yindi combine ancient song cycles and traditional Aboriginal instruments with contemporary instruments and a modern pop sensibility.

The Territory is home to a few old 'bushies', notably Ted Egan, now the administrator of the Northern Territory. Egan's brand of country-folk, infused with tall Territorian tales, is loved by many.

Arrernte band NoKTuRNL play a hard-hitting, groove-laden fusion of rap and metal, with politically charged lyrics. Other contemporary Aboriginal musicians from the Territory include: the Saltwater Band and Letterstick, both of whom play Indigenous music in a reggae/ska style; Djalal Gurruwiwim, an Elder from northeast Arnhem Land and a master *yidaki* player; Broken English, a legendary pub-rock band; Peter Brandy, originally from Halls Creek but now living in Darwin, where he plays a fusion of country and pop; Nabarlek, mixing Indigenous roots music with rock; George Rurrumbu, former lead singer of the disbanded Warumpi Band, who were legends in the Territory and a big influence on Yothu Yindi; and Shellie Morris, an acoustic folk singer popular around Darwin.

## Dance & Theatre

Dance is integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, a physical and spiritual expression that incorporates music, song and art. An Indigenous dance performance will tell a *story* of the Dreaming, of an ancestor

spirit or of the passing down of a law. As most spirit ancestors were animals or birds, dancers imitate the movements and sounds of these creatures.

Dancing styles vary across regions and tribes. Most dances are accompanied by singing, percussion instruments such as clapsticks and boomerangs, or the clapping of hands and thighs. The *yidaki* provides music to the rhythmical stomp of Arnhem Land.

The Tracks Dance Company, based in Darwin, recently won the Sydney Myer Performing Arts Award (Group Award), an outstanding achievement for a company outside of Sydney or Melbourne. Although a non-Indigenous company per se, Tracks seeks to reflect the Territory's unique character in its work, which means close collaboration with Aboriginal artists.

Michael Watts, an emerging playwright from Alice Springs, has generated national attention for works such as *Train Dancing* (2001), about an Aboriginal man torn between love and the effects of racial intolerance. Watts' work has been performed by the Alice Springs-based Red Dust Theatre company, which stages many plays capturing the essence of the Territory.

Music NT ([www.musicnt.com.au](http://www.musicnt.com.au)) is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in Territorian music, with all bases covered from Indigenous to hip hop.

Beloved Territorian bushy Ted Egan is the inventor of the Fosterphone, a percussion instrument made from a beer carton (typically Fosters brand). This gave rise to claims that Egan tuned the instrument by drinking the beer, and requests at gigs for Egan to sing in XXXX (a popular Queensland beer).

# Aboriginal Art

Indigenous art in Australia dates back at least 30,000 years and includes rock carvings, body painting and ground designs. Early art was based on the Dreaming – the Creation – when the earth was formed by struggles between powerful supernatural ancestors such as the Rainbow Serpent, the Lightning Men and the Wandjina spirits. The Dreaming can relate to a person, an animal or a physical feature, or it can be more general, relating to a region, a group of people, or natural forces such as floods and wind.

Body art, another important form of creative expression, is often combined with dance. For example, the Gunwinggu men of west Arnhem Land use a design of intricately patterned crisscross lines on their torsos, given to them by their giant ancestor Luma Luma. The decaying body of Birrkilli, the sacred whale of the Gurrkurr clan, gave them the colours and diamond patterns used in their rituals.

## ROCK ART

Arnhem Land is an area of rich artistic heritage, hosting rock paintings made an estimated 60,000 years ago. The art here takes a literal approach in its depiction of Dreaming *stories*. Easily recognisable (though often stylised) images of ancestors, animals and Macassans (Indonesian mariners; see p24) can be found along with mythological beings and European ships. It's an absorbing record of changing environments and lifestyles over the millennia.

Some places boast paintings from more recent eras, sometimes superimposed over older paintings. Many sites are kept secret – not only to protect them from damage, but also because they are supposedly inhabited

In the 1930s Albert Namatjira, the famous NT Aboriginal artist, was introduced to European-style watercolour painting by a non-Indigenous artist, Rex Batterbee.

## PLAYING POSSUM

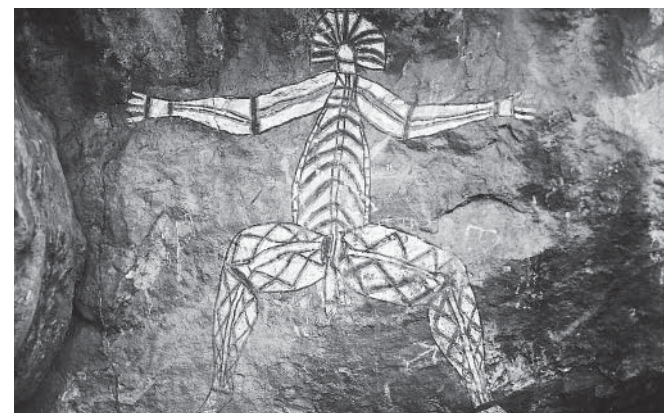
The birth of the modern Aboriginal art movement took place in 1971 at Papunya, 285km north-west of Alice Springs, when a group of community Elders, employed as groundskeepers at the Papunya school, were encouraged to paint a mural on one of the school's external walls. Other community members became enthused by the project and from those humble beginnings spawned a profound ripple effect – images of spiritual significance had, for the first time, taken on a permanent and very public form.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932–2002), one of the pioneers of the Papunya movement, was the first Aboriginal painter to be feted by European and US patrons. He was a contemporary of perhaps the most famous Aboriginal artist, Albert Namatjira, who offered to tutor Possum (then a woodcarver) to paint in the Namatjira fashion. Possum, as usual, preferred to strike out on his own, and came to be known for his choreography of three-dimensional space. Perhaps his most iconic work is *Warlugulong* (1976), a large canvas featuring layers of ancestral legends superimposed over each other in an exciting new style.

In 1988 Possum enjoyed an important retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, along with extensive media coverage in the UK and the US. More overseas exhibitions followed, although Possum saw little money from these.

In 1999 Possum identified a large proportion of his works at a Sydney exhibition as fake, but his credibility was undermined when it was discovered he had previously signed works painted by his family members (even though this was typical of the collaborative nature of Aboriginal art). Humiliated by the negative publicity, he withdrew and stopped painting.

Possum was awarded the Order of Australia in 2002, but he died on the morning of the ceremony.



An example of the superb rock art that can be seen in Kakadu National Park.

GREG ELMS

by malevolent beings, who react badly to those unskilled in Indigenous customs. Two of the finest sites are open to visitors, though: Ubirr (p120) and Nourlangie (p122) in Kakadu National Park.

The early hand or grass prints were followed by a 'naturalistic' style, with large outlines of people or animals filled in with colour. After that came the 'dynamic' style, in which motion was often depicted (like a dotted line to show a spear's path through the air). In this era the first mythological beings appeared, with human bodies and animal heads.

The next style mainly showed human silhouettes and was followed by the curious 'yam figures', in which people and animals were drawn in the shape of yams (or yams in the shape of people and animals). The style known as 'x-ray', which showed creatures' bones and internal organs, also appeared in this period.

## DOT PAINTING

Western Desert paintings, also known as 'dot paintings', partly evolved from 'ground paintings' that formed the centrepiece of dances and songs. These were made from pulped plant material, and the designs were created on the ground using dots of this mush. Dots were also used to outline objects in rock paintings, and to highlight geographical features or vegetation.

These paintings can seem random and abstract, but they actually depict Dreaming *stories*, and can be viewed in many ways, including as aerial landscape maps (which raises the question: who would be watching from above, and how did they get there?). Subjects are often depicted by the imprint they leave in the sand – a simple arc depicts a person (the print left by someone sitting), a *coolamon* (wooden carrying dish) is shown by an oval shape, a digging stick by a single line, a camp fire by a circle. People are identified by the objects associated with them – digging sticks and *coolamons* for women, spears and boomerangs for men. Concentric circles usually depict Dreaming sites, or places where ancestors paused in their journeys.

While these symbols are widely used, their meaning within each individual painting is known only by the artist and the people closely associated with him or her, since different clans apply different interpretations to each painting. Sacred *stories* can therefore be publicly portrayed, as the deeper meaning is not revealed to most viewers.

The colours used in central Australian dot paintings feature reds, blues and purples.

The meticulously detailed Aboriginal Art website ([www.aboriginalart.org](http://www.aboriginalart.org)) features extensive listings and information on various artistic styles for every Aboriginal art centre in the Territory.



## BARK PAINTING

It's difficult to establish when bark was first used, partly because it's perishable and old pieces simply don't exist. However, we do know that European visitors in the early 19th century noted the practice of painting the inside walls of bark shelters.

The bark used is taken from the stringybark tree (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*) in the Wet season when it's moist and supple. The rough outer layers are removed and the bark is dried by placing it over a fire and then under weights on the ground to keep it flat. In a couple of weeks the bark is dry and ready for use.

The pigments used in bark paintings are mainly red and yellow (ochres), white (kaolin) and black (charcoal). The colours are gathered from special sites – some of these have been mined for centuries by the traditional owners and historically were traded with other clans. These natural pigments are still used today, giving the paintings their superb soft and earthy finish. Traditionally, binding agents such as egg yolks, wax and plant resins were added to the pigments. These days, such agents have been replaced by synthetics such as wood glue. The brushes used in the past were obtained from the bush materials at hand (twigs, leaf fibres, feathers, human hair) but these have also largely been replaced by modern brushes.

One of the main features of Arnhem Land bark paintings is the use of *rarrk* designs (crosshatching), which have been handed down through generations. These designs identify the particular clans, and are based on body paintings. The paintings can also be broadly categorised by their regional styles. In the regions to the west, the tendency is towards naturalistic images and plain backgrounds, while to the east the use of geometric designs is more common.

The art reflects Dreaming themes that vary by region. In eastern Arnhem Land the prominent ancestor beings are the Djang'kawu Sisters, who travelled the land with elaborate dilly bags (carry bags) and digging sticks (for making waterholes), and the Wagilag Sisters, who are associated with snakes and waterholes. In western Arnhem Land the Rainbow Serpent, Yingarna, is the significant being (according to some clans), as is one of her offspring, Ngalyod. Other groups paint Nawura as the principal being, travelling through the rocky landscape creating sacred sites and giving people the attributes of culture.

*Art, History, Place* (2004), by art scholar Christine Nicholls, offers a comprehensive overview of Australian Indigenous art – from its origins 40,000 years ago to contemporary work – with extensive referencing of Central Desert and Arnhem Land work.

### PURCHASING ABORIGINAL ART

A few key factors to consider when purchasing Aboriginal art:

- Always check authenticity, ensuring the art is attributed to and licensed to an Aboriginal artist.
- All Aboriginal art should include a certificate of authenticity; in the case of small artefacts, this may take the form of art centre or gallery labels. Documentation should provide details including the artist's name; dates when the work was produced; the artist's language group; details of where the work was made; and an artist's statement.
- If purchasing art works from a gallery, you might like to consider whether the gallery is a member of a professional association, like the Australian Commercial Galleries Association, and whether the work has been sourced from a recognised art centre.

For more information, visit the website of the **Association of Northern, Kimberley & Arnhem Aboriginal Artists** ([www.ankaaa.org.au](http://www.ankaaa.org.au)).

The *mimi* spirits also feature on bark and rock art. These mischievous entities are said to have taught Indigenous people hunting, food gathering and painting skills.

## CONTEMPORARY PAINTING Desert Mob

This annual exhibition, in its 15th year, showcases recent Aboriginal art and craft at the Araluen Arts Centre in the Alice Springs cultural precinct (p180). It provides a unique opportunity for members of the public to purchase and view work from established and up-and-coming Aboriginal artists. In 2004, 400 works from across the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia were exhibited.

The work is sourced from Aboriginal-owned and -governed art centres in Central Australia, organisations that in many communities provide the sole source of income for Indigenous people, as well as acting as custodians of Aboriginal culture.

### Keringke Art Centre

The Keringke Art Centre started in 1987 with a nine-week fabric-painting course and soon began exhibiting abroad. The women of the Centre work with bright colours, expressing traditional motifs and personal experiences within modern society. Keringke is located in Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa; p242), a small community about 80km southeast of Alice Springs.

### Ngukurr

Since the late 1980s the artists of Ngukurr (p169), near Roper Bar in southeastern Arnhem Land, have been producing works using acrylic paints on canvas. Although ancestral beings feature prominently, the works are generally much more modern – their free-flowing forms often have little in common with traditional formal structure.

### Utopia

This community (p213), northeast of Alice Springs, came into existence in 1977 and was initially known for its batik work. In the late 1980s members of the community started to paint on canvases with acrylics, largely abandoning batik. While some men in the community paint, Utopia is best known for its women artists, in particular Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Anmatyerre; 1910–96), Ada Bird Petyarre (Anmatyerre), Kathleen Petyarre (Anmatyerre/Eastern Alywarre) and Gloria Tamerre Petyarre (Anmatyerre).

## ARTEFACTS & CRAFTS

Objects traditionally made for practical or ceremonial use, such as musical instruments and weapons, often featured intricate and symbolic decoration. In recent years many communities have also developed non-traditional craft forms that have created employment and income, and the growing tourist trade has seen demand and production increase steadily. For tips on purchasing crafts, see p269.

### Didgeridoos

These ubiquitous craft items have enjoyed a phenomenal boom in popularity over the last decade or so, particularly with white boys sporting dreadlocks at 'earth' festivals across Australia. Originally they were (and still are, in many Indigenous communities) used as ceremonial musical instruments in Arnhem Land (where they are known as *yidaki*). The original instrument was made from eucalypt branches that had been

**'Didgeridoos have enjoyed a phenomenal boom in popularity over the last decade or so, particularly with white boys sporting dreadlocks at 'earth' festivals across Australia'**

hollowed out by termites. The tubes were often fitted with a wax mouth-piece made from sugarbag (native honey-bee wax) and decorated with traditional designs.

### Boomerangs

These curved wooden throwing sticks are used for hunting and also as ceremonial clapsticks. Contrary to popular belief, not all boomerangs are designed to return when thrown – the idea is to hit the animal being hunted. Although boomerangs follow a similar fundamental design, they come in a huge range of shapes, sizes and decorative styles, and are made from a number of different wood types. The boomerang has infiltrated Western popular culture almost as much as the didge – in bizarre ways, such as the metal boomerang that was used to pick off berserk bikers in *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, and in deeply disturbing ways, like the boomerangs mass produced and branded by perfume giant Chanel that sell for \$300. Why not buy the real thing?

### Wooden Sculptures

Most traditional wooden sculptures were made for particular ceremonies and then discarded but, early in the 20th century, missionaries encouraged some communities and groups to produce wooden sculptures for sale.

Arnhem Land artists still produce soft-wood carvings of birds, fish, other animals and ancestral beings. The lightweight figures are engraved and painted with intricate symbolic designs. Due to their isolation, the

Indigenous people of the Tiwi Islands have developed art forms – mainly sculpture – unlike anywhere else, although there are some similarities with the art of Arnhem Land in the use of natural pigments, feathers and wood for carvings and baskets. In the last 50 years or so, the Tiwi have been producing sculptured animals and birds, many of these being Creation ancestors, as well as traditional *tutini* funerary poles.

### Scorched Carvings

Also very popular are the wooden carvings that have designs scorched into them with hot fencing wire. These range from small figures, such as possums, up to quite large snakes and lizards. Many are connected with Dreaming *stories* from the artist's country. In central Australia one of the main outlets for these is the Maruku Arts & Crafts Centre at the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Cultural Centre (p255). The Mt Ebenezer Roadhouse (p246), on the Lasseter Hwy (the main route to Uluru), is another Indigenous-owned enterprise and one of the most inexpensive places for buying sculpted figures.

### Fibre Craft

Articles made from fibres are a major art form among women. String or twine was traditionally made from bark, grass, leaves, roots and other materials, hand-spun and dyed with natural pigments, then woven to make dilly bags, baskets, garments, fishing nets and other items. Strands or fibres from the leaves of the pandanus palm (and other palms or grasses) were also woven to make dilly bags and mats. While all these objects have utilitarian purposes, many also have ritual uses.

### Hollow-log Coffins

Hollowed-out logs, often used for reburial ceremonies in Arnhem Land, are also a major form of artistic expression. Highly decorated, often with Dreaming themes, they are known as *dupun* in eastern Arnhem Land and *lorrkon* in western Arnhem Land.

### Textiles

The women of Utopia (see p213) are known for their production of brightly coloured silk batiks based on traditional women's body-painting designs called *awely*, and on images of flora and fauna.

In the late 1980s techniques using acrylic paints on canvas were introduced at Utopia, and Utopian art is now receiving international acclaim.

### Pottery

The Western Arrente community of Hermannsburg (p225) has recently begun to work with pottery, a non-traditional Indigenous craft. They have incorporated moulded figures and surface treatments adapted from Dreaming *stories*.

'Hollowed-out logs, often used for reburial ceremonies in Arnhem Land, are also a major form of artistic expression'

Top End Arts ([www.topendarts.com.au](http://www.topendarts.com.au)) has an informative section devoted to NT Aboriginal art, including information on regional differences and ethical purchasing, and advice on where to buy.

Burial site with *tutini* funerary poles, Tiwi Islands.

PETER PFSCHELINZEW



# Environment Tim Flannery

## A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT

There are two really big factors that go a long way towards explaining nature in Australia: its soils and its climate. Both are unique. Australian soils are the more subtle and difficult to notice of the two, but they have been fundamental in shaping life here. On the other continents, in recent geological times processes such as volcanism, mountain building and glacial activity have been busy creating new soil. Just think of the glacial-derived soils of North America, north Asia and Europe. They feed the world today, and were made by glaciers grinding up rock of differing chemical composition over the last two million years. The rich soils of India and parts of South America were made by rivers eroding mountains, while Java in Indonesia owes its extraordinary richness to volcanoes.

All of these soil-forming processes have been almost absent from Australia in more recent times. Only volcanoes have made a contribution, and they cover less than 2% of the continent's land area. In fact, for the last 90 million years, beginning deep in the age of dinosaurs, Australia has been geologically comatose. It was too flat, warm and dry to attract glaciers, and its crust too ancient and thick to be punctured by volcanoes or folded into mountains. Look at Uluru and Kata Tjuta: they are the stumps of mountains that 350 million years ago were the height of the Andes. Yet for hundreds of millions of years they've been nothing but nubbins.

Under such conditions no new soil is created and the old soil is leached of all its goodness, and is blown and washed away. The leaching is done by rain. Even if just 30cm of it falls each year, that adds up to a column of water 30 million kilometres high passing through the soil over 100 million years, and that can do a great deal of leaching! Almost all of Australia's mountain ranges are more than 90 million years old, so you will see a lot of sand here, and a lot of country where the rocky 'bones' of the land are sticking up through the soil. It is an old, infertile landscape, and life in Australia has been adapting to these conditions for aeons.

Australia's misfortune in respect to soils is echoed in its climate. In most parts of the world outside the wet tropics, life responds to the rhythm of the seasons – summer to winter, or Wet to Dry. Most of

Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* is a 'big picture' overview of evolution in Australasia, covering the last 120 million years of history, with thoughts on how the environment has shaped Australasia's human cultures.

The Northern Territory Environment Centre ([www.ecnt.org](http://www.ecnt.org)) has a plethora of information about Northern Territory environmental issues, including the vexed issues of uranium mining and land clearing.

## THE CHANGING SEASONS Susannah Farfor

Plants and animals vary according to habitat, and influence each other in a complex balance of predator and prey. Broadly speaking, there are two distinct habitat zones in the Territory shaped by climate – the arid zone and the wet-dry tropics to the north, which includes the entire Top End.

The arid zone is characterised by low rainfall and hardy, stunted vegetation. When rain falls in this country, life moves into top gear: flowers and woody plants burst into bloom; the sandhills, plains and rocky ridges come alive with nectar-eating birds and insects; and predators enjoy the bumper harvest. For nature lovers this is the best time to visit the Centre.

Wildlife is also attuned to the dramatic annual cycle of Wet and Dry seasons in the Top End. The warm, clear days of the Dry cause waterholes to shrink and large concentrations of wildlife gather near billabongs. The late Dry is an excellent time to see wildlife in northern Australia. By the early Wet most animals are gearing up to breed, migratory birds arrive from Southeast Asia and many different species of insects hatch. With the Wet season rains, breeding is in full swing, drawing to a close as the rains peter out and the cycle begins again.

## NORTHERN TERRITORY NATIONAL PARKS Paul Harding

The Territory boasts two of Australia's star attractions: the Unesco World Heritage-listed Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Parks, both jointly managed by Parks Australia and the traditional Aboriginal owners. But you might be surprised to know the Territory has another 14 national parks administered by the Parks & Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory ([www.nreta.nt.gov.au](http://www.nreta.nt.gov.au)), along with some 25 conservation or historical reserves and 12 nature parks.

The most popular and accessible parks can be reached by conventional vehicle, although even sealed roads into Top End parks can become impassable during the Wet. Other parks are tough to get to and present an exhilarating challenge for 4WD enthusiasts. All of the Territory's parks and reserves offer superb bushwalking opportunities and most have camping facilities. Apart from the 'big two', national parks you should pencil into your itinerary include Litchfield and Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) in the Top End; West MacDonnell, Finke Gorge and Watarrka (Kings Canyon) in the Centre.

In Arnhem Land, the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park features marine and rainforest environments, but a permit is required to visit and it's a pretty remote spot, accessible only by air or a long 4WD journey. Some of the more obscure highlights include Mary River National Park for bird-watching and fishing; Keep River National Park for bizarre sandstone formations and scenery; Gregory National Park for 4WDing; Devil's Marbles and Chambers Pillar conservation reserves for photogenic rock formations; Arltunga Historical Reserve for a step back in time; and Ruby Gap Nature Reserve for a rugged 4WD experience.

Public access is encouraged if safety and conservation regulations are observed. Pets and firearms are not allowed in national parks and nature reserves. Many parks offer ranger-guided walks and talks in the busy season (usually June to September).

National Park	Page	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Kakadu	p108	wetlands, escarpments, waterfalls, rock art	bushwalking, boat cruises fishing, bird-watching	May–Sep
Uluru-Kata Tjuta	p246	rock formations flora & fauna	walking, cultural & desert tours, rock viewing, photography	Apr–Nov
Nitmiluk	p141	Katherine Gorge, open woodland waterfalls	bushwalking, canoeing, swimming, fishing	May–Oct
Litchfield	p98	sandstone ranges, waterfalls termite mounds, open woodlands	bushwalking, swimming, 4WDing	Mar–Nov
Watarrka	p229	Kings Canyon, sandstone ranges, cycads	bushwalking, scenic flights, photography	Apr–Nov
Finke Gorge	p226	Palm Valley, gorges, river beds	bushwalking, 4WDing	May–Oct
West MacDonnell	p216	ranges, gorges, waterholes, arid zone flora & fauna	bushwalking, cycling, swimming, scenic flights	year-round
Elsy	p147	monsoon forest, rivers thermal pools	bushwalking, swimming canoeing	Apr–Sep
Keep River	p154	rock art, boabs, sandstone outcrops	bushwalking	May–Aug
Gregory	p151	grassy woodland, sandstone escarpments	4WDing, bushwalking, boating	May–Sep

Australia experiences seasons – sometimes very severe ones – yet life does not respond solely to them. This can clearly be seen by the fact that, although there's plenty of snow and cold country in Australia, there are almost no native trees that shed their leaves in winter, and nor do any Australian animals hibernate.

## WILDLIFE IN THE TERRITORY

The Northern Territory is famous as a home to kangaroo and other marsupials but, unless you visit a wildlife park, such creatures are not easy to see as most are nocturnal. Their lifestyles are exquisitely attuned to Australia's harsh conditions: marsupials are so efficient that they need to eat a fifth less food than equivalent-sized placental mammals (everything from bats and rats to whales and ourselves), while kangaroos, alone among the world's larger mammals, hop because it turns out that hopping is the most efficient way of getting about at medium speeds. This is because the energy of the bounce is stored in the tendons of the legs – much like in a pogo stick – while the intestines bounce up and down like a piston, emptying and filling the lungs without needing to activate the chest muscles. When you travel long distances to find meagre feed, such efficiency is a must.

The Devil's Marbles (p167), enormous granite boulders seemingly tossed to the ground south of Tennant Creek, are believed by the local Warramungu Aboriginal people to be the eggs of the Rainbow Serpent.

### TOP TERRITORIAN WILDLIFE *Simon Sellars*

#### Birds of Prey

These ruthless scavengers circle over fires for barbecued prey, when they're not consuming their version of fast food: roadkill. The wedge-tailed eagle (wedgie), with a wingspan of up to 2m, is often seen in the outback; it's the Northern Territory's fauna emblem, too. The black kite, with a distinctive forked tail, is virtually everywhere. The white-bellied sea eagle is almost as big as a wedgie and is common around large waterways, where it plucks fish from just below the surface. Remember: don't give a sea eagle a 'wedgie' – that's just asking for trouble.

#### Crocodiles

These 'take-no-prisoners' killing machines colour the Aussie psyche in everything from nature-gone-wrong horror films to real-life stories of tourists who've become lunch. They're found just about anywhere near water in the Top End; the best photo opportunities are at Yellow Water in Kakadu (p126) or Adelaide River Crossing (p93). There are three types of Aussie croc: the inoffensive freshwater crocodile ('freshie'); the extremely dangerous saltwater, or estuarine, crocodile ('saltie'), which can grow to a staggering 6m (20ft) long; and the slang term 'crock of s\*\*t' ('load of rubbish'). The under-resourced Northern Territory government, unable to cull its annual quota of 600 salties, is contemplating outsourcing the killing to safari hunters, who would pay for the privilege.

#### Dingoes

Australia's native dog was brought into the country from Southeast Asia some 6000 years ago and domesticated by Aboriginal people. Pure strains are becoming rare as they interbreed with domestic dogs. Dingoes prey mainly on rodents and small marsupials, although when other food is scarce they sometimes attack livestock (and people).

#### Frilled Lizards

These little rippers are commonly seen in the Top End during the early Wet pretending to be tree stumps or trundling about on their hind legs. The lizard's frill opens when it's pissed off, so be nice. In the sandy deserts, around 50 species shelter among spinifex or burrow into the sand.

Among the more common marsupials you might catch a glimpse of in the Territory's national parks are species of antechinus. These nocturnal, rat-sized creatures lead an extraordinary life. The males live for just 11 months, the first 10 of which consist of a concentrated burst of eating and growing. Like teenage males, the day comes when their minds turn to sex, and in the antechinus this becomes an obsession. As they embark on their quest for females they forget to eat and sleep. Instead they gather in logs and woo passing females by serenading them with squeaks. By the end of August – just two weeks after they reach 'puberty' – every single male is dead, exhausted by sex and burdened with carrying around swollen testes.

This extraordinary life history may also have evolved in response to Australia's trying environmental conditions. It seems likely that, if the males survived mating, they would compete with the females as they tried to find enough food to feed their growing young. Basically, antechinus dads are disposable. They do better for antechinus posterity if they go down in a testosterone-fuelled blaze of glory.

One thing you will see lots of are reptiles. Snakes are abundant, and they include some of the most venomous species known. Where the opportunities to feed are few and far between, it's best not to give your prey

H Cogger's *Reptiles and Amphibians of Australia* is a bible to those interested in Australia's reptiles, including its goodly assortment of venomous snakes, and useful protection for those who are definitely not. This large volume will allow you to identify the species, and you can wield it as a defensive weapon if necessary.

### Kangaroos & Wallabies

The distinctive red kangaroo, ranging over most of inland Australia, is the largest – a fully grown male can stand 2m high and has the attractive reddish coat; females have to make do with blue-grey. Most common in the Top End is the agile wallaby, about 1.7m long when fully grown. By the way, despite what you may have heard, kangaroos don't hop down city streets, they are not kept as pets by Mr & Mrs Joe Suburban, and a kangaroo has never held the Australian welterweight boxing belt.

#### Snakes

The Territory hosts various species of python, some beautifully marked, which kill their prey by constriction. Olive and water pythons hunt at night for rodents and can grow quite large. Most other snake species are poisonous, although only a few are dangerous. Whip snakes are slender, fast-moving species common in the Top End. Several large, venomous species such as the taipan, death adder and brown snake should be avoided at all costs.

#### Water Birds

In the Dry, Top End waterholes are awash with armies of noisy waterfowl: magpie geese, ducks, herons, egrets and Australia's only native stork, the jabiru.

#### Wildflowers

After rain, desert dunes are decorated with desert roses, grevilleas and wattle. The most common of these 'ephemerals', or short-lived plants, are the multitude of daisy species. The poached-egg daisy features white petals and a pale-yellow middle. Common inland flowering shrubs include the desert bottlebrush; the honey grevillea, with golden flower spikes; and the holly grevillea, with its holly-like leaves and red flowers.

#### Wild Horses

Known as 'brumbies', this domestic stock gone wild once attained pest proportions in the Territory, which the government addressed by gunning them down from helicopters: a not-so-popular move with animal activists given that the animals were often wounded and took agonising days to die.

**ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES** *Paul Harding*

With a small population and a large land area, the Northern Territory has a relatively 'clean' environment as far as pollution, waste and sustainable energy are concerned. Some of the biggest environmental challenges here are in natural factors such as introduced pests, weeds and fire management. Protecting the environment must also be balanced by economic factors such as pastoral leases and mining. Some of the key areas of environmental concern are protecting the Top End's river systems, particularly the Daly River, and marine conservation, including mangrove protection around Darwin Harbour.

Numerous introduced pests are causing trouble in the Territory. In northeast Arnhem Land millions of dollars are being spent on the eradication of the insidious yellow crazy ants, which have caused infestations over an area of more than 25,000 sq km. The ants, believed to have been introduced from Asia during WWII, form 'super colonies' that can be as dense as 1000 ants per sq metre. As well as devouring native plants, they can squirt an acid that blinds other animals.

The toxic, unattractive and much reviled cane toad has long been a threat to native animals in Queensland and northern New South Wales, since its introduction to combat the cane beetle in the 1930s (a move that failed almost completely as the beetles can fly, but the toads can't). In the last few years the toads have been moving westward into the Northern Territory and have been sighted in the wetlands of Kakadu National Park and even in Darwin. They breed rapidly and exude a toxic substance that is poisonous to a range of predators, including birds, fish and crocodiles. Apart from halting the spread on land, authorities are desperate to ensure the toads don't make the hop across the water to the Tiwi Islands. One of the difficulties in controlling the cane toads is identification – they bear a similarity to the marbled frog, a common native of the Darwin area.

During the 19th century, misguided acclimatisation societies tried to replace the 'inferior' Australian plants and animals with 'superior' European ones. Such cute blessings as rabbits and foxes, which thrive in rural and outback Australia, date from this time. Many other introduced feral animals still thrive in the Territory, particularly in the Top End where there are plenty of water sources. Wild pigs, feral cats, donkeys, horses (brumbies), camels and buffalo roam around, competing with livestock, trampling young native plants and potentially spreading disease such as foot-and-mouth. Attempts to cull or remove these animals has met with some success, particularly horses and water buffalo.

Fast-growing buffle grass was imported to the Territory from southern Africa as a stock feed, but it's now causing problems as a noxious weed, choking out native plants and creating a carpet of highly flammable growth that's difficult to control with traditional mosaic burning. Another noxious weed, the Mexican poppy is a poisonous thistle-like plant that, like most noxious weeds, presents a threat to pasture and stock as well as native plants.

Uranium mining is a controversial environmental issue in the Northern Territory – an estimated 15% of the world's recoverable yellowcake lies beneath the surface, much of it in Kakadu National Park. When Canberra overruled the Northern Territory government's preferred policy of no more mining leases in 2005, some 16 companies applied for exploratory mining licences. Unlike Jabiluka (temporarily closed), Koongarra (proposed) and Ranger (due to close in 2010), any new mines will have to be located outside the national park. In the case of Koongarra, a moratorium on mining has just been lifted and the French company that owns it is seeking approval to resume mining against the wishes of environmentalists and the traditional owners.

The deserts are a real hit-and-miss affair as far as wildlife is concerned. If visiting in a drought year, all you might see are dusty plains, the odd mob of kangaroos and emus, and a few struggling trees. Return after big rains, however, and you'll encounter something close to a Garden of Eden. Fields of white and gold daisies stretch endlessly into the distance, perfuming the air. The salt lakes fill with fresh water, and millions of water birds – pelicans, stilts, shags and gulls – can be seen feeding on the superabundant fish and insect life. It all seems like a mirage, and like a mirage it will vanish as the land dries out, only to spring to life again in a few years or a decade's time. For a more reliable bird spectacular, Kakadu is well worth a look, especially towards the end of the Dry season around November.

Of Australia's 155 species of land snakes, 93 are venomous. Australia is home to the majority of the world's 15 most venomous snakes.

a second chance – hence the potent venom. Snakes will usually leave you alone if you don't fool with them. Observe, back quietly away and don't panic, and most of the time you'll be OK (see p288 for information on treating snakebites).

Some visitors mistake lizards for snakes, and indeed some of the Territory's lizards look bizarre. Unless you visit Komodo in Indonesia, you will not see a larger lizard than the desert-dwelling perentie. These beautiful creatures with leopard-like blotches can grow to more than 2m long, and are efficient predators of introduced rabbits, feral cats and the like.

# Northern Territory Outdoors

Nature reigns supreme in the Northern Territory and the highlight of any trip here is to get out and experience the many activities on offer, whether it's a walk in the bush, a ride on a camel, casting a lure for a barramundi or floating over the desert in a hot-air balloon.

## BUSHWALKING

With a mix of desert environment, gorge country and superb national parks, the Northern Territory has some of Australia's wildest bushwalking country. To gain a true appreciation of the unique ecosystems throughout the Territory, you'll need to venture into the 'bush' (the all-purpose Aussie term for the countryside) on foot. However, this doesn't mean you need to strap on a backpack and swag and disappear into the wilds for days on end. Much of what the bush has to offer can be explored on easily accessible marked walking tracks that can take anything from 10 minutes to several hours. For more serious bushwalkers there are plenty of longer overnight and multiday walks through varied terrain and landscapes.

Walking will allow you to absorb the sights, smells, sounds and wildlife of places like Kakadu, Litchfield, Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge), the MacDonnell Ranges and Watarrka (Kings Canyon), as well as lesser-known national parks such as Keep River and Gregory. Uluru may look good from the sunset viewing car park, but to really appreciate it you need to do the base walk – and Kata Tjuta will never look the same again after you've done the Valley of the Winds walk.

## RESPONSIBLE BUSHWALKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of the Territory, consider the following tips when bushwalking:

- Carry out all your rubbish and don't forget cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Never bury rubbish.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste at least 30m from a watercourse.
- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- Avoid trampling or removing the plant life.
- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. Carry a lightweight stove.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

## BUSHWALK GRADINGS

Grading systems for bushwalking are always arbitrary. However, having an indication of the grade or level of difficulty may help you choose the walks that will best suit your fitness level. For most of this book we use three basic gradings:

**Easy** A walk on flat terrain or with minor elevation changes usually over short distances on well-travelled, marked routes with no navigational difficulties.

**Medium** A walk with challenging terrain, often involving longer distances and steep climbs.

**Difficult** A walk with long daily distances and/or difficult terrain with significant elevation changes; may involve challenging route-finding.

Note that the multiday Larapinta Trail (p218) has its own grading system.

The best multiday walks in the Territory include the 230km **Larapinta Trail** (p218) through the West MacDonnell Ranges, which is divided into 12 sections ranging from 12km to 31km; and the 66km **Jatbula Trail** (p142) from Katherine Gorge to Leliyn (Edith Falls).

Guided walks are offered by the following companies:

**Trek Larapinta** (☎ 08-8953 2933; [www.treklarapinta.com.au](http://www.treklarapinta.com.au)) Guided walks on the Larapinta Trail.

**Willis' Walkabouts** (☎ 08-8985 2134; [www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au](http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au)) Extended guided bushwalks year-round in both the Top End and the Centre.

**World Expeditions** (☎ 1300 720 000; [www.worldexpeditions.com.au](http://www.worldexpeditions.com.au)) More Larapinta Trail walks.

## Safety & Precautions

In a harsh, remote environment, it pays to be prepared. First rule is to carry plenty of water – at least 1L per person per hour. If you're going on a long walk, let someone know of your planned route and intended return time. Stick to marked trails or make sure you have a good map and compass and know how to use them.

In central Australia, avoid walking in the hottest months (November to March). For multiday walks into remote regions it pays to hire an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). For use only in emergencies, these nifty gadgets send out a distress signal allowing rescuers to locate you. They can be hired in hiking shops in Alice Springs and Darwin for around \$10 a day.

In the Centre, Parks & Wildlife operates the voluntary **Overnight Walker Registration Scheme** (☎ 1300 650 730; [www.nreta.nt.gov.au](http://www.nreta.nt.gov.au)), which is a safety net for overnight walkers. Call with credit card details and full details of your intended walk. There's a deposit of \$50/200 per person/group, which is refunded when you deregister. You must deregister by noon on the nominated day of completion, otherwise a search will be organised – at great expense. The scheme only applies to the Larapinta Trail, Ormiston Gorge to Mt Giles in the West MacDonnell National Park, and the Giles Track in Watarrka National Park. In Kakadu and Nitmiluk national parks, registration for overnight walks is compulsory and a permit must be obtained at the respective visitors centres (\$50 deposit at Nitmiluk). Elsewhere, you should notify the ranger of your intentions if heading out on a long walk.

Other tips:

- Pay any fees and acquire any permits required by local authorities.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route (eg from park authorities).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.

For information on national parks in the Northern Territory see the Parks & Wildlife website ([www.nreta.nt.gov.au](http://www.nreta.nt.gov.au)) and the Parks Australia website ([www.deh.gov.au/parks](http://www.deh.gov.au/parks)).

**TOP BUSHWALKS**

- Kings Canyon Rim Walk, Watarrka National Park (p230)
- Jatbula Trail, Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park (p142)
- Barrk Sandstone Bushwalk, Kakadu National Park (p124)
- Ormiston Pound Walk, West MacDonnell National Park (p223)
- Plateau above Twin Falls, Kakadu National Park (p126)
- Mt Sonder, West MacDonnell National Park (p224)
- Trephina Gorge, East MacDonnell Ranges (p236)
- Valley of the Winds, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (p256)
- Smitt Rock, Nitmiluk National Park (p142)
- Motor Car Falls, Kakadu (p127)

- Walk only in regions and along tracks that fall within the limits of your capabilities.
- Never assume a watercourse or body of water indicated on a map actually contains water.

**CAMEL & HORSE RIDING**

Plodding through the desert on a doe-eyed dromedary, or saddling up to ride at a remote cattle station, is as outback as it gets.

Camels have existed out here since early explorers first imported them to help cover long distances in the harsh conditions. In 1860 camels were imported for the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition and by the late 1860s they were arriving in large numbers along with their handlers – often referred to as Afghans, but actually from various parts of west Asia. The camels were superbly adapted to life in the desert, able to carry heavy loads and survive for relatively long periods without water. Today there are an estimated 60,000 wild camels roaming around the Territory!

Camel tourism began in the 1960s and there are currently four operators in the Territory offering anything from a 10-minute ride to a multiday safari. In Alice Springs (p184) you can take a camel out to breakfast or dinner at the Frontier Camel Farm, or go on an overnight ride, sleeping out in a swag with Pynden Camel Tracks. Down at Uluru (p251) you can plod out towards the Rock at sunrise or sunset with Uluru Camel Tours. For the true camel experience, however, head to Camels Australia at Stuart's Well (p244). Here you can take three- or five-day safaris into the desert. Camels are saddled and led in convoy and are surprisingly easy to ride, but several hours on a dromedary can leave you bow-legged and backside-sore!

Horses have also played an integral part in outback station life, although they have largely been replaced by vehicles and motorcycles. Still, horse-riding opportunities are surprisingly limited, partly due to high public liability insurance costs. In the Centre, Old Ambalindum Homestead (p184) offers riding lessons and short trail rides. Riding's also available at Mt Bundy Station in Adelaide River (p102).

**CYCLING**

You don't have to be a hard-core, long-distance cyclist to enjoy a bit of pedal power in the Territory. The flat terrain of Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine is perfect for getting around and seeing the sights, and

bikes can easily be hired in towns. The cycling track from Alice Springs to Simpsons Gap in the West MacDonnell Ranges (p219) is an excellent day trip and even Uluru can be circumnavigated by bicycle.

As for riding further afield, the distances are vast: along stretches of lonely outback road you may spot a cyclist and wonder what the hell they're doing out there in the searing heat, miles from anywhere. For some, this is almost a rite of passage; the rest stops containing water tanks every 200km or so on main highways make the going a bit easier.

**DIVING**

Darwin Harbour is a wreck-diver's delight. Wrecks from WWII and Cyclone Tracy have created artificial reefs encrusted with marine organisms, which support an abundant mix of soft corals and tropical fish. Unfortunately, the huge tides mean visibility may be poor and diving times can be restricted – neap tides are the best time to dive. See p71 for dive outfits. Diving and snorkelling is also possible from the Gove Peninsula in Arnhem Land if you're on the right tour or charter.

**FISHING**

For many visitors to northern Australia, the biggest lure is to land a 'barra' – Australia's premier native sport fish. Barramundi have great fighting qualities: the fish will make a couple of hits on your line, but once it takes a lure or fly, it fights like hell to be free. As you try to reel one in, chances are it will play the game for a bit, then make some powerful runs, often leaping clear of the water and shaking its head in an attempt to throw the hook. Even the smaller fish (3kg to 4kg) can put up a decent fight – but when they are about 6kg or more you have a real battle on your hands.

Landing the barra is a challenge, but it's only half the fun; the other half is eating it. The taste of the flesh does depend to some extent on where the fish is caught. Fish that have been in saltwater or tidal rivers are generally found to have the sweetest flavour; those in landlocked waterways can have a muddy flavour and softer flesh if the water is a bit murky.

Barramundi is found throughout coastal and riverine waters of the Top End. The best time to catch them is post-Wet (ie around late March to the end of May). At this time the floods are receding from the rivers and the fish tend to gather in the freshwater creeks. A good method is to fish from an anchored boat and cast a lure into a likely spot, such as a small creek mouth or floodway.

Of course, barramundi is not the only fish around. Other popular sport fish include queenfish, mangrove jack, saratoga and threadfin salmon. In coastal waters you'll find Spanish mackerel, barracuda, trevally, golden snapper and red emperor.

There are dozens of commercial operators offering fishing trips for barra and other sporting fish throughout the Top End.

**TOP FISHING SPOTS**

- Mary River (p94)
- Daly River (p104)
- Borroloola (p169)
- Roper Bar (p168)
- Kakadu National Park (p108)

For the lowdown on diving in Australia, see Scuba Australia ([www.scubaaustralia.com.au](http://www.scubaaustralia.com.au)), which has a Northern Territory section.

For an all-round fishing resource, check out [www.fishingtheterritory.com](http://www.fishingtheterritory.com).

The first camel imported to Australia came from the Canary Islands in 1940.

You don't need a fishing licence in the Territory, but there are a few rules. The minimum size limit for barra is 55cm (it's no coincidence that this also happens to be the side measurement of a slab of beer!), and the bag limit is five fish in one day (two in the Mary River system). The fish may not be retained on a tether line at any time, and spears or spear guns cannot be used. Certain areas of the Northern Territory are closed to fishing between 1 October and 31 January.

For more information on fishing regulations contact the **Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory** (☎ 8989 2499; www.afant.com.au) or **NT Fisheries** (☎ 8999 2372).

## FOSSICKING

Northern Australia experienced a couple of mini-gold rushes in the early days, and panning or fossicking for gems and minerals is still a popular pastime. To get to the best spots you really need a 4WD, and don't kid yourself – it's hard, backbreaking work under hot sun if you really want to find that hidden jewel or nugget! With a bit of effort and a good eye, fossickers will find rewards such as agate, amethyst, garnet, jasper, zircon and, of course, gold. Good places to try are the Harts Range (p211) and the northern goldfields between Pine Creek (p104) and Hayes Creek (p103).

In order to fossick you must first obtain a fossicking permit (free). They are available from the tourist offices in Darwin and Alice Springs, or Gemtree (p211) in the Harts Range. Permission to fossick on freehold land and mineral leases must be obtained from the owner or leaseholder. Contact the **Department of Mines & Energy** (in Darwin ☎ 08-8999 5286, in Alice Springs ☎ 08-8951 5658) for information on mining law, geological maps, reports and fossicking guides.

## HOT-AIR BALLOONING

Few experiences are as exhilarating as floating high above the desert as dawn breaks over the rugged MacDonnell Ranges. Once the initial nerves wear off, hanging in the basket of a hot-air balloon is a calming, almost surreal experience, with barely a sound except for the occasional blast of the burners and the clicking of cameras. Three hot-air balloon companies operate daily flights from Alice Springs (p184). They start early in darkness, looking for a suitable launch site in the desert, then there's a flurry of activity as the balloon is unpacked, attached to the basket and inflated. After a one-hour or half-hour flight, the basket touches down – hopefully like a feather – and you're taken for a rewarding chicken and champagne breakfast.

## SCENIC FLIGHTS

Taking to the air in a light plane or helicopter gives you unparalleled views over some of the Northern Territory's finest landscapes. In some cases flights offer the chance to see places that are inaccessible by vehicle or on foot, and the photo opportunities are superb. Some of the best flights are out to Jim Jim and Twin Falls in Kakadu National Park from Jabiru and Cooida (p117) or Darwin (p75), flights over Litchfield National Park (p101), helicopter flights over Katherine Gorge (p144), flights over Uluru (p252), and helicopter flights over the West MacDonnells from Glen Helen Resort (p223).

## SWIMMING

With a hot year-round climate in the Top End and scorching summers in the Centre, swimming is understandably popular. Because of the seasonal presence of the dangerous box jellyfish (marine stingers), Darwin's beaches

are safest from May to September – check locally before venturing in. Likewise, most of the estuarine waters, billabongs and rivers in the Top End are off limits because of saltwater crocodiles. Always heed warning signs and err on the side of caution.

Favourite spots for safe swimming in the Dry are the waterfall-fed plunge pools at Litchfield National Park. Katherine Gorge (p141) is also a good place for swimming. There are several inviting thermal pools in the Top End, including at Mataranka (p145), Berry Springs (p96), Katherine (p137) and the more remote Tjuwalyin (Douglas) Hot Springs (p103).

In the Centre, the MacDonnell Ranges have a string of permanent waterholes that can be freezing in winter but are a godsend in summer. They include Ellery Creek Big Hole (p221), Ormiston Gorge (p222) and Redbank Gorge (p224).

## WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Whether you realise it or not, there's a menagerie of wildlife in the Northern Territory, especially if you're bushwalking or boating. Much of the fauna is very shy (that's what puts the 'wild' in wildlife) and many animals in central and northern Australia are only active at night.

But take the time to stop and look around, and you'll see plenty. The best places for guaranteed wildlife sightings and a chance to see lots of animals up close are the superb Territory Wildlife Park (p96) outside Darwin and the Desert Park (p179) at Alice Springs.

You only want to see saltwater crocodiles from a safe distance, but crocodile farms in Darwin (p69) and the jumping croc shows on Adelaide River Crossing (p93) are a real eye-opener. You may see freshwater crocs at Litchfield National Park (p98) and Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge; p141). The best natural wildlife park in the Territory is Kakadu National Park, especially for bird-watchers. On the Yellow Water cruise (p116) you'll see birds such as herons, egrets, kingfishers, brolgas and jabirus, as well as sea eagles and kites. Another excellent opportunity for bird-watching is the Mary River wetlands (p94).

In the arid centre you'll see kangaroos, black-footed rock wallabies, dingoes and, if you're lucky, small marsupials. Wedge-tailed eagles and whistling kites are a common sight in the air. Good places for wildlife-spotting include the West MacDonnell Ranges (p216) and Watarrka National Park (p229).

The wedge-tailed eagle – the Northern Territory's fauna symbol – has an average wingspan of 2.3m.

The world's worst ballooning disaster occurred in Alice Springs in 1989 when 13 people died after two balloons collided in midair.



# Food & Drink

Australia doesn't really have a national dish. What it does have is 'Modern Australian', an attempt to classify the unclassifiable. If it's not authentically French or some other imported cuisine, or if it's a melange of East and West, or contemporary and traditional styles, then it's Modern Australian. Cuisine doesn't really alter from one region to another, but some influences are obvious, such as the Southeast Asian migration to Darwin. For the Northern Territory government, that's your authentic Australian cuisine right there – a glorious jumble of Indigenous and multicultural infusions. Accordingly, they've initiated a 'New Tastes of Australia' branding campaign for local food and produce, and rebranded Darwin as a centre for 'food tourism'. There may come a day soon when the Territory's mooted harvesting of magpie geese, freshwater long-neck turtles, crocodiles, mud-mussels and other native wildlife species is embraced by the rest of the country's culinary scene.

## STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Barramundi is the Territory's ubiquitous, iconic fish dish and it's generating a buzz overseas, too: at the Danish royal wedding in 2004, Northern Territory barramundi was served in favour of the traditional Atlantic salmon.

Territorian tiger prawns, yabbies, mud crabs and prawns are delectable, while on a different tack (still aquatic, though) the government is looking to trial, in consultation with Indigenous communities, the cultivation of trepang (also known as the 'sea cucumber' or 'sea slug') for Asian food markets. If successful, the trepang would be making a rousing comeback – it's a symbol of early Indigenous history in the Territory, and of cooperation and peace with other cultures (see p24).

Generally, meat, meat and more meat is the go – in the Territory, old habits die hard and cholesterol is for wimps. If you are into dinner-plate-sized, inch-thick steaks, you've come to the right place. Novelty meats such as kangaroo, camel, crocodile and buffalo also feature prominently, especially in places where gaggles of tourists congregate.

### TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS *Matthew Evans*

Much of the Territory's most interesting (if not always the most delicious) produce is native. There's kangaroo, a deep, purpley-red meat, which is deliciously sweet. Fillets are so tender and lean they have to be served rare. The tail is often braised in the same way oxtail is cooked. There's also crocodile, a white meat not dissimilar to fish with a texture closer to chicken. In the outback you may be encouraged to try witchetty grubs, which look like giant maggots and taste nutty, but with a squishy texture. In Kakadu you may find green ants. The way to eat them is to pick them up and bite off their lightly acidic bottoms. Sugar ant abdomens are full of sweet sap; again, just bite off the tail end.

Much of the native flora has evolved to contain unpalatable chemicals. Despite this, you may enjoy fiery bush pepper, coffee-like flecks of wattle seed, vibrant purple rosella flowers, lightly acidic bush tomato (*akudjura*), and, of course, the Hawaii-appropriated macadamia nut.

The wildest food of all is Vegemite, a dangerously salty yeast-extract with iconic status. Most commonly used on toast, it's also not bad on cheese sandwiches. It's often carried overseas for homesick expats, or licked from fingers by freckle-faced youngsters. Outsiders tend to find the flavour vulgar and completely overwhelming. But what would they know?

The *Australian Regional Food Guide*, by Sally and Gordon Hammond, is an invaluable resource for travellers, with listings for regional food producers, restaurants and so on covering every state and territory. There's an accompanying website ([www.australianregionalfoodguide.com](http://www.australianregionalfoodguide.com)).

There are over 170 bush foods and medicines available for consumption in the outback.

In Darwin you can wrap your laughing gear around dishes from Indonesia, India, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Brazil, Portugal, the Philippines, Laos, Japan, Germany, Vietnam, Thailand, China, Italy, Greece and more.

In some of the flashier restaurants, you might find bush-tomato roesti with munthari chutney, camel-eye fillet salt-bush wraps with Borrooloola mud crab, Barramundi moulie, Thai camel salad with yam bean and tamarind, or char-grilled kangaroo dusted in wattle seed and native peppers.

As a rule, outside of Darwin the food scene is pretty much standard – your barramundi will come with chips, or it won't come at all. You might also find that the croc meat you've heard so much about will be crumbed and fried. Alice Springs, Yulara and Kakadu, however, feature restaurants with innovative menus touting many native Australian ingredients, such as wattle seed and quandong.

## DRINKS

In the Territory, it seems, you can order any type of drink you want – as long as it's beer (or Coke). That's largely due to the climate: after a long, hot day working, walking or driving, a cold ale is almost a necessity, so much so that alcohol consumption here ranks above all Australian states and is among the world's highest – a recent estimate attributed 1120 standard alcoholic drinks per Territorian per year.

Many roadhouses pride themselves on the variety of beer they stock, but if you're wondering what to ask for, a 285mL glass of beer is a 'handle', a 425mL glass is a 'schooner' and a 375mL bottle with a cap is a 'stubby'. Most beers have an alcohol content around 5%. That's less than many European beers but stronger than most North American beer (which, as we all know, is like making love in a canoe). Light beers come in at less than 3% alcohol.

Well-known beers in the Territory include Victoria Bitter (or VB), Melbourne Bitter and Carlton Draught; the only brew indigenous to the Territory is NT Draught, but it's not terribly popular. The best mainstream Aussie beers are produced by Cascade (Tasmania) and Coopers (South Australia), and keep your eye out for the products of boutique breweries like James Squire, Matilda Bay, Little Creatures and Mountain Goat. You'll find Guinness on tap in numerous pubs in Alice and Darwin.

Excessive use of alcohol is a problem in many Aboriginal communities and for this reason many are now 'dry'; it's an offence to carry alcohol into these places. The problem has also led to restricted trading hours and even 'dry days' in some places.

If you don't fancy a beer, you could always turn to wine, as many Australians have done. Good-quality Australian wines are relatively cheap and readily available. Most wine is sold in 750mL bottles or in 2L and 4L 'casks' (a great Australian innovation, sometimes called 'Chateau Cardboard' or 'goonies').

White wines are almost always consumed chilled; in summer or in the outback many people chill their reds, too. Australia also produces excellent ports (perfect for around the campfire) and superb muscats, but average sherries.

But the Territory always has to do things differently, and in the case of wine it really has no choice; the harsh climes make grapevines a non-starter. Instead, while you're here, try some mango wine – from the Red Centre Farm (p206). The extra-dry variety complements spicy dishes, while sweet mango wine is terrific with dessert.

The Northern Territory has the world's highest per capita consumption rate of Coca-Cola.

## CELEBRATIONS

Food and celebration are strongly linked: celebrations often involve equal amounts of food and alcohol. A birthday could well be a barbecue (barbie) of steak or prawns, washed down with a beverage or two. Weddings are usually followed by a big slap-up dinner, though the food is often far from memorable. Christenings are more sober, mostly offering home-baked biscuits and a cup of tea.

Christmas, in mid summer, is less likely to involve a traditional European baked dinner, and more likely to be replaced by a barbecue, full of seafood and quality steak, as a response to the warm weather. Prawn prices skyrocket, chicken may be eaten with champagne at breakfast, and the main meal is usually in the afternoon, after a swim, and before a really good, long siesta.

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Most restaurants open around noon for lunch and from 6pm or 7pm for dinner. Lunch is usually taken shortly after noon, and dinner bookings are generally made for 7.30pm or 8pm, though in Darwin some restaurants stay open past 10pm.

In Darwin, the climate is naturally suited to alfresco dining, as well as to the delightful night-market tradition. As the sun dips, half the town descends on Mindil Beach Night Market, where every man, woman, kid and dog settles under the coconut palms for sunset, submitting to whichever tantalising food stall overwhelms their olfactory nerves the most. Similar stalls can be found at the Parap Village Market, Nightcliff Market and Palmerston Market, while Rapid Creek Market resembles an Asian marketplace, boasting exotic ingredients, a heady mixture of spices and the scent of jackfruit and durian. See p80 for more on Darwin's markets.

Darwin and Alice Springs have a fabulous range of eateries, with all major cuisines represented at any budget, though your money will not go as far as in southern capitals. Prices range widely from \$10 up to \$30 for a main course; portions will generally be enormous. Most places are licensed to sell alcohol, though some also advertise BYO (bring your own).

## Quick Eats

A competitively priced place to eat is in a club or pub where you order (at the kitchen or bar) staples like fisherman's basket, steak, mixed grills, chicken cordon bleu or Vienna schnitzel.

While not serving the most inspired food, roadhouses provide convenient stops along the highways. Typically, you'll find fried food and snacks, though some roadhouses also function as the town pub.

While a wide range of produce is sold in supermarkets, most of it has been trucked long distances and is not always as fresh as it might be. It can also be more expensive than in east-coast cities. The exception is beef,

### TOP TERRITORY DINING EXPERIENCES

- Dining champagne-style in the desert at the Sounds of Silence dinner, Yulara (p258)
- Eating a freshly caught barramundi – from your own line – in the Top End (p51)
- Browsing the multitude of ethnic food stalls at Mindil Beach Market, Darwin (p80)
- Taking a camel ride out to a three-course bush dinner, Alice Springs (p191)
- Barbecuing your own barra, roo, camel or emu meat at the Outback Pioneer, Yulara (p258)

## DOS & DON'TS *Matthew Evans*

- Do 'shout' drinks – this is a revered custom where people rotate paying for a round of drinks. Just don't leave before it's your turn to buy, and always shout for your group on arrival at the pub.
- Do tip (up to 15%) for good service, when in a big group, or if your kids have gone crazy and trashed the dining room.
- Do show up for restaurant dinner reservations on time. Not only may your table be given to someone else if you're late, staggered bookings are designed to make the experience more seamless.
- Do take a small gift and/or a bottle of wine to dinner parties.
- Do use British knife and fork skills: keep the fork in the left hand, tines down, and the knife in the right.
- Do offer to wash up or help clear the table after a meal at a friend's house.
- Do ring or send a note (even an email) a day or so after a dinner party, unless the friends are so close you feel it unnecessary. Even then, thank them the very next time you speak.
- Do offer to take meat and/or a salad to a barbecue. At the traditional Aussie barbie for a big group, each family is expected to bring part or all of their own tucker.
- Don't smoke in eateries – it's banned – and never smoke in someone's house before asking.
- Don't talk with your mouth full – it's considered uncouth.
- Don't ever accept a shout unless you intend to return the shout soon afterwards.
- Don't freak out when the waiter in a restaurant attempts to 'lap' your serviette (napkin) by laying it over your crotch. It's considered to be the height of service. If you don't want them to do this, place your serviette on your lap before they get a chance.
- Don't expect a date to pay for you. It's quite common for everyone to pay their own way.
- Don't expect servile or obsequious service. Professional waiters are intelligent, caring equals whose disdain can perfectly match any diner's attempt at contempt.
- Don't ever tip bad service.

locally produced and cheap. Away from the main towns, the range and freshness of food drops and prices increase.

Milk bars sell an assortment of pies, pasties, sandwiches and milkshakes, and there are usually a few fast-food joints. All towns of any size have at least one pizza place and an Asian takeaway, while Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine have bakeries and delicatessens selling gourmet fare.

## VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Many cafés and restaurants in Darwin and Alice Springs have vegetarian dishes on the menu, while enlightened pubs and roadhouses often feature something meatless. Elsewhere you may have to resort to cheese and tomato toasties, the fairly ordinary salad bars at pub bistros, or cook for yourself. Take care with risotto and soups, as meat stock is often used.

Vegans will find the going much tougher, but there are usually dishes that are vegan-adaptable at restaurants.

## EATING WITH KIDS

Dining with children is relatively easy. Apart from the most flash places, children are generally welcomed, particularly at Chinese, Greek or Italian restaurants. Kids are usually more than welcome at cafés, while bistros

**EAT YOUR WORDS** *Matthew Evans*

**Barbie** A barbecue, where (traditionally) smoke and overcooked meat are matched with lashings of coleslaw, potato salad and beer.

**Chiko Roll** A fascinating large, spring roll–like pastry for sale in takeaway shops. Best used as an item of self-defence rather than eaten.

**Esky** An insulated ice chest to hold your tinnies, before you hold them in your tinny holder. May be carried onto your tinny, too.

**Pav** Pavlova, a meringue dessert topped with cream, passionfruit and kiwifruit or other fresh fruit.

**Rat coffins** Meat pies (aka maggot bags); the traditional ones are made with minced beef and eaten with tomato sauce.

**Sanger/sando** A sandwich.

**Snags** Sausages (aka surprise bags).

**Snot block** A vanilla slice – vanilla custard topped and tailed with pastry.

**Tim Tam** A commercial chocolate biscuit that lies close to the heart of most Australians. Best consumed as a Tim Tam Shooter, where the two diagonally opposite corners of the rectangular biscuit are nibbled off, and a hot drink (tea is the true aficionado's favourite) is sucked through the fast-melting biscuit like a straw. Ugly but good.

**Tinny** Usually refers to a can of beer, but could also be the small boat you go fishing for mud crabs in (and you'd take a few tinnies in your tinny, in that case).

**Tinny holder** Insulating material that you use to keep the tinny ice cold, and nothing to do with a boat.

and clubs often see families dining early. Many fine-dining restaurants don't welcome small children (assuming they're all ill-behaved).

Most places that do welcome children don't have separate kids' menus, and those that do usually offer everything straight from the deep fryer – crumbed chicken and chips, that kind of thing. It's better to find something on the menu (say a pasta or salad) and have the kitchen adapt it slightly to your children's needs.