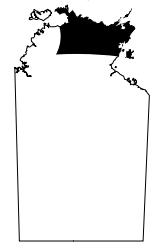


Kakadu & Arnhem Land



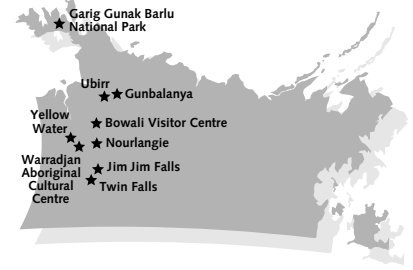
Kakadu and Arnhem Land epitomise the remarkable landscape and cultural heritage of the Top End. Each is a treasure house of natural history and Aboriginal art, and both are significant in terms of contemporary Indigenous culture and its connection with tradition.

Kakadu is not just a nature reserve; it is also an acknowledgement of the elemental link between the Aboriginal custodians and the country they have nurtured, endured and respected for thousands of generations. The landscape is an ever-changing tapestry – periodically scorched and flooded, apparently desolate or obviously abundant depending on the season. The sun-baked rocky ramparts of the Arnhem Land escarpment mark the boundary of the ‘stone country’ – the elevated Arnhem Land Plateau. In a big Wet, dramatic waterfalls cascade off the escarpment to fill raging watercourses that spill over onto the vast floodplains. Replenished lowlands of emerald green are scattered with sprawling billabongs, life is super-abundant and roads are flooded. The plateau and the sandstone outliers become islands of sanctuary: ancient monsoon shelters and rock-art galleries.

The water will recede, shrinking billabongs will become crowded then deserted, fires will ignite, a patchwork of green, yellow, brown, black will await next season’s rains. For climate calls the tune, as it always has – when the migrating birds arrive, when the crocodile lays her eggs, when the magpie geese can be easily hunted.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Viewing the exceptional Aboriginal rock-art galleries under the massive rock face of **Nourlangie** (p122)
- Spotting the ochre thylacine and catching the sunset from the rocky sentinel of **Ubirr** (p120)
- Discovering the rock-art of Injalak and visiting the art centre at **Gunbalanya** (p128)
- Cruising with crocodiles and seeing remarkable birdlife on **Yellow Water Wetlands** (p116)
- Visiting Kakadu’s excellent and absorbing **Bowali Visitor Centre** (p114) and **Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre** (p114)
- Taking a small-group, expertly guided tour to explore **Jim Jim and Twin Falls** (p124)
- Investigating the ruins of Victoria Settlement in the remote **Garig Gunak Barlu National Park** (p129)



■ TELEPHONE CODE ☎ 08

■ Kakadu National Park: www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu/
 ■ East Arnhem Land Tourism Association: www.ealta.org

KAKADU NATIONAL PARK

Kakadu National Park is one of Australia's (if not one of the world's) greatest national parks. Encompassing almost 20,000 sq km, it is certainly one of the largest parks in Australia, and is renowned for its protection of a spectacular ecosystem and an important concentration of ancient rock art. In 1984, Kakadu gained World Heritage Listing for both its ecological and cultural heritage.

The name Kakadu comes from Gagadju, one of the languages spoken in the north of the region. Much of Kakadu is Aboriginal land, leased to the government for use as a national park. The entire park is jointly managed by Parks Australia and the traditional Aboriginal owners. There are around 300 Aboriginal people living in several Aboriginal settlements in the park and in the township of Jabiru, and about one-third of the park rangers are Aboriginal.

The traditional owners are represented through five associations, which own a number of the park's material assets, including resorts at Jabiru and Cooinda, the Border Store and the Yellow Water cruise operation.

History

Kakadu was proclaimed a national park in three stages. Stage One, the eastern and central part of the park (including Ubirr, Nourlangie, Jim Jim and Twin Falls and Yellow Water Billabong), was declared in 1979. Stage Two, in the north, was declared in 1984 and gained World Heritage listing. Stage Three, in the south, was finally listed in 1991, bringing virtually the whole of the South Alligator River system within the park.

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE

It is known that Aboriginal people have lived in the Kakadu area for at least 23,000 years, and possibly up to 50,000 years. Artefacts such as stone tools and grindstones found at a number of sites indicate constant habitation in the area.

As in other parts of Australia, the people led a hunter-gatherer existence, where men hunted and women gathered vegetable foods and seeds. They moved through the country as necessary, but never aimlessly, and along defined paths that had been used for generations in the search for food, water or other natural resources such as ochre or spears.

The rocky nature of the rugged countryside that typifies much of the park offered excellent shelter and many of these shelters bear art sites of international importance.

Today the park is occupied by a number of different groups (or clans), each with a different language and often different traditional practices. Although many practices have been modified or lost altogether in the years since contact with whites, the traditional owners still have strong personal and spiritual links with the land.

EUROPEAN EXPLORATION

Although a number of vessels had sailed along the coast on exploratory voyages since the mid-17th century, it wasn't until Captain Phillip King made a number of voyages between 1818 and 1822 that any of the hinterland was investigated. King travelled up the East Alligator and South Alligator Rivers, and named them after mistaking the many saltwater crocs for alligators.

The first European to come through this area overland was the remarkable Prussian naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt, who set out from Queensland in October 1844 for Port Essington on the Cobour Peninsula. He crossed the Arnhem Land plateau and the South Alligator River many months later, before finally staggering into Port Essington, somewhat worse for wear, in December 1845.

Some 20 years later, a party led by experienced explorer John McKinlay was sent out by the South Australian government to find a better site than Escape Cliffs by the Adelaide River mouth for a northern settlement. McKinlay botched the expedition by not setting out until the middle of the wet season, which had been particularly severe that year. The party took months to travel just the relatively short distance to the East Alligator River, and ended up bailing out by shooting their horses, constructing a makeshift horse-hide raft and floating all the way back to Escape Cliffs!

In the 1870s the surge of prospectors to the goldfields at Pine Creek led to increased activity in the Kakadu area, and this was followed by the start of pastoral activity.

In the 1890s a few Europeans started to make a living from shooting buffalo for hides in the Alligator rivers region. Foremost among these men was Paddy Cahill, who dominated European settlement in this area until 1925. In that year the Church Missionary Society was given permission by the government to establish a mission at Oenpelli, one of a number throughout the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, which had been established in 1921. By this stage any attempts to set up pastoral properties had failed and parts of the area had become vacant crown land.

The buffalo industry continued throughout the first half of the 20th century with many Aboriginal people working as hunters and tanners. However, with the introduction of synthetics demand fell away and hunting became unviable.

In 1969 and 1972 the precursors to Kakadu, the Woolwonga and Alligator Rivers Wildlife Sanctuaries, were declared. These were followed in 1978 by the granting of some land titles to the traditional Aboriginal owners under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*, and the proclamation of the Kakadu National Park in 1979.

MINING

In 1953 uranium was discovered in the region. Twelve small deposits in the southern reaches of the park were worked in the 1960s, but were abandoned following the declaration of Woolwonga Wildlife Sanctuary.

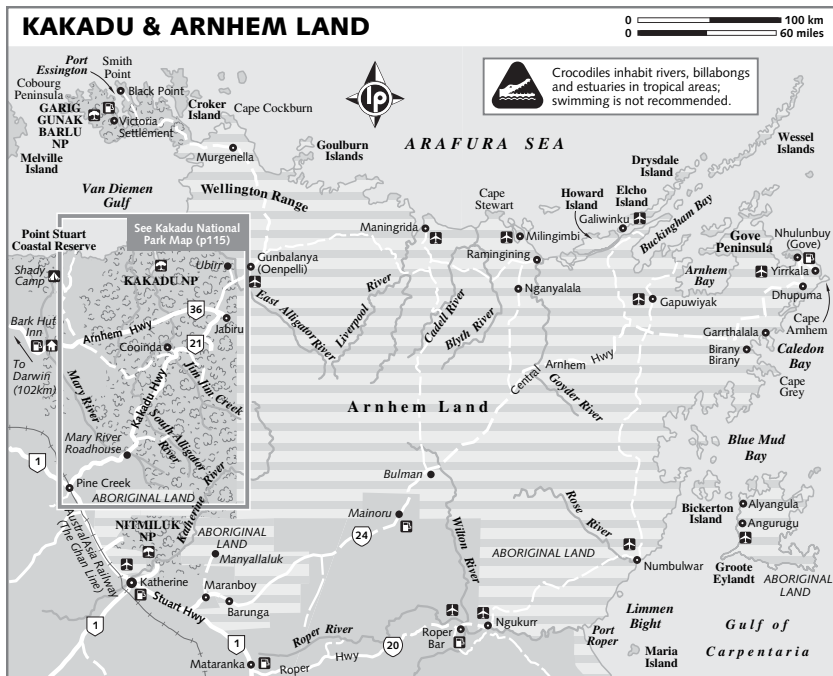
In 1970 three huge deposits – Ranger, Nabarlek and Koongarra – were found, followed by Jabiluka in 1973 (see the boxed text p110). The Nabarlek deposit (in Arnhem Land) was mined in the late '70s, and the Ranger Uranium Mine started producing ore in 1981.

Wildlife

HABITATS & PLANTS

Kakadu's landforms, vegetation and wildlife are inextricably linked, and an understanding of one is virtually impossible without some appreciation of the others.

The Kakadu region has six major landforms: the Arnhem Land escarpment and



JABILUKA MINE

Uranium was discovered at Jabiluka in 1971, and an agreement to mine was negotiated with the local Aboriginal peoples. Mine development was delayed due to oscillating Federal government mining policy until 1996, by which time concern had grown that Aboriginal Elders had been coerced into signing the agreement.

The Jabiluka mine became the scene of sit-in demonstrations during 1998, which resulted in large-scale arrests. A Unesco delegation inspected the mine site and reported that it would endanger Kakadu's World Heritage listing, a finding later contradicted by an Independent Science Panel. In 2003, stockpiled ore was returned into the mine and the decline tunnel leading into the deposit was backfilled as the mining company moved into dialogue with the traditional landowners, the Mirrar people.

In February 2005 the current owners of the Jabiluka mining lease, Energy Resources of Australia (ERA), signed an agreement that gave the Mirrar the deciding vote on any resumption of this controversial mining project. Under the deal ERA is allowed to continue to explore the lease, subject to Mirrar consent. In addition, every four years ERA is allowed to ask the Mirrar to consider opening the mine, beginning in 2006. As the Mirrar have staged a David and Goliath-style battle against the mine's construction for many years, it's unlikely their position, based on cultural and environmental concerns, will change. However, with the closure of the Ranger mine in 2010, the Mirrar will be under considerable pressure to find alternative income.

plateau, coastal estuaries and tidal flats, riverine floodplains, lowlands, monsoon rainforests, and the southern hills. Each has its own distinctive mix of vegetation and animals. Over 1600 plant species have been recorded in the park, and a number of them are still used by the local Aboriginal people for food, bush medicine and other practical purposes.

Arnhem Land Escarpment & Plateau

The meandering Arnhem Land escarpment cuts into the eastern boundary of the park and marks the start of the vast Arnhem plateau – a rugged expanse of sandstone stretching 500km through east and south-east Kakadu. The eroded cliffs, ranging from 30m to 300m in height, provide a dramatic backdrop to many parts of the park. The plateau itself is surprisingly dry, mainly because any rain soaks quickly into the sandstone, recharging the water table and keeping many rivers and waterfalls flowing year-round.

The soil on the plateau is shallow and low in nutrients, and supports hardy plants that can tolerate the generally poor conditions, such as spinifex grass and the endemic sandstone pandanus palm.

Coastal Estuaries & Tidal Flats

The coastal zone has long stretches of mangroves, which are important for stabilising the mud flats and provide a nursery ground for marine and bird life. Mangroves line the

South Alligator River for much of its length upstream, but most of this habitat is not generally accessible.

Floodplains

Kakadu is drained by four major rivers (from west to east, the Wildman, West Alligator, South Alligator and East Alligator), which during the Wet overflow to form vast wetlands. These floods are a chaotic yet vital part of the park's ecology. Areas on river floodplains that are perfectly dry underfoot in September could be under 3m of water a few months later. As the waters recede in the Dry, some loops of wet-season watercourses become cut off, and don't dry up; these billabongs are a magnet for wildlife.

The wetlands and many of the permanent billabongs are fringed by stands of tall trees, predominantly paperbarks with their sweet-smelling blossoms, which attract a multitude of birds, and also freshwater mangroves and pandanus palms. The wetlands offer some of the most spectacular sights of the park, and have been considered sufficiently important to be placed on the List of Wetlands of International Importance. Some of the more accessible wetland areas include Yellow Water, Mamukala, Ubirr and Bubba.

Lowlands

About half the park – predominantly the southern section – is dry lowlands with

open grassland or woodland. The main tree of the woodland, and one that dominates much of the Top End, is a eucalypt, the Darwin woollybutt – a predominantly smooth-barked tree with a conspicuous fibrous base. Below the canopy, pandanus palms and other small trees grow, while the ground is covered by annual grasses. Naturally enough these grasses are the dominant form of vegetation in the grasslands, and after the Wet can shoot up to 2m high.

Much of the Kakadu Hwy from the Stuart Hwy into Jabiru passes through this habitat.

Monsoon Rainforest

Isolated pockets of monsoon rainforest appear throughout the park, and are of one of two types: coastal and sandstone. Coastal monsoon rainforest is dominated by banyan, kapok and milkwood trees, and generally appears along river banks or other places where there is permanent water – either above or below ground. Sandstone monsoon rainforest grows along the gorges of the escarpment, such as at Jim Jim Falls.

Southern Hills

Rocky hills and ridges in the southern part of the park are of volcanic origin, and erosion of this material has led to a distinctive soil, giving rise to some unique flora and, in turn, fauna. One of the most noticeable and

widespread eucalypts found here, especially in the Gunlom vicinity, is the salmon gum, which has smooth salmon-pink trunk and branches.

ANIMALS

Kakadu has over 60 species of mammals, more than 280 bird species, 120 or so types of reptile, 25 species of frog, 55 freshwater fish species and at least 10,000 different kinds of insect. There are frequent additions to the list and a few of the rarer species are unique to the park.

Most visitors see only a fraction of these creatures in a visit, since many of them are shy, nocturnal or scarce. Take advantage of talks and walks led by park rangers, mainly in the Dry, to get to know and see more of the wildlife (see p116).

Mammals

Eight types of kangaroos and wallabies inhabit the park, mostly in the open forest and woodland areas, or on the fringes of the floodplains. Most commonly seen are agile wallabies – petite, fawn-coloured wallabies that rocket through the undergrowth or into the path of your car – and the large antilopine wallaroo, Kakadu's largest macropod. Those not so often sighted include the short-eared rock wallabies, which can sometimes be seen at Ubirr first thing in the morning and at

WHY SO MUCH SMOKE?

Many first-time visitors to the Top End in the Dry comment on the amount of smoke in the sky from large bushfires. In a country where bushfires are associated with enormous damage and loss of life, it sometimes seems as though huge tracts of the Top End are being reduced to ashes. In fact the truth is that the fires, although uncontrolled, are deliberately lit and are rejuvenating the country.

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have used fire as a tool for hunting and environmental management. In fact, they have been doing it for so long that they have changed the environment, selecting many plant species that not only survive fires, but which also rely on them for seedling regeneration. The usual practice was to light fires in the early Dry to burn the lower shrubs and spear grass that grows so prolifically during the Wet. Fires late in the Dry were avoided as they could burn out of control over huge areas. The early-season fires would burn over a fairly small area, and the result was a mosaic of burnt and unburnt areas. Populations of plants and animals that would have been destroyed in a wildfire could thus shelter in unburnt refuges and recolonise burnt areas.

Since European settlement of the Top End and the decline in Aboriginal people leading a traditional existence, the burning patterns have changed. This led to the accumulation of unburnt material on the ground and any fires late in the season could destroy huge areas.

The benefits of the traditional methods of environmental management have been recognised for some time now and park management now recreates the mosaic burn pattern.

sunset. It is well camouflaged and when still can easily be missed. Also keep your eyes open for the enigmatic and beautiful black wallaroo at Nourlangie Rock, where individuals sometimes rest under shaded rock shelters.

Nocturnal northern brushtail possums, sugar gliders and northern brown bandicoots are also common in the woodlands. Kakadu is home to 28 bat species and is a key refuge for four rare varieties. At dusk, look out for huge fruit bats leaving their camps.

Dingoes are also sometimes encountered bounding through spear grass along the roadsides.

Birds

Spectacular, numerous, colourful and noisy – birds are the most conspicuous inhabitants of Kakadu. Those with a general interest will find much to enjoy on the wetlands and walking tracks; keen bird-watchers should head straight for Nourlangie Rock or Gunlom to winkle out some of the rarer species before enjoying the water-bird spectacle. The greatest variety is seen just before the Wet, when masses of birds congregate at the shrinking waterholes, the migrants arrive from Asia and many species start their breeding cycle.

Kakadu is internationally famous for its abundant water birds, and the huge flocks that congregate in the dry season are a highlight. The park is one of the chief refuges in Australia for several species, among them the magpie goose, green pygmy-goose and Burdekin duck. Other fine water birds include pelicans, darters and the black-necked stork, or jabiru, with its distinctive red legs and iridescent blue-black plumage. Those with bright yellow eyes are females; the males have black eyes. Water birds are most easily seen at Mamukala and other wetlands, or on the Yellow Water cruise.

The open woodlands are home to yet more birds. You're quite likely to see rainbow bee-eaters, kingfishers (of which there are six types in Kakadu), the long-tailed pheasant coucal and the endangered bustard, Australia's heaviest bird of flight, as well as gaudy parrots and cockatoos: look for raucous sulphur-crested white cockatoos in the paperbark trees and spectacular red-tailed black cockatoos on recently

burnt ground. Raptors include majestic white-bellied sea eagles, which are often seen near inland waterways, while whistling and black kites are common. Count yourself lucky if you spot an emu in the park – and keep it to yourself, lest it ends up as bush tucker. At night you might hear barking owls calling (they sound just like dogs) and you will almost certainly here the plaintive cry of the bush stone-curlew.

Reptiles

Kakadu is home to an extraordinary number of reptile species. Of the 120 species so far recorded, 11 are endemic, and the striking Oenpelli python was first seen by non-Aboriginal people only in 1976. The world's largest reptile (the estuarine or saltwater crocodile) is abundant in Kakadu. Several large specimens normally hang around Yellow Water. Both Twin and Jim Jim Falls have resident freshwater crocodiles, which are considered harmless. While it's quite a thrill to be so close to nature, all crocodiles are not to be meddled with on any account.

After the crocodiles, Kakadu's most famous reptilian inhabitant is probably the frilled lizard. These large members of the dragon family can grow to 1m in length and are a common sight during the Wet. Look for them sitting upright by the roadside, or scurrying away through the bush on their hind legs. You're more likely to spot one of the goanna species weaving along the trails or sliding through the water.

Although Kakadu has many snakes, most are nocturnal and rarely encountered. Several beautiful species of python include the olive python and the striking black-headed python. File snakes, so named because of the texture of the skin, live in permanent billabongs and are a favoured bush tucker.

Fish

Among the 55 species of fish are some that spend part of their lives in saltwater. The most famous is, of course, the barramundi – a renowned sportfish that can grow to well over 1m long. All 'barra' are born male and change to female at the age of five or six years. The secretive archer fish is so named because it swims just below the surface and, with pinpoint accuracy, squirts drops of water at insects on overhanging branches to knock them down as prey.

Insects

If you're wondering what that engine-like sound coming across the wetlands at dusk is, don't ask – run! The mosquitoes at Ubirr may just carry you away, and they seem to come equipped with hypodermic needles. Mozzies seem to be the most noticeable insect in the park, although they become less of a menace as you move south.

Termites are probably more abundant still, although their impressive earth mounds are much more obvious than the actual insects; these are northern Australia's answer to the vast grazing herds of Africa.

One of the most famous of the park's insect inhabitants is Leichhardt's grasshopper, a beautiful blue and orange insect that was not seen again by science until 130 years after its discovery in 1845. The Aboriginal people know them as Aljurr, the children of Namarrgon (Lightning Man), because they are said to call their father to start the storms before the Wet.

Climate

The average maximum temperature in Kakadu is 34°C year-round. Broadly speaking, the Dry is from May to October and the Wet is from November to April; unsurprisingly, most of the average rainfall of 1600mm falls in the Wet. The transition from Dry to Wet transforms the Kakadu

landscape: wetlands grow, rivers flood and unsealed roads become impassable, cutting off some highlights like Jim Jim Falls.

Orientation

Kakadu National Park is huge. It's 170km from Darwin at its nearest boundary, and stretches another 130km from there across to the western edge of Arnhem Land. It is roughly rectangular and measures about 210km from north to south.

Two main roads traverse the park (Arnhem Hwy and Kakadu Hwy), which are both sealed and accessible year-round. Most points of interest and places to stay are reached off these highways.

The Arnhem Hwy stretches 120km east from the Stuart Hwy to the park entrance and a further 107km to Jabiru, passing the resort at South Alligator on the way.

Seven kilometres past the South Alligator bridge is the Mamukala Wetlands, and 29km further is the turn-off to Ubirr, one of the park's major sites, which lies another 39km to the northeast near the East Alligator River. This road also gives access to Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula.

The bitumen Kakadu Hwy turns south off the Arnhem Hwy shortly before Jabiru. It runs past the Park Headquarters and Bowali Visitor Centre (2.5km), and the turn-offs to

KAKADU'S SEASONAL CYCLE

The Aboriginal people of Kakadu recognise six seasons in the annual climatic cycle. These seasons are marked not only by observed changes in the weather but also by its effect on plant growth and animal behaviour.

Gunmeleng This is the 'build-up' to the Wet, which starts in mid-October. Humidity increases and the temperatures rise to 35°C or more – and the number of mosquitoes, always high near water, rises to near plague proportions. By November the thunderstorms have started, billabongs are replenished and the water birds and fish disperse. Traditionally this is when the Aboriginal people made their seasonal move from the floodplains to the shelter of the escarpment.

Gudjuek The Wet proper continues through January, February and March, with violent thunderstorms and an abundance of plant and animal life thriving in the hot, moist conditions. Most of Kakadu's rain falls during this period.

Banggereng In April, storms (known as 'knock 'em down' storms) flatten the spear grass, which during the course of the Wet has shot up to 2m in height.

Yekke The season of mists, when the air starts to dry out, extends from May to mid-June. The wetlands and waterfalls still have a lot of water and most of the tracks are open; and there aren't too many other visitors. The first firing of the countryside begins.

Wurgeng & Gurrung The most comfortable time to visit Kakadu is during the late Dry in July and August. This is when wildlife, especially birds, gather in large numbers around shrinking billabongs; it's also when most tourists come to the park.

Nourlangie (21km), Muirella (28km), Jim Jim Falls (41km), Cooinda (47km), Maguk (88.5km) and Gunlom (134km), before passing through the southern entrance to the park (145km) and emerging at Pine Creek on the Stuart Hwy (207km).

Old Jim Jim Rd leaves the Kakadu Hwy 7km south of Cooinda and heads west for 145km, passing Giyamongkurr (Black Jungle Springs), before joining the Arnhem Hwy east of Bark Hut.

MAPS

The *Kakadu National Park Visitor Guide & Maps* booklet contains detailed information on all the sights and facilities, including good maps. It is available at the Darwin visitor information centre, Bowali Visitor Centre and the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre.

The Hema *Kakadu National Park* 1:390,000 map is updated regularly and is widely available. The Bowali Visitor Centre sells 1:100,000 topographic maps covering most parts of the park; they can also be studied at the Bowali resources centre. These are essential if you are exploring some remote areas of Kakadu.

Information

Kakadu National Park (www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu; admission free) is open year-round. Access roads to Jim Jim and Twin Falls and to West Alligator Head are closed during the Wet, and attractions in the southern part of the park, such as Gunlom, are accessible only to 4WDs in the Wet.

BOWALI VISITOR CENTRE

The **Bowali Visitor Centre** (☎ 8938 1121; Kakadu Hwy; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a beautifully designed building of walk-through displays that sweep you across the land, explaining Kakadu's ecology from both cultural and conservation perspectives. There is good access and facilities for disabled visitors, a souvenir shop and a good café with espresso coffee and snacks.

The information desk has plenty of leaflets on various aspects of the park. A theatre shows a 25-minute audio-visual presentation on the seasonal changes in the park (screened hourly from 9am to 4pm), and an excellent resource centre has a comprehensive selection of reference books and maps. Another theatre shows documentaries about the park from 8.30am to 3.30pm daily.

The Marrawuddi Gallery sells a range of souvenirs and is well stocked with books on all things Kakadu. A couple of recommended purchases are Bill 'Kakadu Bill' Neidjie's *A Story About Feeling*, which allows you to *feel* Kakadu, and Malcolm Arnold's *Birds of the Top End*.

The visitors centre is about 2.5km south of the Arnhem Hwy intersection. A walking track connects it to Jabiru, about 2km away (30 minutes). Allow at least two hours to get the most out of a visit.

WARRADJAN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL CENTRE

This **cultural centre** (☎ 8975 0051; Yellow Water Area; ☎ 9am-5pm) near Cooinda gives an excellent insight into the culture of the park's traditional owners. The circular design of the building symbolises the way Aboriginal people sit in a circle when having a meeting and is also reminiscent of the *warradjan* (pig-nosed turtle).

The displays depict creation *stories* when the *Nayuyunggi* (first people) laid out the land and the laws, and the winding path you follow through the display symbolises the way the Rainbow Serpent moves through the country. It gives an introduction into the moiety (kin relationships) system and skin names (groups) of the region.

You can choose the video you wish to view from one of 12 on Kakadu and aspects of the local culture. There's also a craft shop selling local art, didgeridoos and paintings, as well as T-shirts and refreshments.

Warradjan is an easy walk (1km, 15 minutes) from the Cooinda resort.

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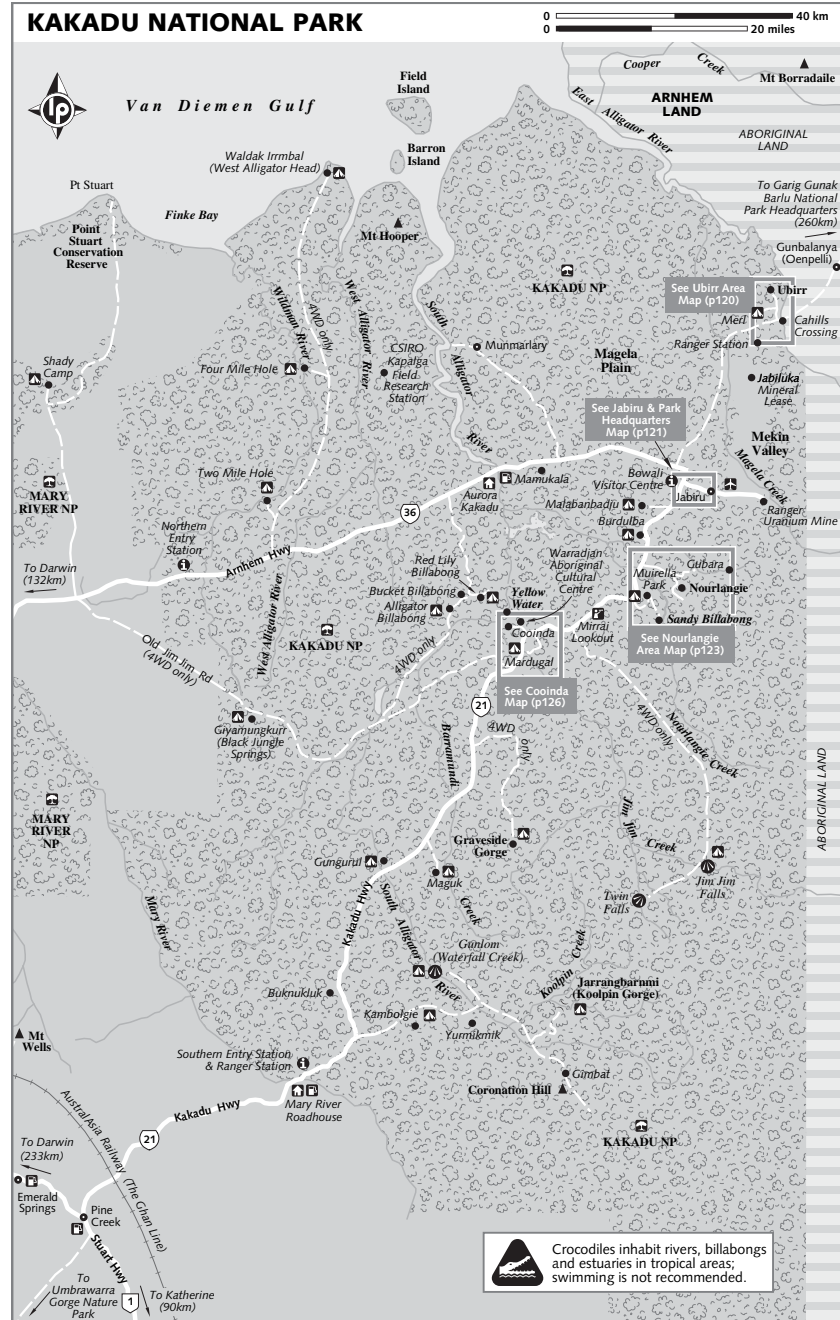
There is wheelchair access to the main gallery and Rainbow Serpent art sites at Ubirr, Anbangbang rock shelter (the main gallery at Nourlangie), the plunge pool at Gunlom, Bowali Visitor Centre and Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre.

Wheelchairs can also be accommodated on the Yellow Water cruise – advise staff when booking.

Activities

BUSHWALKING

Kakadu is excellent but challenging bushwalking country. Many people will be satisfied with the marked tracks. For the more



ROCK ART

Kakadu's extraordinary rock-art sites were critical to the park's World Heritage listing. The art is referred to as naturalistic – portraying the physical, social and cultural environment – and may depict animals that no longer exist, such as the thylacine. More than 5000 sites are known, the oldest dating from more than 20,000 years ago. Truly this is one of the world's greatest collections of rock art: some of the finest galleries are at Ubirr, Nourlangie and Nanguluwur.

The paintings have been classified into four roughly defined periods: Pre-estuarine, which is from the earliest paintings up to around 6000 years ago; Estuarine, which covers the period from 6000 to around 2000 years ago, when rising sea levels flooded valleys and brought the coast to its present level; Freshwater, from 2000 years ago; and Contact period, from about 500 years ago.

For the local Aboriginal people the rock-art sites are a major source of traditional knowledge and are used as their historical archives. The most recent paintings, some executed as recently as the 1980s, connect the local community with the artists. Older paintings are believed by many Aboriginal people to have been painted by spirit people, and depict *stories* that connect the people with creation legends and the development of Aboriginal law.

The majority of rock-art sites open to the public are relatively recent. The paintings, which often have layers of styles painted over one another, may depict hunting scenes, favoured prey, ceremonies or creation ancestors. The hauntingly beautiful stick figures are *mimi* ancestral beings and are one of the oldest art styles.

The conservation of the Kakadu rock-art sites is a major part of the park management task because the natural, water-soluble ochres (paints) used are very susceptible to water damage. Drip-lines of small ridges of clear silicon rubber have been made on the rocks above the paintings to divert the water flow. The most accessible sites receive up to 4000 visitors a week, which presents the problem of dust damage. Boardwalks have been erected to keep the dust down and keep people at a suitable distance from the paintings.

adventurous there are infinite possibilities, especially in the drier southern and eastern sections of the park. You will need a permit from the Bowali Visitor Centre to camp outside established camping grounds.

The marked tracks within the park range from 1km to 12km long and are all fairly easy. Many of the ranger-led activities involve a guided walk along various tracks, and there is a *Park Notes* fact sheet for most, so you can do a self-guided walk. These sheets are available from the visitors centre and usually from a box at the start of each track. Lonely Planet's *Walking in Australia* features a detailed trail description of the Barrk Sandstone Bushwalk at Nourlangie.

A bushwalking permit, available from the Bowali Visitor Centre, is needed for overnight walks. Topographic maps are necessary for extended walks and must be submitted with a permit application. The maps are available from **Maps NT** (☎ 8999 7032; 1st fl, cnr Cavenagh & Bennett Sts, Darwin; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) and at the Bowali Visitor Centre. Allow one week for the permit to be issued.

The **Darwin Bushwalking Club** (☎ 8985 1484; www.bushwalking.org.au/dbc) welcomes visitors and

may be able to help with information too. It has walks most weekends, often in Kakadu.

GUIDED WALKS & TALKS

A wonderful variety of informative and free activities are conducted by park staff during the Dry. If you're in the area, they're well worth joining. The range includes: art-site talks at Ubirr and Nourlangie; guided walks at Ubirr, Nourlangie, Yellow Water, Mardugal, Maguk and Gunlom; kids' activities at Gunlom; and slide shows in the early evening at the Kakadu Lodge in Jabiru, Muirella Park camping ground, Aurora Kakadu Resort at South Alligator, Gagudju Lodge Cooinda, Mardugal camping ground and Gunlom camping ground.

The schedule of activities differs somewhat from season to season; find out details from the Bowali Visitor Centre.

WETLAND & RIVER TRIPS

Yellow Water Cruise

The **crises** (☎ 8979 0145; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; 1½hr adult/child \$40/16, 2hr \$45/18) on the Yellow Water wetlands that operate throughout the year are probably the most popular

activity within the park. Take extra film as you'll spot crocodiles and numerous species of water birds against a backdrop of vivid greens and a bright blue sky mirrored in the still water. The dawn trip is the best, but the other trips throughout the day can be equally good. Take mosquito repellent and sunscreen.

During the Dry, 1½-hour trips depart daily at 11.30am, 1.15pm and 2.45pm, and two-hour cruises leave at 6.45am, 9am and 4.30pm. During the Wet, only 1½-hour trips are available, leaving daily at 8.30am, 11.45am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm.

Tickets are purchased at Gagudju Lodge Cooinda (p126), from where a shuttle bus will deliver you to the departure point. Book at least a day ahead during busy times.

East Alligator River Cruise

It's worth taking a **Guluyambi cruise** (☎ 1800 089 113; www.guluyambi.com.au) on the East Alligator River near Cahill's Crossing in the north of the park. An Aboriginal guide accompanies the 1½-hour trip and the emphasis is on Aboriginal culture and relationship with the land.

Cruises depart from the upstream boat ramp at East Alligator at 9am, 11am, 1pm and 3pm in the Dry and cost \$40/20 per adult/child. Bookings can be made at the Border Store, Jabiru airport and most travel agencies. Be at the boat ramp 15 minutes prior to departure.

During the Wet, Guluyambi operates additional half-day tours including a cruise across the picturesque flooded Magela Creek and a bus drive on to Ubirr (adult/child \$100/80). It departs Jabiru at 10.30am daily and provides the only means by which visitors can get to Ubirr when it is at its best.

SCENIC FLIGHTS

The view of Kakadu from the air is spectacular. **Kakadu Air** (☎ 1800 089 113; www.kakaduair.com.au), at Jabiru and Cooinda, have 30-minute/one-hour fixed-wing flights for \$100/175 per person. Helicopter tours cost from \$170 (20 minutes) to \$430 (70 minutes) per person. A scenic flight is the only way to see the stunning Jim Jim and Twin Falls in the Wet and if you're after that aerial view of the majestic Arnhem Land escarpment, take the one-hour flight from Cooinda.

Tours

There are loads of tours to Kakadu from Darwin and a few that start from inside the park. These range from comfortable sight-seeing to bumpy 4WD trips with energetic activities. Shop around and ask about student/YHA discounts, stand-by rates and wet-season specials.

The first thing to note is that even if you don't have your own wheels, it's possible to explore Kakadu and its surrounds at your leisure and at a discount. Trying to get around on a bus pass alone will be frustrating, but you can see a lot by combining transport to Jabiru, Ubirr and Cooinda with a couple of tours. Camping gear can be hired inexpensively in Darwin (see p85).

Generally, day tours from Darwin combine two sights such as Nourlangie Rock and the Yellow Water Cruise and are very long (ie 14-hour) days and cost around \$160. Two-day tours taking in Nourlangie, Ubirr and the Yellow Water cruise cost around \$350. Three-day tours typically go off the bitumen and take in Jim Jim Falls, Nourlangie and the Yellow Waters cruise, and cost from \$650. Longer trips will give time to really appreciate the park and explore the more remote attractions.

FROM DARWIN

Readers consistently recommend **Wilderness 4WD Adventures** (☎ 8941 2161; www.wildernessadventures.com.au) for the young and energetic traveller. Another small-group option with a good reputation that has a range of tours is **Billy Can Tours** (☎ 1800 813 484). At the top end of Top End safaris, **Odyssey Tours & Safaris** (☎ 1800 891 190; www.odysaf.com.au) runs comfortable, non-rushed tours from three to five days overnighing in either lodges or exclusive permanent tent sites.

A one-day tour to Kakadu from Darwin is really too quick, but if you're short of time it's better than nothing. You could try **Aussie Adventure** (☎ 1300 721 365; www.aussieadventure.com.au; adult/child incl lunch & cruise \$150/130), which will whizz past some wetlands, on to Ubirr art site, Bowali Visitor Centre and Yellow Water for a two-hour cruise, then back to Darwin. You could also try **APT** (☎ 1800 891 121) for reasonable coach-touring. **Unique Indigenous Land Tours** (☎ 8928 0022; adult/child \$210/170) organises a full day in Kakadu that includes visits to local artists and a bush tucker walk.

Willis's Walkabouts (☎ 8985 2134; www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au) organises bushwalks of two days or more, guided by knowledgeable Top End walkers following your own or preset routes.

FROM JABIRU & COOINDA

The 4WD access road to Jim Jim and Twin Falls inhibits many from venturing to these beautiful spots. Most 4WD rental agreements stipulate that the vehicle must not be taken along this route. A few companies run trips out to Jim Jim and Twin Falls, including lunch and paddling gear, departing from Jabiru or Cooinda. These include **Kakadu Gorge & Waterfall Tours** (☎ 8979 0111; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; adult/child \$170/145) and **Lord's Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris** (☎ 8948 2200; www.lords-safaris.com; adult/child \$140/130), which also runs trips into Arnhem Land (Gunbalanya) for \$180/130.

Kakadu Animal Tracks (☎ 8979 0145; www.animaltracks.com.au; adult/child \$135/75) runs highly recommended tours combining a wildlife safari and Aboriginal cultural tour with an Indigenous guide. You'll see thousands of birds on the floodplains in the Dry, and get to hunt and gather, prepare and consume bush tucker and crunch on some green ants. The seven-hour tour departs Cooinda at 1pm.

Kakadu Fishing Tours (☎ 8979 2025; Jabiru; half/full-day \$145/260) operates fishing tours on the South and East Alligator Rivers. **Yellow Waters Fishing Safaris** (☎ 8979 0415; Cooinda) operates full- and half-day fishing tours on Yellow Waters billabong.

Want to learn more about uranium? You can take a two-hour tour of the Ranger mine east of Jabiru. The tours of the large open-cut mine and extraction plant are run by **Kakadu Air** (☎ 1800 089 113; adult/child \$25/10; ✈ 10.30am & 1.30pm May-Oct) and depart from Jabiru airport.

Sleeping

With the exception of camping grounds, accommodation prices in Kakadu can vary tremendously depending on the season – Dry-season prices (given here) are often as much as 50% above wet-season prices. Details of hotels, resorts, restaurants and cafés are listed under individual place headings throughout the section.

CAMPING

Facilities at camping grounds operated by the National Parks range from basic sites with

pit toilets to full amenities blocks with solar hot showers, although there's no electricity at any of them. Some remote bush sites, usually accessible only by 4WD, have no facilities. Commercial camping areas with more facilities, such as restaurants and swimming pools, are attached to the various resorts at South Alligator, Jabiru and Cooinda.

National Parks Camping Grounds

There are four main National Parks **camping grounds** (adult/child \$5.40/free). These are at Merl, near the Border Store at Ubirr; Muirella Park, several kilometres south of the Nourlangie turn-off and then 6km off Kakadu Hwy; Mardugal, just off the highway 1.5km south of the Cooinda turn-off; and Gunlom, 37km down a dirt road that branches off Kakadu Hwy near the southern entry gate. Only Mardugal is open during the Wet. All have pit fires, hot showers, flushing toilets, drinking water and a generator zone. These are the only sites that are really suitable for caravans. See the individual sections for more details.

National Parks provide 14 more basic camping grounds around the park at which there is no fee. They have fireplaces, some have pit toilets and at all of them you'll need to bring your own drinking water. To camp away from these grounds you will need a permit from the Bowali Visitor Centre.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Northern Air Charter (☎ 8945 5444; www.flynac.com.au) flies from Darwin to Jabiru and also has full-day scenic flights of Kakadu from \$400 per person.

BUS

Greyhound Australia (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) has a daily service between Darwin and Cooinda via Jabiru. Buses reach the Yellow Water wetlands in time for the 1pm cruise, and depart after the cruise, 1½ hours later. The bus leaves Darwin at 6.30am and Jabiru at 10.15am, arriving at Cooinda at 12.30pm. It departs from Cooinda at 2.30pm and Jabiru at 4.10pm, and arrives in Darwin at 7pm. One-way/return fares from Darwin are \$45/85 (Jabiru) and \$60/115 (Cooinda).

CAR

Ideally, take your own vehicle. It doesn't have to be a 4WD, since roads to most sites

of interest are sealed, but a 4WD will give you greater flexibility and is the only possible way to see Jim Jim or Twin Falls. Sealed roads lead from Kakadu Hwy to Nourlangie, to the Muirella Park camping area and to Ubirr. Other roads are mostly dirt and blocked for varying periods during the Wet and early Dry.

Hire cars (including 4WDs) are available through **Thrifty** (☎ 1800 626 515; Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn) at Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn in Jabiru (p122).

WEST ALLIGATOR AREA

A turn-off to the north, just past the park entrance on the Arnhem Hwy, leads to basic camp sites at **Two Mile Hole** (8km) and **Four Mile Hole** (38km) on the Wildman River, and **Waldak Irrmbal** (West Alligator Head; 80km), which are all popular fishing spots. The track is suitable for conventional vehicles only in the Dry, and then only as far as Two Mile Hole.

About 35km further east along the Arnhem Hwy, a turn-off to the south, again impassable to 2WD vehicles in the Wet, leads to camp sites at **Alligator, Bucket** and **Red Lilly** billabongs, and on to the Kakadu Hwy.

SOUTH ALLIGATOR AREA

The South Alligator River Crossing is on the Arnhem Hwy 64km into the park, 3km past Aurora Kakadu resort. There's a boat ramp at this popular fishing spot and a picnic area near the bridge. The resort has a bar, fuel and a well-stocked shop.

Bushwalking

There are a couple of easy walks here.

Gu-ngarre Monsoon Rainforest (3.6km return, 90 minutes, easy) This flat circular walk skirts the South Alligator resort through monsoon forest and woodlands before passing Anggardabal billabong. Interpretive signs show Aboriginal plant uses.

Mamukala Wetlands (3km, up to two hours, easy) This large wetland area is an excellent place to view water birds on the wetlands fringed with paperbark woodlands. It is at its best during September and October, when truly spectacular congregations can build up, including thousands of magpie geese. A short walk from the car park leads to a bird-watching hide overlooking the wetlands, while the longer walk leads through the woodlands around the wetlands.

Sleeping & Eating

Aurora Kakadu (☎ 1800 818 845; www.auroraresorts.com.au; Arnhem Hwy; unpowered & powered sites per person

SHARING KAKADU STORIES

The Namarkan Sisters

The story of the Namarkan sisters is told to warn young children about the dangers of crocodiles. One day, the sisters were sitting together by a billabong when one of the sisters dived into the water, changed into a crocodile, then paddled back and frightened the life out of her sister. She then changed herself back and returned to her sister, who related how she had been terrified by a crocodile.

The first sister got such a kick out of this, that she repeated it over and over. Finally the other sister realised what was going on, and retaliated in the same way. The sisters then realised that if they were to turn themselves into crocodiles permanently, they could scare and eat anyone they pleased.

Today the Namarkan sisters are present in all crocodiles, evident in the lumps behind the eyes and their great skill and cunning as hunters.

The Rainbow Serpent

The story of the Rainbow Serpent is a common subject in Aboriginal traditions across Australia, although the story varies from place to place.

In Kakadu the serpent is a woman, Kuringali, who painted her image on the rock wall at Ubirr while on a journey through this area. This journey forms a creation path that links the places she visited: Ubirr, Manngarre, the East Alligator River and various places in Arnhem Land.

To the traditional owners of the park, Kuringali is the most powerful spirit. Although she spends most of her time resting in billabongs, if disturbed she can be very destructive, causing floods and earthquakes, and one local story has it that she even eats people.

\$10, budget rooms per person \$20, motel rooms \$145-200; (♿) A couple of kilometres west of the South Alligator River, this place is set in lush, sprawling gardens with shady trees and plenty of bird life. The budget rooms contain four bunks, en suite and fridge, and the motel rooms are spacious with phone and tea and coffee facilities. There's a pool and spa area, tennis court, laundry and gas barbecues, plus a restaurant (buffet dinner \$35) that's open for breakfast and dinner, and a bar (mains \$17 to \$26) that serves lunch and dinner.

The **shop** (h6.30am-8pm) sells fuel, basic groceries and souvenirs.

UBIRR

Ubirr is an outcrop of the Arnhem escarpment, famous for its spectacular Aboriginal **rock-art site** (☞) 8.30am-sunset 1 Apr-30 Nov, 2pm-sunset 1 Dec-31 Mar). It lies 39km north of the Arnhem Hwy.

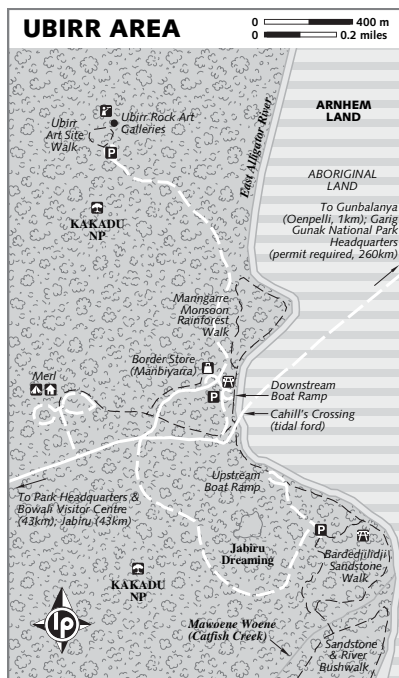
An easily followed path from the Ubirr car park takes you through the main galleries. A track then leads up to a lookout with superb views over the Nardab floodplains, which are stunning at sunset. There are paintings on numerous rocks along the path, but the highlight is the main gallery with a large array of well-preserved x-ray-style wallabies, possums, goannas, tortoises and fish, plus a couple of *balanda* (white men) with hands on hips, an intriguing Tasmanian tiger and *mimi* figures. Also of major interest here is the Rainbow Serpent painting, and the picture of the Namarkian Sisters, shown with string pulled taut between their hands.

The Ubirr paintings are in many different styles. They were painted during the period from over 20,000 years ago right up to the 20th century. Allow plenty of time to seek out and study them.

Shortly before Ubirr you pass the **Border Store** (☎ 8979 2474; ☞ 7am-7pm Apr-Dec), which sells supplies and snacks. There is a National Parks camping ground nearby (see opposite), and boat ramps upstream and downstream of Cahill's Crossing. There are also picnic tables on the riverbank opposite the Border Store.

Other activities in the area include bushwalking, fishing and cruises on the East Alligator River (see p117).

All of the access roads are sealed, although low-lying areas may be inundated during the Wet.



This part of the park is as far east as you can go, and the East Alligator River marks the boundary with Arnhem Land. If you have a permit, Cahill's Crossing – a tidal ford – gives access to Arnhem Land and Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), plus Garig Gunak Barlu National Park on the Cobouru Peninsula. Exercise caution when crossing the ford – vehicles are occasionally swept away – and on no account should you attempt to cross on foot because death by crocodile is a distinct possibility.

Bushwalking

There are four tracks in the Ubirr area: **Ubirr Art Site Walk** (1km return, one hour, easy) This track loops around the rock-art galleries, and there's a short but steep side track to a lookout with stunning panoramic views over the East Alligator River floodplain. It's popular at sunset. **Manngarre Monsoon Rainforest Walk** (1.5km return, 30 minutes, easy) Mainly sticking to a boardwalk, this walk starts by the boat ramp near the Border Store and winds through heavily shaded vegetation, palms and vines. **Bardedjilidji Sandstone Walk** (2.5km, 90 minutes, easy) Starting from the upstream picnic area car park, this walk takes in wetland areas of the East Alligator River and

some interesting eroded sandstone outliers of the Arnhem Land escarpment. Informative track notes point out many features on this walk.

Sandstone & River Bushwalk (6.5km, three hours, medium) This extension of the Bardedjilidji Walk features sandstone outcrops, paperbark swamps and riverbanks.

Sleeping & Eating

Merli Camping Ground (adult/child \$5.40/free) This National Parks ground is close to Ubirr and the Border Store. There's plenty of shade, a generator-use zone and showers and toilets. Be prepared for legions of mosquitoes and remember it's closed in the Wet.

Border Store (☎ 8979 2474; ☞ 7am-7pm Apr-Dec) Stocks a good range of groceries, snacks and takeaway food. Alcohol is not available and neither was fuel at the time of writing. The popular hostel that once was here was in disrepair and closed, but may re-open during the life of this edition.

JABIRU

pop 1780

The township of Jabiru, built to accommodate workers at the nearby uranium mine,

was completed in 1982 and is the major service centre for Kakadu.

Information

The town's Jabiru Plaza shopping centre has a good range of amenities. There's a branch of the Westpac Bank and a Commonwealth Bank agency, and Eftpos is available at the supermarket or Mobil service station.

Jabiru Community Health Centre (☎ 8979 2018; Jabiru Plaza; ☞ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri except Wed 9am-2.30pm)

Jabiru Travel Centre (☎ 8979 2548; Shop 6, Jabiru Plaza; ☞) Internet access \$3 per 20 minutes.

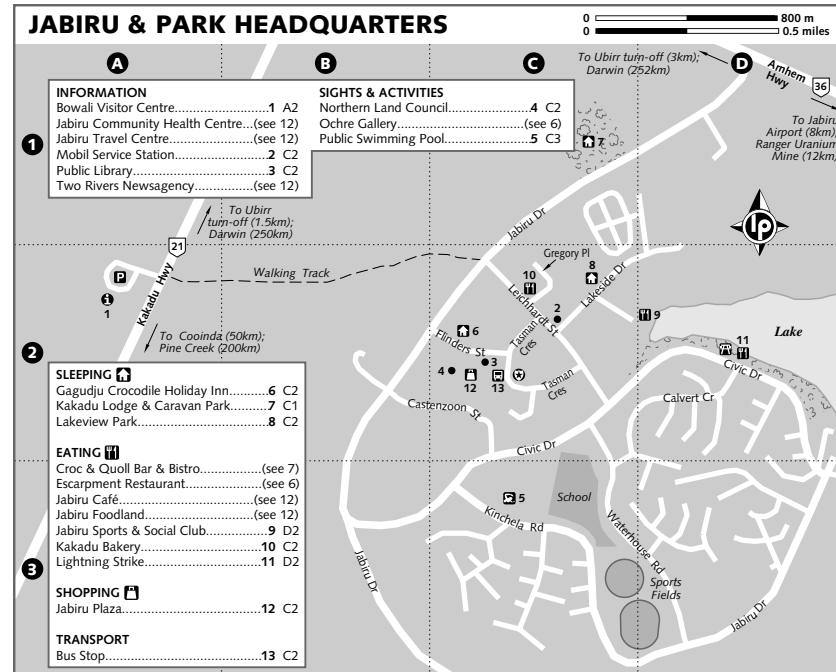
Mobil service station (☎ 8979 2001; cnr Leichhardt St & Lakeside Dr; ☞ 6.30am-8.30pm) For fuel, mechanical repairs, camping gas, general groceries and ice.

Northern Land Council (☎ 8979 2410; Flinders St; ☞ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Issues permits (\$14) to visit Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), across the East Alligator River.

Police station (☎ 8979 2122; Tasman Cres) Opposite the shopping centre.

Public library (☎ 8979 2097; per 20min \$3; ☞) Email access.

Two Rivers Newsagency (☎ 8979 2727; Jabiru Plaza; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat, 9am-12.30pm



Sun) Houses the Commonwealth Bank agency and post office where the mail closing time is at 5pm Monday to Friday and noon Saturday.

Sights & Activities

It's worth a wander through the **Ochre Gallery** in the foyer of the Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn on Flinders St. The gallery displays a range of works from Kakadu and Arnhem Land.

You can hire boats at **Kakadu Boat Hire & Tackle** (☎ 8979 3703) for \$180 per day (including fuel), though you'll need a towbar on your car. Rod and reels, eskies and chairs are also available.

If you feel like a dip there's an Olympic-sized **public swimming pool** (☎ 8979 2127; adult/child/family \$3/1.30/6; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon, Wed & Fri, noon-6pm Tue & Thu, 10am-4pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun) just off Civic Drive.

See p118 for details on tours from Jabiru.

Sleeping & Eating

Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn (☎ 8979 9000; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; Flinders St; d \$170-290; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This place is designed to resemble a crocodile when viewed from the air and graces many brochures and postcards of Kakadu. The rooms are clean and comfortable if a little ordinary. Try for one on the ground floor beside the central pool. The Escarpment Restaurant (mains \$25 to \$30) shows a bit more verve, serving inspired buffet and à la carte meals seasoned with bush ingredients, and delectable desserts. It's open for all meals. The art hanging in the Ochre Gallery in the foyer is worth inspecting.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Lakeview Park (☎ 8979 3144; www.lakeviewkakadu.com.au; 27 Lakeside Dr; r for up to 4 people \$85, d/cabin \$110/180; 🍷 🍷) Aboriginal-owned Lakeview Park is a particularly good option for families and groups, offering a range of comfortable tropical-designed bungalows set in lush gardens. The fan-cooled budget rooms are also available to YHA members (and only YHA members!) for \$20 a bed. The doubles share a communal kitchen, bathroom and lounge, and also come equipped with their own TV and fridge, while the two-bedroom cabins sleep up to five people.

Kakadu Lodge & Caravan Park (☎ 1800 811 154; www.aurora-resorts.com.au; Jabiru Dr; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$20/25, dm \$31, lodge r \$130, cabins \$195-230; 🍷 🍷 🍷) An impeccable resort with shady, grassed sites and a great swimming pool. The comfortable, no-frills dorms and lodge rooms have linen and sleep four people; bathroom and cooking facilities are communal. The cabins have en suites and kitchenette and sleep up to five people. There are coin-operated gas barbecues, camp kitchens and laundry facilities. Internet access is available at the kiosk which sells a small range of groceries and ice. Overlooking the pool, the **Croc & Quoll Bar & Bistro** (dinner mains \$20) features barra and roo as well as pasta, curry burgers, steak and the odd vegetarian option. It's open for breakfast and dinner.

Kakadu Bakery (☎ 8979 2320; Gregory Pl; 🕒 7am-2pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat) Near the fire station, this superb little bakery has a range of fresh bread and pies and is the only place to get a cheap meal in the early morning. The scrolls here are delicious and the bags of Anzac cookies come highly recommended.

Lightning Strike (Civic Dr; meals \$5-10; 🕒 10am-5pm Thu-Sun) This tiny van beside the lake is tops for takeaway. The homemade pastries are a highlight but it's all good – hamburgers, yiros, pizza, nachos and fish 'n' chips.

Jabiru Sports & Social Club (☎ 8979 2326; Lakeside Dr; mains \$10-15; 🕒 lunch daily, dinner Mon-Sat) This is the place to meet the locals over a beer. The meals aren't haute cuisine but they are generous.

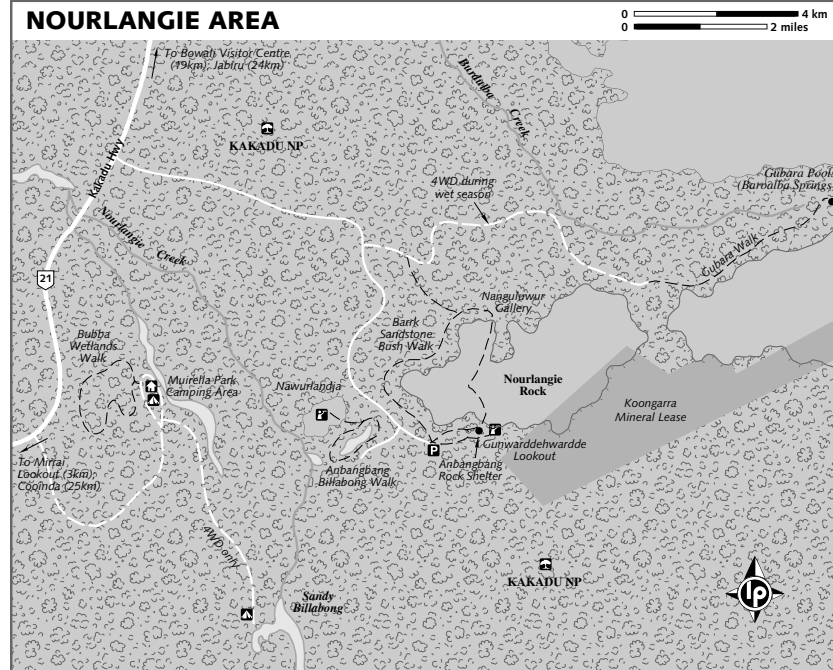
Jabiru Café (☎ 8979 2570; Shop 7, Jabiru Plaza; meals \$5-15; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat & Sun) In the Jabiru Plaza shopping centre, this greasy spoon prepares fresh sandwiches, burgers and Chinese food.

Jabiru Foodland (Jabiru Plaza; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun & public holidays) This supermarket is well stocked and has a good range of camping equipment.

If you need a drink, stock up in Darwin or the Bark Hut Inn (p94); takeaway liquor is not available to casual visitors to Jabiru. Alcoholic drinks can be bought and drunk on the premises at the hotels in Jabiru, Cooninda and South Alligator.

NOURLANGIE

The sight of this looming, mysterious, outlier of the Arnhem Land escarpment makes it easy to understand why it has been impor-



tant to local Aboriginal people for so long. Its long, red, sandstone bulk – striped in places with orange, white and black – slopes up from the surrounding woodland only to fall away at one end in sheer, stepped cliffs. Beneath is Kakadu's best-known collection of rock art.

The name Nourlangie is a corruption of *nawulandja*, an Aboriginal word that refers to an area bigger than the rock itself. You reach it at the end of a 9km sealed road, which turns east off the Kakadu Hwy, 21km south of the Arnhem Hwy. Turn-offs along this route lead to other interesting spots, such as the dirt track to Nanguluwur and Gubara, Nawulandja lookout and Anbangbang, and make spending a whole day in this area of Kakadu worthwhile. The road is open from 8am to sunset daily.

From the main car park a walk takes you first to the **Anbangbang rock shelter**, which may have been used for 20,000 years as a refuge from heat, rain and the frequent wet-season thunderstorms. The shelter may have housed up to 30 people of the Warramal clan. Archaeological finds have

revealed that the shelter was in almost constant use from about 6000 years ago to the time of contact.

The **Anbangbang Gallery** is the main gallery and is accessible by wheelchair – elsewhere the track is steep in parts. The gallery here was repainted in the 1960s by Nayambolmi (also known as Barramundi Charlie), a respected artist, fisherman and hunter. The major character in the gallery is **Namondjok**, who broke traditional law by committing incest with one of his clan sisters. Next to Namondjok is **Namarrgon**, the Lightning Man, depicted here surrounded by an arc of lightning.

From the gallery a short walk takes you to a lookout with a view of the Arnhem Land escarpment, and Lightning Dreaming (Namarrgon Djadjam), the home of Namarrgon.

Bushwalking

Nourlangie is one of the most visited parts of the park, and there are five other walking tracks at points along the access road. **Nawulandja Lookout** (600m return, 30 minutes, medium) This is just a short walk up a gradual slope, but it

gives excellent views of the Nourlangie Rock area and is a good place to watch the sunset.

Nourlangie Art Site (1.5km return, one hour, easy to medium) This path takes you around the base of Nourlangie Rock past the range of excellent rock-art sites. From the gallery you can walk on to Gunwarddehwardde Lookout.

Anbangbang Billabong Walk (2.5km loop, one hour, easy) This picturesque, lily-filled billabong lies close to Nourlangie, and the picnic tables dotted around its edge make it a popular lunch spot. The track starts on the left about 1km back from the main Nourlangie car park.

Nanguluwur Gallery (3.5km return, two hours, easy) This outstanding, but little visited, rock-art gallery sees far fewer visitors than Nourlangie simply because it's further to walk and has a gravel access road. Here the paintings cover most of the styles found in the park, including very early dynamic style work, x-ray work and a good example of 'contact art', a painting of a two-masted sailing ship towing a dinghy. The colours in the overhanging rock are also beautiful.

Gubara Pools (6km return, two hours, medium) Further along the same road from Nanguluwur is the turn-off to this 3km walk, which winds along a sandy path and skirts some clear pools in a patch of monsoon rainforest also known as Baroalba Springs. Remarkably, at least 14 species of freshwater fish are found in these small pools.

Barrk Sandstone Bushwalk (12km loop, eight hours, difficult) Barrk is the male black wallaroo and you might see this elusive marsupial if you set out early. Starting at the Nourlangie car park, this difficult walk passes through the Anbangbang galleries before a steep climb to the top of Nourlangie Rock. Cross the flat top of the rock weaving through sandstone pillars before descending along a wet-season watercourse. The track then follows the rock's base past the Nanguluwur gallery and western cliffs before emerging at the car park. It passes through some diverse habitats and offers stunning views. Pick up a copy of the relevant *Park Notes*, do not walk alone, start as early as possible and carry plenty of water; it's also probably a good idea to tell staff at Bowali that you're going on this walk, and let them know when you get back.

MALABANBADJU, BURDULBA & MUIRELLA PARK

Muirella Park is an excellent camping area that's convenient as a base for visiting Nourlangie, 25km away, and for Cooinda and Yellow Water, which are about 30km south along the Kakadu Hwy. Two other basic camping grounds, Malabanbadju and Burdulba, are just off the Kakadu Hwy, south of Jabiru.

Bushwalking

A couple of pleasant walks start from the Malabanbadju and Burdulba camping areas.

You'll find the Mirrai Lookout signposted off the Kakadu Hwy, while Bubba Wetlands is accessed from Muirella Park.

Bubba Wetlands Walk (4km return, two hours, easy) Starting near the Muirella Park camping ground (signposted), this walk skirts the edge of the Bubba Wetlands. There are wooden benches at intervals around the edge. There is no access to this walk in the Wet.

Iligadjarr Floodplain Walk (4km loop, 90 minutes, easy) The name refers to the ancestral file snakes that live in the billabong, and on this interesting walk along the grassy floodplain around Burdulba billabong you can learn something of the uses the Aboriginal people had for the various wetland plants. Don't try to do this walk in the Wet.

Mirrai Lookout (1.6km return, one hour, difficult) This lookout is just off the Kakadu Hwy, 4km south of the Muirella Park turn-off. The track scales the dizzy heights of Mt Cahill (120m) and trees obscure some of the view.

Sleeping

Situated right on a paperbark-lined billabong, **Muirella Park** (adult/child \$5.40/free) is a National Parks camping ground 6km off the Kakadu Hwy and 7km south of the Nourlangie Rock turn-off. It's actually on a reclaimed airstrip that was part of a safari camp in the 1950s. There's shaded barbecues and excellent amenities. Note that parts of the site can be flooded during the Wet.

Malabanbadju and Burdulba Camping Grounds have few facilities and camping is free. A 6km 4WD track leads from Muirella Park to a free bush camping area at Sandy Billabong, which has basic toilet facilities only.

JIM JIM & TWIN FALLS

These two spectacular waterfalls are along a 4WD dry-season track that turns south off the Kakadu Hwy between the Nourlangie Rock and Cooinda turn-offs. The 57km track to Jim Jim Falls is lined by the escarpment and the last 9km is slow going.

Jim Jim Falls, a sheer 215m drop, is awe-some after rain, but its waters shrink to nothing by about June. Even so, the gorge is impressive at any time, and the plunge pool makes a great swimming hole (when it is croc-free) – there's even a brilliant-white sandy beach. To reach the falls themselves requires a 1km scramble over rocks and tree trunks.

Twin Falls are reached via a 10km bumpy ride from Jim Jim camping ground, followed by an 800m boat shuttle through the

snaking, forested gorge that cuts through 200m sandstone cliffs. The boat shuttle was introduced because of the risk posed by crocodiles. Tickets (adult/child \$10 return) can be purchased at the Garnamarr Camping Area, Bowali Visitor Centre, Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn, Gagudju Lodge Cooinda, Mardugal camping ground and the information centre in Darwin (p65).

Twin Falls is possibly more impressive for most visitors as it enjoys year-round flows. The flows of Jim Jim Creek at the Jim Jim camping area means the track is often impassable until well into the Dry. Markers indicate the depth in the middle of the creek, but these should be used as a rough guide only as wheel tracks in the sandy creek bed can mean the water is deeper than you think. If you are unsure, wait for a tour vehicle or someone else with local knowledge to cross before attempting it. This crossing is suitable only for high clearance 4WDs equipped with a snorkel.

CROCODILES

Australia has two types of crocodile: the freshwater or freshie (*Crocodylus johnstoni*) and the estuarine crocodile (*C. porosus*), better known as the saltwater or saltie. Both are found in the northern part of the country, including the Northern Territory.

The saltwater crocodile is Australia's largest, heaviest and most dangerous reptile, growing to over 6m in length. It is common in both fresh and salt water in the Top End, including billabongs, estuaries and major river systems. It is often seen at sea, sometimes far from land, and is also found throughout Southeast Asia and parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Most of its diet consists of crabs, fish and turtles, but for a large 'saltie' any animal is potential game, including wallabies, livestock, dogs and even humans. A hunting crocodile waits submerged, superbly camouflaged with only its eyes and nostrils above the surface. Should an animal get too close, it lunges with incredible power and speed, propelled by its massive tail, and drags its victim under water. Although those powerful jaws can crush a pig's head in one bite, the croc first drowns its prey by rolling over and over. Crocs cannot swallow under water and after the 'death roll' must surface to eat.

But even an estuarine crocodile's life has its trials. The young are born only 30cm in length and to reach maturity they must dodge birds, fish and larger crocodiles. To find a mate, a male must run the gauntlet of confronting older, territorial males, which sometimes inflict fatal injuries. Travelling overland at night to reach a new waterhole, crocs sometimes perish in bushfires. Or, trapped in a drying swamp, they can suffer death by dehydration. Should it survive these hardships, a croc can live 50 years and some very large specimens are estimated to be 80 years old.

The smaller freshwater croc is endemic to Australia and is found in freshwater rivers and billabongs. Freshwater crocs, which have narrower snouts and rarely exceed 3m in length, are harmless to people unless provoked.

All crocs are totally protected in the Territory, and Parks & Wildlife spends considerable time and money surveying waterways and ensuring they are safe for people to enjoy. Ask locally before swimming or even paddling in any Top End waterways. Attacks on humans by salties in recent years have been well documented. Warning signs are posted alongside many dangerous stretches of water.

A few adventure tours regularly visit Jim Jim and Twin (see p117). The road to both Jim Jim and Twin is often closed until well into May or even June, and road access to Twin Falls closes off in the early Wet. If the road is open, Jim Jim alone is worth the visit as there is usually plenty of water dropping over the cliffs. The only way to see the falls during the Wet is from the air.

Bushwalking

Some rough scrambling are all that's required to get the most out of these two magnificent waterfalls.

Budjmii Lookout (1km return, 45 minutes, medium) There are excellent escarpment views on this fairly rugged walk, which starts from the Jim Jim camping ground.

Jim Jim Falls (1km return, one hour, medium) This is more of a scramble than a walk, as you climb over and around boulders of increasing size as you approach the falls. It is definitely not suitable for small children unless you can carry them. Allow at least an hour for a swim in the fantastic plunge pool at the foot of the falls.

Barrk Malam (6km return, five hours, difficult) This is a very steep marked trail up to the plateau above Jim Jim Falls. Carry plenty of water.

Plateau above Twin Falls (6km return, three hours, medium) This marked trail offers good views and the chance to swim (at own risk) in pools above the falls.

YELLOW WATER & COOIDA

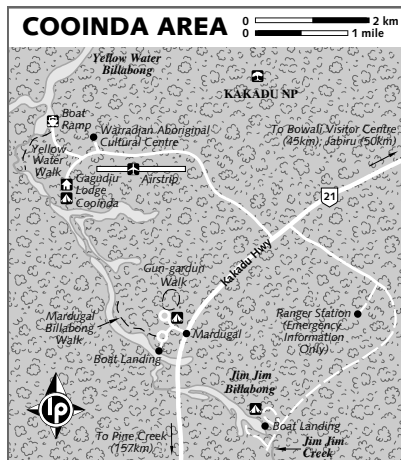
The turn-off to the Cooida accommodation complex and the superb Yellow Water wetlands is 48km down the Kakadu Hwy from its junction with the Arnhem Hwy. It's then 4.5km to the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre (p114), a further 1km to the Yellow Water wetland turn-off, and about another 1km again to Cooida.

A boat trip on the wetlands is one of the highlights of most people's visit to Kakadu (see p116). Yellow Water is also an excellent place to watch the sunset, particularly in the Dry when the smoke from the many bushfires at this time of year turns the setting sun into a bright red fireball. Bring plenty of insect repellent with you as the mosquitoes can be voracious.

Visitors should be particularly careful of crocodiles at Yellow Water – some impressive specimens hang around here. Keep well away from the water's edge and don't dangle your legs over the edge of the floating pontoons.

Bushwalking

The accessibility of the wetlands and the boat cruises make this the busiest part of the park.



Mardugal Billabong (1km, 30 minutes, easy) Close to Mardugal camping area, a short walk takes you along the shore of Mardugal Billabong.

Yellow Water (1.5km return, one hour, easy) This walk is little more than a stroll along a raised boardwalk out to a small viewing platform over the wetland.

Gun-gardun (2km, 40 minutes, easy) Also near the Mardugal camping ground, this circular walk showcases woodlands – Kakadu's most widespread habitat.

Sleeping & Eating

Cooida is by far the most popular place to stay, mainly because of the proximity of the Yellow Water wetlands and the famous boat cruises. It gets crowded at times, mainly with tour groups.

Gagudju Lodge Cooida (☎ 8979 0145; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$15/30, dm \$30, budget/motel d \$70/240; 🚻 📶 🚰) This resort has a large camping area with plenty of shade, although the facilities are stretched at times. The budget air-con units are comfortable, though tiny, and share the camping ground bathroom facilities. There's a camp kitchen at the centre of the budget rooms. The motel rooms are spacious and comfortable and sleep three people; an extra \$30 will get you a fourth bed. These rooms drop to \$150 when demand isn't high.

At the time of research the bar and restaurant area was undergoing renovation. The **Mimi Restaurant** (mains \$25-30; 🍳 breakfast & dinner) serves a continental and cooked breakfast and at dinner there is usually a Top End selection of barra, buff and croc. The **Barra Bar & Bistro** (mains \$15-20; 🍷 10am-10pm) serves pizzas and snacks and lunch mains from noon to 2.30pm, and has live entertainment five nights a week. The **shop** (🕒 6am-9pm dry season, 6am-7.30pm wet season) at the resort sells fuel plus basic food, film and souvenirs.

Just off the Kakadu Hwy, 2km south of the Cooida turn-off, the National Parks **Mardugal Park** (adult/child \$5.40/free) camping area is the only site not affected by the Wet. It's a nice, shady spot with showers, toilets and a generator zone.

COOIDA TO PINE CREEK

Just south of the Yellow Water and Cooida turn-off, the Kakadu Hwy heads southwest out of the park to Pine Creek on the Stuart Hwy, about 160km away.

About 45km south of Cooida is the turn-off to the beautiful falls and pools of **Maguk**

SICKNESS COUNTRY

During the 1950s and '60s the southern part of what is now Kakadu National Park was the site of about a dozen small mines through the South Alligator River valley. The mines pulled high-grade uranium, gold, zinc, lead, silver, palladium, tin and copper from the ground. All mining ceased in 1964.

The Jawoyn people call this area Buludjang – Sickness Country – and believe it was created by Bula, a powerful spirit who still lives underground, and that Bolung, the Rainbow Serpent, inhabits the billabongs in this country. They also believe that, if disturbed, both these creation ancestors can wreak havoc in the form of great storms, floods, disease and even earthquakes.

In geological terms, the Buludjang contains high levels of uranium and unusually high concentrations of arsenic, mercury and lead. In the 1980s preparations to mine Guratba (Coronation Hill) in the Buludjang created great fear among the Jawoyn people. In the words of one Elder:

'My father know that gold was there longa Guratba. He said, "Don't take any white man there. Bulardemo (Bula) will rock 'im, you and me. Shake the ground. We won't be alive. He will push and burn the trees...no hope, nobody can stop him.'"

But of course we all know that Australian uranium is used only for peaceful purposes.

(Barramundi Gorge), 12km off the highway along a 4WD track. Another 5km brings you to the turnoff to **Gungural**, a picnic area and basic camping ground that is 2WD accessible. Nearby, the highway crosses the South Alligator River, the traditional boundary between Jawoyn and Gagudju country.

After a further 37km along the highway, a turn-off on the left (east) leads 37km along a gravel road to **Gunlom** (Waterfall Creek). This is another superb escarpment waterfall and plunge pool, and the only one accessible by conventional vehicle. There is camping here and a lovely grassy picnic area with gas barbecues and tables shaded by salmon gums.

Southeast of Gunlom, accessible by 4WD only and then with a permit, is **Jarrangbarmi** (Koolpin Gorge) – a beautiful and little-visited gorge with rock-art sites. This area is worth visiting as part of a tour, since the rock-art galleries are hard to find. Inquire about tours to this area with the operators mentioned on p117.

Bushwalking

The southern section of the park is less frequented than others, although the car park at Gunlom is sometimes full.

Maguk (2km return, one hour, medium) From the Maguk camping ground, this flat walk takes you to a plunge pool at the base of a small waterfall, which flows year-round. Allow time for a swim.

Gunlom Waterfall (1km return, one hour, difficult)

This short but steep walk takes you to the top of the dramatic Gunlom Waterfall. It has incredible views and is a good place to look for rare escarpment wildlife, such as

black wallaroos. There's also a short walk to the large pool at the base of the waterfall (200m) with disabled access. Another, to Murrill Billabong (1km), carries on to the bank of the South Alligator River (2.5km).

Jarrangbarmi (Koolpin Gorge; 2km, 90 minutes, medium) This unmarked track follows Koolpin Creek to a series of pools and waterfalls. There's a rock-art site and safe swimming in the creek.

YURMIKMIK BUSHWALKS

Five walks of varying difficulty penetrate the southern stone country of the park from Yurmikmik, 5km south of the South Alligator River on the road to Gunlom. Some are day or half-day walks, and others are overnight and involve bush camping and navigational skills; these require permits and should only be attempted by experienced bushwalkers.

Boulder Creek Walk (2km loop, 45 minutes, medium) This is the easiest of the Yurmikmik walks and crosses Plum Tree Creek through woodlands and monsoon forest to return to the car park.

Yurmikmik Lookout Walk (5km return, 90 minutes, medium) The lookout gives fine views over Jawoyn country – the rugged ridges of the southern park area, the South Alligator River and the high, flat Marrawal Plateau.

Motor Car Falls Walk (7.5km return, three hours, medium) Named after the exploits of an old tin miner who drove his truck up here in 1946, this is actually a disused vehicle track. Markers lead to a plunge pool.

Motor Car Creek Walk (11km, seven hours, difficult) From Motor Car Falls, this is an unmarked section along the creek to the South Alligator River. It is essential to carry a topographic map (Topographic Map Sheet 5370/NatMap Series or Callaman 1:50,000) and compass, and a camping permit is required.

Motor Car and Kurrundie Creek Circular Walk

(14km, 10 hours, difficult) A topographic map, compass and camping permit are essential for this unmarked overnight walk. The effort will be repaid by remote and seldom-visited country along Kurrundie Creek, returning by the South Alligator River and Motor Car Creek.

Sleeping & Eating

Mary River Roadhouse (☎ 8975 4564; Kakadu Hwy; unpowered/power sites for 2 \$13/17, dm \$17, budget s/d \$30/40, motel d \$90; ♿ ♿) Located just outside the park's southern boundary, this friendly roadhouse has a variety of accommodation options and a bistro (mains \$15 to \$20), which is open for lunch and dinner, plus cheaper takeaway food. This place can get busy in the Wet, when tour groups bypass Kakadu's drenched camping grounds to overnight here.

National Parks operates the **Gunlom camping ground** (adult/child \$5.40/free), a mostly shady area with flush toilets, hot showers, water and gas barbecues, and there's a separate generator area. Other basic camping grounds in the area include: Maguk; Gungural, which is accessed from the highway; and Kambolgie, on the Gunlom Rd.

ARNHEM LAND

The entire eastern half of the Top End comprises the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, a vast, virtually untouched area with spectacular scenery, few people and some superb rock-art sites. The area is about the size of Victoria and has a population of around 20,000. The only settlements of any size are Nhulunbuy (Gove), on the peninsula at the northeastern corner, and Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), just across the East Alligator River from Ubirr in Kakadu National Park.

To the north is the remote Cobourg Peninsula, most of which is preserved as Garig Gunak Barlu National Park and features the ruins of the ill-fated Victoria Settlement, some fine fishing and the world's only wild herd of banteng, or Indonesian cattle.

Access to Arnhem Land is by permit only and numbers are strictly controlled. It has long been known for its superb fishing, but the 'stone country' – the Arnhem escarpment and its outliers – also hosts literally thousands of Aboriginal rock-art sites of incredible variety, age and interest.

Access to Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) and Cobourg Peninsula is across the East Alligator River from Ubirr in Kakadu. Access to the central and northeastern section of Arnhem Land is via Katherine.

Tours

If you get the opportunity to head into Arnhem Land – jump! A few tours take visitors into Arnhem Land, though usually only to the western part.

Arnhemlander (☎ 1800089113; www.arnhemlander.com.au; adult/child \$185/145) operates 4WD tours to the Mikinj Valley and Injalak Art Centre at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli).

Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris (☎ 8927 5240; www.arnhemland-safaris.com) has been taking people to Mt Borradaile, north of Oenpelli, for years. Meals, guided tours, fishing and accommodation in the comfortable safari camp are included in the daily price of around \$450; transfers from Darwin can be arranged. The three-day tour from Darwin, Kakadu or Katherine costs \$2400 twin-share. They also run hunting and fishing safaris.

Lords' Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris (☎ 8948 2200; www.lords-safaris.com; adult/child \$180/130) runs highly recommended small-group 4WD tours to Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), including an Aboriginal guided walk to the Injalak Hill rock-art site, lunch and a scout around the Mikinj Valley.

Venture North Australia (☎ 8927 5500; www.northemastralia.com; 4-/5-day tour \$1300/1600) has tours to remote areas and features expert guidance on rock art. It also has a safari camp near Smith Point on the Cobourg Peninsula.

Gove Diving & Fishing Charters (☎ 8987 3445; www.govefish.com.au) runs a plethora of fishing, diving and snorkelling, and wilderness trips from Nhulunbuy.

GUNBALANYA (OENPELLI)

pop 740

Gunbalanya is a small Aboriginal town 17km into Arnhem Land across the East Alligator River from the Border Store in Kakadu. The drive in itself is worth it: brilliant green wetlands and spectacular escarpments make the journey picturesque.

A permit is required to visit the town, which is usually issued for the **Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre** (☎ 89790190; www.injalak.com). At this centre, artists and craftspeople produce traditional paintings on bark and paper, plus

didgeridoos, pandanus weavings and baskets, and screen-printed fabrics, either at the arts centre or on remote outstations throughout Arnhem Land. Prices here are wholesale – all sales benefit the artists and therefore the community. Credit cards are accepted and discounts are offered to YHA members.

As you walk around the veranda of the arts centre to see the artists at work (morning only), peer out over the wetland at the rear to the escarpment and Injalak Hill (Long Tom Dreaming). A knowledgeable local guide will conduct tours to see the fine rock-art galleries here. The two-hour tours (bookings essential) cost \$120 per group and depart Gunbalanya at 9am from Monday to Friday (also Saturday from June to October). It's a hot climb and you will need to take water.

You can obtain permits from the **Northern Land Council** (☎ 8979 2410; Flinders St, Jabiru; per person \$13.20; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), which issues them on the same day, although 24 hours' notice is appreciated. Road access is only possible between May and October, otherwise you'll need to fly in and out.

Check the tides at Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River before setting out so you don't spend hours sitting around on the bank.

COBOURG PENINSULA

This remote wilderness, 570km northeast of Darwin by road, includes the Aboriginal-owned **Garig Gunak Barlu National Park**. The peninsula juts nearly 100km into the Timor Sea from the northwest tip of Arnhem Land.

The Cobourg Peninsula is on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance and is the habitat of a variety of migratory birds. The marine section of the park protects the peninsula's rich surrounding waters. Coral reefs and seagrass meadows attract dugong, dolphins and six species of turtles. Indo-Pacific humpbacks are seen regularly in Port Essington. You may also come across a wide variety of introduced animals, such as Indonesian banteng cattle, Timor ponies and pigs, all imported by the British when they attempted to settle the Top End in the 19th century. The coastline here is beautiful but unfortunately unsafe for swimming due to crocs, sharks and sea stingers.

The fishing here is legendary, and sought-after fish include tuna and mackerel and a variety of reef fish. A couple of resorts provide

fishing trips (see p130). It's not really possible to explore the inland parts of the park as there are virtually no tracks within the park apart from the main access track, but you can still wander along the white sandy beaches.

The park is jointly managed by the local Aboriginal inhabitants and the Parks & Wildlife Commission. Alcohol must not be consumed while travelling through Arnhem Land, but it's permitted beyond the Garig Gunak Barlu entrance.

History

Traditionally, Aboriginal clans lived off the rich marine life of the area. They traded trepang (sea cucumbers) for artefacts such as pottery, fabrics, tobacco, gin, steel blades and food with the Macassans (from Sulawesi) in trading lines that spanned the length and breadth of Australia. Some of their words were absorbed into the Aboriginal languages, such as *balanda* (white man) and *mutiyara* (pearl shell).

In 1818 Captain Phillip King explored and named the Cobourg Peninsula and Port Essington. British fears of French and Dutch expansion into the area led to unsuccessful attempts at settlement at Melville Island, then Raffles Bay on the Cobourg Peninsula, and a third attempt at Port Essington in 1838. This garrison town was named Victoria Settlement, and at its peak was home to over 300 people. The British intention was that it would become the base for major trade between Australia and Asia, but in 1849, after the settlement had survived a cyclone and malaria outbreaks, it was abandoned.

Information

Entry to Garig Gunak Barlu is by permit. You pass through Arnhem Land on the way, and the Aboriginal owners here restrict the number of vehicles going through to 20 at any one time. It's advisable to apply up to a year in advance for the necessary permit, which must be obtained from the **Parks & Wildlife Commission** (☎ 8999 4814; PO Box 496, Palmerston, NT 0831). The camping fee is \$220 plus \$13 transit fee per vehicle (five people) for a stay of up to seven days.

At Black Point (Algarlarlari) there is a ranger station and **visitors centre** (☎ 8979 0244) that has an good cultural centre detailing the Aboriginal, European and Macassan people, and the history of Victoria Settlement.

You'll need a 4WD to explore this remote region; no caravans or trailers are allowed into the park.

Garig Store (☎ 8979 0455; Black Point; 🕒 4-6pm Mon-Sat) sells a good range of provisions including frozen meats, dairy products, ice, fuel, camping gas and outboard mix. Credit cards are accepted and basic mechanical repairs generally can be undertaken. Boat tours to Victoria Settlement and hire boats can be arranged here.

Sights

Victoria Settlement (Murrumurrdmulya) is tucked into the far reaches of Port Essington, the superb 30km-long natural harbour that virtually cleaves the peninsula in two. It's well worth a visit, but is accessible by boat only. It is remarkable to think that where soldiers and civilians once strutted about in Victorian finery there's now only woollybutts and vines. The ruins still visible include various chimneys and wells, the powder magazine, part of the hospital, some peculiar beehive-shaped stone cottages and the cemetery where many of the original settlers were buried.

Boat tours and hire can be arranged at the Garig store (above).

Sleeping & Eating

Cobourg Beach Huts (☎ 8979 0455; www.cobourgbeachhuts.com.au; Smith Point; d \$220; 🚻) These secluded beachfront huts are fitted with solar-heated showers and louvered window-walls, and enjoy fantastic views overlooking Port Essington from their verandas.

Cape Don (☎ 1800 000 871; www.capedon.com.au; Cape Don; tw share per person \$675) At the lighthouse keeper's homestead, it includes comfortable accommodation, airfares to/from Darwin, all meals, guided fishing and wildlife tours in the price. Three- to seven-day packages are available.

Seven Spirit Bay Wilderness Lodge (☎ 8979 0277; www.sevenspiritbay.com; Vashon Head; tw share per person \$1300) This is an award-winning resort set in secluded wilderness accessible only by air or boat. Accommodation is in open-sided 'habitats', each with semi-outdoor private bathroom. This price includes two days' accommodation and meals, all activities and return air transfer from Darwin.

There's a good, shady camping ground about 100m from the shore at Smith Point. Facilities include showers, toilets, barbecues

DETOUR

Unashamedly, this is a fishy detour. Near the remote Aboriginal community of **Maningrida**, which is about 400km northeast of Darwin on Arnhem Land's north coast, is an exclusive fishing lodge: **Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge** (☎ 8983 1544; www.barralodge.com.au; tw share per person \$4000). Three-day packages from Darwin include return airfare, accommodation, meals, guided fishing trips, fishing gear and permits to enter Aboriginal land. The lodge has unparalleled access to several wild rivers, isolated lagoons and expanses of blue water. Accommodation is in comfortable safari-style cabins and while fishing is what it's all about, non anglers can revel in the wildlife viewing, and visit the Maningrida Arts and Culture Centre and local rock art.

and limited bore water; generators are allowed in one area of the camping ground.

Getting There & Away

The quickest way to get to Garig is by air, although it will leave you without transport when you arrive. There's an airstrip at Smith Point (Ngardimardi), which is serviced by charter flights, such as **Northern Air Charter** (☎ 8945 5444; www.flynac.com.au), from Darwin.

The track to Cobourg starts at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) and is accessible by 4WD vehicle only. The track is closed in the Wet and usually opens in early May. The 270km drive to Black Point from the East Alligator River takes four to six hours and the track is in reasonable condition. The trip must be completed in one day as it's not possible to stop overnight on Aboriginal land.

Check the tide chart, included with your permit or at Bowali Visitor Centre in Kakadu, for low tide crossing times at Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River.

EASTERN ARNHAM LAND

Gove Peninsula is the area of most interest to visitors of Eastern Arnhem Land. This is the home of the Yolngu people who have lived in the area for around 60,000 years. Notable figures from this region include the band Yothu Yindi, many high-profile academics, actor David Gulpillil and artist David Mangali (whose work appeared on

Australia's first dollar note in the 1960s). The movie *Yolngu Boy* was filmed here.

History

Dutch navigators in the 17th century were followed by Englishman Matthew Flinders, who named this area after one of the earlier Dutch ships. Early overland visitors to Arnhem Land were the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845 and the South Australian surveyor David Lindsay in 1883.

During the late-19th century, cattle stations covered much of the area, although the land was largely unsuitable for stock, and there were also a number of Christian missions. In 1931 the area was proclaimed an Aboriginal reserve on the recommendations of an investigation in the Northern Territory by the Federal government.

In 1963 the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala made an important step in the land rights movement when they protested against the plans for a manganese mine on their land. They failed to stop it, but forced a government inquiry and won compensation.

Information

The East Arnhem Land Tourist Association (☎ 8987 2255; www.ealta.org; Westall St, Nhulunbuy) has an office attached to the Walkabout Lodge.

PERMITS

If you are flying into Gove, no permit is needed, but to venture outside Nhulunbuy (even to the beaches close by) you need to get a Recreational Permit (\$22) through the local **Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation** (☎ 8987 3992; www.dhimurru.com.au; Arnhem Rd, Nhulunbuy). These are issued on the spot. It also publishes a useful visitors' guide (\$10), available at its office. A permit is not necessary to visit the Buku Larrngay Mulka Art Centre & Museum in Yirrkala.

If you wish to drive along the Central Arnhem Hwy from Katherine, a permit from the **Northern Land Council** (☎ 8971 9802; 5 Katherine Tce, Katherine) is required. You'll need confirmed accommodation bookings in Nhulunbuy or verification that you are visiting family or friends there. Allow at least two weeks for the issue of a permit.

Tours

Birds, Bees, Trees & Things (☎ 8987 1814; www.birdsbeestreesandthings.com.au) is a one-man outfit of-

fering cultural tours to Dhalinybuy, a designated recreation area near Cape Arnhem, and a day with the local Yolngu community. Costs vary depending on group size from \$300 to \$350 per person.

There are plenty of operators offering fishing, diving charters and wilderness safaris. Contact the tourist association for details.

Groote Eylandt

This large island off the east Arnhem Land coast is also Aboriginal land, with a big manganese-mining operation. Alyangula, the main settlement here, has a population of about 650.

Nhulunbuy

pop 4000

The township of Nhulunbuy was built in the 1970s to service the bauxite-mining centre, 15km from town, which has a deep-water export port. On Friday morning there are free **tours** of the bauxite mine and plant.

Nambara Arts & Crafts Aboriginal Gallery (☎ 8987 2811; www.ybe.com.au; Melville Bay Rd) sells locally made art and crafts from northeast Arnhem Land and often has artists in residence.

Buku Larrngay Mulka Art Centre & Museum (☎ 8987 1701; www.aboriginalart.com.au; admission \$2), 20km south of Nhulunbuy, is a major repository of bark painting, carved totems and other artefacts in the country, and shouldn't be missed. Pride of place goes to the two superb Yirrkala Church Panels, each depicting one of the two moieties (or groupings) underpinning the Yolngu kinship system – *Duwa* and *Yirridja*.

SLEEPING

Walkabout Lodge (☎ 8987 1777; www.walkaboutlodge.com.au; 12 Westall St; s/d \$160/185, premier d \$220; 🚻 🚿) This is a beachfront resort complex with a pool and restaurant close to the town's facilities. The premier rooms have a lovely aspect and reception can help process beach-walking permits.

Gove Peninsula Motel (☎ 8987 0700; www.gove.motel.com; 1 Matthew Flinders Way; s or d \$135, tw \$145; 🚻 🚿) This is the best place to stay in Nhulunbuy itself.

Mainoru Outstation Store (☎ 8975 4390; Central Arnhem Hwy) It abuts Arnhem Land to the south and sells fuel, takeaway food and supplies. Inquire here about B&B accommodation at beautiful Mainoru, a working cattle station.

Getting There & Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There's a shuttle service (\$8) from the airport to town, or you can hire a car from **Gove Rentals** (☎ 8987 1700), which has an office at the airport.

AIR

Airmorth (☎ 8920 4000; www.airmorth.com.au) flies between Darwin and Nhulunbuy for \$270 one way, and between Darwin and Groote Eylandt (\$300). **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas

.com.au) also flies between Darwin and Gove (one way from \$185).

LAND

Access to Gove (during the Dry only) is via the gravel Central Arnhem Hwy, which leaves the Stuart Hwy 52km south of Katherine and cuts northeast across Arnhem Land the 700km or so to Gove. Locals do the trip in as little as nine hours, but it's better to take your time and do it in a couple of days. You will need a permit for this trip (see p131).