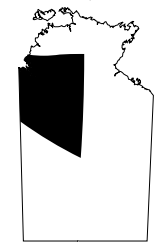


# Katherine & Victoria River District



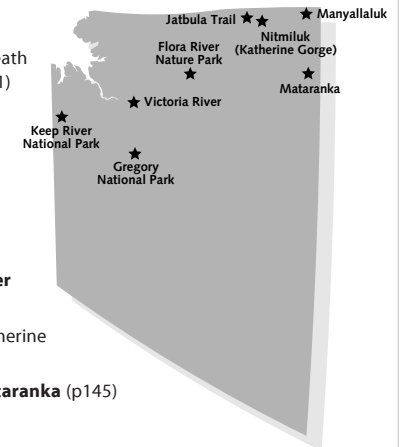
The town of Katherine is the Territory's third-largest settlement and a major crossroads for travellers. Passing through town are the Stuart Hwy, from Darwin to Port Augusta, and the Darwin–Adelaide railway, while the Victoria Hwy branches west towards the Kimberley region of Western Australia. There are several attractions in the Katherine region, but top of everyone's list should be the majestic Katherine Gorge, the centrepiece of the Nitmiluk National Park. This is one of the Territory's finest parks with spectacular scenery and wonderful opportunities for canoeing, bushwalking and swimming.

South of Katherine, you can visit Cutta Cutta limestone caves, or take the turn-off to Manyallaluk to immerse yourself in traditional Aboriginal culture. About 100km south of Katherine, the popular Mataranka hot springs bubble up from deep beneath the earth to afford a rejuvenating and relaxing swim. For an even more natural spa, head to nearby Bitter Springs, where the warm mineral-rich waters flow untamed through the palm forest.

West of Katherine, the Victoria Hwy traverses some of the Territory's finest scenery on its way to the Western Australia border. Nature's gifts include the secluded Flora River, where you can paddle from one pristine waterhole to the next, and the red sandstone gorges of the untamed Victoria River. This is an area of crocodile-infested rivers, bizarre boab trees and vast cattle stations. Large parts of this country have been conserved in reserves such as Gregory National Park and the remarkable Keep River National Park.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Paddling a canoe along an ancient course beneath the spectacular walls of **Katherine Gorge** (p141)
- Delving deeper into Aboriginal culture with hands-on instruction at **Manyallaluk** (p145)
- Watching wallabies come to drink at sunset on the wild **Victoria River** (p151)
- Exploring pastoral history and the rugged 4WD tracks of **Gregory National Park** (p151)
- Canoeing the mineral-blue waters of **Flora River Nature Park** (p149)
- Bushwalking the **Jatbula Trail** (p142) from Katherine Gorge to Leliyn (Edith Falls)
- Soaking tired limbs in the thermal pools at **Mataranka** (p145)



■ TELEPHONE CODE ☎ 08

- Katherine Regional Tourism Association: [www.krta.com.au](http://www.krta.com.au)
- NT Parks & Wildlife Commission: [www.nreta.nt.gov.au](http://www.nreta.nt.gov.au)

## National Parks

The Katherine region and Victoria River District boast some of the finest national parks in the Territory. In addition to conservation and education, these parks are especially well set up for recreational activities such as canoeing, bushwalking, 4WDing, fishing and camping.

**Nitmiluk National Park** (p141) embraces one of the Northern Territory's prime attractions – Katherine Gorge. Here you can take a tour or paddle your own canoe through a series of spectacular sandstone gorges whose silent towering walls conceal ancient art and evoke more than a little awe and mystery. Nitmiluk is also home to Leliyn (Edith Falls), a tranquil, fish-filled swim-

ming hole, and the Jatbula Trail, a spectacular five-day bushwalk linking Katherine Gorge to Leliyn.

More water-borne activity is possible at **Flora River Nature Park** (p149), where special ramps have been constructed over the natural tufa dams to allow canoes to move from one section of the river to another. Well-prepared 4WDers will relish the challenging tracks of **Gregory National Park** (p151), while bird-watchers and budding botanists will find plenty of new discoveries at remote **Keep River National Park** (p154), near the Western Australia border.

Northern Territory Parks & Wildlife also runs a packed schedule of walks, talks and slide shows throughout the Dry.

schedule is published in the widely available *Come Alive in Territory Parks* and the local schedule should be posted at the relevant park's information bays.

## KATHERINE

pop 6720

This bustling little place is the biggest town by far between Darwin and Alice Springs. Katherine has long been an important stopping point – the river it's named after is the first permanent running water on the road north from Alice Springs. It's a mixed blessing really, because Katherine has suffered several devastating floods. The last major flood, in January 1998, inundated the surrounding countryside and left its mark up to 2m high on Katherine's buildings. Katherine is a good place to replenish supplies on the long drive north or south, or west along the Victoria Hwy to Western Australia. It's also the gateway to the spectacular Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park.

## HISTORY

The Katherine area is the traditional home of the Jawoyn and Dagoman Aboriginal people. Following land claims they have received the title to large parcels of land, including Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park.

The first Europeans through the area were those in the expedition of Ludwig Leichhardt in 1844. The river was named the Catherine by John McDouall Stuart in 1862, but for some reason the current spelling was adopted. As was so often the case with Territory towns, it was the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line and the establishment of a telegraph station that really got the town going.

Pastoral ventures soon followed, one of the most notable being the establishment of Springvale Station by Alfred Giles in 1878. Although his attempts at sheep and cattle farming were not outrageously successful, he laid the foundations for the cattle industry in the Katherine region.

The town found its current site when the railway bridge over the Katherine River was opened in 1926. During WWII, Katherine became a major defence-force base, and it

even received a bit of attention from the Japanese when nine bombers raided the town in March 1942.

The town now survives largely on the tourism generated by Nitmiluk National Park and the business from nearby Tindal air force base.

## ORIENTATION

Katherine's main street, Katherine Tce, is the Stuart Hwy as it runs through town. Giles St, the road to Katherine Gorge, branches off to the northeast in the middle of town. Murphy Street branches west off the Stuart Hwy to become the Victoria Hwy (for Victoria River, Timber Creek and Western Australia), part of Hwy 1 around Australia.

Long-distance buses pull into the transit centre and 24-hour BP station, diagonally opposite the information centre.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Katherine Books** (☎ 8972 2530; Shop 10, Oasis Shopping Centre)

**Top News** (☎ 8971 1203; Shop 9, Oasis Shopping Centre) For newspapers, magazines and maps.

### Emergency

The **police station** (☎ 8972 0111; Stuart Hwy) is 2km south of the centre of town.

### Internet Access

**Didj Shop Internet Café** (☎ 8972 2485; cnr Giles St & Railway Tce; per 15min/1hr \$2/7) Internet access is available here, along with a chat.

**Katherine Art Gallery** (☎ 8971 1051; 12 Katherine Tce; per 15min \$2) Aboriginal art and craft shop (see Shopping p140).

**Katherine library** (☎ 8971 1188; Randazzo centre, Katherine Tce; per 30min \$3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri, 10am-7pm Thu, 10am-1pm Sat)

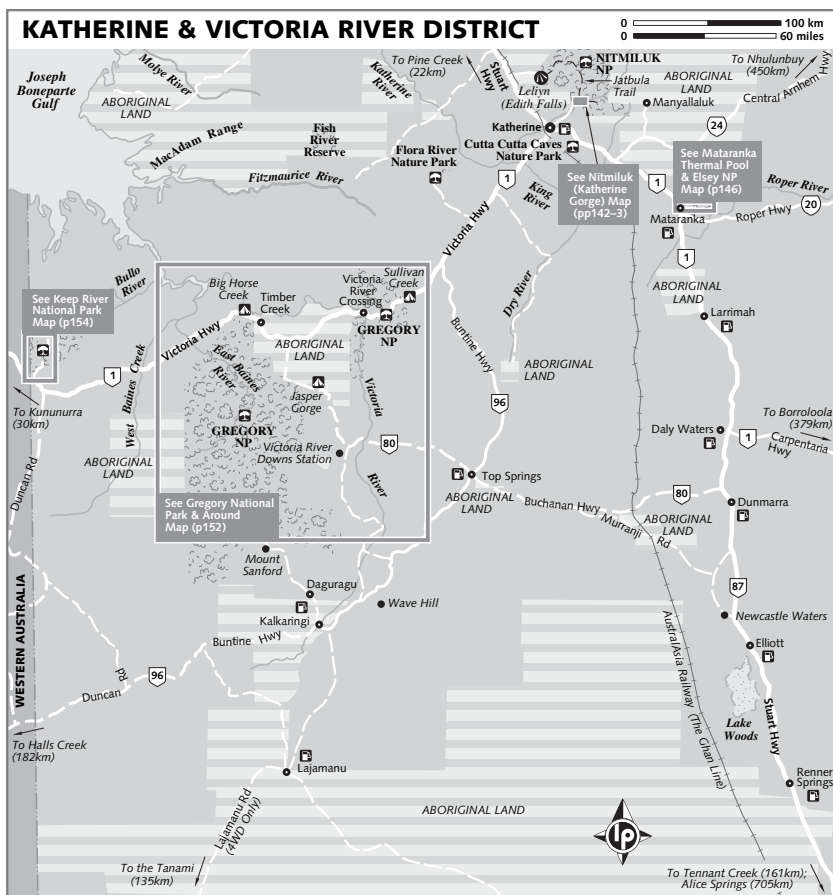
### Medical Services

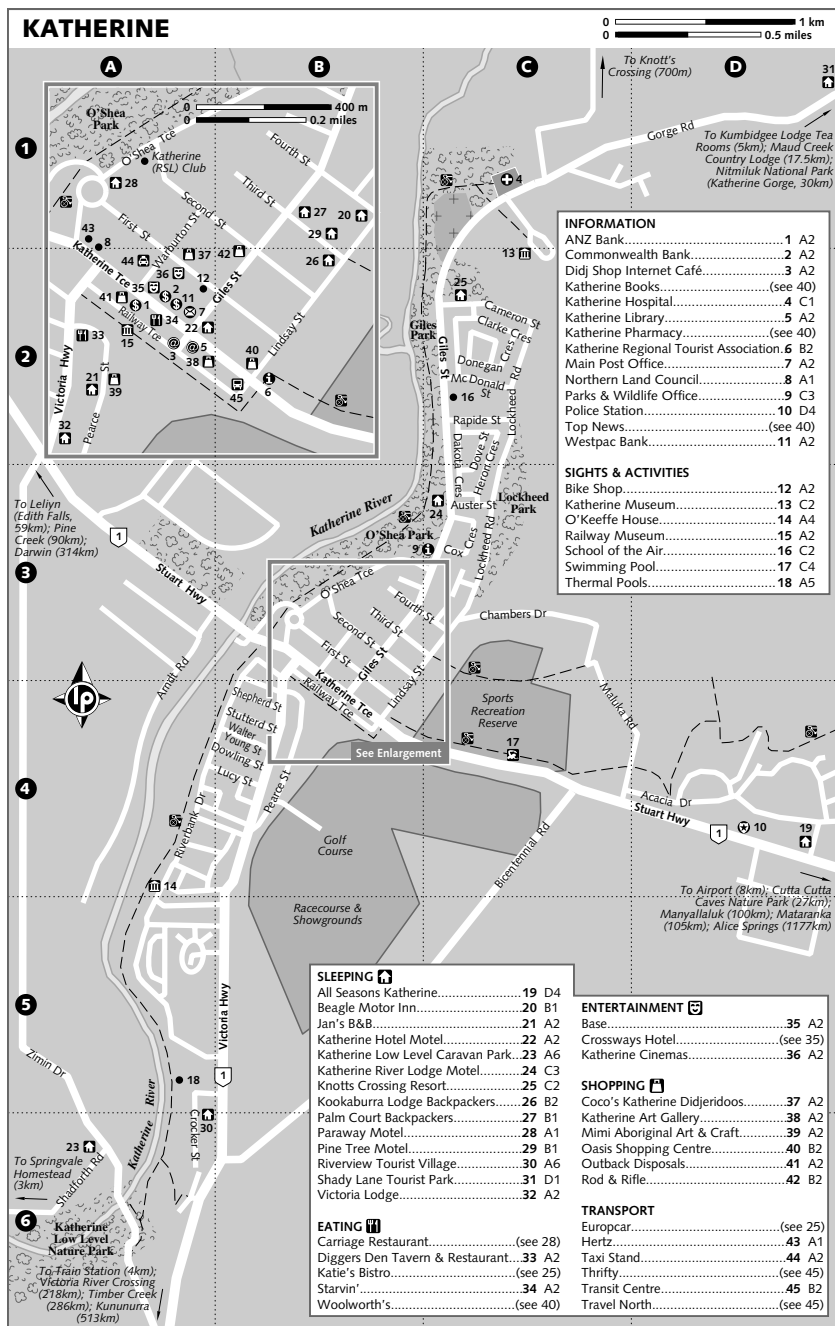
**Katherine Hospital** (☎ 8973 9211; Giles St) In case of emergency, the hospital is about 2.5km north of the town centre.

**Katherine Pharmacy** (☎ 8972 3310; Shop 18, Oasis Shopping Centre)

### Money

Branches of the ANZ, Commonwealth and Westpac banks, all with ATMs, line Katherine Tce.





**INFORMATION**

ANZ Bank.....	1	A2
Commonwealth Bank.....	2	A2
Didj Shop Internet Cafe.....	3	A2
Katherine Books.....	(see 40)	
Katherine Hospital.....	4	C1
Katherine Library.....	5	A2
Katherine Pharmacy.....	(see 40)	
Katherine Regional Tourist Association.....	6	B2
Main Post Office.....	7	A2
Northern Land Council.....	8	A1
Parks & Wildlife Office.....	9	C3
Police Station.....	10	D4
Top News.....	(see 40)	
Westpac Bank.....	11	A2

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Bike Shop.....	12	A2
Katherine Museum.....	13	C2
O'Keeffe House.....	14	A4
Railway Museum.....	15	A2
School of the Air.....	16	C2
Swimming Pool.....	17	C4
Thermal Pools.....	18	A5

**SLEEPING**

All Seasons Katherine.....	19	D4
Beagle Motor Inn.....	20	B1
Jan's B&B.....	21	A2
Katherine Hotel Motel.....	22	A2
Katherine Low Level Caravan Park.....	23	A6
Katherine River Lodge Motel.....	24	C3
Knotts Crossing Resort.....	25	C2
Kookaburra Lodge Backpackers.....	26	B2
Palm Court Backpackers.....	27	B1
Paraway Motel.....	28	A1
Pine Tree Motel.....	29	B1
Riverview Tourist Village.....	30	A6
Shady Lane Tourist Park.....	31	D1
Victoria Lodge.....	32	A2

**EATING**

Carriage Restaurant.....	(see 28)	
Diggers Den Tavern & Restaurant.....	33	A2
Katie's Bistro.....	(see 25)	
Starvin'.....	34	A2
Woolworth's.....	(see 40)	

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Base.....	35	A2
Crossways Hotel.....	(see 35)	
Katherine Cinemas.....	36	A2

**SHOPPING**

Coco's Katherine Didjeridoos.....	37	A2
Katherine Art Gallery.....	38	A2
Mimi Aboriginal Art & Craft.....	39	A2
Oasis Shopping Centre.....	40	B2
Outback Disposals.....	41	A2
Red & Rifle.....	42	B2

**TRANSPORT**

Europac.....	(see 25)	
Hertz.....	43	A1
Taxi Stand.....	44	A2
Thrifty.....	(see 45)	
Transit Centre.....	45	B2
Travel North.....	(see 45)	

**Post & Telephone**

Telephones are located outside the **main post office** (cnr Katherine Tce & Giles St), as well as at the Oasis shopping centre and the information centre.

**Tourist Information**

**Katherine Region Tourist Association** (☎ 8972 2650; www.krta.com.au; cnr Stuart Hwy & Lindsay St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun, to 5pm in the Dry) Stocks information on all areas of the Northern Territory, plus national park information notes.

**Northern Land Council** (☎ 8971 9802; 5 Katherine Tce) If you wish to drive along the Central Arnhem Hwy towards Nhulunbuy (p131), a permit from the Northern Land Council is required.

**Parks & Wildlife office** (☎ 8973 8888; 32 Giles St) National park information notes are available here.

**SIGHTS**

The **Katherine Museum** (☎ 8972 3945; Gorge Rd; adult/child \$3.50/1; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri & 10am-1pm Sat Mar-Oct, 10am-1pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb, 2-5pm Sun year-round) is in the old airport terminal opposite Katherine Hospital, about 3km from the centre of town. The original Gypsy Moth biplane flown by Dr Clyde Fenton, the first Flying Doctor, is housed here along with a tiny helicopter used for cattle mustering. There's a good selection of historical photos, including a display on the 1998 flood.

A few kilometres beyond the museum and signposted off Gorge Rd is **Knott's Crossing**, the original Katherine River crossing and now a popular fishing spot. A building near here, formerly the Sportsman's Arms & Pioneer Cash Store, was used in the filming of *We of the Never Never*.

Katherine's **Railway Museum** (Railway Tce; admission \$2; ☎ 1-4pm Mon-Fri May-Oct), owned by the National Trust, includes a display on railway history in the original station building (1926) and a dilapidated steam engine sitting on a section of the old north Australian line.

At the **School of the Air** (☎ 8972 1833; www.schools.nt.edu.au/ksa; Giles St; adult/child \$5/2; ☎ Mar-Nov), 1.5km from the town centre, you can listen into a class and see how kids in the remote outback are educated. Guided tours are held at 9am, 10am, 11am on weekdays and bookings are preferred.

**O'Keeffe House** (Riverbank Dr; admission \$2; ☎ 1-4pm Mon-Fri in dry season), near the Victoria Hwy, is one of the oldest buildings in town. It was originally constructed with simple bush

poles, corrugated iron and flywire mesh by the Army in 1942 as a recreation hut. After WWII the building passed through a number of hands, until it was bought in 1963 by Olive O'Keeffe, a nursing sister who became well known for her work throughout the Territory. The building was bought by the National Trust after 'Keeffie's' death in 1988.

Ernest Giles established **Springvale Homestead** (☎ 8972 1355; Shadforth Rd) in 1879 after he drove 2000 cattle and horses and 12,000 head of sheep from Adelaide to the site in 19 months. It claims to be the oldest cattle station in the Northern Territory. The stone homestead still stands by the river, about 8km southwest of town. You're welcome to wander around the homestead, or take the free tour at 3pm daily (except Monday) from May to October.

**ACTIVITIES**

**Cycling**

Katherine is more or less flat and cycling is a good way to get around town. The **Bike Shop** (☎ 8972 1213; Shop 3, 16 First St) can do repairs and has bikes and gear for sale. Bikes are available for hire at some hostels, such as Kookaburra Lodge Backpackers (\$10 per day).

**Scenic Flights**

**Skysafari** (☎ 1800 089 103; Nitmiluk National Park) Helicopter flights over three/eight/13 gorges in Nitmiluk cost \$60/90/145.

**North Australian Helicopters** (☎ 1800 621 717) Runs similar flights from Kumbidgee.

**Swimming**

The 105-hectare **Katherine Low Level Nature Park** is 5km south of town, just off the Victoria Hwy. It's a great spot on the banks of Katherine River, with a popular dry-season swimming hole. There are picnic tables, gas barbecues and toilets here. A cycle/walking path along the southern bank of the river connects the park with town and the **thermal pools**. Floating in the clear, warm (32°C) waters past pandanus palms to the rapids area is a delight. The pools are accessible from the Victoria Hwy, a few kilometres south of town, or there's wheelchair access from Croker St. For wheelchair access call the **council** (☎ 8972 1322; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) for the combination lock code.

The public **swimming pool** (☎ 8972 1944; Stuart Hwy; adult/child \$3/1.50; ☎ 10am-6pm), about 750m

past the information centre towards Maratanka, is partly shaded.

## TOURS

Katherine has a diverse range of tours on offer. You can delve into local history or Aboriginal art and culture, cruise out to Nitmiluk, or journey into Kakadu and Arnhem Land. Ample brochures are available at the information centre.

**Gecko Canoeing** (☎ 8972 2224; www.geckocanoeing.com.au) runs exhilarating guided canoe trips on the more remote stretches of the Katherine River. Trips vary from one/three days (\$180/600) on the Katherine River to expeditions of up to 10 days on the Baines, Wickham and Victoria Rivers. A combined five-day hike along the Jatbula Trail in Nitmiluk National Park with five days of canoeing costs \$2000. Prices include meals and safety gear.

**Katherine Town Tour** (☎ 8971 0793; www.katherinetowntour.com; adult/child \$35/25) operates half-day tours of local and regional attractions, including the Cutta Cutta Caves (p144) and Springvale Homestead.

**Manlyallaluk Tours** (☎ 1800 644 727; www.manlyallaluk.com; Manlyallaluk) offers excellent Aboriginal culture tours at Manlyallaluk (p145), some of which depart from Katherine. A one-day cultural experience (adult/child \$165/80) from Katherine includes a bush-tucker and bush-medicine walk, lunch, and painting and craft activities.

**Travel North** (☎ 8971 9999; www.travelnorth.com.au; Transit Centre, Katherine Tce) has two-day camping trips via Kakadu to Darwin, which cost \$360 and include all meals and a Yellow Water cruise. Other tours include Kakadu, Arnhem Land, Litchfield and Manlyallaluk.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Katherine Country Music Muster** Features plenty of live music in the pubs and on the street over the May Day long weekend.

**Katherine Canoe Marathon** Two-day, 80km race organised by the Red Cross in June.

**Barunga Festival** During the Queen's Birthday long weekend in June, Barunga, 80km southeast of Katherine, hosts Aboriginal people from around 40 communities. There are displays of traditional arts and crafts, as well as dancing and athletics competitions.

**Katherine District Show** An annual agricultural show held in July, incorporating the Katherine Rodeo and Campdraft.

**Flying Fox Art & Cultural Festival** Runs throughout August and features local artists and performers, dragon-boat races and a street parade.

## SLEEPING Budget

### HOSTELS

Katherine's hostels tend to be converted motels, with bathrooms in each room. Each has a pool and cooking facilities, and although within a short walk of the transit centre, all offer pick-ups from there. Information boards in the hostels are a great place to check job opportunities on remote stations.

**Kookaburra Lodge Backpackers** (☎ 1800 808 211, 8971 0257; www.kookaburrabackpackers.com.au; cnr Lindsay & Third Sts; dm \$19, s/d or tw \$50; ☎ ☑ ☒ ☓) A few minutes' walk from the transit centre, this is a popular, well-run place with a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. The double rooms have a TV and fridge. There's a kitchen in each dorm room, an outdoor common area with TV, and bike and canoe hire. A free breakfast and YHA/VIP discounts are available.

**Palm Court Backpackers** (☎ 1800 626 722; www.travelnorth.com.au; cnr Third & Giles Sts; dm \$19, tw or d \$50; ☎ ☑ ☒) This friendly hostel is a few blocks from the main street and offers free pancake breakfasts. The old motel rooms are looking worn and weary, but each room has a bathroom, fridge and TV.

**Victoria Lodge** (☎ 1800 808 875; 21 Victoria Hwy; dm/ s/d \$18/40/55; ☎ ☑ ☒) Not too far from the main street, this is a clean place with a variety of units, double rooms and dorms. There's a combined kitchen and lounge area with TV and shared bathroom between each couple of rooms.

### MOTELS

**Katherine River Lodge Motel** (☎ 8971 0266; www.katherineriverlodge.net; 50 Giles St; s/d/family \$60/70/100; ☎ ☑ ☒) This is a large motel with spotless, good-value rooms, including adjoining family rooms that sleep six. The attached River Restaurant (mains \$10 to \$15) serves inexpensive hearty meals, including \$6.50 kids' meals.

**Beagle Motor Inn** (☎ 8972 3998; cnr Lindsay & Fourth Sts; s/d \$60/70; ☎ ☑ ☒) This affordable motel is in a quiet location close to the town centre. The rooms are well worn and nothing special (some cheaper rooms share bathrooms), but it's a friendly place and there are disabled rooms and a licensed restaurant.

## CAMPING

**Knott's Crossing Resort** (☎ 1800 222 511, 8972 2511; www.knotscrossing.com.au; cnr Cameron & Giles Sts; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$18/22, cabins from \$60, motel d from \$110; ☎ ☑ ☒) On the road towards the gorge, this resort is set amid lush tropical gardens. All powered sites have private bathrooms and there are spacious family rooms with kitchens, plus the excellent Katie's Bistro.

**Katherine Low Level Caravan Park** (☎ 8972 3962; lowlevel@austarnet.com.au; Shadforth Rd; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$24/27, cabins from \$95; ☎ ☑ ☒) Across the river, off the Victoria Hwy about 5km from town, is this manicured park with plenty of shady sites, a great swimming pool and spotless amenities. There are barbecues as well as a camp kitchen equipped with a stove, fridge and a microwave. The bar and bistro (mains \$10 to \$20) area shelters under a massive fig tree.

**Shady Lane Tourist Park** (☎ 8971 0491; www.shadylanetouristpark.com.au; Gorge Rd; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$20/25, cabins from \$50, self-contained cabins \$95; ☎ ☑ ☒) This is a friendly park about 6km out of the town centre towards Nitmiluk. There is plenty of shade, a range of spotless cabins and clean amenities, while the camp kitchen has a fridge and gas barbecues.

**Riverview Tourist Village** (☎ 8972 1011; www.riverviewtouristvillage.com.au; 440 Victoria Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$17/21, budget s/d \$28/38, motel s/d \$65/75, cabins from \$65; ☎ ☑ ☒) This complex is convenient to the thermal pools, is pet friendly and there's lots of shade. If the sound of road-trains whizzing by doesn't lull you to sleep, try to secure a site away from the highway boundary.

There are also powered en suite sites at the All Seasons Katherine (below).

## Midrange

**All Seasons Katherine** (☎ 1300 812 443, 8972 1744; www.accorhotels.com.au; Stuart Hwy; powered sites for 2 \$25, d \$120-140; ☎ ☑ ☒ ☓) About 4km south of the town centre, this is Katherine's best hotel, which incongruously also has a pleasant caravan park with barbecues, gardens and a tennis court. The spacious queen-size doubles are worth the extra outlay, and the family room with kitchen is great value. Wheelchair accessible rooms are also available. The restaurant serves a buffet dinner (\$28).

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Maud Creek Country Lodge** (☎ 8971 1814; www.maudcreekcountrylodge.com.au; Gorge Rd; s/d \$110/135, cottage d \$165; ☎ ☑ ☒) This friendly and peaceful rural retreat is just 6km from the gorge on a former cattle run. Here you can go bushwalking, bird-watching and river fishing or just relax under the shady veranda. There are motel-style rooms that share a communal kitchen and TV lounge, or there is a private self-contained cottage. A continental breakfast is supplied with all tariffs and the minibar is pegged at town prices.

**Jan's B&B** (☎ 8971 1005; jcomleybbaccom@yahoo.com.au; 13 Pearce St; guesthouse s/d \$50/85, B&B s/d \$110/150; ☎ ☑ ☒ ☓) This place is a real gem with immaculate B&B rooms sharing bathroom facilities, or a fully self-contained guesthouse. Guests are welcome to use the pool table, piano, lounge area, spa and the guesthouse's (next door) pool and kitchen. Book ahead.

**Paraway Motel** (☎ 8972 2644; reservations@parawaymotel.com.au; O'Shea Tce; s/d \$80/90; ☎ ☑ ☒) This smart motel is as neat as a pin and its quiet location is still handy to the shops. Standard motel rooms are spotless and comfortable. There's the excellent Carriage Restaurant and it is handy to the Katherine (RSL) Club.

**Pine Tree Motel** (☎ 8972 2533; pinetree2@bigpond.com; 3 Third St; s/d \$100/120, ☎ ☑ ☒) This is a comfortable chain motel with spacious, well-appointed rooms arranged around a central garden and pool. There's a licensed restaurant and guests can enjoy a poolside barbecue on Sunday.

**Katherine Hotel Motel** (☎ 8972 1622; 3 Giles St; s/d from \$75/80; ☎ ☑ ☒) This large complex has standard motel rooms, queen-size rooms and family rooms. There's a bistro, cocktail bar and lively public bar, which is thankfully well away from the rooms.

## EATING

**Katie's Bistro** (☎ 8972 2511; Knotts Crossing Resort, cnr Giles & Cameron Sts; mains \$19-28; ☎ ☑ dinner) This tourist park bistro is locally regarded as Katherine's best restaurant. The dozen or so main courses may include Japanese hotpot, or seared buffalo fillet, as well as

grilled barra, steaks and one or two vegetarian options. Quality wine is available by the glass.

**Carriage Restaurant** (☎ 8972 2644; Paraway Motel, O'Shea Tce; mains \$20-27; ☎ dinner) A quiet licensed restaurant with a delicate touch. Choose from a small range of delectable mains such as the flaky vegetarian parcel, Moroccan lamb or classic pan-fried barramundi.

**Diggers Den Tavern & Restaurant** (☎ 8971 0422; 7 Victoria Hwy; mains \$9-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) This welcoming bar has an all-day menu till 6pm, then cranks up its busy and popular kitchen with pizzas, pastas, steaks and, on Thursdays, a \$10 buffet.

**Kumbidgee Lodge Tea Rooms** (☎ 8971 0699; Gorge Rd; mains \$7-18; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This casual eatery, 10km out of town, is a tranquil spot to indulge in a hearty 'bush breakfast' (\$12) or a Devonshire tea while catching up with the rest of the world in the newspapers. The Sunday buffet breakfast (\$12) is hugely popular.

**Starvin'** (☎ 8972 3633; 32 Katherine Tce; mains \$8-18; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) The local pizza and pasta joint for when nothing but a pizza will fill the hole.

**Woolworth's** (Oasis Shopping Centre; Katherine Tce; ☎ 7am-10pm) If you're self-catering, this is the cheapest place for hundreds of kilometres around to stock up on supplies. It also has a liquor shop and a bakery.

## ENTERTAINMENT

The **Crossways Hotel** (☎ 8972 1022; 23 Katherine Tce) boasts the town's only nightclub, **The Base** (admission \$5; ☎ 9pm-4am Fri & Sat), which kicks off around 1am, though Saturday nights may not kick off at all. A block away on the main street, the **Katherine Hotel Motel** (☎ 8972 1622; cnr Katherine Tce & Giles St) has occasional live bands.

**Katherine Cinemas** (☎ 8971 2555; www.katherinecinemas.com.au; 20 First St; adult/child \$13/8) screens current release movies.

## SHOPPING

**Mimi Aboriginal Art & Craft** (☎ 8971 0036; mimiarts@bigpond.com; 6 Pearce St) This Aboriginal-owned co-op sells quality art and crafts from the Katherine, Arnhem Land and Kimberley regions.

**Coco's Katherine Didgeridoos** (☎ 8971 2889; 21 First St) Sells didgeridoos in a variety of keys (A to G) from its shed.

**Katherine Art Gallery** (☎ 8971 1051; 12 Katherine Tce) This shop has a wide range of art from the Katherine area as well as the central deserts and Arnhem Land.

**Outback Disposals** (☎ 8972 3456; 58 Katherine Tce) This store can supply all the camping gear you'll need, including a vast range of parts for gas stoves.

**Rod & Rifle** (☎ 8972 1020; cnr Giles & Second Sts) A huge emporium of outdoor, camping and fishing supplies.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Katherine Airport is 11km south of town, just off the Stuart Hwy. **Airmorth** (☎ 1800 627 474) and a number of other companies fly charters to/from Katherine from Darwin and Alice Springs and other destinations in the Territory.

**Greyhound Australia** (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) has regular services between Darwin and Alice Springs, Queensland or Western Australia. All buses stop at Katherine's **Transit Centre** (☎ 8971 9999; 6 Katherine Tce). Typical one-way fares from Katherine include: Darwin (\$70, 4½ hours), Alice Springs (\$210, 15 hours), Tennant Creek (\$135, eight hours) and Kununurra (\$110, 4½ hours).

The *Ghan* train travels between Adelaide and Darwin, stopping at Katherine for a few hours to allow passengers to visit Katherine Gorge; see p277 for timetable and fare details. Katherine train station is off the Victoria Hwy, 9km southwest of town. **Travel North** (☎ 8971 9999; Transit Centre) runs shuttles between the station and town.

Car rental companies:

**Europcar** (☎ 13 13 90; Knotts Crossing Resort, cnr Cameron & Giles Sts)

**Hertz** (☎ 8971 1111; cnr Katherine Tce & O'Shea Tce)

**Thrifty** (☎ 8972 3183; Transit Centre, 6 Katherine Tce)

## GETTING AROUND

The town centre is compact enough to walk around, although some sights, such as the thermal pools and museum, are a bit far – you can rent bicycles at Kookaburra Lodge (p138) and Palm Court Backpackers (p138).

Taxis congregate at a stand near the corner of Warburton and First Sts, behind Red Rooster. Alternatively, call **Katherine Taxis** (☎ 8972 177).

# AROUND KATHERINE

## NITMILUK (KATHERINE GORGE) NATIONAL PARK

This 2920-sq-km park, about 30km from Katherine, is one of the most visited sites in the Northern Territory. The best-known feature is the series of 13 sandstone gorges, known as Katherine Gorge, which has been carved out by the Katherine River on its journey from Arnhem Land to the Timor Sea. It is a hauntingly beautiful place (when it's not crowded) and is well worth a visit. In the Dry the tranquil river is perfect for a paddle, but in the Wet the deep still waters and dividing rapids are engulfed by an awesome torrent that churns through the gorge.

The lesser-known Leliyn (Edith Falls), also part of Nitmiluk, are accessible from the Stuart Hwy 40km north of Katherine. Leliyn features a great swimming hole, waterfalls and walking trails. Access roads to both sections of the park are sealed, but may be cut off for short periods during the Wet.

What was once Katherine Gorge National Park was proclaimed in 1962. In 1989 the Jawoyn Aboriginal people gained ownership following a land claim that had been lodged in the late 1970s. The name was changed to Nitmiluk and the land leased back to Parks & Wildlife (then known as the Conservation Commission). It is now managed by the Nitmiluk Board of Management, which has a Jawoyn majority, and traditional practices such as hunting, food gathering and ceremonies are still carried out in the park. Nitmiluk is the Jawoyn name for the Cicada Dreaming, which takes in the area from the park headquarters up to the end of the first gorge.

## Wildlife

### ANIMALS

The park's animal life is also typical of the Top End. Large goannas are a common sight around the boat ramp area, and agile wallabies visit the camping ground. Flying foxes squabble and chatter around the picnic ground and ply the gorges at dusk.

Birds are abundant and about 170 species have been recorded in the park. Around the camping ground and Nitmiluk Centre look for noisy gatherings of apostlebirds, parrots such as the aptly named rainbow lorikeet and

red-winged parrot, and flocks of little corellas. Great bowerbirds, blue-faced honeyeaters and blue-winged kookaburras are also common around the park HQ. In dry weather look for small birds, such as finches and honeyeaters, coming in to drink at sprinklers. One of the park's most valued inhabitants is the rare and endangered Gouldian finch.

## PLANTS

The most obvious plant community here is the open woodland, so typical of the Top End, dominated by trees such as bloodwoods, ironwood and the beautiful salmon gum. Between and under the trees are smaller shrubs, including native plums and tall (up to 2m high) spear grass. Pockets of monsoon rainforest grow in sheltered, well-watered sites, such as Butterfly Gorge. Along the main waterways grow lofty paperbarks and stands of pandanus, while the higher sandstone ridges are typically covered in spinifex grass and hardy shrubs such as grevilleas and acacias.

## Information

The **Nitmiluk Centre** (☎ 1800 089 103, 8972 1253; ☎ 7am-7pm Apr-Sep, 7am-5pm Oct-Mar) has excellent displays and information on the park's geology, wildlife, the traditional owners (the Jawoyn) and European history. There's also a desk for **Parks & Wildlife** (☎ 8972 1886), which has information sheets on a wide range of marked walking tracks that start here and traverse the picturesque country south of the gorge. Some of the tracks pass Aboriginal rock paintings up to 7000 years old. The more detailed *Guide to Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park* (\$6.60) is also available here. Registration for overnight walks and camping permits (\$3.30 per night) is from 7am to 1pm; canoeing permits are also issued. Check at the centre for information on ranger talks.

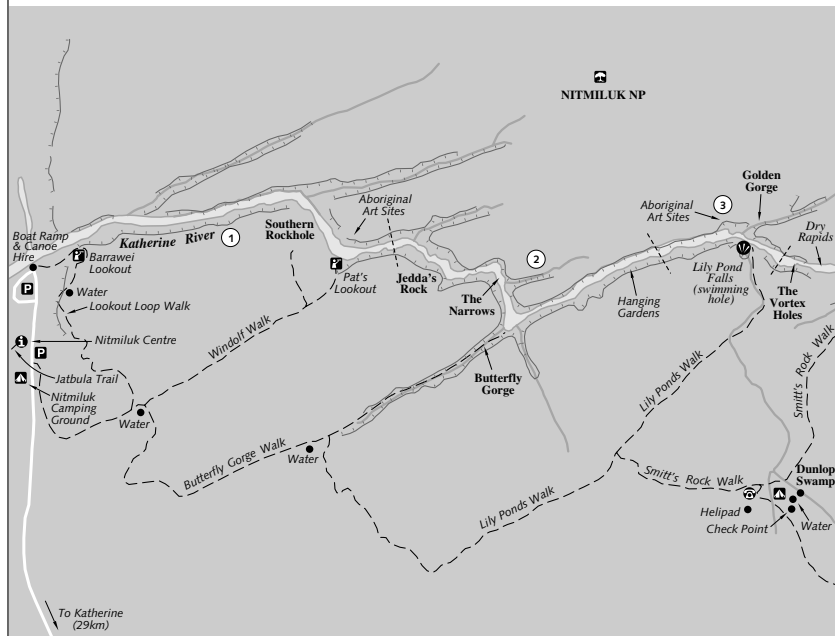
The Nitmiluk Centre, camping ground and boat tours are all wheelchair accessible.

## Activities

### SWIMMING

The gorge is usually safe for swimming in the Dry and there's a designated swimming platform near the picnic area (yep, the one opposite the croc trap!). However, it's probably best enjoyed by taking a canoe and finding your own space somewhere upstream.

## NITMILUK (KATHERINE GORGE)



In the Wet the gorge is closed to boats and canoes. The only crocodiles around are generally the freshwater variety; however, Parks & Wildlife staff will advise if the situation is otherwise.

## BUSHWALKING

The park has approximately 120km of walking tracks, ranging from short strolls to the 66km one-way Jatbula Trail to Leliyn (Edith Falls). Updated information, maps and information sheets on the walking trails are all available from the Parks & Wildlife desk at the Nitmiluk Centre.

Walkers setting out on any overnight walk must register and deregister at the Nitmiluk Centre. There's a \$50 refundable deposit for any overnight walk and a camping fee of \$3.30 per person per night. For day walks, registration is not necessary, but you should inform someone of your intentions, and you can voluntarily register with the ranger. Don't forget to deregister on return.

The main walks, all of which are clearly marked, are listed here. Note that all distances include return (measured from the Nitmiluk

Centre), and that times will vary depending on the individual and the weather.

**Barrawei (Lookout) Loop** (3.7km, one hour, medium) A short, steep climb with good views over the Katherine River.

**Windolf** (8.4km, 3½ hours, medium) A good walk that features a swimming spot at the southern rockhole near the end of the first gorge.

**Butterfly Gorge** (12km, 4½ hours, difficult) A shady walk through a pocket of monsoon rainforest, often with butterflies, leads to midway along the second gorge and a deep water swimming spot.

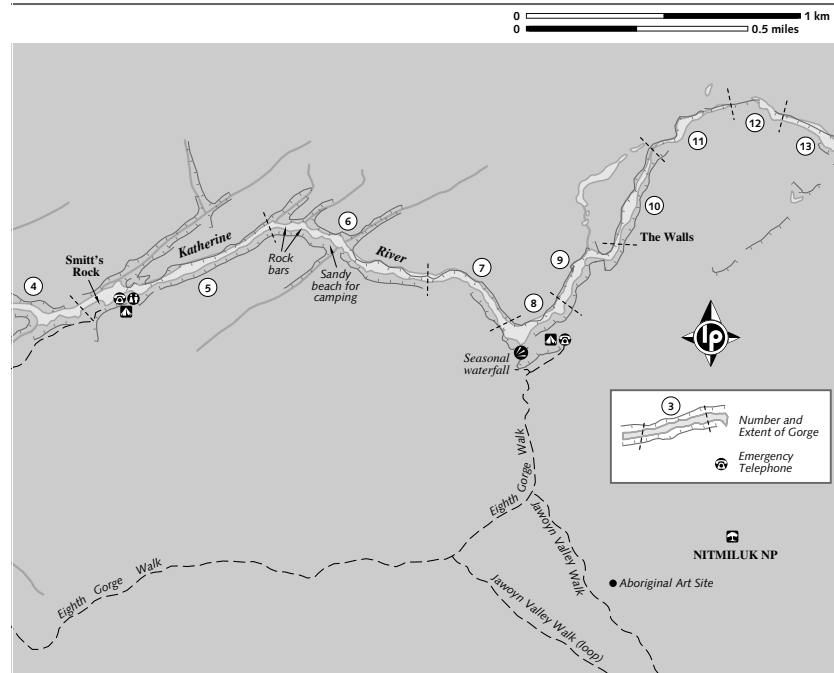
**Lily Ponds** (20km, 6½ hours, difficult) This walk leads to Lily Pond Falls, at the far end of the third gorge. Ask at the Nitmiluk Centre for an update on the swimming hole here.

**Smitt Rock** (24km, 8½ hours, difficult) A rugged trek that takes you to Smitt Rock near the start of the fifth gorge. There are excellent gorge views along the way, and you can swim and camp overnight at Dunlop Swamp.

**Eighth Gorge** (33km, overnight, difficult) Most of the way this trail is actually well away from the edge of the gorge, only coming down to it at the end.

**Jawoyn Valley** (40km, overnight, difficult) A wilderness loop trail leading off the Eighth Gorge walk into a valley with rock outcrops and rock-art galleries.

**Jatbula Trail** (66km, five days, difficult) This walk to Leliyn (Edith Falls) climbs the Arnhem Land escarpment,



taking in features such as the swamp-fed Biddlecombe Cascades (11.5km from the Nitmiluk Centre), the 30m Crystal Falls (20.5km), the Amphitheatre (31km) and the Sweetwater Pool (61.5km). Note that this walk can only be done one way (ie you can't walk from Leliyn to Katherine Gorge) and that a minimum of two people are required to do the walk. See the Parks & Wildlife information sheet and Lonely Planet's *Walking in Australia* for detailed trail notes.

## CANOEING

Nothing beats exploring the gorges in your own boat. Bear in mind the intensity of the sun and heat, and the fact that you may have to carry your canoe over the rock bars and rapids that separate the gorges. Pick up the *Canoeing Guide* (which shows points of interest along the way, such as rock art, waterfalls and plant life) at the Nitmiluk Centre.

**Nitmiluk Tours** (☎ 8972 1253; nitmiluk@bigpond.com) hires out single/double canoes for a half day (\$34/55, departing 9am and 1pm) or full day (\$45/70, departing 9am), including the use of a waterproof drum for cameras and other gear, a map and a life jacket. The canoe shed is at the boat ramp by the main car park, about 500m beyond the Nitmiluk Centre.

You also can be a little more adventurous and take the canoes out overnight for \$135/90 per adult/child, plus \$3.30 for an overnight camping permit. Bookings are essential as overnight permits are limited and there is a \$60 deposit. It's also possible to use your own canoe in the gorge for a registration fee of \$5.50 per person per day, plus a refundable \$50 deposit.

## FISHING

There are more than 40 species of fish in the river (including barramundi), which makes fishing, by lure only, popular here.

## Tours

## GORGE CRUISES

The other, much less energetic way to get out onto the water is on a cruise run by **Nitmiluk Tours** (☎ 1800 089 103, 8972 1253; nitmiluk@bigpond.com; Nitmiluk Centre). Bookings on some cruises can be tight in the dry season, so it's a good idea to make a reservation the day before.

The two-hour cruise (adult/child \$45/17) goes to the second gorge and visits a rock-art gallery (including 800m walk). Departures

are at 9am, 11am, 1pm and 3pm daily year-round. There's wheelchair access to the top of the first gorge only. The four-hour cruise (adult/child \$65/30) goes to the third gorge and includes refreshments and a chance to swim. Cruises leave at 9am daily from April to late October, plus at 11am and 1pm May to August. Finally, there's an eight-hour trip (adult or child \$105), which takes you up to the fifth gorge, involves walking about 5km and includes a barbecue lunch and refreshments. It departs at 9am daily from May to October.

During the Wet, and departing only when the water level is above 2m, power boats (adult/child \$50/37, 45 minutes) speed to the end of the third gorge, straight over the dry-season rock bars and rapids.

### BUSHWALKING

Extended bushwalks in and around Nitmiluk, with overnight camping, are offered by **Willis's Walkabouts** (☎ 8985 2134; www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au).

### SCENIC FLIGHTS

Helicopter flights with **Skysafari** (☎ 1800 089 103, 8972 2345) include a 10-minute sweep of three gorges for \$60, a 15-minute flight over eight gorges for \$90, and a 25-minute flight through all 13 gorges for \$145. These flights and others can be booked at the Nitmiluk Centre.

### Sleeping & Eating

Camping is the only option at the gorge itself.

**Nitmiluk Caravan Park** (☎ 8972 1253; Nitmiluk Centre; unpowered/powerd site for 2 \$19/23) This park has plenty of grass and shade and is well equipped with hot showers, toilets, barbecues and laundry. Wallabies and goannas are frequent visitors.

**Nitmiluk Bistro** (☎ 8972 1253; Nitmiluk Centre; mains \$12-20; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serving well-prepared breakfasts, snacks and lunches, such as burgers and salads, this licensed bistro occasionally puts on evening meals in the Dry, sometimes accompanied by live music.

### Getting There & Away

It's 30km by sealed road from Katherine to the Nitmiluk Centre, and a few hundred metres further to the car park, where the gorge begins and the cruises start.

**Travel North** (☎ 8972 1044; Transit Centre, 6 Katherine Tce, Katherine; one way/return \$15/22) runs a regular shuttle bus between Katherine and the gorge to meet up with the gorge tours and on an 'as required' basis. Buses leave the Transit centre at 8am, 12.15pm and 2.15pm and leave the gorge at 9am, 1pm and 5pm. Children travel at half price. Seats are usually booked with cruise bookings.

### LELIYN (EDITH FALLS)

Leliyn is in the western corner of the park and can be reached by car from the Stuart Hwy, 40km north of Katherine, then it's 20km further along a sealed road to the falls and camping ground. The falls themselves cascade into the lowest of three large **pools** (swimming ☹ 7am-7pm); it's a beautiful, safe place for swimming and a ranger is stationed here throughout the year.

Bushwalking here reveals many treasures. The **Leliyn Trail** (2.6km loop, 1½ hours) climbs into escarpment country through grevillea and spinifex and past scenic look-outs (Bemang is best in the afternoon) to the Upper Pool, where the **Sweetwater Pool Trail** (8.6km return, three to five hours, medium) branches off. The peaceful Sweetwater Pool has a small camping ground site; overnight permits are available at the kiosk.

Jawoyn traditional owner Ryan Baruwei leads **tours** (30min/1hr \$15/20) at Leliyn explaining its significance and meaning to the Jawoyn, as well as the traditional uses of the native flora. Book through the **Katherine Visitor Information Centre** (☎ 8972 2650).

The Parks & Wildlife **camping ground** (☎ 8975 4869; adult/child/family \$8.80/4/20) at the main pool has grassy sites, lots of shade, toilets, showers, a laundry and disabled facilities. Fees are paid at the **kiosk** (☹ 8am-6pm), which sells good-value breakfasts, snacks and basic supplies. Nearby is a picnic area with gas barbecues and tables.

Access to the park is year-round, though occasional flooding does occur.

### CUTTA CUTTA CAVES NATURE PARK

These tropical caves are the only cave system open to the public in the Territory. The 1499-hectare Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park protects this extensive karst (limestone) landscape 27km south of Katherine. The caves have a unique ecology and you'll be sharing the space with brown tree snakes, plus the

endangered ghost bats and orange horse-shoe bats that they feed on, 15m below the ground. During the Dry, however, the bats move into the far recesses of the caves and visitors have little chance of seeing them.

Cutta Cutta is a Jawoyn name meaning many stars; it was taboo for Aborigines to enter the cave, which they believed was where the stars were kept during the day. The first European person to see the cave was a local stockman in 1900, after whom it was known as Smith's Cave.

Only one cave is currently open to the public and it was badly damaged by Australian soldiers during WWII, who used the limestone curtains and stalactites for target practice. In the Dry the caves are in fact quite dry, but in the Wet they can flood.

The only way to see the caves is through **Guided Cave Tours** (☎ 8972 1940; adult/child \$13/6.50; ☹ 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm & 3pm dry season), which run 45-minute tours from the caves' kiosk. There are limited numbers on each tour, so book ahead. Inquire at the Parks & Wildlife office in Katherine about whether the nearby **Tindal Cave**, which is larger and in better condition than Cutta Cutta Caves, is open.

### MANYALLALUK

The former 3000-sq-km Eva Valley cattle station, **Manyallaluk** (☎ 1800 644 727, 8975 4727) abuts the eastern edge of Nitmiluk National Park, the southern edge of Kakadu and the western edge of Arnhem Land. The name Manyallaluk comes from a Frog Dreaming site found to the east of the community. The land is owned by the Jawoyn Aboriginal people, some of whom organise and lead highly regarded **cultural tours** (self-drive adult/child \$125/70, incl transfers to/from Katherine \$165/80). You'll learn about traditional bush tucker and medicine, spear throwing and how to play a didgeridoo on the one-day tours, which include lunch and billy tea.

Run in conjunction with **Odyssey Tours & Safaris** (☎ 1800 891 190; www.odysaf.com.au), two-day Nipbamjen Arnhem Land tours, offer a unique opportunity to explore rugged, pristine wilderness and interact with the Aboriginal people. The tours depart Katherine Saturday and Wednesday from May to October and cost \$565, including meals and accommodation.

**Manyallaluk Art & Craft Centre** (☹ afternoon Mon-Thu, or by appointment) has excellent art and

crafts at competitive prices, and is included in the tours. No permits are needed to visit the community, but alcohol is prohibited.

There's a **camping ground** (unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$12/18) with grassy sites, and a community store with basic supplies.

The community is equidistant – around 100km – from Katherine and Mataranka. The turn-off to Manyallaluk is 15km along the Central Arnhem Hwy, then 35km along a well-maintained, all-season gravel road. The trip takes about 90 minutes.

### MATARANKA

pop 500

The main attraction of Mataranka, 105km southeast of Katherine, is the nearby Eley National Park and its famous thermal pools.

The first European explorers through this region were Ludwig Leichhardt (1845) and John McDouall Stuart (1862). When AC Gregory came through in 1856 on his exploratory journey from Victoria River Depot (Timber Creek), he named Eley Creek after Joseph Eley, a young surgeon and naturalist in his party. The name went on to become famous as Eley Station (established in 1881) – the setting for *We of the Never Never* (see the boxed text p147).

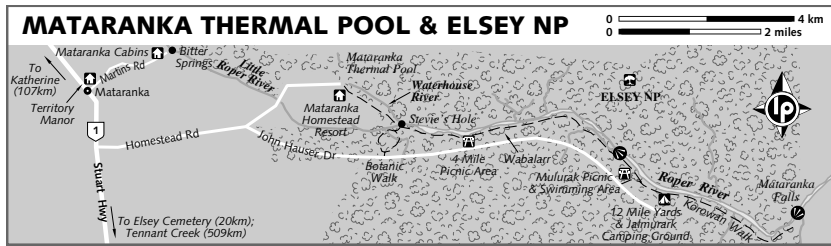
The **Back to the Never Never Festival** takes place in Mataranka in May and includes an art show, rodeo and bush poetry recitals.

### Information

The **Mataranka Rural Transaction Centre** (☎ 8975 4403; ☹ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) is the post office agent and has Internet access (\$2 per 15 minutes). Facilities along the west side of the main street include a supermarket, a couple of roadhouses, a **police station** (☎ 8975 4511) and a pub.

### Sights & Activities

Mataranka's famous crystal-clear **thermal pool** is about 10km east of town. The turn-off to the hot springs is 1.5km south of Mataranka, and then it's 8km along the bitumen Homestead Rd. The warm, mineral-rich waters flow from Rainbow Spring into a landscaped pool surrounded by rainforest palms. Don't expect the secluded tranquillity of other hot springs in the Top End; the pool is reached via a short boardwalk from the touristy Mataranka Homestead Resort and can get very crowded. There's no need to worry about the



freshness of the water, however, as it comes out of the ground at more than 16,000L per minute at a temperature of 34°C.

About 200m away (follow the boardwalk) is the **Waterhouse River**, where you can walk along the banks, or rent canoes for \$10 an hour. **Stevie's Hole**, a natural swimming hole in the cooler Waterhouse River, about 1.5km from the homestead, is rarely crowded.

Outside the homestead entrance is a replica of the **Elsey Station Homestead**, which was made for the filming of *We of the Never Never* (shown daily at noon in the main homestead), and now houses historical displays.

The **Never Never Museum** (Stuart Hwy; adult/child \$2.50/1; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), back in Mataranka town, has displays on the Overland Telegraph Line, as well as WWII and railway paraphernalia.

## Tours

**Travel North** (☎ 1800 089 103; www.travelnorth.com.au; adult/child \$85/70) runs half-day tours to the Mataranka thermal pool from Katherine.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Mataranka Homestead Resort** (☎ 8975 4544; matarankahomestead@bigpond.com.au; Homestead Rd; unpowered/powerd site for 2 \$18/22, dm/s/d \$17/80/95, cabins for \$100; 🍷) This popular resort, only 100m from the thermal pool, has accommodation to suit all budgets. The large camping ground has plenty of grass and shade, good amenities and barbecues. The hostel rooms are rustic (fan-cooled only) but quite comfortable, and linen is provided. The air-con motel rooms have fridge, TV and bathroom, while the cabins have a kitchenette and sleep up to six people. Bookings are advised.

The resort's Garden Bistro (mains \$12 to \$22) churns out steaks, fish and chicken dishes for lunch and dinner. It operates from the Maluka Bar area, as does Jeanie's Takeaway (mains \$6 to \$12), which serves burg-

ers and snacks. You can get an insight into the early drover's palate at Cheon's Kitchen, next to the Elsey Station Homestead replica, which serves up corned beef or stew and damper from June to August. There's also a shop here selling basic groceries.

**Mataranka Cabins** (☎ 8975 4838; www.mataranka.cabins.bigpondhosting.com; Martins Rd, Bitter Springs; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$15/18, cabins \$70; 🍷) Located on the banks of the Little Roper River, only a few hundred metres from Bitter Springs thermal pool, is this quiet bush camping ground with comfortable cabins. The secluded, open-plan cabins are equipped with linen, bathrooms and kitchens, and accommodate up to six people. Check out the amazing termite mounds adorning the front paddock.

**Territory Manor** (☎ 8975 4516; www.travelnorth.com.au; Martins Rd; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$19/22, s/d \$80/95; 🍷 🍷) About 300m off the highway, north of Mataranka on the road to Bitter Springs, this place has ample shady sites and attractive rammed-earth motel rooms. The restaurant (mains \$15 to \$20) serves huge steaks, fresh barramundi and delicious desserts. Barramundi in the dam are fed in spectacular manner at 9.30am and 1pm daily.

**Stockyard Gallery** (☎ 8975 4530; Stuart Hwy; ☎ 8am-5pm) In town, this casual café set in a tranquil garden is a bit of a legend. There's a delicious range of home-made snacks and cakes – try the muffins with fresh plunger coffee, an excellent mango smoothie or the unusual bush-orange ice cream. The art gallery here is worth a browse and information on the region is also available.

Other sleeping and eating options in the town itself:

**Mataranka Roadhouse** (☎ 8975 4571; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$13/18, s/d/cabin \$65/75/95; 🍷)

**Mataranka Hotel** (☎ 8975 4512; fax 8975 4323; s/d/cabin \$55/65/95; mains \$8-20; 🍷 lunch & dinner; 🍷) Graffiti-adorned old pub.

## Getting There & Around

**Greyhound Australia** (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) buses travelling up and down the Stuart Hwy make the detour to the homestead. To Darwin it's \$90 (6½ hours) and to Alice Springs it's \$200 (14½ hours).

## ELSEY NATIONAL PARK

This 138-sq-km national park surrounds the Mataranka Homestead and takes in the Little Roper River and a long stretch of the Roper River, with monsoon forests along its banks. On the eastern edge of the park are colourful tufa limestone formations, which form the Mataranka Falls. The Roper River section of the park is reached along John Hauser Dr, which turns off Homestead Rd.

The area is the site of some Dreaming trails of the Yangman and Mangarrayi people. Mataranka Station was selected as an experimental sheep station in 1912. The sheep did not prosper and were removed in 1919, but cattle did better and some of the yards are still standing at 12 Mile Yards.

## Sights & Activities

**Bitter Springs**, a serene, palm-fringed thermal pool, is accessed via Martins Rd from Mataranka. Its language name is *Korran*, part of the Black Cockatoo Dreaming, but its less tasteful name was derived from the

high mineral content that makes the water unpleasant to drink. The incredible blue colour of the 34°C water is due to dissolved limestone particles.

A **walking trail** (900m loop, 15 minutes) circles the spring and has viewing platforms into palm and paperbark forests. You can jump in for a therapeutic swim upstream from the bridge. There are information boards, toilets and gas barbecues near the car park.

There are some tranquil and safe **swimming spots** along the Roper River at 4 Mile, Mulurak and 12 Mile Yards. Freshwater crocs inhabit the river but it is safe to swim above the falls.

A few kilometres along John Hauser Dr from the Homestead Rd turn-off, the **Botanic Walk** (1.5km, one hour, easy) passes through dense vegetation bordering a creek and has interpretative signs explaining the Aboriginal uses of various species. **Korowan Walk** (4.1km one way, two hours, easy) follows the scenic Roper River downstream from Mulurak, through 12 Mile Yards (1km) to a set of small cascades and Mataranka Falls.

**Canoe hire** (s/d canoe per hr \$6/8) is available from the 12 Mile Yards camping ground. **Fishing** is permitted and prized catches include barramundi, black bream and saratoga.

## JEANNIE GUNN

Probably the most famous woman in the history of the Territory is Jeannie Gunn. Originally from Melbourne, where she had run a school for young ladies, she arrived in the Territory in 1902 with her husband, Aeneas, who had already spent some years there and was returning to take up the manager's position at Elsey Station.

It was a brave move on the part of Jeannie as at that time there were very few European women living in the Territory, especially on isolated cattle stations. They made the trip from Darwin to Elsey station over several weeks during the Wet.

Station life was tough, but Jeannie adapted to it and eventually gained the respect of the men working there. She also gained a good understanding of the local Aboriginal people, a number of whom worked on the station.

Only a year after their arrival at Elsey, Aeneas contracted malarial dysentery and died. Jeannie returned to Melbourne and soon after recorded her experiences of the Top End in the novel *We of the Never Never*, published in 1908. She was a keen observer of the minutiae of station life, and her observations captured the imagination of the people down south who led such a different existence. These days, however, her depiction of Aboriginal people seems somewhat patronising.

Jeannie was awarded an OBE in 1939 for her contribution to Australian literature, and died in Melbourne in 1961 at the age of 91.

Her book remains one of the classics of outback literature, recording in detail the lives of the early pioneers, and was made into a film in 1981.



## Sleeping & Eating

**Jalmurark Camping Ground** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) Located at 12 Mile Yards, this place has lots of grass and shade. There are solar hot showers, toilets, tables and gas barbecues. Note, generators are not allowed.

There are picnic grounds with tables, pit barbecues and toilets at Bitter Springs, 4 Mile Yard and Mulurark.

## ELSEY CEMETERY

About 7km off the Stuart Hwy, 7km south of the Roper Hwy turn-off, is Elsey Cemetery where a number of the real-life characters portrayed in the novel *We of the Never Never* are buried. Among them are Aeneas Gunn, the manager of the station and husband of Jeannie Gunn, the book's author.

During WWII the army located the bodies of a number of them, including Henry Ventlia Peckham ('The Fizzer'), and moved their remains here.

The site of the original homestead, as near as can be determined, is 500m or so beyond the cemetery, by the bridge over the Elsey Creek. A plaque and cairn mark the spot.

# VICTORIA RIVER DISTRICT

The Victoria River, one of the largest in northern Australia, starts in rugged country on the northern fringes of the Tanami Desert and winds its way north through sandstone gorges, native grasslands, and vast cattle stations, before entering the sea in the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf.

It's 513km on the Victoria Hwy from Katherine to Kununurra in Western Australia. The road is bitumen for its entire length and in very good condition as it traverses expansive pastures and woodlands, winds through sandstone outcrops and crosses the flood-prone Victoria River. As you approach the border you'll notice the distinctive boab trees found in much of the northwest.

The majority of travellers to the area tend to keep to the Victoria Hwy; however, there's much to see and do in the Gregory and Keep River National Parks, especially if you have a 4WD and a sense of adventure.

There's a 1½-hour time change when you cross the border. All fruit and vegetables

must be left at the quarantine inspection post here. When entering the Territory from Western Australia, a variety of fruits and vegetables must also be deposited here.

## History

European exploration started when the British naval vessel HMS *Beagle* surveyed the north coast in 1839, having recently completed a five-year worldwide journey with a young naturalist on board by the name of Charles Darwin. The *Beagle* negotiated the difficult mouth of the Victoria River (named by the *Beagle's* captain, John Wickham, in honour of Queen Victoria) and sailed 200km upriver to its navigable limit, which today is the site of Timber Creek.

In the 1850s the Colonial Office in London, with the prompting of the Royal Geographic Society, funded an expedition that was to travel from the Victoria River east to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The expedition was led by a young surveyor, Augustus Gregory, and the party landed at (and named) Timber Creek, when their ship, the *Tom Tough*, ran aground in shallows and was repaired with local timber.

For the next six months Gregory and his party surveyed the area extensively, and it was largely thanks to his glowing reports of the region that pastoral activity and European settlement followed. The 1880s saw a pastoral boom, and it was during this time that the major stations of the Victoria River District were established – Victoria River Downs (the so-called 'Big Run' or VRD), Wave Hill, Bradshaw, Auvergne and Willeroo.

The cattle industry became the backbone of the Territory economy, and in the post-war recovery period of the 1950s there was strong worldwide demand for meat. This led to the development of an infrastructure across the Territory and Queensland, but particularly in the Victoria River District where cattle were so important.

In 1966 Wave Hill Station became the focus for the Aboriginal land rights issue when 200 Gurindji Aboriginal workers and their families, led by Vincent Lingiari, walked off the job in protest against poor living and working conditions (see the boxed text opposite). It wasn't until 1975 that the Gurindji received title to 3200 sq km of claimed land at Wave Hill, and it was 1986 before full ownership was granted.

## THE WAVE HILL STOCKMEN'S STRIKE

Aboriginal stockmen played a large role in the early days of the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory. Because they were paid such paltry wages (which often never even materialised) a pastoralist could afford to employ many of them, and run his station at a much lower cost. White stockmen received regular and relatively high wages, were given decent food and accommodation, and were able to return to the station homestead every week. By contrast, Aboriginal stockmen received poor food and accommodation and would often spend months in the bush with the cattle.

In the 1960s Vincent Lingiari was a stockman on the huge Wave Hill Station, owned by Vestey's, a British company. His concern with the way Aboriginal workers were treated led to an appeal to the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU), which had already applied to the Federal Court for equal wages for Aboriginal workers. The Federal Court approved the granting of equal wages in March 1966, but it was not to take effect until December 1968. Lingiari asked the Wave Hill management for equal wages but the request was refused and, on 23 August 1966, the Aboriginal stockmen walked off the station and camped in nearby Wattie Creek. They were soon joined by others, and before long only stations that gave their Aboriginal workers good conditions and respect were provided with workers by Lingiari and the other Gurindji Elders.

The Wattie Creek camp gained a lot of local support, from both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people, and it soon developed into a sizeable community with housing and a degree of organisation. Having gained the right to be paid equally, Lingiari and the Gurindji people felt, perhaps for the first time since the arrival of the pastoralists, that they had some say in the way they were able to live. This victory led to the hope that perhaps they could achieve something even more important – title to their own land. To this end Lingiari travelled widely in the eastern states campaigning for land rights, and finally made some progress with the Whitlam government in Canberra. On 16 August 1975, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam attended a ceremony at Wattie Creek where more than 3200 sq km of land (now known as Daguragu to the Gurindji) was handed over. This was solemnly symbolised by Whitlam pouring earth into the hand of Lingiari.

Lingiari was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for service to the Aboriginal people, and died at Daguragu in 1988.

When a second federal electorate was formed in the Northern Territory in 2001, it was honoured with the name Lingiari. Yet perhaps a more significant postscript than that recognition was the achievement in 2003 by three descendants of the Wave Hill strikers. Kalkaringi Community Education Centre students Rhonda Rankin, Lianna Brown and Meshach Paddy completed Year 12 at their home community – a ground-breaking accomplishment for Northern Territory's remote Indigenous communities.

## FLORA RIVER NATURE PARK

Flora River Nature Park, 132km southwest of Katherine, protects a beautiful stretch of the mineral-rich Flora River, including the lush riverine forest lining its banks, the dry open woodland it dissects, and the mineral springs that bring it too life. The high mineral content lends the water an almost unnatural hue. The glowing blue-green water is responsible for the fascinating tufa dams, where calcium carbonate precipitates onto roots and rocks and eventually dams the river, raising its level and creating pretty cascades.

Although there is access to the river at a few points to view the tufa cascades, the park is best enjoyed by boat, particularly a silent canoe. The birdlife in this veritable oasis is

amazing, and the fishing (lure only) can be good, but there's no swimming due to the crocs. Regulations only allow canoes or small tinnies less than 3.6m with engines less than 15hp. To protect the tufa there are small ramps for crossing the dams and power boats are limited to a 3km stretch of the river.

At **Djarrung camping ground** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) there are hot showers and barbecues (collect wood before entering park).

The park turn-off is 87km southwest of Katherine; the park entrance is a further 36km along a good dirt road.

## VICTORIA RIVER CROSSING

The setting of Victoria River Crossing (where the Victoria Hwy crosses the Victoria River,

192km southwest of Katherine) is superb. The crossing snugly sits among sandstone gorges, and the high red cliffs and flat-top range are quite a sight. Much of the area around the crossing forms the eastern section of the Gregory National Park (opposite), and there are basic camping and picnic facilities at **Sullivan Creek** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70), about 17km east of the crossing.

The settlement, west of the bridge, basically consists of a roadhouse, the **Victoria River Wayside Inn** (☎ 8975 0744; fax 8975 0819; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$15/20, s/d \$35/65, motel d from \$80; ☎ 7am-10pm; ♿), which is a pleasant place with grassy, though slightly exposed sites, budget dongas and comfortable motel rooms. It also has a shop, bar and a dining room (mains \$16 to \$22), which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Access to the river itself is via a track 500m west of the crossing. Bush camping is permitted 10km upstream from the crossing – accessible by boat only. Three-hour boat cruises (\$45 including morning or afternoon tea) and fishing trips (\$65, BYO gear) can also be arranged here.

## TIMBER CREEK

pop 300

Almost 100km west of Victoria River Crossing is Timber Creek, the only town between Katherine and Kununurra. It is close to the Victoria River at the foot of the rugged Newcastle Range. Barramundi fishing is a major drawcard to Timber Creek, whether casting a line from shore, taking a boat trip, or hiring a tinny.

It's a tiny place that relies almost entirely on passing trade as people stop to rest and refuel, or stock up with supplies before heading off into Gregory National Park.

## History

In 1839 the *Beagle* negotiated the river to a spot about 8km from town, which came to be known as the Victoria River Depot. The depot was established to service the new pastoral leases that had opened up the country to the south.

Race relations were an early problem, and a police station was set up here at the turn of the 20th century to establish order and help control the 'hostile' Aboriginal people. These days the old police station is a museum.

## Information

The caravan park and motel, service station, supermarket and two pubs are clustered along the highway in 'town'. There's no bank, but the roadhouses have Eftpos facilities.

**Medical clinic** (☎ 8975 0727)

**Parks & Wildlife Office** (☎ 8975 0888; ☎ 7am-4.30pm) About 1km west of town on the highway, it has informative displays on the region, good wall maps of Gregory National Park, and park notes. If you require the detailed 4WD track notes to Gregory National Park, you will need to ask for them.

**Police station** (☎ 8975 0733)

**Timber Creek Community Council** (☎ 8975 0860; per 30min \$2.50; ☎ 8am-4.30 Mon-Fri) Internet access about 500m west of the Wayside Inn.

## Sights & Activities

The old **Police Station** (admission \$2.50; ☎ 9-11am Mon-Fri May-Oct), built in 1908 to replace the 1898 original, is now a museum with displays of old police and mining equipment. The turn-off down O'Keefe St is about 2km west of town; about 200m past the museum is an old **cemetery**.

The **Timber Creek Heritage Trail** is a 3.5km return walk that starts next to the roadhouse at the western end of town. It takes a leisurely two hours, including a stop at the bird hide in front of the Parks & Wildlife office and time to look at the police station and graves.

Two kilometres west of town, a sign reading 'river access' leads to **Policeman's Point**, where there's good fishing off the rocks.

There's a series of scenic **lookouts** about 5km west of town, plus a memorial to the Nackerroos (North Australian Observation Unit) with information detailing the area's military history. The view looks out over the Victoria River to the Bradshaw army base.

There is no public access to the army-run Bradshaw Station side of the bridge spanning the Victoria River, but you can walk across for the view.

A further 12km west of town, a cairn marks the turn-off to the **Gregory's Tree Historical Reserve**, a great boab on which Augustus Gregory carved the date of the arrival and departure of his North Australia Expedition. Interpretive boards tell his story. It's 3.5km down a dirt road then a 500m return walk that is wheelchair accessible.

**Timber Creek Boat Hire** (☎ 8975 0722; per half/full day \$70/100) has punts with 15hp outboards for hire – inquire at the roadhouse.

## Tours

Bookings for most tours in the area can be made through **Beverley's Booking Centre** (☎ /fax 8975 0850).

**Barra Fishing Safaris** (☎ 8975 0688; \$220) has full-day fishing trips, including all fishing gear, lunch and refreshments.

**Big Horse Barra** (☎ 8975 0850) offers similar fishing tours.

**Max's Tours** (adult/child incl refreshments \$60/30; ☎ 4pm during the Dry) runs a 3½-hour trip on the Victoria River, where you'll see crocodiles, wallabies, turtles, fish and a glorious sunset on one of Australia's largest untamed rivers.

**Northern Air Charter** (☎ 8975 0628; www.flynac.com.au; per person \$350, minimum 2 people) runs scenic flights over the Bungle Bungles in Western Australia, which are better value than in Western Australia itself. The circular flight includes Piccaninny Gorge, Argyle Diamond Mine, Lake Argyle, Keep River National Park and up to the spectacular, rugged mouth of the Victoria River. You can even stop at Sara Henderson's 'Bullo Station'.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Timber Creek Gunamu Tourist Park** (☎ 8975 0722; fax 8975 0772; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 \$13/19, budget s/d \$45/70, motel d \$90-105; ♿) Although it looks like there are several businesses in town, they nearly all fall under this umbrella organisation. Enormous trees shade the 'Circle F' camping area, which is bordered by a creek (unsafe for swimming) and there are a couple of good swimming pools. There is no camp kitchen.

This complex includes the **Timber Creek Hotel/Roadhouse** (☎ breakfast & lunch) and the **Wayside Inn** (mains \$10-20; ☎ dinner), which both have bars and bistros serving standard roadhouse meals; takeaway food is also available at the roadhouse. The **supermarket** (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat) here has a good range of staples and frozen meat, and a post office agency.

Parks & Wildlife runs the **Big Horse Creek camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70), beside the river in Gregory National Park, 10km west of town.

## Getting There & Away

**Greyhound Australia** (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) buses call through on the route between Katherine (\$60, 3¼ hours) and Kununurra (\$55, 1¼ hours).

## GREGORY NATIONAL PARK

This little-visited park sits at the transitional zone between monsoonal and semi-arid regions and covers 12,860 sq km. Apart from the beautiful sandstone scarps that the Victoria Hwy passes through, most visitors see little of Gregory. But some parts are accessible to 2WDs and, for those properly equipped, the park's rugged 4WD tracks will provide a challenge rewarded with superb gorge country and solitude.

The park was gazetted in 1990 and apart from its scenic values protects reminders of the early pioneers and links to the region's Aboriginal people – the Wardaman, Ngariman, Ngaliwurri, Nungali, Jaminjung and Karrangpurra groups. The park's core is the former Bullita Station, but it also includes parts excised from neighbouring stations, such as Victoria River Downs, Humbert River, Delamere, Auvergne and Innesvale.

The park consists of two separate sectors: the eastern sector, also known as the Victoria River section, and the much larger Bullita sector in the west. The two areas are separated by the Stokes Range Aboriginal land. Bullita was originally an outstation of the Durack family properties.

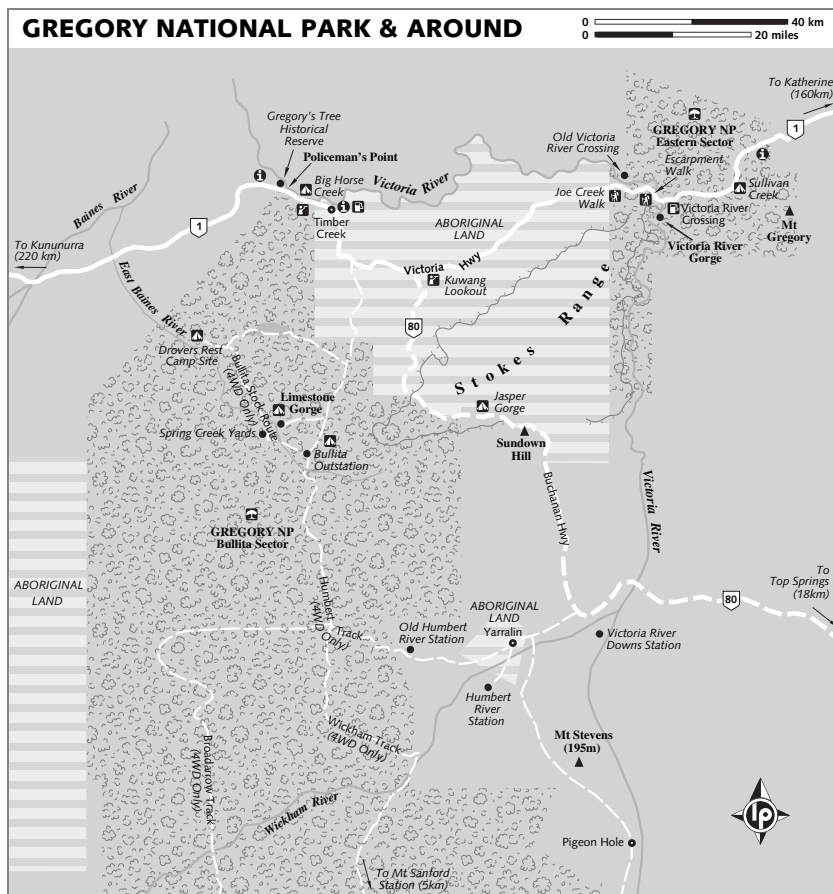
The park offers a chance to get off the beaten track. There's excellent fishing, bush camping and a 4WD track network that tests both vehicle and driver.

## Wildlife ANIMALS

There is not a great deal of animal life to be seen, particularly during the Dry, although agile wallabies are reasonably common. Among the 140 bird species recorded are the white-quilled rock-pigeon of rocky escarpments, the white-browed robin and the rare Gouldian finch.

## PLANTS

The northern part of the park consists of grassy woodland, with pockets of monsoon forest, while the southern hills are dominated by snappy gum and spinifex; less-common plants include the Victoria palm, a *Livistona* palm that grows on the sandstone escarpments, and the northern grey box, a eucalypt endemic to the park. Despite the arid conditions, some 900 plant species grow in the park, including 70 acacias and 30 eucalypts.



## Information

Information on the park can be obtained from **Parks & Wildlife** (in Timber Creek ☎ 8975 0888, in Bullita ☎ 8975 0833). Road condition reports are available from the Timber Creek and **Katherine Parks & Wildlife office** (☎ 8973 8888).

There's an information bay just inside the park's eastern boundary, about 165km west of Katherine and 31km east of Victoria River.

To travel on any of the 4WD tracks you need to **self-register** (☎ 1300 650 730) and leave a \$50 credit card deposit, which is re-credited on deregistration. You may not see another car in weeks on these lonely tracks. Along the Bullita Stock Route track there is a sign-in, sign-out book at each end

of the track. Parts of the 4WD tracks are pretty rugged and it is not recommended for 'light' 4WDs; high ground clearance is essential and it is recommended that two spare tyres be carried.

No provisions are available in the park and all visitors must be self-sufficient. The nearest stores are at Timber Creek and Victoria River Crossing.

Water should be carried at all times and any taken from rivers or billabongs needs to be boiled before drinking. Both saltwater and freshwater crocodiles live in the park.

The Bullita sector of the park is sometimes closed during the Wet season and all the 4WD tracks are closed between October and May.

## Sights & Activities

### BULLITA OUTSTATION

The historical homestead here has interpretive displays and the very photogenic original timber stockyards, which are maintained by Parks & Wildlife staff. The name of one of the Duracks is carved in a boab tree nearby. The homestead is 52km from the Victoria Hwy along a well-maintained gravel road that's suitable for conventional vehicles. There's a shady camping ground with good access to the East Baines River for fishing.

### LIMESTONE GORGE

Limestone Gorge is 9km off the main Bullita access track and accessible by 2WD vehicle during the Dry. Before you reach the camping ground there's a short **Calcite Flow Walk** (600m, 30 minutes) to interesting limestone formations. At the gorge camping ground, on the junction of East Baines River and Limestone Creek, there's excellent swimming in the croc-free Limestone Creek and a **Limestone Ridge Walk** (1.8km, one hour) providing views the karst landforms and the East Baines River.

### BULLITA STOCK ROUTE 4WD TRACK

This 93km track follows part of an old stock route into the western part of the park through some beautiful limestone-gorge country to the **Drovers Rest Campsite** (50km from Bullita Outstation), then loops back to join the main Bullita access track, 27km from the Victoria Hwy. Average driving time to complete the track is eight hours.

Cattle were taken from Bullita and Humbert River Stations along this track to the Auvergne Stock Route further north, and then on to the meatworks in Wyndham (Western Australia). The Spring Creek Yards (13km from Bullita Outstation) were typical of yards used during cattle drives, when up to 500 head were moved.

At the junction of the Spring Creek and East Baines River (21km), a huge boab was obviously the site of a regular drovers' camp – 'Oriental Hotel' is carved into it and still clearly visible.

### HUMBERT 4WD TRACK

This track along an old packhorse trail is an alternative entry or exit point to the park. It connects Bullita with Humbert River Station 62.5km away, just outside the southeastern

edge of the park and 30km west of Victoria River Downs. The track was originally a supply trail for Humbert River from Victoria River Depot. It passes through some superbly scenic and quite isolated country, and it takes about six hours from Bullita to Humbert River. There is only bush camping along this route.

### WICKHAM & BROADARROW TRACKS

The 92km Wickham and 230km Broadarrow tracks extend into the southern region of the park, and beyond onto pastoral roads to the Buntine Hwy. These tracks see even fewer vehicles, are slow going and pass through rugged, dry country.

### BUSHWALKING

The smaller eastern section of the park has a few short walks up and along the Victoria River escarpment.

#### Escarpment Walk (3km return, 1½ hours, medium)

Spectacular views of the escarpment and interpretive signs punctuate this walk, 2km past Victoria River Crossing. Watch out for the loose surface in places.

**Joe Creek Walk** (1.7km return, 1½ hours, medium to difficult) The turn-off to this walk is 10km west of the Crossing. This is a beautiful, tranquil spot where you can scramble up the escarpment for more stunning views. It's best in the early morning. After wet-season storms, small cascades water the Livistona palms lining the foot of the cliffs. There's a picnic ground with tables, pit barbecues and toilets.

#### Kuwang Lookout (100m return, 15 minutes, easy)

Between Victoria River Crossing (60km) and Timber Creek (35km), this lookout (150m from the car park) gives a fine, sweeping view over the peaks of the Gregory National Park 12km away. An interpretive sign explains the Aboriginal significance of what you see.

### Sleeping

Sullivan Creek Camping Ground – 17km east of Victoria River Crossing – sits by a waterhole you can't swim in and has no drinking water, but it does have picnic tables, pit barbecues, toilets and a smattering of shade. Bush flies can be bad here.

The camping grounds at Bullita Homestead, Limestone Gorge and Big Horse Creek in the western part of the park have picnic tables, wood fires and pit toilets. Big Horse Creek is a beautiful spot to launch if you've brought a tinny along with you.

Pay **camping fees** (\$3.30/1.65/7.70 per adult/child/family) into the honesty box at each site.

## KEEP RIVER NATIONAL PARK

Bordering Western Australia just off the Victoria Hwy, this 570-sq-km park has stunning sandstone formations, varied walks and a number of significant Aboriginal rock-art sites. This region of the Territory is the tribal area of the Mirriwung and Gadjerong people. Two communities live within the park and carry on their association with the land.

### Information

There's an information bay 400m along the entrance road with facts about the park's landscape, culture and wildlife. A notice-board advises if any trails are closed.

There's a **rangers station** (☎ 9167 8827) and Interpretive Centre (usually unstaffed) 3km into the park from the main road. Cockatoo Lagoon can be seen from the bottom of the garden here.

Bushwalkers intending to camp overnight in the park away from the designated camping grounds must notify the rangers before setting off. It's a good idea to carry a topographic map (1:100,000 *Keep River* 4766) and compass, and definitely carry water. Reliable water is available only from a tank near the park entrance and at Jarnem camping ground. Temperatures in the Wet (November to April) are hot (37°C) and it gets very humid.

Access to the park's sights and camping grounds is along gravel roads usually suitable for 2WDs, but they may be cut by floods during the Wet.

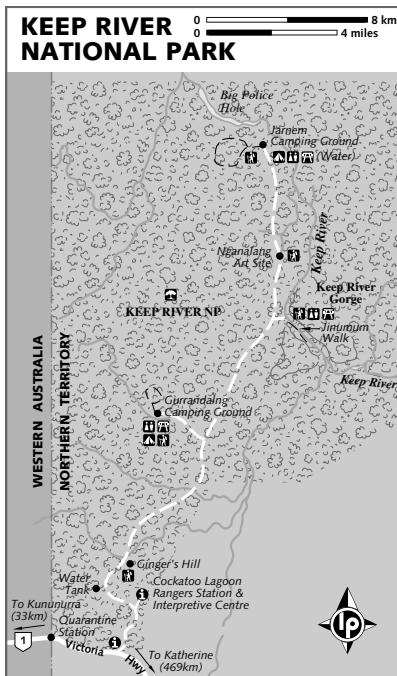
### Sights

The beautiful scenery is a reason in itself to visit the boab-studded Keep River National Park, but there are a few other attractions.

It supports abundant wildlife – some 200 bird species and 50 mammals have been recorded in the park, although many are nocturnal or active only at dawn and dusk.

**Cockatoo Lagoon**, behind the Interpretive Centre, is worth a visit to see several species of water birds, including spoonbills, jabirus and plumed whistling ducks. Access is limited because it's also the home of the rare flat-headed frog.

The park's many sandstone outcrops are home to creatures adapted to this environment – look out for short-eared rock wallabies, and listen for the sudden whirr of a fleeing white-quilled rock pigeon, or



the melodious call of the sandstone shrike thrush echoing among the rocks.

The **rock-art site** at Nganalang has an estimated 2500 rock carvings (petroglyphs), and a very impressive rock-art gallery with numerous painted images, including *gurrimalam* the rainbow snake, echidnas, kangaroos, tortoises and crocodiles.

### Bushwalking

Pamphlets about self-guided walks are available at the start of the trails. Remember to carry sufficient water and wear a hat. Check the information bay for updates on trail conditions.

**Nganalang** (500m, 10 minutes, easy) This short walk leads to an impressive rock-art site on a beautiful sandstone outcrop.

**Ginger's Hill** (500m, 10 minutes, easy) A gentle walk off the main entrance road to an interesting rock hide used by Aboriginal hunters to catch hawks and eagles.

**Gurrandalng Walk** (2km, one hour, medium) This pleasant walk heads off from the Gurrandalng (Brologa Dreaming) camping area and scrambles up an escarpment for some fine views. Excellent interpretive signs explain the wildlife and flora. Great in the early morning and late afternoon.

**Jitunum Walk** (3km, 1½ hours, easy) A comfortable walk through the gorge. Look for Aboriginal paintings along the steep red walls and enjoy the frenetic birdlife near the permanent waterholes. There are picnic tables and fireplaces at the car park.

**Jarnem walks** Three interesting walks start at the camping ground in the north of the park and follow the same route for the first 1.3km. The **Nigli Gap Walk** (6km return, two hours, medium) leads to eroded sandstone formations, part of the same range as the Bungle Bungles – it's most photogenic in the afternoon. The **Lookout Walk** (4.5km return, two hours, medium) heads up to a panoramic viewpoint. The **Loop Walk** combines both of these walks.

### Sleeping

There are two **camping grounds** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70). Gurrandalng, 15km into the park, allows generators and is very popular. Jarnem, 28km from the entrance, is quiet, usually uncrowded and has a water tank. Each site has picnic tables, fireplaces and pit toilets. Pay fees into the honesty boxes.

### WESTERN AUSTRALIA BORDER

Several kilometres past the Keep River turn-off there is a 24-hour agricultural checkpoint where you must leave all fruit, vegetables, nuts and honey before proceeding. If you're only heading into Western Australia for a day, ask the staff to keep it safe for 24 hours.

Useful phone numbers across the border include the **Kununurra Tourism Bureau** (☎ 08-9168 1177), **hospital** (☎ 08-9168 1522) and **police** (☎ 08-9166 4530).

## BUNTINE & BUCHANAN HIGHWAYS

The Buntine and Buchanan Hwys are lonely roads linking remote cattle stations and Aboriginal communities with the Victoria and Stuart Hwys, and which offer alternative routes into Gregory National Park and Western Australia. The Buntine, named after road-train and beef-road pioneer Noel Buntine, leaves the Victoria Hwy 126km southwest of Katherine and is sealed all the way to Kalkaringi, via Top Springs. From Kalkaringi it's unsealed to Halls Creek in Western Australia.

From the Stuart Hwy, the gravel Buchanan Hwy (named after legendary stock-

man Nat Buchanan; see boxed text below) traverses a monotonous 180km to Top Springs, before continuing northwest past the famous Victoria River Downs cattle station, through the impressive Jasper Gorge, to eventually link with the Victoria Hwy 30km east of Timber Creek.

### TOP SPRINGS

Top Springs is not a pretty place; it consists solely of a roadhouse and a road junction. The Murranyi Stock Route, which connected Newcastle Waters with Wave Hill and was pioneered by Nat Buchanan, passed through Top Springs.

The only option here is the **Top Springs Hotel/Roadhouse** (☎ /fax 8975 0767; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 free/\$10, budget s/d \$25/45, motel d \$85; ♿ ♿), which has a grassy camping area, budget dongas and comfortable motel rooms. There are two bars and good meals are available in the dining room (mains \$10 to \$20). Basic groceries and fuel are also available here.

From Top Springs the bitumen Buntine Hwy (formerly Delamere Rd) heads north

### NAT BUCHANAN

Although Nathaniel Buchanan was not a great land-holder in the mould of Kidman or the Duracks, he was a great cattleman and drover, and was responsible for the settlement of huge areas of the outback.

Known as Old Bluey because of his shock of red hair, Nat Buchanan led many drives through Queensland and the Northern Territory, including what was likely the largest cattle drive ever undertaken in Australia: the movement of 20,000 head from Aramac in Queensland to Glencoe Station, near Adelaide River in the Northern Territory.

In 1896, at the age of 70, Buchanan set off from Tennant Creek, trying to find a direct route across the Tanami Desert to Sturt Creek in the north of Western Australia. He hoped to find a route suitable for droving cattle, rather than having to take them further to the north. While the hoped-for route didn't eventuate, this was probably the first European crossing of the Tanami Desert.

Buchanan was accompanied on some of his cattle drives by his son Gordon, who reflected on his experiences in the book *Packhorse & Waterhole*.

**DETOUR**

The gravel Buchanan Hwy heading northwest from Top Springs takes you to the famous Victoria River Downs Station (100km). The road is generally in good condition and can easily be travelled by conventional vehicles in the Dry.

**Victoria River Downs**, known throughout the Top End as VRD, or the Big Run, is one of the largest stations in the area (over 12,000 sq km), and is its focal point. It was one of the many large pastoral leases established in the 1880s and was stocked with cattle brought in on the hoof from Queensland. Jock Makin wrote about the place in his book *The Big Run*.

The road passes right by the homestead area, which looks more like a small town than a station. There are no tourist facilities, although the public are welcome to use the **general store** (☎ 8975 0853; 🕒 7-9.30am, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat), which stocks all manner of gear and groceries, including cold drinks.

From VRD the road continues north to the Victoria Hwy (140km), passing through the spectacular red sandstone of **Jasper Gorge** (60km), part of the Stokes Range on the edge of Gregory National Park. There's a small secluded bush camping ground (no facilities) on Jasper Creek where you can trap Cherapin (a delicious crustacean) and fish.

If you're travelling by 4WD, it's possible to enter Gregory National Park via a rough track from Humbert River Station, 30km west of VRD; see p153. Before doing so, self-register for the route on ☎ 1300 650 730.

to join the Victoria Hwy (165km), or you can head southwest to Kalkaringi and Western Australia, or east to Dunmarra (182km) on the Stuart Hwy, or northwest to Victoria River Downs, Jasper Gorge and Timber Creek (see the boxed text above).

**KALKARINGI**

pop 260

From Top Springs, the sealed Buntine Hwy heads southwest on the 170km stretch to Kalkaringi, which is pleasantly located on the banks of the Victoria River. This small town exists basically to service the Aboriginal community of **Daguragu**, 8km to the north. Daguragu was formerly known as Wattie Creek and grew out of the Aboriginal stockmen's strike of 1966 (see the boxed text p149).

For visitors, the town offers a chance to refuel and refresh, and there are limited fishing and swimming opportunities in the river. The town is a dry area and as such alcohol is not permitted.

The gravel road west to Halls Creek in Western Australia is generally good, although it can be made treacherous or even cut (usually only for short periods) by creeks during the Wet.

Facilities in the town include a **police station** (☎ 8975 0790) and **medical clinic** (☎ 8975 0785).

**Kalkaringi Service Station Caravan Park** (☎ 8975 0788; fax 8975 0855; unpowered/powerd sites

for 2 \$12/18, s/d \$50/60, cabin d \$80; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat, Sun & public holidays; 🚰) has a camping ground with plenty of grass and shade. The budget rooms have a TV and fridge, while the cabin is fully self-contained. The service station sells fuel, takeaway food and provisions, including fresh bread daily.

You can fly between Kalkaringi and Katherine with **Janami Air** (☎ 8953 5000) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for \$250 one way.

**LAJAMANU & THE TANAMI TRACK**

From Kalkaringi, the Lajamanu Rd heads south to Lajamanu (105km), an Aboriginal community in the Tanami Desert, from where it's a further 232km to the Tanami Track (p207). The country changes abruptly from grassed and lightly treed cattle country to the red spinifex plains of the Centre, as if a line has been drawn delineating desert and grazing land. The road is generally in good condition, but it does get sandy and the numerous creek-bed crossings will make it difficult for a 2WD to get through.

A permit is not required to traverse the road or get fuel and supplies here. The **Lajamanu Service Station & Store** (☎ 8975 0896; 🕒 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat) sells fuel and supplies. Keeping separate hours are its **takeaway** (🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9-11am Sat) and small **grocery shop** (🕒 5-7pm). There's also a **police station** (☎ 8975 0622) here.

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