

Rock of ages: sunset in  
Aboriginal-owned  
Arnhem Land

## Northern exposure

**Simone Baird** grew up among the creepies, crawlies and crocs of the Northern Territory. But following in the footsteps of her adventurous dad, she realises nothing can prepare you for the Top End

**T**hey call it the Top End. Encompassing Darwin, Kakadu National Park and Aboriginal-owned Arnhem Land, among other parks, it is one of the toughest destinations in the world. If there's water, chances are a crocodile's living in it – unless it's the sea, in which case expect deadly box jellyfish. Outdoor toilets harbour venomous snakes. In the bush, if the heat doesn't get you, the feral pigs or water buffalo might. And if, while driving at dusk, you catch a wallaby crossing the road at the wrong time, it'll go through your windscreen and wind up in the car. You want adventure? Go to the Top End.

Born and raised in Darwin, with a father who took me on fishing and hunting trips in the bush, I thought there would be little that could surprise me in the Northern Territory. But I have never been to Kakadu (Oz's most famous national park) or Arnhem Land (three times the size of Belgium and home to beautiful ancient rock paintings), so given the chance to return with a group of friends – fellow Aussies living in the Big Smoke – I take it. Even though I explored much of the Top End as a child, I know there is so much more my father has seen but never shown me.

I can remember when Dad and his mates returned home from a long fishing trip in these parts – the stink of their clothes would make the air curdle. Out of Dad's pick-up truck would come cool boxes full of barramundi, prawns and live

mud crabs, which scattered down the driveway in a break for freedom, sending our cattle dog into fits of hysteria. (A mud crab is a beast of a thing, bigger than your head, with claws that can – and often do – break clean the neck of a beer bottle, never mind a finger.)

My journey into the wild starts from Darwin, where we rent a 4WD and make for Corroboree Camp, part of the Mary River system, where we once went camping as a family. We'd fish in lily-strewn billabongs while crocodiles swam beneath the tin boat, thumping the bottom with their tails. We kids didn't have to be told twice to stop trailing our hands in the water.

But it turned out that any thoughts of health and safety were fit only for the children: 'You've got to imagine the sheer terror,' Dad explained, 'of sitting in a >

**Get me there**

**GO INDEPENDENT**

The best way to get to Kakadu and Arnhem Land is to fly to Darwin and then drive. **Qantas** (020 8600 4300, [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)) offers flights from £887, via Singapore. Book a 4WD Challenger (with pop-up roof, sleeping two adults) at **Britz** (00800 200 8081, [www.britz.com](http://www.britz.com)) from £526 for five days; tent hire £40.

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Bamurru Plains** (00 61 2 9571 6399, [www.bamurruplains.com](http://www.bamurruplains.com)) offers adult twin shares from £579pp per night, with a minimum two-night stay – price includes meals, drinks and tours. There are numerous **camping sites** in Kakadu, ranging in price from free to £6 per adult per night ([www.environment.gov.au/parks/kakadu/visitor-activities/camping.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/kakadu/visitor-activities/camping.html)); some don't allow alcohol, while others don't have drinking water. **Kakadu Culture Camp** (00 61 428 792048, [www.kakaduculturecamp.com](http://www.kakaduculturecamp.com)) has permanent tent accommodation from £120pp, £40 per child, including dinner. **Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn** (00 61 8 8979 0145, [www.gagudju-dreaming.com](http://www.gagudju-dreaming.com)) in Jabiru is shaped like a crocodile and offers double rooms from £101, B&B. It also offers motel rooms from £100 in the nearby **Gagudju Lodge Cooida**.

**GO PACKAGED**

**Travelbag** (0871 703 4240, [www.travelbag.co.uk](http://www.travelbag.co.uk)) can tailor-make your Top End holiday, with Qantas flights from Heathrow, via Singapore. Options include a four-day safari-style tour in a small group – taking in Katherine, Litchfield Park and Kakadu – from £1,499pp, including transport, accommodation, a two-hour canoeing trip, guides and most meals. Or a Top End Escape five-night tour includes being met at Darwin airport, three-star hotels and air-conditioned large coaches, for £1,719pp.

**LOCAL TOURS**

In Darwin, **Bamurru Plains** (as above) offers a two-night package from Darwin from £1,450pp, based on two sharing, including flights from Darwin to Bamurru, accommodation, meals and scheduled activities such as bush and air-boat tours. **Lords Safaris** (00 61 8 8948 2200, [www.lords-safaris.com](http://www.lords-safaris.com)) offers private three- or four-day 'peek' tours of Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land from Darwin, including most meals, camping and tours, from £3,234pp for two people, or £3,604pp for four. The company can also arrange a day tour for small groups to Arnhem Land, in an air-conditioned mini van, for £120pp, including lunch and afternoon tea. **Wilderness 4WD Adventures** (00 61 8 8132 8238, [www.wildernessadventures.com.au](http://www.wildernessadventures.com.au)) has three-day tours of Kakadu from £363pp, including camping and meals.



**Dad said Uncle Bobby was the only male in Darwin who wore pantyhose in the bush**

canoe in the middle of a moonless night, your Uncle Bobby standing in the water spearing crocodiles. Still, we got more barramundi than I've ever caught in my life.'

My Uncle Bobby taught my father to fish and hunt Territory-style in the early '70s and was, Dad says, 'the only male in Darwin who wore pantyhose in the bush' – he had a paranoia that a leech would get up his shorts. As Uncle Bobby was growing up in the Daly River region, he learned his bush skills from the Aborigines; he spoke several of their dialects, although I could never make out a word he said as he rarely had his false teeth in.

Nowadays, there's a little piece of luxury not far from Corroboree. Bamurru Plains safari lodges have flyscreens for walls: three sides look out over the flood plain, which stretches five kilometres to the coast. Here we find wallabies jumping around termite mounds, but we're also instructed not to walk past the front of the lodges – maternal buffalos are not to be trifled with, and this part of the flood plain boasts the highest density of crocs in the NT (it wouldn't be the Top End if it wasn't potentially life-threatening).

Next morning we set off for Kakadu. East of Bamurru Plains, the national park

is served by three highways, although 'highway' overplays it a little. They're sealed roads in good condition. Visit here in the Dry – the 'winter' months between May and August – and the roads are flat and straight, cutting through dusty scrubland. Visit here in the Wet and chances are you'll be doing so in a plane – or swimming.

Of the 210,000 tourists who come to Kakadu every year, almost all make the pilgrimage to Jim Jim Falls, a magnificent 150m waterfall. Access involves a stomach-lurching stretch of off-road – when the signs here say '4WD only', they mean it. A marker in the car park indicates the 'one-kilometre walk' to the falls which, in reality, is a long and sweaty scramble over rocks and boulders that form the riverbed in the Wet. The path follows Jim Jim Creek to the gorge, where we can't help but spot the croc-trap on the far side of the water, a rotting pig's head bobbing inside.

As we climb, gradually the dusty savanna gives way to lush monsoon forest, and the ochre walls of the cathedral-deep gorge soar, glowing in the sunlight. This might be one of the Territory's most famous tourist attractions but we get Jim Jim all to ourselves (NT's version of 'busy' is very different to the rest of the world's) and

because the gorge is cleared of crocodiles and open for swimming, floating here is a spectacular and serene experience.

Of those who visit Kakadu each year, just 1,000 cross into Arnhem Land, and you must have a permit to enter. Sab Lord's family-operated company is one of the few that can take groups across. Which is why Dan Croft, a towering man in a battered Akubra hat, with a lifelong love of the bush, picks us up just after dawn from our hotel.

There's no checkpoint at the crossing; a croc-infested river serves as the border. I think of my dad, who told me, 'When you see what's up there – the rock formations, the land, the art – you understand why the Aborigines never wanted to let that country go.'

Picking up our local guide and artist, Tony Nadjalaburnburn, we head to a nearby escarpment and tread our way beneath rocky overhangs; there are no railings to keep you back from the countless ancient paintings here. The styles change from stick figures to stencils, creation myths to barramundi. Some of the rock art is more than 5,000 years old, and there's a raw grace to this ancient landscape. A lake-like billabong cuts through grassland, its aquatic green a

shock of colour against dusty ochre roads and a sun-bleached blue midday sky.

We might be in the middle of the bush, but that's no excuse to let standards slip. Later that afternoon Dan wrestles the mini van down a dirt track, driving through lush grass before parking under trees beside a billabong for afternoon tea. To the non-natives in our group, the billabong – all white sandy beach, willow trees and crystal-clear water – screams 'gorgeous swimming hole'. To me, it immediately screams 'croc'.

'See that?' Dan points to the far side of the billabong. The group stops nibbling on their Anzac biscuits and follows his finger. 'That's a croc.' He's pointing to a log shape slowly swimming against the currents. Nobody steps backwards. In fact, one Japanese couple walk right up to the water's edge and get their toes wet, trying for a better camera shot.

'Oh, for fuck's sake...' Dan mutters as he shepherds everyone back up the bank. While the Top End is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure for the savvy traveller, it doesn't suffer fools; and now Dan draws a line in the sand – literally – between us and the water.

'Don't cross it,' he says. ■

Wild times: clockwise from above, in the vast Kakadu National Park, options include hiking, bathing in waterfalls, croc-spotting, looking out for one of the cuter native species, and taking in the magnificent views of the flood plain

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY, TOURISM AUSTRALIA, AXIOM