

Title:

Tour Kakadu in Australia's Top End

Word Count:

857

Summary:

The tropical northern region of Australia's Northern Territory, known as the Top End, includes the city of Darwin, the town of Katherine, Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land. The Top End is one of the last great secrets of adventure travel, although word is spreading fast about the magnificent, unspoilt natural beauty found there.

Keywords:

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Article Body:

The tropical northern region of Australia's Northern Territory, known as the Top End, includes the city of Darwin, the town of Katherine, Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land. The Top End is one of the last great secrets of adventure travel, although word is spreading fast about the magnificent, unspoilt natural beauty found there.

Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory, is serviced by international airlines and also by the newly completed Ghan railway which connects southern Australia to Darwin via Alice Springs in Central Australia. Darwin is closer to Asian cities such as Jakarta and Singapore than it is to southern Australian cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. Temperatures in Darwin and the Top End hover around a comfortable 30 degrees C (85 degrees F) all year round. Like most tropical areas, the Top End year is not defined by 'summer' and 'winter' weather events but by what Top-Enders call 'the wet' and 'the dry'. These terms refer to the wet and dry seasons respectively, which should be taken into consideration when planning an itinerary for exploring the Top End as road conditions and access vary greatly according to season. Wet season flooding can occur from November to April, and may cause temporary closure of routes to some of the more spectacular but remote Top End destinations.

Among the many magnificent attractions found in the Top End are Kakadu National Park, Litchfield National Park, and Katherine Gorge. Closest to Darwin is Litchfield National Park, approximately an hour's drive south. All three

destinations can conveniently be visited in succession, travelling from Darwin in either a clockwise direction (Kakadu, Katherine Gorge, Litchfield) or an anti-clockwise direction (Litchfield, Katherine Gorge, Kakadu).

Kakadu is the premier tour destination in the Northern Territory's Top End. Kakadu National Park is a World Heritage listed park located approximately 250km east of Darwin. While a return day trip from Darwin to Kakadu is possible, a few days should be allowed in order to fully experience Kakadu's magic. The name Kakadu is the name of the indigenous language spoken in the north-western section of Kakadu National Park.

Apart from a few areas, Kakadu does not consist of dense tropical rainforest but rather of flat tropical savanna woodlands. The abundant birdlife and other wildlife which flocks into Kakadu's wetlands during the dry season demonstrates how important the area is for local flora and fauna, and in fact Kakadu's World Heritage listing was based primarily on its importance as a wetlands area. Kakadu contains over 1000 plant species, one quarter of all freshwater fish species found in Australia, and one third of all bird species.

Kakadu National Park covers over 6000 square kilometres, and comprises several distinct sub-regions. The floodplain subregion lies to the north of the plateau and receives the full force of wet season monsoonal rains from November to March, when the region becomes a vast expanse of water. In the dry season the Kakadu floodplain is characterised by permanent billabongs. This area of Kakadu is famed for its waterlilies and edible lotus lilies. The plateau subregion is a rugged sandstone formation which rises sharply to 250 metres from the lowlands to the north and offers some of the most memorable scenery in the park. The escarpment extends for some 600 kilometres and is the site of many major waterfalls and deep gorges. The lowlands subregion is a vast eroded plain with many rocky outcrops to the north of the escarpment. The tidal flats subregion is a coastal area characterised by mangroves and rainforest which can survive on saline sandy soils. Finally, Kakadu's southern hills subregion is located at the southern most point of the park where the headwaters of the South Alligator River run through stony woodland country.

Litchfield National Park, located about 130 kms south of Darwin, is visited by more than 250,000 visitors annually. Visitors are attracted by the lush monsoonal rainforest, permanent spring-fed waterfalls, magnetic termite mounds, weathered sandstone outcrops and historic ruins. Litchfield can be comfortably explored in a one day drive from Darwin, although there is plenty of accommodation in the region for those who wish to stay longer. Litchfield has its major attractions linked by sealed road, although a 4WD vehicle may be necessary to visit more remote areas.

Litchfield's most popular attractions include Wangi Falls, twin waterfalls that cascade into a large pool amid lush rainforest, and Buley Rockhole, a chain of small pools linked by small waterfalls. Both locations are popular swimming places. Other attractions include the spectacular Tolmer Falls, the fantastically-shaped sandstone towers known as the Lost City, and the magnetic Termite Mounds, thin two-metre high towers aligned north-south to keep the inside of the mound cool in the heat of the sun.

Katherine Gorge (Nitmiluk) is located in Nitmiluk National Park about 300 kilometres south of Darwin. It is one of the most spectacular areas in the Top End, winding 12 km through 13 separate gorges with walls more than 70m high. The park is rich in Aboriginal rock art representing the spiritual 'dreaming' of the Jawoyn people, the traditional owners of the land. For bushwalkers, Nitmiluk National Park has more than 100 kilometres of meandering walking tracks, including a challenging five-day trek to Edith Falls.