

WET AND



FLY HIGH

The wetlands of the Top End are flush with bird life – and many other creatures, including crocodiles

WILD



THE DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS OF THE TERRITORY'S TOP END ARE ANCIENT OUTPOSTS OF NATURAL BEAUTY, WHERE SEASONAL CHANGES AND THE MOVEMENT OF WATER INVIGORATE THE LANDSCAPES. WE EXPLORE THE REVERED AREA FROM ITS VAST WATERWAYS

WORDS MITCH BROOK

THE TOP END OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

has always been an unknown for me. Having grown up in the cities of Australia's east coast, places like Kakadu, Katherine Gorge and Litchfield seemed like fabled and faraway lands.

In the Top End – which stretches from North Queensland, through the territory, over to Western Australia – there are only two seasons: “The Wet” (November to April) and “The Dry” (May to October). During The Wet, monsoon rains fill vast floodplains, bringing life to barren land. During The Dry, little rainfall causes the plains to empty and wetlands to dry out. I'm here in May during the change of seasons: the summer storms have dried up, but the wetlands are still submerged.

The phenomenon is best seen from the wetland waters, and I've chosen this location to discover these areas that are unknown to me.

MARY RIVER WETLANDS

The airboat that takes me on my first venture looks like a dinghy with an aeroplane propeller attached. The airboat, which operates from Wildman Wilderness Lodge about two hours east of Darwin, is a smooth ride. It pushes a surge of water before it, giving the effect of a giant mirror being shaken around, and reflecting the infinite blue sky above. Waterlilies dance as we pass, birds take wing, and scraggly marsh trees bare their crooked limbs.

“There is something truly special about water-based touring,” says



Wildman tour guide Leroy Beachley. “The Mary River region has an abundance of wildlife and it provides our guests an great opportunity to get really close.”

When the airboat stops, bobbing in the water with the propeller off, the sound of nature rises – the leap of a frog from branch to water, the buzzing of damselflies, birds calling and beating their wings. “The animals seem to know when tourists are approaching,” says Leroy. “They do their best to be seen and make an impression. Airboating is a whole new experience – you're right in there among it.”

I spot a lumpy mass gliding on the surface of the water. It could be a log, but then I see a golden eye, its narrow-slit pupil tracing the airboat. Crocodiles are found all through the waterways of the Territory, and locals and visitors alike are warned of the danger of approaching even small bodies of water (just read the *NT News*).

A moment with the beasts is common on tours, says Leroy.

“Witnessing a croc looking into our boat to say good morning to a very nervous guest can be pretty special.”

In The Dry, much of the Mary River floodplains will dry up, allowing for a four-wheel-drive tour that follows a similar route to my airboat adventure. That's the polarisation that the two seasons cause – millions of litres of water empty from the wetlands, allowing for a whole different set of flora to flourish around shrinking water sources. Water buffalo become more prevalent, and wildlife in general is easier to spot as it gathers around diminishing waterholes.



MAKING WAVES

Join an airboat tour to explore the Mary River wetlands in style (and speed)



"EACH DAY AND EVERY HOUR IS DIFFERENT. YOU'RE ALWAYS SEEING SOMETHING NEW"

YELLOW WATER BILLABONG, KAKADU

Travelling south from Mary River takes you through Kakadu National Park, a wilderness of bushland, rocky escarpments and valleys. "The pristine water here flows 90km down from the ancient escarpment – it's about 2.6 billion years old," says guide Lisa Gambling, of Yellow Water Cruises.

It's dark at 5am when I head to Yellow Water wetlands in the south of Kakadu. The air feels cool and light, and the deep navy sky is seeping into a lighter shade as my boat pushes off from the jetty. "Yellow Water is a special area," says Lisa. "Each day and every hour is different out there. You're always seeing something new."

The pace is slow as the wetlands awaken; I watch the sunrise hues morph between blue and purple, highlighted by gold. The clouds dotted above the horizon blush red. The sun breaches the horizon and orange light sparks movement and sound.

"Yellow Water is home to many species of birds, some resident and some migrating from as far as Siberia," says Lisa. Everywhere I look, magpie geese flap their wings, jabirus stand high in eucalypts, jacanas strut across lily pads and herons watch for fish.

Dragonflies and damselflies hover like helicopters. An electric blue one lands on my shoulder, munching on an even smaller, bright green bug. This is life in the wetlands – nature feeding and being fed on, an endless continuum of life and death and life again, Wet and then Dry – and the cycle begins again.

KATHERINE RIVER, NITMILUK

Fewer sprawling wetlands and more towering rocky bluffs differentiate Nitmiluk National Park from Kakadu. I'm now aboard a boat gliding down a gorge on the Katherine River.

The sky is clear as we cruise, then disembark for a brief walk to a second gorge. On the way, high above, is rock art that's many thousands of years old. That's the intrigue of these wildernesses: not only are they beautiful, they show the permanence of humans and the stories they tell.

As we take off once more in the second gorge, the sun nears the horizon. Sunset here is a slow sleep: the shutters are drawn on the world as the last sunlight burns on the red stone walls, the sky running the spectrum from white through blue to black on the horizon. It's this contrast between night and day that makes Katherine Gorge memorable for me. ➤

THREE TO TRY

Yellow Water Dawn Cruise

Book ahead and set the alarm early for a departure at 6.45am.

Tel: 1800 500 401;

gagudju-dreaming.com

Wildman Cruises

Airboat tour availability depends on conditions, but Wildman operates other cruises for guests too.

Tel: +61 (8) 5527 6860;

wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au

Katherine Gorge Dinner Cruise

Book the Nabilil Dreaming Sunset Cruise for a cultural experience, as well as a three-course meal on your way back. Tel: +61 (8) 8972 1253;

nitmiluktours.com.au

WHERE TO STAY

Darwin

Rydges Darwin Airport Resort, 1 Sir Norman Brearley Dr, Marara
Tel: +61 (8) 8920 3333; rydges.com/darwin-airport-resort

Mary River

Wildman Wilderness Lodge,
Point Stuart Rd, off Arnhem Highway
Tel: +61 (7) 5527 6860;
wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au

Kakadu

Mercure Kakadu Crocodile Hotel,
1 Flinders St, Jabiru
Tel: +61 (8) 8979 9000;
accorhotels.com.au/hotel/mercure-kakadu-crocodile-hotel

Nitmiluk

Cicada Lodge, Gorge Rd, Katherine
Tel: +61 (8) 8974 3100;
cicadalodge.com.au



THE WATERFALLS OF LITCHFIELD

An environment renowned for its fierce waterfalls, Litchfield National Park lies north-east of Nitmiluk. Here, the rains of The Wet feed waterways that burst from ridges and escarpments.

Wangi Falls is the widest of them, filling a pool at its base. The amount of water that comes through here has turned the surrounding area into a forest: the air is close and humid, and wet greenery surrounds you as you traipse up the sharp slope to a lookout. Tolmer Falls is slim, its water tumbling down two drops to a cave and pool. Look down into the gorge into which it falls – here, the wash of spray from the base of the falls forms rainbows that shift in and out of being like smoke.

Locals are always competing for bathing space in the pool beneath Florence Falls. Two cascades shower over a precipice, cooling off swimmers below before bubbling off into a creek. Those who are game climb the rocks around the falls and jump back down into the water.

Driving back to Darwin, I discover

THE RAINS OF THE WET FEED WATERWAYS THAT BURST FROM ESCARPMENTS

that one more experience with water in the Territory is waiting. I've been watching the roiling clouds on the horizon threaten a late-Wet downpour. Now it starts, and my windscreen is hammered by fat raindrops, obscuring my vision. As I turn on the headlights, slow the car and switch on the wipers, I realise the rain will wash off, trickle through the undergrowth and end up in the wetlands I've visited, or gush over the waterfalls of Litchfield. It's all part of the cycle of the Top End. ★

Travel info ↓

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ノーザンテリトリー

オーストラリアの最北端には、雨期(11月～4月)と乾期(5月～10月)の季節がある。雨季には広大な氾濫原を埋めつくし、乾季には氾濫平野や湿地帯は一気に干上がる。

メアリー川の湿地帯

ダーウィンの東にあるワイルドマン・ウィルダネス・ロッジから運行しているエアボートに乗ると、「ここには多くの野生動物が息を吐いて、近くで触れ合うことができるのですよ。」と、現地のガイドが教えてくれた。目的地に着き、プロペラが止まると、水面へとジャンプするカエル、イトトンボが飛ぶ音、鳥たちのさえずりなど、大自然の音が聞こえてくる。そして、金色の目をしたワニも。これには地元民も気を付けなければいけない。

イエローウォータービラボンのカカドゥ国立公園

私がイエローウォータービラボンに向かったのは、まだ薄暗い朝午前5時。日によって、1時間毎に違う表情を見せる場所であるということを現地のガイドが教えてくれた。と、同時に私はそこで、青、紫、金色がかった日の出とそこに集まる様々な鳥たちを見た。

キャサリン川のニトミルク

ボートは崖がそびえ立つキャサリン川を静かに下って行く。2番目の峡谷で少し降りてみた。頭上高くそびえるのは八千年以上前に出来たとと言われる岸壁。ただ美しいだけでなく、人類文化の歴史をも見せつける。峡谷を後にしたとき、太陽はすでに世界に幕を下ろすように水平線に近づいていて、白、青、黒のグラデーションを作っていた。

リッチフィールド国立公園の滝

激しさで有名な滝のある公園。ワングィ滝とトルマー滝は非常に美しく印象的。フローレンス滝下のプールでは地元の人々が水浴びの場所取りでにぎわう。これらの滝は水浴びしている人々の暑さを鎮めてくれる。

帰路で雨に降られ、その雨を見ながら気付いたことがある。この雨こそがリッチフィールドの滝の流れに勢をつけているのだと。そして、これらが、トップエンド(オーストラリア最北端)における連鎖の一部なのだろうと。