

NORTHERN TERRITORY TOUR, NT

WHO WENT: Phoenix Arrien, 35, Vic

DARWIN

My trip begins so calmly. Darwin is a steamy place where everyone seems to be either a traveller or a stockhand. The night markets offer great shopping and nightclubs buzz with people like Max from Melbourne, who's up here guiding safaris for the so-called winter: "Averaging 29 degrees Celsius," he says with a satisfied smile and a gorgeous tan. A few of us meet up at the Frontier Hotel, where five different types of wildlife grace the chalked menu board. "Try the emu," Max chirps, "It tastes of chicken." Kylie is all for the buffalo, but I want the crocodile. It's a chewy-beef taste of things to come.

LITCHFIELD & KAKADU

Leaving this city of sin, sun and strange menus, I travel south to Litchfield National Park for a refreshing swim under its waterfalls and a walk around a strange, alien city – the intriguing magnetic termite mounds, which all face the same way, kind of like a natural cemetery.

The next day I head to the Northern Territory's jewel – Kakadu. Famous for its natural green pools, waterfalls and one of the largest collections of rock art in the world. Ubirr Rock offers a wealth of this ancient indigenous expression. On top of the rock, I channel Croc Dundee and gaze at spectacular views of wetlands lit emerald and gold by a brilliant sunset. It's a vast, ancient land and my soul lifts and flies among the black kites wheeling above prowling dingoes.

EAST ALLIGATOR RIVER

"Crocodiles jump three quarters of their body length out of the water," says our aboriginal guide. We jump back into our seats. These titbits keep

coming as our little boat putters along the East Alligator River in Kakadu.

My first sight of a crocodile is riveting: a knobby grey head floating just above the water's surface. A spine-chilling four metres of leather and skin, he keeps pace with our boat, one unblinking eye looking straight at me.

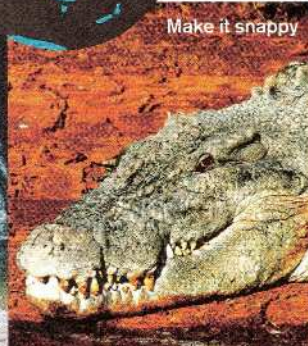
I'm in a low-sided vessel with Guluyambi Cruises, gasping in astonishment at long – and I mean long – teeth sticking out of diamond-shaped heads like rows of stalactites and -mites. The cruise stops by cliffs covered with aboriginal rock art, and we see furry wallabies and nervous brumbies. The guides demonstrate the use of natural foods and hunting tools before a commotion from a high bank draws our attention. A crocodile explodes out of a cloud of dirt and dust, and races down the embankment towards the river. It's jaw-droppingly speedy – faster than any human can run.

Halfway down the embankment the gradient drops away and the crocodile launches its three metre's worth of scale, muscle and teeth off the ground. We watch in surprise, horror and fascination as it jumps the remaining five feet into the river. It lands near us, causing another commotion as we launch ourselves towards the other end of the boat. I look at our guide. "Impressive, wasn't it?" he smiles.

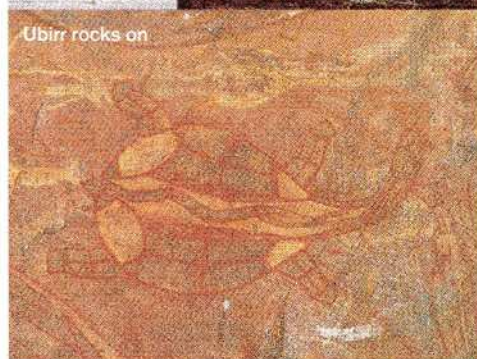
We finally reach an innocent looking stream. This is the home of 100-year-old Eric – at six metres, he's the longest croc on the river. He doesn't show himself and we don't go lookin'. Any animal that swallows stones to help digest buffaloes has my undying respect. As we pass silently, I try to ignore the side of the aluminium boat. For there, indented forever, are teeth marks from a past crocodile. **WH!**



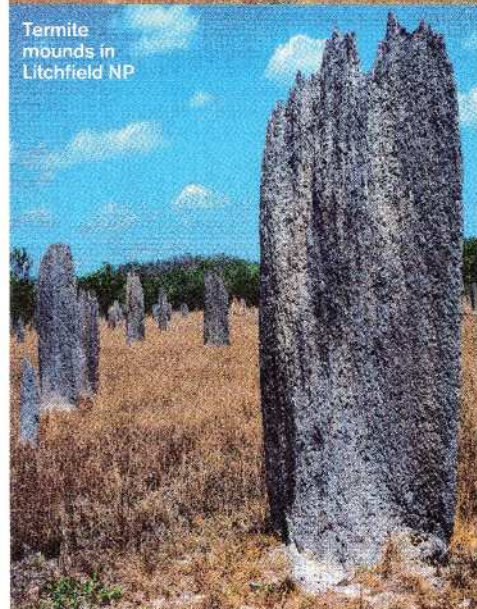
Phoenix at the falls



Make it snappy

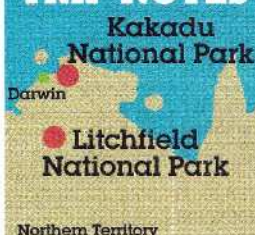


Ubirr rocks on



Termite mounds in Litchfield NP

TRIP NOTES



Getting there

Fly to Darwin, then either take the Greyhound to Kakadu, join one of the many tours, or hire a car. For more information, call 13 67 68 or visit travelnt.com.au. The East Alligator River borders Kakadu and Western Arnhemland. Guluyambi Cruise provides a shuttle bus from the border.

The cost

A one hour and 45 minute Guluyambi Cruise on the East Alligator River in Kakadu costs \$40 per person. For more information, call 1800 089 113 or visit guluyambi.com.au.

When to go

May to about September is the dry season when the weather is cooler, ranging from 20 to 33 degrees. It's the most popular time for visitors. December to March is the wet season when the temperature is a hot and humid 25 to 34 degrees, though relief arrives with the tropical rains.