

Kakadu Circle No. 1: May 3-24, 2009

The 2006 20th Anniversary trip and the one which followed in 2007 were so good that none of those who took part could understand why the trip has run so seldom in recent years. We can't understand why there was so little interest for 2008. This trip is designed to allow more time than normal for visiting Aboriginal art sites and exploring the areas near our path. There may be one or more occasions when we spend two nights in one camp so that we can take a full day to explore nearby areas. Those who prefer not to go exploring may use the extra time for bird watching or photography — or just relaxing and enjoying their surroundings.

Every season has its advantages but when people ask us when they should come, we tell them, “**If you plan to come to Kakadu only once, we advise you to do it in May.**” May is normally the month when the humidity of the post wet season gives way to the Dry. It is the time when the weather finally cools off at night. Water is still plentiful and most of the waterfalls are still flowing well. Many of the 4WD tracks in the park remain closed so we can enjoy many areas without the tourist masses who arrive later in the year.

Closed tracks are a handicap as well as being beneficial. It is very unlikely that the track into Jim Jim will be open so we should have Jim Jim and Twin Falls to ourselves. This also means that it is impossible to do only a part of the trip. Once you begin the walk, you are in it to the end.

We have to place the food drop before the roads close in November. If we do not have at least four bookings by 15 November, this trip will not run.

Section 1: Koolpin to Twin: Approx May 3-13

The walk begins at Flying Fox Crossing on the South Alligator River in the southern part of Kakadu, about 330 kilometres and four to five hours from Darwin. A relatively flat eight kilometre walk along the banks of the river and across the plain brings us to the beginning of Koolpin Gorge.

Koolpin Gorge is beautiful. The pools are perfect for swimming, the waterfalls and views a photographers delight. Aboriginal art sites tell us that this has been a special place for thousands of years. Although the gorge is only four kilometres long, it is too good to rush through. We take at least a day to reach the top.

From the top of the gorge, we normally follow Koolpin Creek, then one of its tributaries, as we search out some of the Aboriginal art sites which line the route. A short walk through a pass brings us to a small tributary of Twin Falls Creek. The immediate area contains an abundance of Aboriginal art sites. Because this is just the beginning of the dry season, there is enough water to allow us to take at least one full day, probably two, to really get to know the area.

Not far from these sites, in a rocky area near where we first reach Twin Falls Creek, there are more excellent art sites. We spend additional time here, visiting the art sites. Continuing downstream, Twin Falls Creek passes through a mix of sandy and rocky areas for about six kilometres to the Amphitheatre Falls where the river drops 20 metres into the upper gorge. Few groups have ever been able to resist spending at least an hour here just admiring the views and enjoying the pool below the falls. Another seven kilometres past sandy beaches and more pools brings us to the top of Twin Falls.

Twin Falls consists of a series of drops of up to 20 metres and a final 80 metre plunge into the gorge below. Here we have a break and take time to enjoy the spectacular views. The route to the bottom of the lower gorge is on a marked trail, as easy as any part of the walk. Swimming in the pool below the gorge is strictly prohibited because of the danger of large crocodiles (never a problem above the escarpment where almost of our walk takes place).

From Twin, we will do a cross country walk to Jim Jim Falls and our food drop. Following the vehicular track would require wading Jim Jim Creek at a potentially dangerous point, so we will cross at a rocky area unsuited to both vehicles and crocodiles. Jim Jim is the highest waterfall in Kakadu, over 200 metres in total with a final drop of about 160 metres.

Maps. 1:50 000 El Sherana (first few km at beginning of walk), Koolpin & Jim Jim Falls or 1:100 000 Stow (1st few km at beginning of walk) & Jim Jim.

Section 2: Twin to Gunlom: Approx May 13-24

We may stay at Jim Jim or we may walk back to near Twin Falls after collecting our food drop. That decision will depend on how we feel at the time. If we remain at Jim Jim, we will stop somewhere on the plains beyond Twin Falls as adding 8-10 km to what is already the longest single day's walk on any of our Kakadu trips is not possible. Fortunately, this early in the year, we have the option of stopping in places that run dry later. However, we do it, the route finishes with a climb back to the top of the escarpment where we will spend some time enjoying the views and pools at Surprise Falls.

From Surprise Falls, we continue across the plateau, passing through the largest patch of open country rainforest in the park, across the upper reaches of Koolpin Creek and over to the top of Graveside Gorge where a double waterfall drops 100 metres into a pool in the gorge below. After taking time to have a good look at Graveside, we move along to Cascades Creek and the first of its many pools and art sites. The walk down the four kilometre gorge is a slow one. There are a few places where you have the choice of edging along narrow rock ledges (close to water level, no big drops), floating your pack through the creek, or climbing up and around.

The pools and art sites are too nice to pass by, so stops are frequent as we make our way down to the cascades for which the creek is named. The last 500 metres often takes two hours or more as the deep pools and a natural water slide are much too inviting to pass by in a rush.

Next, we visit Gronophylum Creek with its unusual multi-trunked palms, beautiful, sandy camp sites and deep, clear pools. The rugged landscape away from the creek is reminiscent of central Australia with its red rock and spinifex covered hills. A short, steep climb to the top of one of the hills presents us with an incredible panorama. Following the creek, you might walk three kilometres in an hour. Following a straight-line compass bearing, the landscape is such a jumble of broken rock that three kilometres might take you three days.

From Gronophylum, we cross to the Barramundi system and its many waterfalls. Our final campsite in Barramundi Valley is on the banks of a huge, shady pool below a small waterfall. It is a beautiful spot, but there is more to come.

The next morning is rather strenuous. A one kilometre walk brings us to the steepest climb of the trip. From the spectacular vantage point at the top of the hill we enjoy a magnificent view out across the plateau and over the broken rock country that makes up the headwaters of Waterfall Creek. A climb down to a small rocky plateau brings us to a creek where nature has created a place which a number of people have said is their favourite in all Kakadu. We take our time so that we can fully appreciate this location.

From this area, another climb takes us down past more Aboriginal art and onto the plain above Gunlom (UDP) Falls. A six kilometre walk brings us to a rocky area with numerous pools and cascades. A further four kilometres gets us to the top of Gunlom Falls where we enjoy a view out over the plains below. From Gunlom, we take our bus to Coinda. After abistro meal at the pub, we spend the night in budget accommodation, avoiding the mosquitoes which plague the wetlands. Next morning, we do a Yellow Waters cruise and get a good view of the Kakadu wetlands before returning to Darwin and the airport, ready for the flight home.

Maps: 1:50 000 El Sherana (short bit of walk), Jim Jim Falls, Koolpin & Goodparla or 1:100 000 Jim Jim & Mundogie.

Notes

You don't need to carry breakfast and lunch items for the full three weeks. Our food drop near Jim Jim or Twin Falls is in sealed metal drums and contains some breakfast and lunch items to ensure that you can keep your pack weight as low as possible. Those who book before the drop goes out can put in specific requests.

You should prepare a package containing a change of clothes and a towel to come out with the bus if you want to take advantage of the hot showers at Coinda. You should have enough money to pay for your drinks at the pub.

Large crocodiles have come into the pools below Jim Jim and Twin Falls during the wet season many times during recent years. At least ten had to be removed in 2006. Unless the park rangers have checked out the pool and given the all clear (unlikely at this date), no one will be allowed to do the swim below either falls.

Make sure you keep some money and a water bottle with you during the drives. It may not be possible to get at your pack until the vehicle is unloaded at the end.

Map. The 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas but is not suitable for navigation.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall	Level 3
Climate	Level 2-3. May is a transition month when the weather gradually turns cooler and less humid. The average daily maximum temperature is 32-33°C (90-92°F). The average nightly minimum ranges from about 17°C (62°F) in the southern part of the park to about 22°C (71°F) in the north. Averages can, however, be misleading. We have had the temperature drop as low as 10°C (50°F) in May on one of these trips. Sleeping bags are essential. Rain is unlikely, but still possible so we recommend that you bring a tent or mosquito net with a fly to ensure against getting wet at night.
Terrain	<p>Level 3. There are few steep climbs, none of which is over 200 m. As short as they are, these climbs are strenuous. Some may require using your hands to hold on as you climb up or down. None are technically difficult. None require ropes or other special equipment. There will be some places where you have to step from stone to stone as you walk along the edge of a creek.</p> <p>The creeks are low enough so that swimming across with packs is unlikely to be necessary. It may, however, be necessary to wade across slippery rocks through waist deep water. Your guide can help if you need assistance.</p> <p>None of the walking is on a marked trail. If you have never done any off-track walking through moderately rough terrain, nothing we can say can adequately describe the experience. The photos on our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, can give you a partial picture, but they cannot substitute for the real thing. Most of those who have not had any off-track walking experience find it more difficult than those who have done it before.</p> <p>Anyone who does not regularly (average twice a month) go bushwalking carrying a full pack would benefit from doing some pre-trip training. Do this and you will almost certainly enjoy the trip. If you are not an experienced off-track bushwalker and you don't do any training or any other form of strenuous physical exercise, you might feel that the trip is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience.</p>
Vegetation	Level 2-3. Much of the walking is through relatively flat, open woodland with a grassy understorey. Some short sections of grass may hide a broken rocky surface where you will have to be particularly careful. There may be some slow sections where you will have to pass through thick scrub. The vegetation can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt. At this time of year, the spear grass has finished seeding and dried out.
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer. Some days will be shorter. This is the most leisurely and relaxing long distance Kakadu trip we offer..
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 10 days food. This will include about 3-4 kg of the evening meals. You need a sleeping bag and a tent or mosquito net with a fly.
Art	We visit a variety of art sites. Two areas we pass through are among the best for art in the park.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at any of the campsites.
Swims	May is a good month to see Kakadu's waterfalls. Most creeks are still flowing well and the swimming is excellent. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
Lowlights	Carrying food for 11 days. Possible heat and humidity, especially early in the trip.
Highlights	Kakadu's biggest waterfalls seen early in the dry season without the dry season tourist crowds. Perfect weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites.

- Wildlife** Birds are always present but spread out at this time of year. You are unlikely to see many large animals. The Yellow Waters cruise is excellent for birds, many of which you are unlikely to see on the walk. It also gives you a good chance to see large estuarine crocodiles.
- Fishing** Not permitted on this walk.

Cooinda and Bowali

Cooinda is a resort situated in the heart of the Kakadu wetlands. This is an area noted for its wildlife — and mosquitoes. The former make it a great place to visit, the latter make it an uncomfortable place for an overnight walk. The attractions at Cooinda include the Yellow Waters cruises, the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre and a short dry season nature walk along a marked trail.

The Yellow Waters cruise provides the best way to see the wetlands and allows you approach the wildlife (especially birds and crocodiles) much closer than you could do on foot. The cultural centre is a few hundred metres from the hotel and provides an insight into the lives of the Aboriginal traditional owners of the park. The nature walk offers a pleasant way to spend an hour or two, especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

The Bowali Visitor Centre just outside Jabiru has good displays about the natural history of the park. All are worth a visit.

Warradjan, Bowali and the Cooinda hotel all offer a variety of souvenirs for sale. Bring extra cash or a credit card if you think that you might wish to purchase anything beyond the drinks, ice creams and lunches that most people purchase there.

Itinerary: Kakadu Circle No. 1

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change.

Day 0 Pre-trip meeting, 6.30 p.m., Pool Side Bar & Restaurant, Holiday Inn Darwin, 122 The Esplanade. **Note.** There are two Holiday Inns next to each other on the Esplanade. The meeting is in the taller one, closer to the roundabout at the end of the street. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 8 a.m. pick up. Pick up is from your accommodation if you have notified us where you are staying at least a week before departure or have made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from Darwin Transit Centre at 69 Mitchell Street. Drive to Kakadu. Begin walk carrying full packs. Bush camp.

Day 2–11 Bush camping, carrying full packs.

Day 12 Food drop. (This could be a day early or a day late.)

Day 13–19 Bush camping, carrying full packs every day.

Day 20 Return to vehicles. Drive to Cooinda. Visit Warradjan. Overnight in budget accommodation.

Day 21 Early morning Yellow Waters cruise. Drive back to Darwin via Nourlangie and/or the Bowali Visitor Centre. Drop off at your accommodation mid afternoon.