

Kakadu Highlights No. 7: August 9-22, 2009

Section 1: Graveside — Surprise: August 9-17

This walk combines a portion of our normal Graveside route, part of our Kakadu Circle route and a gorge which we do not visit on any other trip. You see a variety of landscapes, deep gorges, beautiful swimming pools and cascades as well as a number of little known Aboriginal art sites.

The drive from Darwin to the start of the walk is over 300 kilometres, including about 45 kilometres on a 4WD track which is so rough that it can take over two hours on its own. From the parking area, a relatively flat walk of about eight kilometres brings us to the entrance to a magnificent little gorge. A delightful walk through the gorge brings us to the top of the plateau for a short walk across to where we can look out across the plains toward the escarpment. We work our way down to Surprise Creek and make our way up to the base of Surprise Falls. Another climb brings us to our camp site next to the pools at the top of the falls where we enjoy excellent views down the valley.

From Surprise, we continue across the plateau, passing through the largest patch of open country rainforest in the park and across the upper reaches of Koolpin Creek. When we reach Graveside Creek, we find a number of interesting rocky areas. Some contain Aboriginal art sites. We will take our time and have a good look to see if we can add to those we already know.

We make our way down the creek to the top of Graveside Gorge where a double waterfall drops 100 metres into a pool in the gorge below. Depending on how much time we have left, we may simply drop down into the gorge, spend a day exploring and return to the vehicle or we may move over to Cascades Creek and follow that route.

If we drop down into the gorge, we will find that it actually consists of two separate gorges, both full of lush, shady vegetation and cool, inviting pools.

The alternative, Cascades Creek, is reached by an easy four kilometre walk across the plateau to a small waterfall and the first of 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. (You can waterproof your pack by lining it with two garbage bags, one inside the other. On many trips, some people choose to swim while others choose to climb.)

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 rush past.

A relatively flat walk on the final full day brings us back to the vehicle. We then drive to Katherine where we meet those joining for section two and enjoy a restaurant meal and spend a night in accommodation. The following morning we bid farewell to anyone leaving at this point and head to Manyallaluk.

Maps. 1:50 000 Koolpin or 1:100 000 Jim Jim. The 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas but is not suitable for navigation.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall	Level 3.
Climate	Level 3. The average maximum temperature is 32-34°C. And the average nightly minimum is about 17-19°C. It is, however, not uncommon for the temperature to drop as low as 10°C (50°F). Occasionally it goes lower still. Sleeping bags are essential. Rain is highly unlikely.
Terrain	Level 3. The terrain ranges from open woodland to narrow rainforest gorges. Parts are flat and easy. Other parts require scrambling over river stones of a variety of sizes. There are a few steep, but short climbs. You walk through almost every type of terrain that it is possible to encounter in Kakadu.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 7 days food. This will include about 2-3 kg of the evening meals. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.

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. One or two days might be longer.
Art	We visit a variety of art sites, some of which are in excellent condition.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites.
Swims	Most creeks are still flowing well and the swimming is excellent. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
Lowlights	The very long drive to the start of the walk.
Highlights	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..
Fishing	Not permitted on this walk.

Note for section one. Many groups do the walk in the reverse direction. The guide will make the decision based on the conditions at the time.

If we pass through Pine Creek early enough, those finishing with section one may choose to get dropped off there and catch the bus back to Darwin.

Section 2: Manyallaluk to Katherine Gorge: August 17-22

This overlaps the first section and includes the night at Katherine. Katherine is the starting point for visits to Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park. Tens of thousands of people flock to the park every year. The vast majority spend about half a day doing a boat cruise through a small part of the gorge system before moving on. A few do a longer cruise, hire a canoe or take a short walk on one of the marked trails. Not one in a hundred would put on a pack and do an overnight walk. Not one in a thousand will have an experience like the one we are now able to offer.

Nitmiluk is Aboriginal Land, owned by the same people who lived in the region since the Dreamtime. In combination with Manyallaluk Aboriginal Cultural Tours, we are proud to offer you a chance to experience a small portion of their culture combined with a walk through portions of the Katherine Gorge system which tourists never visit.

After our night in Katherine, we are driven to Manyallaluk where we are met by our Aboriginal guides for the day. A portion of the morning is spent on a short, informative walk where you are shown bush tucker and medicines that are in season at the time. On return, there should be time for a swim before a barbecue lunch. Afternoon activities may include traditional bark painting, fire lighting, spear throwing, didgeridoo playing and basket weaving. You will be encouraged to participate in these activities so that you can better understand them. We will spend the night in the Manyallaluk campground.

The following morning, we and our Aboriginal guide are driven to the start of the walk. After a visit to a large Aboriginal art site, we descend from the plateau and walk down to and along the Katherine River where we make our first camp, well beyond where the tourists go. There is no trail, just the rugged beauty of the gorge and its surrounds.

The next day, we continue along the Katherine River, possibly taking a short cut to reach our camp for the day. Along the way, our Aboriginal guide will show us an art site or two and explain some things about the country through which we are walking. On the final day's walk, quite rugged in places, we may choose to float our way through a short section of the gorge rather than climb around it. The walk finishes where we meet a boat which takes us back to the park headquarters. We spend the night in Katherine.

A 300 km drive the next morning brings us to Darwin where the trip ends.

Maps. 1:50 000 Comoye & Katherine or 1:100 000 Eva Valley & Katherine maps show the Manyallaluk to Gorge walk. The Nitmiluk Park map shows most of the route but is not satisfactory for off-track navigation.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall	Level 3.
Climate	Level 3. The average maximum temperature is 32-33°C. And the average nightly minimum is about 17-19°C. It is, however, not uncommon for the temperature to drop as low as 10°C (50°F). Occasionally it goes lower still. Sleeping bags are essential. Rain is highly unlikely.
Terrain	Level 3. The terrain ranges from open woodland at the beginning to broken sandstone near Katherine Gorge. Parts are flat and easy. Other parts require scrambling up and down through small gorges. There are a few steep, but short climbs. Overall, it rates as moderately difficult.
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. One or two days might be longer.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 6 days food. This will include about 2-3 kg of the evening meals. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.
Art	We visit a several art sites in a variety of conditions..
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites.
Swims	Swimming is excellent. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
Lowlights	Masses of tourists at the end in Katherine Gorge.
Highlights	Walking with an Aboriginal guide in his or her home country. Cultural tour at Manyallaluk. Perfect weather. Great swimming holes. Spectacular gorge scenery.
Wildlife	Birds are always present but spread out at this time of year. You are unlikely to see many large animals.
Fishing	OK near the beginning. Sooty grunter and catfish are the most likely to be caught.

Notes on section 2. Scenic helicopter flights are available at Katherine Gorge. The price ranges from about \$50 to over \$100 depending on what itinerary is chosen and on how many people share the flight. Depending on our arrival time, you will have the option of doing a flight either before or after the walk.

Although we have arranged to have an Aboriginal guide from Manyallaluk to accompany us for the walk from Manyallaluk to Katherine Gorge, unforeseen cultural obligations could make this impossible. In that case, we will do the walk with only the Willis's Walkabouts guides.

Be prepared for the possible pack float. One garbag inside another should keep the contents of your pack dry for the short distance involved. The swim cuts off a couple of steep climbs.

Notes for both sections

It is a good idea to have a change of clothes and a towel to take advantage of the hot showers at Katherine and Manyallaluk. You should have enough money to pay for your drinks at the pub.

You should keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you in the car during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the journey.

Those doing both sections will have to carry only what they need on each section. Additional food and clothing can be left in the vehicle during the walks.

On the evenings where we eat in a restaurant, your meal is included in the trip price. Your drinks are not.

Terrain and difficulty - General Information

Little or 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.

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 either section is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience. Although both walks are level three, the lighter pack and shorter duration on section two make somewhat easier.

Itinerary: Kakadu Highlights No. 7

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change.

Section 1 Graveside-Surprise

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 alternative arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from the Mitchell Street Tourist Precinct at 69 Mitchell Street. Drive to Kakadu. Begin walk carrying full packs. Bush camp.

Day 2–8 Bush camping, carrying full packs.

Day 9 Return to car. Drive to Katherine. Overnight in budget accommodation.

Section 2 Manyallaluk to Katherine Gorge

Day 9 Those beginning with this section catch the Greyhound bus from Darwin to Katherine. You will need to check the current timetable when you book. The cost of the bus is not included in the cost of the tour.

On arrival, you can check into your accommodation saying that you are part of the Willis's Walkabouts group. Due to the fact that the members of the group are finishing a walk that morning, we cannot be more specific about the arrival time than to say it will be in the afternoon.

Make sure you bring money for drinks, etc.

Day 10 Bus or drive to Manyallaluk. One day cultural tour. Overnight in Manyallaluk campground. Bring a towel for showers.

Day 11 We get dropped off at the start of the walk. Visit art site near start. Carry packs to campsite on the Katherine River.

Day 12 Walk down Katherine River. Bush camp.

Day 13 Continue walking. Boat pick up and cruise back through the lower gorges. Overnight in budget accommodation.

Day 14 Return to Darwin, drop off at your accommodation early to mid afternoon.