

Kakadu Super Circle No. 1: Jan 18 - Feb 7, 2009

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 camp ground at the base of Koolpin Gorge. With vehicles unable to get in, we have it completely to ourselves.

Koolpin Gorge is beautiful. In January, the waterfalls are spectacular. The pools are perfect for swimming. The views are 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 a full day to reach the top.

From the top of the gorge we take a short cut across the plain and through the first of two low passes. Just before the second, there is a sudden change in vegetation as we enter a monsoon rainforest. Generally restricted to small gorges such as the one through which we are passing, these forests offer deep shade and a flora totally different to that of the open plains.

Our path now takes us toward Twin Falls Creek where we turn and head upstream, bound for one of the most interesting and least known parts of the park. The plateau is a mixture of sandy flats and broken rock outcrops, many of which hide major Aboriginal art sites. No group can possibly visit them all but all groups visit a good selection. Some shelters contain only a few paintings, others contain dozens. Picture yourself sitting in a shelter, studying the art then turning around to watch the rain come down, imagining how it must have been for those who called this region home for so many thousands of years.

At this time of year all of the smaller creeks and waterfalls should be flowing. We take the time and stop to explore some of these. As we travel, we notice dramatic changes in the landscape. Small and scrubby vegetation in one location, towering paperbarks in another. Flat plains here and rocky outcrops of all shapes and sizes there.

And, of course, there are the swims. Every day we find more beautiful pools that seem to demand that we stop for yet another dip. If time permits, our final night on Twin Falls Creek is spent at a set of cascades stretching over a kilometre. During the dry season, all you would see would be a few still pools. During the green season, they will be covered in water, a magnificent sight.

From the cascades, or, if we have been moving relatively slowly, a point further down Twin Falls Creek, we cross over to the upper reaches of Jim Jim Creek. Since lack of water will not be a problem, we can skirt some extremely rocky and scrubby country and make our way along the edge of the rough area, visiting a few art sites as we go.

We reach Jim Jim Creek and the first of many inviting pools about two and a half days upstream from the falls. The walk along Jim Jim Creek is generally flat and easy, with numerous stops for swims and visits to Aboriginal art sites. Jim Jim Falls is the highest waterfall in Kakadu, 200 metres overall, with a final sheer drop of 160 metres. With Jim Jim in flood, the view from the top is awesome. From the top of the falls, we follow the marked trail to the bottom and make our way across the plains toward Twin Falls.

Near where we camp at the base of Twin Falls Gorge, we uncover the food drop left in sealed drums in November. It will contain most of the food necessary for the evening meals for the rest of the trip as well as a limited amount of breakfast and lunch items. (See note.) Rubbish accumulated to this point can be left in one of the drums.

Swimming up the gorge below Twin Falls is not permitted due to the danger of large crocodiles. This means that we will have to cross above the falls. We do this by following a marked trail to the top and then going upstream to a pool where it is safe to swim. Before moving up, we will stop for break and take time to enjoy the views. We then return to the bottom and continue west toward Surprise Falls.

The first day after leaving Twin Falls Creek is one of the longest of the entire trip as we make our way across the plains and climb up the escarpment to enjoy the views and pools at 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 twin waterfall drops 100 metres into a pool in the gorge below. After taking time to enjoy this area, we move along to the top of Cascades Creek.

A relatively easy walk along the top of the gorge brings us to the cascades for which the creek is named, a series of pools and drops which can turn into a single mass of white water after a storm. Next, if time permits, we move across the valley to Gronophylum Creek with its unusual multi-trunked palms. 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 walking three kilometres might take you three days.

When Gronophylum is in flood, the walk along the creek is considerably more difficult than it is during the dry season. We may choose to omit the lower portion of Gronophylum and take a short cut up the main Graveside valley.

From Gronophylum, we head overland to Barramundi with its many waterfalls. We have a choice of several routes. Our choice will be determined by the amount of time we have left and by the water levels at the time. We finish with a walk along the Maguk 4WD track (closed at this time of year) out to the main road and our pickup.

We then drive to Coinda and the Kakadu wetlands, a very different environment to that through which we have been walking. The wetlands are flat and full of mosquitoes, not the best place for a bushwalk. However, they are also full of wildlife. The cruise on Yellow Waters allows us to see the wetlands wildlife at close range, far closer than you could approach on foot. We will do the 3 pm cruise, the last one for the day, so that you can see just how different the wetlands look when they are in full flood.

The day finishes with a drive to Jabiru or Mary River Park for a final night in the bush. Early the following morning, we board the vehicle for Darwin and the airport, ready for the flight home. Our choice will be determined by the best available accommodation for the price.

For those who have a spirit of adventure and possess the needed fitness, this will be an exciting experience, remembered for a lifetime.

Maps. 1:50 000 El Sherana (1st few km to Koolpin Gorge), Koolpin, Jim Jim Falls & Goodparla or 1:100 000 Stow (1st few km to Koolpin Gorge), Jim Jim & Mundogie. The 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas but is not detailed enough for accurate navigation.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall Level 5

Climate Level 5. It will be hot (although not as hot as you might think) and it will be humid. The average daily maximum is 33-34°C (91-94°F). If we get a spell of relatively dry weather, the temperature could reach 40°C (104°F). The average minimum is 24°C (75°F). Sleeping bags are not needed. Rain is almost certain.

On average it will rain two days out of three, mostly in short, sharp bursts. Averages can, however, be misleading. Occasionally, it might rain for days at a time. (This makes it somewhat harder to walk but it also makes the waterfalls more spectacular and keeps it relatively cool.) Occasionally, it may rain very little. This makes it substantially hotter than normal. There will be many opportunities to swim and cool off, but you must be prepared for hot, humid conditions.

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>You will definitely have to float your pack across one or more flooded creeks. If you can't swim at least 100 m unaided, do not do this trip.</p> <p>Even in the boggiest of seasons, Kakadu has nothing that can compare with the mud of Tasmania. However, if you have a particularly wet year, you may find yourself sinking up to mid calf regularly on some days.</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	<p>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.</p> <p>The spear grass normally reaches its peak in March, often three or four metres tall in some areas (much shorter in others). We may encounter short sections of partially collapsed and seeding spear grass during some portion of the trip, but this early it is unlikely that there will be much.</p>
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer. Section two rates as level four because of the long first day. Those who have already done section one seldom find it particularly difficult.
Packs	Pack weight - level 3. You need to carry 10-11 days food. This will include about 2½-3½ kg of the evening meals. You do not need a sleeping bag but you do need a tent with a fly.
Art	We visit a variety of art sites.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are good to excellent but we have to avoid some of our dry season campsites which could get flooded. You are unlikely to see anyone else anywhere along the route..
Swims	This is the best time to see Kakadu's waterfalls. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
Lowlights	Heat and humidity. Possible lack of rain can make it more uncomfortable than normal. Exceptional rain can slow us down. Carrying food for 10-11 days.
Highlights	Kakadu's biggest waterfalls seen at their spectacular best. Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites.
Wildlife	The lush green landscape that dry season visitors can only imagine.
Fishing	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.

Notes

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.

Once you start, you are in to the finish. There is no vehicular access anywhere along the route.

To take part you need above average fitness, the ability to swim (there are a number of river crossings which may require floating your pack), a sense of adventure and a desire to see the best that Kakadu has to offer. You do not, however, need to be a superman or superwoman.

There will be limited amounts of breakfast and lunch foods available at the food drop. This means that it will not be necessary to carry all your breakfasts and lunches for the full trip. A list of what is available will be sent out to those who book.

We may have to place the food drop at Jim Jim rather than at Twin. This would mean two particularly strenuous days, one just before and one just after the food drop. It would also mean having to swim across a flooded Jim Jim Creek above the falls twice as well as once across Twin Falls Creek above the falls. This would probably require shortening the route elsewhere.

It is very important that you pack well enough so that you can keep most things in your pack dry, even if you have to pack a wet tent or other wet items. On a long trip like this where durability is important, a good pack liner is essential. Garbages will almost inevitably tear and leak. Wet food can rot and leave you with little or nothing to eat during the day.

An airbed is very helpful when you have to float a pack a long distance. For example, one group decided to float packs down the upper gorge above Twin Falls. However, where you have to constantly get in and out of the water, an airbed can be more of a hindrance than a help.

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

The route described in the trip notes is for relatively fast groups and may have to be modified. The road to Koolpin was washed out by floods in 1997, 1998 and 2001 forcing us to go in and out via Barramundi Creek. As this can add a day or two to the route to Twin Falls Creek, this could mean turning downstream when you reach Twin Falls Creek.

Itinerary: Kakadu Circle No. 1

- Note 1** **Day 0 is the day before departure.**
- Note 2** **This itinerary is subject to change.** Exceptionally severe flooding can cause route changes and could conceivably cause a delay in the return to Darwin. If you can afford the time, try not to book a flight on the day after the trip finishes.
- Day 0** Pre-trip meeting, 6.30 p.m., Pool Side Bar & Restaurant, Holiday Inn, 122 The Esplanade. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us 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 alternate arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from Mitchell Street Tourist Precinct at 69 Mitchell Street.
Drive to Kakadu. There will be a stop along the way to buy cool drinks, etc.
Begin the walk, bush camp carrying full packs.
- Day 2-19** Bush camps, carrying full packs each day. You normally reach the food drop about day 10. Play it safe and carry food for 11 days before the food drop.
- Day 20** Return to vehicles drive to Cooina. Afternoon cruise. We may spend the night at Cooina or we may drive to Jabiru or Mary River Park.
- Day 21** Return to Darwin. Drop off at your accommodation, late afternoon.