

New Year in Kakadu: December 27, 2008 - January 3, 2009

Anyone who selects this trip should have a spirit of adventure. Those who take part will not know exactly where they are going until shortly before the trip departs. This is because nominating an area too soon would mean that we couldn't guarantee to show them the best that Kakadu and the Top End have to offer at this time of year. The reason for this is the weather.

The exact date of the monsoonal rains which cool the land and fill the creeks cannot be predicted far in advance. The monsoon normally begins around mid December. However, in some years, it begins in late November. In others, it may not arrive until mid January. By delaying our decision, we can be sure of choosing an area where water is plentiful and roads are open.

The walk we do will *probably* be chosen from the following. Circumstances beyond our control may require us to choose a walk not listed in these notes.

Baroalba Creek

If we have a small group (maximum of nine including the guide) and if we have had good early rains, we might take you to Baroalba Creek. Baroalba Creek is the main drainage for Mount Brockman, a large, irregularly shaped massif sitting on the plains a few kilometres away from the edge of the Arnhem escarpment. Its maximum dimensions are about 11 kilometres east to west and 15 kilometres north to south. Its maximum height is about 300 metres above sea level, about 240 metres above the surrounding plain. While the edges of the massif are extremely rugged and steep, much of the centre consists of a large basin drained by Baroalba Creek. The rugged nature of the approaches prevented buffalo from reaching the basin, making this one of the few completely undisturbed areas in Kakadu. The area is full of rock shelters that were used by Aboriginal people over the millennia. It contains what may well be the greatest concentration of Aboriginal rock art in Australia, dating from the most ancient to the most recent. (Because of the archaeological importance of this area, walking parties are restricted to a maximum of seven people.) The best time to visit this area is during or immediately after the green season when every creek is flowing and the waterholes are all full.

If the vehicle track to the carpark is open, the walk starts with an easy three kilometre stroll along an old four wheel drive track to Baroalba Springs where we can enjoy a refreshing swim. From here, we leave all tracks behind, beginning a somewhat strenuous scramble up the boulder strewn creek, or, if water levels are too high, up a smaller nearby creek. The alternative is a shorter, less strenuous but less scenic route.

Once inside the basin, the ground levels out and the walking becomes easier. There are a number of nice camp sites to tempt us as we work our way upstream, taking our time, stopping every so often to have a swim or just to enjoy the shade of a cool rock shelter or the sight of a particularly colourful patch of flowers.

Next day we continue our leisurely walk through the art sites and interesting rock formations in the central basin. Among the many things we will encounter are a nice set of cascades and a rock shelter which offers fantastic views up and down the valley. Words cannot do it justice. No one who has ever been there has left disappointed.

During our time exploring the basin, we may spend one or two nights on high points which offer magnificent 360° views. The climbs are fairly steep and we will need to carry water, but we can leave excess gear in rock shelters below so our packs will be as light as possible.

Toward the end of the walk, we may decide to walk back more or less the way we came or, if water levels permit, we may exit via Radon Gorge to the north.

From Baroalba, it is a relatively short drive to Cooina. After a cook-your-own barbecue 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

Note. Exceptionally severe flooding can mean that we have to walk a portion of the vehicle track leading to the Baroalba car park. This can make the first part of the walk substantially longer and harder.

Map. 1:50 000 Nourlangie Creek or 1:100 000 Cahill.

Barramundi and Waterfall Creeks

If the roads in southern Kakadu are closed, we might take you to visit the springs and cascades along Barramundi and Waterfall Creeks and their tributaries. At this time of year, the track to Barramundi will almost certainly be closed so this choice requires a walk of about eight km along the track both going in and coming out.

From where we leave the track, a short walk takes us to the base of a small gorge and one of the prettiest patches of monsoon forest in Kakadu. Depending on how long it takes us to get there, we may choose to camp near the base of the gorge, or we may move several km further along. There are no campsites in the gorge, so we have to have enough time to reach the top when we begin.

Once on the plateau, we find fairly flat going for a couple of km before heading down another lovely little creek to Barramundi Gorge above the falls. A short walk from where we hit the creek brings us to the end of the gorge and a broad sandy valley. If we have had little rain, the only visible water is in a few isolated pools. All the flow is through the sand below our feet. After about five kilometres, we turn off into a side valley and suddenly find flowing water. Another kilometre and we arrive at a beautiful, deep, clear, shady pool where we can relax and enjoy a swim. At this time of year, the best campsites are either well downstream or well upstream, away from the pool and possible flash flooding.

A short climb above the falls brings us to more beautiful pools and waterfalls — one of the prettiest places in Kakadu, but not a good place to camp if flooding is at all likely. From here, we cross the plateau and make our way to a small waterfall and the largest pool in the entire Barramundi system. Huge *Allosyncarpia* trees give deep shade on the wide, sandy banks of the pool, another exceptional camp site.

Next something rather strenuous. Whether we do it as a day walk or take our packs and go out for a night or two will depend on how much rain there has been and how energetic the group is feeling. A one kilometre walk takes 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 which has carved a small cave. At this time of year, the water is likely to be too high to swim through but it may still be possible to climb down and see a portion of the cave.

Continuing down this small creek brings us to the base of a second escarpment, where we find a number of Aboriginal art sites. We then either return the way we came or move through a pass where we descend once more into Barramundi Valley.

Maps. 1:50 000 Goodparla or 1:100 000 Mundogie.

Koolpin Creek to Barramundi Creek

If the bridge over the South Alligator River in the southern part of Kakadu is open, and if we have a large enough group to need two vehicles, another possibility is to do an A to B walk through some of the most interesting parts of southern Kakadu. This requires leaving one vehicle at the end of the walk on the Barramundi track, so a car shuffle will be necessary.

From Darwin, it is over 300 km and four to five hours to Flying Fox Crossing where we begin. The car shuffle could add up to an extra two hours. It is worth it. From the start, a relatively flat six kilometres brings us to the base of Freezing Gorge. Although Freezing Creek is relatively small, it is spectacular. If water levels permit, we will walk up the lower portion of Freezing Gorge. Although we do not rate this walk as difficult, the one and a half km walk up Freezing Creek below the gorge can be a daunting experience for some people. Portions of the walk involve climbing over boulders the size of a room in a typical house. People who have never done anything like this before may find it difficult. Progress up the creek is likely to be quite slow. The main gorge begins above this point. This gorge is the deepest and narrowest we know of in Kakadu. If time and water levels permit, we will continue up the gorge and back again before returning to camp over the hills, a much quicker and drier route than the one we used going up.

A two km walk the next day brings us to the base of Koolpin Gorge. Koolpin is beautiful. At this time of year, the waterfalls can be spectacular. The pools are perfect for swimming. The views are a photographer's 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 likely that we won't reach the top in one day. The reason is that unless water levels are exceptionally low, we will have to do a strenuous but spectacular climb around the first waterfall.

From the top of the gorge, we walk to a little known waterfall on a side creek, then return to the main valley which leads us to Barramundi Creek. Most of the valley is broad and sandy but there are interesting patches of monsoon forest and nice waterfalls along the way. A short walk through the pass at the top of the valley brings us to the largest pool in the Barramundi system. For further details, see the Barramundi-Waterfall notes above.

Maps. 1:50 000 Koolpin and Goodparla or 1:100 000 Jim Jim and Mundogie topographic.

Terrain and difficulty. Although some sections of this walk are fairly flat and straightforward, others are anything but. There are some longish sections of rock scrambling and a couple of short but sharp climbs.

Nitmiluk: Katherine Gorge to Edith Falls

This is the walk we did in 2005-06. Nitmiluk National Park is much more than just the area immediately around Katherine Gorge itself. The park extends far to the north and includes a number of creeks and waterfalls. It is the only park in the N.T. which has a well established set of walking trails. The longest of these is the trail to Edith Falls, a route which normally takes five days. We always take longer so that we can show you some of the lovely spots which lie hidden from those who restrict themselves to the marked trail.

In terms of the variety of terrain and number of waterfalls, this walk is at least equal to any walk of similar length in Kakadu. During the dry season any reasonably experienced bushwalker should have no trouble following the trail. At this time of year, lush growth and fallen trail markers can make parts of it hard to follow.

The first point of interest on the marked trail is the Rockhole Waterfall. Unlike those who come later in the year, you will see it flowing well.

If we kept strictly to the marked track, you would see little of interest between Biddlecombe Cascades and Crystal Falls. These are wonderful places, but there are other beautiful waterfalls and gorges waiting for those who know where to look. We know and will show you the best that the area has to offer.

From Crystal Falls, we may follow the track to the Edith River. Depending on how we are going for time, we may then follow the track down to Edith Falls or we may detour to Stow Creek on Aboriginal land outside the park. We are very fortunate to have received permission to do the walk to Stow Creek, an area out of bounds to the general public.

The walk from the Edith River to Stow Falls is a moderately long one which includes some fairly rough terrain. Stow Falls is a series of four waterfalls and pools which have been visited by only a few local bushwalkers in recent years.

We spend at least half a day here — the falls are too nice to leave too quickly. From the falls, we continue downstream along Stow Creek, scrambling up and down a few small hills to cut out some of the river bends and save ourselves several kilometres. Our final night is spent next to one of the many large pools on the river. The final day brings us out onto the plains where we take a bearing and do a relatively flat walk back to our vehicle.

In either case, we finish at Edith Falls with a cool drink at the kiosk and a final swim in the pool below the falls.

Maps. 1:50 000 Katherine, Seventeen Mile & Edith River or 1:100 000 Katherine. The 1:50 000 Nitmiluk National Park map shows all the walking tracks in the park but does not give the detail necessary for off-track navigation.

Notes. This is an A to B walk which will require a vehicle shuffle at the start.

Some campsites may not have yet fully recovered from the damage caused by the 1998 Katherine floods.

Do you get the idea? The guide is going to take advantage of his or her years of Top End bushwalking experience to choose the most interesting and enjoyable walk possible. Why not come along?

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall Level 3

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 34-35°C (93-95°F). If we get a spell of relatively dry weather, the temperature could reach 40°C (104°F). If we get a spell of cool, overcast weather, we might have days where the maximum temperature is only 28-29°C (82-84°F). The average minimum is 24-25°C (75-77°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 Level 3.

Whichever walk we choose, there will be a good mix. Some sections will be flat and relatively easy, others will include short, steep climbs. There will inevitably be some sections of rock hopping. The creeks are likely to be low enough so that swimming across with packs will not be necessary.

Exceptional rain could cause this to change so you need to be prepared to float your pack across a flooded creek.

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 sections.

On most of the walks, little 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 the trip is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience.

Vegetation Level 2-3. Much of the walking is likely to be 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.

The spear grass normally reaches its peak in March, often three or four metres tall in some areas (much shorter in others). This early in the season, it is unlikely that it will present much of a problem.

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 a ten days' food. This will include about 3-4 kg of the evening meals. You do not need a sleeping bag but you do need a tent and fly.

Art Every possible walk includes some art sites. Some are excellent, some fairly faded.

Campsites Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are good, some are 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 most of the routes.

Swims This is the best time to see the waterfalls in the Top End. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot. Floating packs across a flooded creek is a real possibility. If you can't swim at least 100 m unaided, do not do this trip.

Lowlights Heat and humidity. Possible lack of rain can make it more uncomfortable than normal. Exceptional rain can slow us down. Carrying ten days' food.

Highlights	Wet season waterfalls. Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites. The lush green landscape that dry season visitors can only imagine.
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.

Notes: all possibilities

Although most of the walking should be relatively easy, you need to carry your food for the full trip. Whichever route we choose, there will be no point on the route where you come anywhere near a road or 4WD track so a food drop is not possible.

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.

A day pack is likely to be useful on this trip.

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. A pack liner can be considered essential at this time of year. Garbages are a useful supplement. They are not satisfactory on their own.

Exceptionally severe flooding can cause route changes.

Weather can range from extremely hot and humid to cooler and cloudy to very wet. This will affect how difficult you find the trip and the walks will be adjusted accordingly.

Terrain and difficulty. Wherever we go, the walk will include both flat ground and a substantial amount of rock hopping. As we will not know where we are going until shortly before we go and as the terrain and difficulty vary according to the amount of rain we have had, we cannot be more specific except to say that the walks should not be exceptionally easy or exceptionally difficult.

The vegetation can vary dramatically from year to year. What was easy walking one year may be quite scrubby the next. On the other hand, sections of scrub can disappear in a bushfire.

Unless it is raining, you can expect a lunch and swim break of two hours or more most days.

Groups where a majority enjoy a leisurely start in the mornings will not be able to cover the same distance as groups which manage to get away quickly. This is a holiday — a fast or leisurely start is your choice.

Itinerary: New Year In Kakadu

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., Tracy's Bar, Holiday Inn, 122 The Esplanade. **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 alternate arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from Darwin Transit Centre 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 2–7 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.

Day 8 Return to vehicles and drive back to Darwin.