

# Darwin and Kakadu



I didn't have a whole lot of time to plan for the six days in Australia before the cruise to the Kimberly area, so turned to Betty at Griffin Travel in Arlington Heights. This long-established travel agency has helped me since 1990, especially when I have complicated itineraries.

Betty was wonderful and quickly arranged tours and activities. She also selected the perfect place for me to stay in Darwin -- the Radisson Suites Zen Quarter Hotel. The property has good-size, comfortable suites and is walking distance from the main part of town. Their included breakfast is excellent. Most importantly, staff is friendly and helpful. When I had a technical difficulties with my computer, the owner/manager immediately identified the problem then drove me to a store to buy the part I needed.

Oh yes-- there is free and fast wi-fi!

So after a "jet-lag" day where I pretty much didn't do anything, I joined a half day sightseeing tour of Darwin. What first appears to be a sleepy little town with not much going for it, turns out to be one with a

vibrant cultural life and a long and interesting WWII history. Our tour takes us here, there and everywhere with stops at two excellent museums. And the best part is finding out that guide Gordon will also be guiding my 3 day trip in Kakadu National Park. This local man is impressive, talks continuously and I swear never takes a breath. He is full of facts and figures and no question stumps him. My kind of guy.

Next adventure is a full day sightseeing trip to Litchfield National Park which is OK. A big surprise on this trip is learning that with all its gorgeous white sand beaches, lovely lakes and rivers, this part of Australia is rife with both saltwater and freshwater crocodiles so swimming in any kind of open water is not a good idea! The main focus of the trip is swimming in crocodile-free swimming holes. So for me, the trip to Litchfield Park is just a long, scenic bus ride. Perfect for the jetlagged.



The crowning glory of “the top end” as they call this part of Australia, is Kakadu National Park and Betty arranged a three day trip for me.

The park is huge - about 16,000 square miles with a variety of landforms, habitats and wildlife. Many species are found nowhere else in the world. It has something here for everyone: birders, hikers, campers, fishermen as well as those interested in history, culture and art.

It is also Aboriginal land which has been cared for and in use for over 50,000 years. It is a designated UNESCO site with over 5,000 rock art sites. Not only that, but the area is full of sacred sites, ceremonial areas, and burial grounds.

Rock art has always held a fascination for me. I've gone out of my way to view sites in India, Tibet, South Africa, Morocco, Greece, Indonesia, Portugal, Spain and our beautiful southwest and will never tire of searching them out.

These are images and pictures that connect us to the past. What are these people from 20,000+ years ago trying to say? Are the images just directionals? Or "I am here" pictographs? And what is their connection to the Aboriginal peoples of today?

The sites in this part of Australia fall into four categories:

- \* The creation ancestors (how people came to be and how the land was formed)
- \* Changes in landscape (showing extinct animals, plants and birds)
- \* Art that has been painted over (X-ray art) -- then "refreshed" by succeeding generations
- \* Art that shows European contact (depicts ships, weapons, armor, etc)



Aboriginal is a generic term -- like Caucasian or Asian. Each tribe is a complex society which has its own iconography, its own story of creation (dreamtime) and its own hierarchy of relationships to each other. Within the term "Aboriginal" are the various tribes. In Kakadu it is the Bininj (aka Mungguy). Later I would have interaction with different tribes (or clans) in The Kimberly. In essence, the Bininj own Kakadu National Park and they let others (us) enter parts of it.

They are also smart cookies and have leased large tracts for mining - which is one of the major ways the clan earns money. They award long-term leases to companies which mine for uranium, gold, copper, and zinc. As casual travelers, we are not allowed into the mining areas.

Kakadu is also a land of stories and traditions. With being inhabited for thousands of years, its people have developed their own mythology that explains how the world came to be and of ones place in it. Stories and strong traditions are passed from one generation to the next like a golden jewel that must be kept intact and treasured for new generations to enjoy then give to the next.

Over the three days in Kakadu we visit woodlands, forests, savannas, mangroves, stone escarpments and floodplains. We view rock art, take a cruise down Kathryn Gorge, watch jumping crocodiles on the Adelaide River and visit museums.



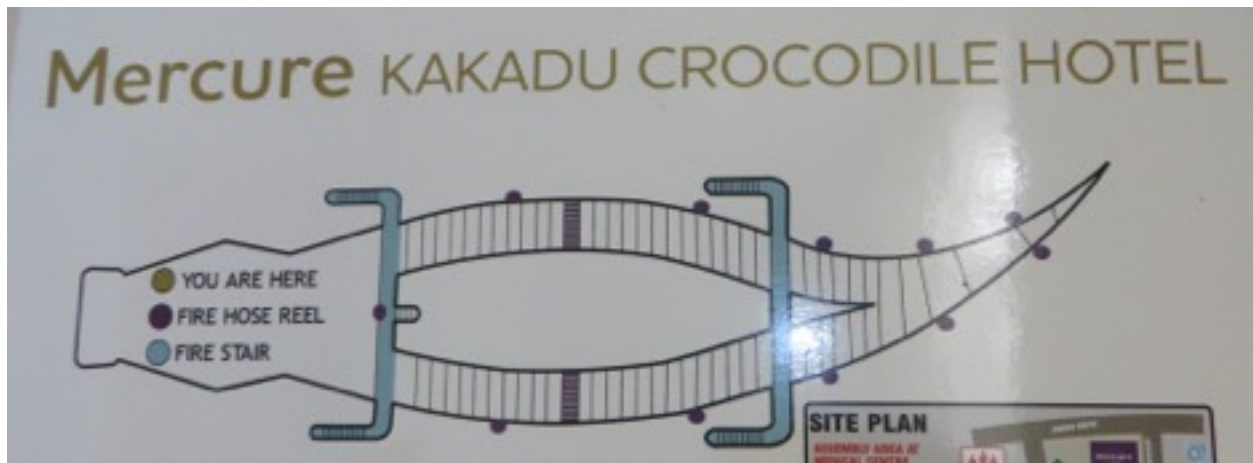
I didn't feel too good about this -- the company baits the crocks to make them jump out of the water for us.







My favorites were the cruise on Katherine Gorge and taking Kakadu Air for a scenic flight over the national park.



As for the hotels, we spend one night at the zaney Crocodile Hotel, shaped like.....a crocodile!

We stopped at two interpretation centers, each belonging to a different clan. They are mini-museums, complete with displays offering insight into the lifestyles and traditions of the tribe. They also have quite nice gift shops! Don't think things here are inexpensive - hand woven baskets run in the hundreds of dollars, as does aboriginal art and textile work.

These simple "authentic" yarn bracelets cost 200 AUD (about \$175



There is no way we can see everything in three days, but it is a privilege to even have this taste.

This part of Australia has a lot to offer. I would love to return and visit more Aboriginal lands in the north and far west: the Tiwi Islands, (Tiwi people) just off the Darwin coast, the Cutta Cutta Caves (Jawoyn people) and Arnhem Land (the Gunbalanya people known for their art). In addition the cities of Broome and Perth and there is always Tasmania!

All too soon embarkation day for L'Austral arrives. I am ready!