

Walking in Kakadu with Willis's Walkabouts

(Confederation photo competition prize)

by David Rowe

I have been a member of Span Outdoors Club for 20 years. Last year I entered several photos in the Confederation's 75th Anniversary Photo Competition and was lucky enough (with a photo taken in Claustal Canyon) to win first prize - a bushwalking holiday for 2 people with Willis's Walkabouts (Darwin).

Although I have done a couple of guided trips overseas (ski touring on the New Zealand glaciers for example), I had never before been on a commercially run trip in Australia. Looking at the Willis's programme, it was difficult to choose from the many trips offered in the Kimberley, Kakadu and central Australia. In the end my partner, Emily, and I decided upon a 12 day walk in Kakadu called "Baroalba – Hill 420 Circle". We chose this one for several reasons: The descriptions of the campsites and numerous swimming holes sounded very appealing; the abundance of aboriginal art sites in the area; and being in March, it is a wet season trip. We had been to the Kimberley (and I to Kakadu) in the dry before, so we were keen to visit this area in the wet season when all the creeks and waterfalls are flowing.

And we weren't disappointed! On 16th March, we left Darwin with Russell Willis and our other four companions for the walk. Because of the sensitivity of the area this walk is restricted to a group size of 7 including the guide. For the first 5 days of the trip we were in Baroalba Creek, the main drainage for the Mt Brockman massif. Immediately to the south-west lies Nourlangie Rock and a few kilometres across the plains to the east is the edge of the Arnhem Land Plateau. The walking mostly involved following the creeks, except when we were scrambling around or under cliffs or on the ridges looking for aboriginal art sites. There was an abundance of art. Virtually every overhang or sheltered rock face contained at least some paintings and some of the major sites were really fantastic. The quality and layers of different styles of paintings that gave us an idea of the antiquity of the Aboriginal art and culture as well as an insight into the Australian fauna over the ages. For example, we saw paintings of Thylacines (Tasmanian Tigers), which have been extinct on the mainland for thousands of years, as well as wallaroos/wallabies, crocodiles, fruit bats, echidnas and goannas (to mention a few). After spending a while in the heat exploring the cliffs and pagodas a swim is a must and the nearest swimming hole usually wasn't far away – one big advantage of walking here during the wet season – there were often more beautiful swimming holes and waterfalls than we had time to stop and swim in.

Dinner each night was a three course affair – soup, dinner and dessert. The cooking was done for us each night by Russell, a luxury I've never experienced before on our club bushwalks! Every meal was excellent and there were some very yummy desserts. Each person on the trip carried a share of the dinners – a parcel that was given to us at the start of the trip. We all brought our own breakfasts and lunches. Not having to cook in the evenings meant we had plenty of time to lounge around in the water or lie in the shade and read a book.

On day 5 we left the Baroalba area via a pass down through the cliffs and headed across the plains to the edge of the Arnhem Land Plateau. We camped at the point where a large creek flows out of the escarpment and meets the plains. Here there were several large pools connected by cascades that made very pleasant spa baths and we camped on some flat rock shelves next to one of the pools. In the morning we continued up the creek and the next 4 days were spent exploring the creeks and rocky landscape in this area of the Arnhem Plateau and getting some great views from the edge of the escarpment.

Eventually the time came to start heading back towards the car, but Russell couldn't resist searching out more rock art at the base of the cliffs on the way. In the process, we found a 'new' pass up the western side of the escarpment that promised to take us to the top of Hill 420, the high point that would give us a 360° view. So in order to have a full day to try for the top, we camped an extra night on the plains below. However time was no longer on our side and the extremely rugged nature of the terrain – multiple cliff lines and mazes of rocky pagodas dissected by countless deep canyons – finally defeated us. The final day was a spectacular walk along a broad, grassy plain, with the Arnhem Land Plateau on our left and the Baroalba cliffs on our right.

I can highly recommend this trip, and I'm sure the other trips offered by Willis's Walkabouts are just as good, especially for those areas which could be difficult for private bushwalking parties to gain access to. Obviously we are not the only ones who think so, as many of Willis's clients return for more – for three of our group this was their second or third Walkabout.

Thank you to Russell Willis for his generous donation of this prize for the photo competition. For information on his trips visit www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au or phone: 08 8985 2134.