

Kakadu Highlights No. 12: October 19-31, 2009

As the year progresses, the hot, dry weather of September turns into the hotter, more humid weather of October and November. All but a few creeks have completely disappeared. Major rivers are reduced to a series of isolated waterholes. The land lies brown and parched, waiting, still, silent and sweltering.

Suddenly, a wind springs up. In a matter of minutes, the temperature drops five or even ten degrees. The first few drops of rain turn into a torrent as lightning flashes and thunder roars. Then it is over and still once more. Then the frogs began to call and the birds begin to sing. The land turns green again, almost as you watch. All nature rejoices in the change.

Even in this, the hottest time of year, there are a few beautiful, cool, shady creeks and gorges where the bushwalker can relax and watch the birds as they come in for a drink or listen to the cicada chorus which announces the coming change. Knowledgeable locals head bush at every opportunity, leaving the ignorant to swelter in the city. Our routes have been chosen with relaxation, swimming and shade in mind. Walking will generally be restricted to early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The hot middle part of the day will be devoted to taking it easy and soaking up the sights and sounds of the environment around us.

Section 1: Barramundi Creek: October 19-23

The drive from Darwin normally takes at least four hours. From the end of the track, a short walk takes us to the main falls and the climb to the upper gorge. A walk through the upper gorge brings us to a lovely beach camp site. The next good spot is about two hours away so we may decide to stop here for the night.

When we leave the gorge, we find ourselves in a broad sandy valley. 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 brings us to a beautiful, deep, clear, shady pool where we can relax and enjoy a swim. A short climb to the top brings us to more beautiful pools and waterfalls. We may camp near here or we may decide to push on across the plateau and down to 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.

If we have taken two days to get to this point, we will probably spend a second night there, doing another day walk without full packs. If we have taken three days, we will begin working our way back down the main valley, sometimes in the deep shade of a patch of monsoon forest, more often in the open woodland, stopping for the occasional swim along the way. Our final campsite is normally at a pool near the top of the upper gorge.

A short walk on the last full day gets us back to the vehicle. An hour's drive brings us to Cooinda. After lunch, if people are interested and if time permits, we can go visit the art sites at Nourlangie Rock. The day finishes with a cook your own barbecue at the pub and a night in budget accommodation. This section finishes with the 6.45 a.m. Yellow Waters Cruise the following morning. The cruise gives you the opportunity to see the wetlands wildlife at close range, far closer than you could approach on foot. The early hour ensures that you see more of the wildlife than those who do the midday cruises.

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

Terrain and Difficulty (more info in the general description after section four)

Overall	Level 3.
Terrain	Level 3. The first part of the walk is along a marked track. The next several kilometres are quite well defined and generally easy going although there is a bit of scrambling over river stones. Most of the terrain up to the large pool mentioned in paragraph three is fairly flat and relatively easy. There are, however, a couple of short but steep climbs at the beginning and end.
Vegetation	Level 2-3. Mostly open woodland or open areas along the creek.
Hours	4-6 hours most days.
Packs	Pack weight - level 2. You need to carry four days food. You can probably leave your sleeping bag at home but we do recommend a well ventilated tent or mossie dome with fly.
Art	There are a few minor sites that we may visit.
Campsites	Sand or rock ledges. Excellent sites near the water. We should have them to ourselves.
Swims	Swimming is excellent. Good pools all along both creeks.

Lowlights Possible tourist crowds at the start of the walk. Hot, sticky weather.
Highlights Relaxing next to two of the most beautiful pools in Kakadu.

Section 2: Graveside Area: October 22-29

This section overlaps the first with the meal and night's accommodation at Coinda plus the early morning Yellow Waters cruise.

The walk takes you into the greatest concentration of permanently flowing creeks we have yet found in Kakadu. You see a variety of landscapes, deep gorges, beautiful swimming pools and cascades as well as a number of little known Aboriginal art sites.

Although the drive from Coinda to the start of the walk is less than 100 kilometres, the last 45 kilometres is on a 4WD track which is so rough that it can take over two hours on its own. From the parking area, a relatively easy three kilometre walk across some fairly flat ground brings us to a lovely pool and our first camp site.

During the next five days, we visit Graveside Gorge, Cascades Creek and, if time permits, Gronophylum Creek. The two main gorges at Graveside contain some of the nicest monsoon forest in Kakadu. We usually spend most of a day exploring the gorges, enjoying the shade and relaxing in and around the large pools.

Cascades Creek is noted for its many pools, cascades and Aboriginal art sites. It is so pleasant that our trip up or down the four kilometre gorge normally takes a full day. 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. The last 500 metres alone often takes two hours or more as the deep pools and a natural water slide are much too inviting to pass by in a rush.

The loop which joins the two creeks takes us through the open woodland of the plateau and through tall paperbarks and other trees which line the creek that drains the main valley.

We may also visit Gronophylum Creek with its unusual palms, beautiful, sandy camp sites and deep, clear pools. 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 you with an incredible panorama. Following the creek, you might walk three kilometres in an hour. Following a compass bearing, the landscape is such a jumble of broken rock that the same three kilometres might take you several days.

Early on the final day, we walk back to the vehicle and continue to Coinda or Jabiru where we drop off those finishing with this section.

Maps. 1:50 000 Koolpin or 1:100 000 Jim Jim.

Terrain and Difficulty (more info in the general description after section 3)

Overall Level 2.
Terrain Level 2-3. 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 find in Kakadu.
Vegetation Level 2-3. Mostly open woodland or open areas along the creeks. Some short sections of thick scrub along Cascades Creek
Hours 4-6 hours most days.
Packs **Pack weight** - level 2-3. You need to carry six days food.
Art There are a number of interesting art sites along this route.
Campsites Sand or rock ledges. Excellent sites near the water. We should have most or all of them to ourselves.
Swims Swimming is excellent. Good pools all along all creeks.
Lowlights Long, rough 4WD drive at the beginning and end. .
Highlights The magical cascades and waterslide on Cascades Creek. Spectacular Graveside Gorge.

Note for section 2. Many groups begin with Cascades Creek and finish with Graveside Gorge. The guide will decide which to visit first based on the conditions at the time.

Section 3: Ubirr and the Mary River: October 29-31

After a brief stop in Cooinda or Jabiru, we drive to Ubirr, site of one of the best collections of Aboriginal art in Kakadu. For most of the year, it is completely overrun with bus loads of tourists. By late October, most of these are gone. We will time our visit for dusk or dawn the next morning when we will have it almost to ourselves. The rest of our time will be spent relaxing and doing one of the short nature walks in the area. Perhaps we will be lucky enough to spot one of the large crocodile which inhabit the East Alligator River. No swims here! But if we can't have a swim, we can enjoy a shower and a cool drink as we listen to the dawn and dusk choruses of the birds.

The Yellow Waters cruise and the area near the East Alligator River will have provided us with a taste of what the Top End wetlands have to offer. Our trip finishes with the most comfortable wetland experience we can offer — a day and night aboard a houseboat on the Mary River.

We cruise slowly along the Mary, watching the hundreds of birds that line the river banks and enjoying the changing scenery around us. Those who wish to try their hand at catching a barramundi have a chance to do so. We pull in to shore for the night and enjoy a relaxing final meal in the bush as we listen to the night sounds around us. The following morning, we cruise back to where we began and get into the vehicles for the drive back to Darwin. The trip is over, but the memories will linger on.

Note. We cannot book the houseboat until we have bookings on the tour. If we do not get early bookings, we may not be able to do the cruise as scheduled.

Maps. 1:100 000 Mary River

Terrain and Difficulty (more info in the general description after this section)

Overall	Level 0.
Terrain	Level 0. The only walking is getting on and off the houseboat.
Vegetation	Level 0. No vegetation on the river, but we pass through a variety of habitats on the shores.
Hours	4-6 hours most days.
Packs	None.
Art	None.
Campsites	A bed on the boat.
Swims	None. Large crocodiles inhabit this section of the Mary River.
Lowlights	Hot, sticky weather. Not being able to swim.
Highlights	Wildlife and a wonderfully relaxing way to finish two weeks in the bush.

General Terrain and Difficulty for all sections

Terrain	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 more than if you do not. The relatively easy nature of sections one and three means that they should suit almost anyone who meets our minimum level of fitness. Anyone who has already done section two should find that section three is easier than it would have been if they were beginning with section three.
Climate	October and November are two of the hottest months of the year with an average daily maximum of 38°C (100°F). The average minimum is 24-25°C (75-77°F). Temperatures below 20°C (68°F) have been known to occur, but they are rare. Leave your sleeping bag at home. Bring thermals for insurance if you want to insure against a chilly night.

We tailor our walking to the climate, starting early and having long breaks next to pools in the middle of the day. If you accept the climate, you should have a wonderfully relaxing holiday. If you want to march on regardless of the weather, you may find it frustrating. Thunderstorms are fairly likely so we recommend that you bring a lightweight tent or mossie dome with fly.

Wildlife Birds are concentrated near the waterholes at this time of year. You will see thousands at Yellow Waters and on the Mary River. The Yellow Waters and Mary River cruises give you a good chance to see large estuarine crocodiles.

Fishing Not permitted on the first two sections. Fishing can be good from the houseboat. Barramundi can sometimes be caught from the boat.

Notes

Those doing more than one section of the trip will have to carry only what they need on each section. Additional food and clothing can be left in the vehicle during the walks.

If you meet us in Kakadu, you will have to purchase a park entrance ticket on your way into the park. Our guide(s) should reimburse you automatically. Please remind them if this is not done soon after you meet.

Make sure you have your lunch, a water bottle, and some money with you in the vehicle during the drives as it may be difficult to get into your pack during the journey.

A day pack is useful on all sections.

Bring a book or two if you'd like to read during the long breaks. Flies can be a nuisance at this time of year so it's a good idea to bring a lightweight insect net for use during the breaks.

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

If you wish to do some fishing on the final section, you will need to bring your own fishing gear.

Flies are sometimes particularly bad at this time of year. Bring plenty of repellent. You might also wish to hang a lightweight mosquito net at lunchtime as well.

Map. The 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas in Kakadu.

Cooinda

Cooinda is a resort situated in the heart of the Kakadu wetlands. This is an area noted for its wildlife — and mosquitoes. The former make it a great place to visit, the latter make it an uncomfortable place for an overnight walk. The attractions at Cooinda include the Yellow Waters cruises, the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre and a short dry season nature walk along a marked trail.

The Yellow Waters cruise provides the best way to see the wetlands and allows you to see the wetlands wildlife (especially crocodiles and birds) at close range, far closer than you could approach on foot. The early/late hour ensures that you see more of the wildlife than those who do the midday cruises. The cultural centre is a few hundred metres from the hotel and provides an insight into the lives of the Aboriginal traditional owners of the park. The nature walk offers a pleasant way to spend an hour or two, especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

Both the cultural centre and the hotel offer a variety of souvenirs for sale. Bring extra cash or a credit card if you think that you might wish to purchase anything beyond the drinks, ice creams and lunches that most people purchase there.

Itinerary: Kakadu Highlights No 12

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 All itineraries may be subject to change.

Section 1 Barramundi Creek

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

Day 2–3 Bush camping, mostly carrying full packs. May include day walks without full packs.

Day 4 Return to vehicles. Drive to Coinda, arriving about lunch time. Visit Nourlangie Rock if time permits. Book into budget accommodation. Opportunity to wash clothes and have hot shower. Bring towel and toiletries and money for drinks. Cook-it-yourself barbecue meal at the pub.

Day 5 6.45 a.m. Yellow Waters cruise. Section ends. Those ending here can catch Greyhound-Pioneer bus to Darwin or Katherine leaving mid to late afternoon. To be safe, check current timetable and book in advance.

Section 2 Graveside Area

Day 4 Those beginning with this section catch the Greyhound-Pioneer bus from Darwin to Coinda at about 6.30 a.m. There is only one bus per day. Check the current timetable when you book. The cost of the bus is not included in the cost of the tour. On arrival, wait in the open air pub and meet the group there about lunch time. 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 about lunch time. Book into budget accommodation. Opportunity to wash clothes and have hot shower. Bring towel and toiletries and money for drinks. Cook-it-yourself barbecue meal at the pub.

Day 5 6.45 a.m. Yellow Waters Cruise. Drive to Graveside. Begin walk, carrying full packs. Bush camp.

Day 6–10 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days, possibly day packs on one or more days.

Day 11 Return to vehicle. Drop off those finishing with this section. Drive to Ubirr.

Section 3 Ubirr and the Mary River

Day 11 Those beginning with this section catch the Greyhound-Pioneer bus from Darwin to Coinda or Jabiru (their choice) at about 6.30 a.m. There is only one bus per day. Check the current timetable when you book. The cost of the bus is not included in the cost of the tour. Meet the group about lunch time and drive to Ubirr. Afternoon walk.

Day 12 Dawn walk near Ubirr. Drive to Mary River and begin houseboat cruise.

Day 13 Finish houseboat cruise. Drive back to Darwin. Drop off at your accommodation.