

# THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN Travel + LUXURY

APRIL 29-30, 2023

- A year of remembrance for Picasso
- Secrets of Bangkok's fabled river
- Vietnam's latest luxe seaside villas

## TALES FROM THE TOP END

A NEW WAVE OF INDIGENOUS  
TOURS IN THE TERRITORY **Page 8**

### KIMBERLEY UNREAL UNSPOILT UNBELIEVABLE

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**Inclusions:** 10 night luxury Ponant cruise with all meals, beverages and shore excursions escorted by experienced naturalist guides.

**Voyages Depart Darwin: 23 July, 12 August 2023**

Deck 5 Balcony Stateroom - \$17,140 Person 1/ \$8,570 person 2

**Bonus: 2nd PERSON HALF PRICE**

**Plus:** \$1,500 Air Credit per cabin\*

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**Plus:** Luxury car transfers to/from nearest capital city airport\*

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\*Conditions apply. Subject to availability of services at time of booking. New bookings only. Not combinable with other Ponant or Ultimate offers. Price quoted based on PR5 Stateroom - with 2nd person at half price. Luxury car airport transfers valid up to 35kms from relevant airport. Office hours: Mon to Fri 9:30am to 5:30pm AEST.



It's low tide as we wade knee-deep into the lukewarm sea off Darwin's Casuarina Beach, following our guide's instructions to wash our sweat into the water to let Mother Earth know we're here. As seabirds whirl overhead, Larrakia man Trent Lee points out Old Man Rock (Darriba Nungalinga) lying further out to sea.

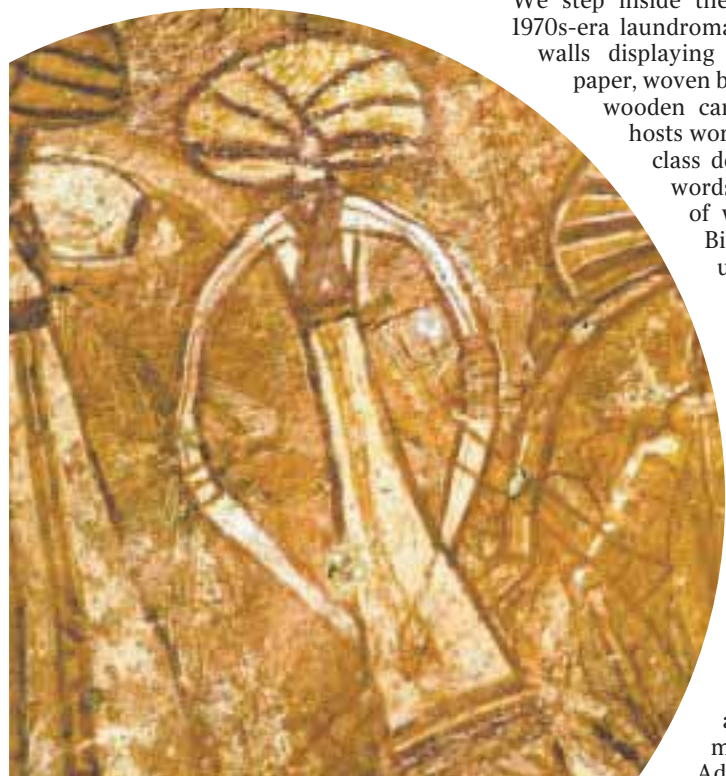
"We believe he's the first Larrakia man to walk the landscape ... he helped create the rivers and estuaries," says Lee.

Besides running the risk of encountering a crocodile, people should not swim around, sit on or otherwise disturb Old Man Rock, for his wrath is fierce. Some claim Cyclone Tracy, which devastated Darwin almost 50 years ago, came about because people failed to respect the revered site. "It's a very important area for us ... we do ask people not to go there," Lee says.

Returning to the shore, Lee takes us higher on to the dunes to teach traditional fire-making and weaving, and to demonstrate the art of spear-throwing. His weapon performs a smooth, graceful arc before hitting the target, and then it's our turn. The members of my tour group throw long, short and sideways, only calling it quits after someone almost downs a masked lapwing in flight and Lee playfully warns, "Whatever you kill, you have to eat."

Lee started Saltwater Cultural Tours four years ago to enhance how visitors engage with the capital city the Larrakia call Garramilla. "It's very important to keep culture alive," he says. He is one of a burgeoning number of First Nations operators who are sharing their sacred knowledge, practices and ways of life, while creating employment and economic opportunities for current and future generations.

Amid ongoing debate about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, Aboriginal cultural tours, galleries, accommodation providers, retailers and natural attractions are flourishing.



## Ancient ways and modern comforts in the Top End

DENISE CULLEN

According to Tourism NT, there are now more than 150 authentic Aboriginal culture experiences offered across the tropical Top End and iconic Red Centre.

They include the Laundry Gallery, which launched last year in suburban Parap. This Aboriginal-owned and operated exhibition space supports remote female artists, says co-founder Nina Fitzgerald, whose family hails from Kakadu, the Torres Strait Islands and the Wuthathi people of northeast Cape York. We step inside the spruced-up shell of a 1970s-era laundromat to find light lavender walls displaying works on canvas and paper, woven baskets and hand-painted wooden carvings. The gallery also hosts workshops. We're here for a class designed to teach 20 key words in Kunwinjku, a dialect of western Arnhem Land's Bininj Kunwok language, under the tutelage of Jeanett Burrunali from Bininj Kunwok Regional Language Centre.

"(Bininj) is one of the top 10 strongest Indigenous languages of Australia," says Burrunali, who speaks seven languages, including four dialects of Bininj.

Later, my mind swimming with words such as "manme" (food), "kamak" (good) and "bobo" (goodbye), my head hits the pillow at Adina Apartment Hotel



Darwin Waterfront. The property is partly Indigenous-owned, with almost two in five employees identifying as First Nations Australians and Aboriginal artwork around every corner. I'm staying in a one-bedroom apartment overlooking the city's wave pool, lagoon and promenade, recreational facilities that are popular with locals because they're crocodile-free.

The following day, we're up early for a day trip to the smaller of the two main Tiwi Islands, 80km north of Darwin.

"Welcome to Bathurst Island," says pilot Leslie Snuderl, as our eight-seater touches down on the tarmac. Here to greet us is Tiwi elder Edward (Teddy) Portaminni who, with wife Teresia, has run Tarntipi Bush Camp for the past eight years, immersing visitors in Tiwi culture by having them spend time with family on country. Although Tarntipi is the only Tiwi-owned and operated accommodation on the island, guests must be prepared to rough it, camping in tents and self-catering ("except for some fresh fish"). Typical activities include basket-weaving, spear-making, fishing, swimming and storytelling.

We've arrived at the tail end of a bumper

wet season, which has cut off road access to the camp, so Portaminni is instead giving us a taste of what guests can expect by exploring the 2000-strong township of Wurrumiyanga, formerly Nguiu.

The day unfolds in a blur of bold ochre colours and cultural pride, as we explore a range of venues, including award-winning Bima Wear and the Tiwi Design art centre. When we arrive at Ngaruwanajirri, a work space for artists with a disability, Portaminni points out the arched ceiling, decorated with distinctly Tiwi motifs and geometrical designs. "It's like the Sistine Chapel," he says.

Most eye-opening are the personal stories, such as how Portaminni's grandfather had four wives, but "when the priest (Father Francis Xavier Gsell) came (in 1911) everything changed". He recalls eating meals at the Bathurst Island Mission site where the Patakijiyali Museum now stands, and we drive by the historic Nguiu church where our hosts married in 1977 (and which featured in the 2019 film Top End Wedding).

On our return to Darwin, we head to Admiralty House for a four-course meal prepared by executive chef Michael Foster, a 28-

# CULTURE AND COU

Nawurlandja Lookout in Kakadu National Park, main; Ayal Aboriginal Tours, far left; waterfall in the park, right



# NTRY

## MORE TO THE STORY

As early morning sunshine turns the spear grass around us to spun gold, Victor Cooper is scanning the track, sniffing the air and listening to every snap in the undergrowth.

"There," he says. A traditional owner and former ranger of Kakadu National Park who has been running Ayal Aboriginal Culture Tours since 2008, Cooper points to an almost imperceptible depression in the red dirt ahead of us. "Water buffalo, but he's been and gone – I hope."

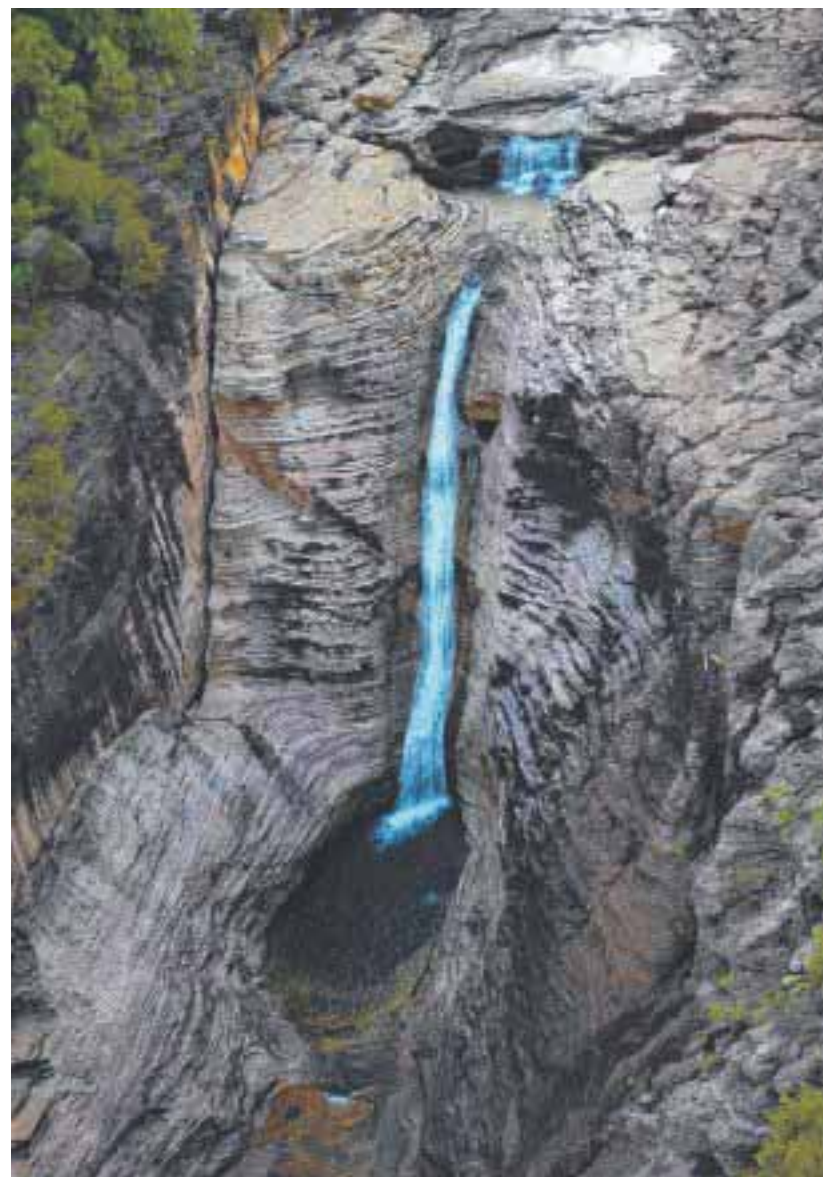
We're walking through savanna woodlands on our way to Nanguluwurr, one of the region's less-visited rock art sites. Watching Cooper lead, it's clear that reading the country comes as naturally to him as breathing. It's a short 1.7km walk from the carpark to the imposing rock and its interpretive signage, which opens a window on flesh-eating spirits, animals rendered in X-ray style and scenes from everyday life.

There's also an example of first contact art, in the form of a white sailing ship and anchor chain. "Everything here is real ... what they saw, they painted and that's the only way they can tell a story to others," Cooper explains.

What's visible at Nanguluwurr is just a fraction of what is hidden deep within the almost 20,000sq km expanse of World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park, home to one of the world's greatest concentrations of rock art sites.

According to James Morgan, a Bininj man who founded Yibekka Kakadu Tours, there are about 5000 known rock art sites within Kakadu, and at least another 5000 that remain unrecorded. He encourages us to take our time as he leads us on a sunset tour of the famous Burrungkuy (Nourlangie) rock art site. "The more you look the more you'll see," he says. Ancestral beings including Namarrkon, or Lightning Man, are depicted here, and while the age of some of these paintings is unknown, their power seems enduring.

"The painting is a spirit; when you look at it, it looks back at you," says Morgan.



Below, from left: James Morgan of Yibekka Kakadu Tours; Laundry Gallery in Parap, Darwin; safari tent at Cooinda Lodge, Jabiru; dukkah-dusted wagyu steak at Admiralty House, Darwin. Nourlangie rock art in Kakadu National Park, below, far left



year-old Darwin-born Aboriginal man with family ties to country in Daly River and Kakadu. Drawing on menus from two restaurants here – The Darwin Club upstairs and Char downstairs – we dine on kangaroo carpaccio served with Kakadu plum jam, grilled Skull Island tiger prawns with finger lime and lemon myrtle-crumbed King George whiting.

Foster prefers to pique diners' curiosity about native ingredients rather than "whack them with it". "By introducing them in a different way and having them off centre, they will want to know more," he explains. The next morning, after a breakfast at Aboriginal Bush Traders, a not-for-profit gallery and cafe, we turn up the volume on Yolngu Radio and hit the Arnhem Highway for the three-hour drive east to Kakadu National Park, where the traditional owners are the Bininj in the north and Munguy in the south. One of our first adventures is a doors-off helicopter ride, which gives an

exhilarating bird's-eye view of thundering waterfalls, and some of the rugged sandstone escarpments we'll be exploring on foot.

We're staying overnight in simple but comfortable airconditioned rooms at Cooinda Lodge Kakadu. Owned by Kakadu Tourism and managed by Accor, the sprawling property is located beneath a canopy of trees be-

side Yellow Water Billabong. Five Yellow Water villas, due to open in May, are under construction, and a peek inside one named Namarngol (barramundi) reveals a spacious bedroom, luxurious bathroom in moody black stone, galley kitchen and rear deck overlooking the bush. The lodge makes a great base from which to explore attractions such as Marrawuddi Arts & Culture. Working with more than 500 Kakadu artists, the centre and gallery moved to its new Jabiru site in 2020 and is described by manager Katie Hagebols as a "flagship for the future" of the former uranium mining town.

Cooinda is also home of the Kakadu Full Moon Feast, which took place on April 1, showcasing seasonal bush tucker. There is, indeed, a veritable feast of Indigenous experiences to be had across the territory. Given the range of new, expanded and reimagined offerings, it seems that as demand for immersive Indigenous experiences grows, the traditional custodians of the land are listening.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Tourism NT.  
[northernterritory.com](http://northernterritory.com)

## IN THE KNOW

April to September is the best time to visit the Northern Territory. Rates at the Adina Apartment Hotel Darwin Waterfront from \$499 a night, twin-share.

[adinahotels.com](http://adinahotels.com)

Cooinda Lodge Kakadu has accommodation from \$329 (room only).

[kakadutourism.com](http://kakadutourism.com)

Saltwater Cultural Tours runs three-hour outings from Darwin; \$150 a person.

[saltwaterculturaltours.info](http://saltwaterculturaltours.info)

Laundry Gallery in Parap opens Wednesday to Saturday (check website for times); Monday and Tuesday by appointment.

[laundrygallery.com.au](http://laundrygallery.com.au)

Tarntipi Bush Camp on Bathurst Island offers two-night homestay experiences for \$599 a person.

[tarntipi.com](http://tarntipi.com)

The Darwin Club at Admiralty House opens Wednesday to Saturday for dinner.

[admiraltyhouse.com.au](http://admiraltyhouse.com.au)

Aboriginal Bush Traders in Darwin's Mall offers a breakfast plate plus a gallery tour for \$40.

[aboriginalbushtraders.com](http://aboriginalbushtraders.com)

Kakadu Air Services operates 60-minute wet season scenic flights from Jabiru; \$660 a person.

[kakaduai.com.au](http://kakaduai.com.au)

Marrawuddi Arts & Culture in Jabiru is open daily.

[marrawuddi.com.au](http://marrawuddi.com.au)

Ayal Aboriginal Tours runs a 6½ hour outing from Jabiru in airconditioned 4WD; \$250 a person.

[ayalkakadu.com.au](http://ayalkakadu.com.au)

The two-hour rock art tour led by Yibekka Kakadu Tours in the national park costs \$47 a person.

[yibekka.com.au](http://yibekka.com.au)