

Darwin

Eguide

Darwin, Australia is a long way from everywhere. Because of its isolation, it is a city frequently omitted from the itineraries of visitors, but many believe that the 'Top End', as the northern half of the Territory is known, is the best part of Australia. Darwin is a base for the Kakadu and Litchfield national parks.

Darwin is a place of sunshine, beaches and hectic nightlife. Darwin has a pleasant relaxed atmosphere. Darwin is a European city, but there are people here from many different ethnic backgrounds and a large Aboriginal population. Darwin has a tropical climate, and therefore no summer and winter, but instead a wet season from November until April and a dry season from May until October.

Darwin was badly damaged during World War 2, rebuilt and then destroyed a second time with the Cyclone Tracey that struck on Christmas Eve 1974. Darwin was rebuilt and has resulted in a well designed Central Business District with parks and outdoor malls.

Darwin sits on a peninsula and the CBD is in the south eastern area of Darwin. The Esplanade and Lamerro Beach are on the western edge. The backpacker area is on Mitchell Street close to the bus transit centre. The main shopping street is the Smith Street Mall.



Darwin History

The earliest European efforts to settle the Top End were mainly due to British fears that other European powers might get a foothold on the Australian continent. The harbour had been discovered back in 1839 by John Lort Stokes on the Beagle and named it Port Darwin after Charles Darwin.

Ludwig Leichardt reached Port Essington overland from Brisbane in 1845. In 1863 the region was under the control of the administration in South Australia. A settlement was established in 1864 at Escape Cliffs on the mouth of the Adelaide River but abandoned in 1866. Between 1824 and 1829 Fort Dundas on Melville Island and Fort Wellington on the Cobourg Peninsula, 200 km northeast of Darwin, were settled and then abandoned. Darwin came into being in 1869. The city was originally named Palmerston after the British Prime Minister and changed to Darwin in 1911.

Darwin developed when gold was discovered at Pine Creek, about 200 km south of the city in 1871. When the gold rush ended growth in Darwin slowed. Darwin gained prominence during World War II. Darwin was a base for action against the Japanese in the Pacific. The road to Alice Springs was surfaced and made contact with the rest of Australia easier. Darwin was bombed many times and nearly 250 lives were lost.

By 1974, Darwin was a growing settlement. This changed dramatically early on Christmas morning of that year when Cyclone Tracy passed over Darwin, killing 69 people in six hours and flattening over 70% of the city. Darwin in 2008 is an important city as the entry point for the Northern Territories, a centre for administration and mining. New port facilities and the railway line to Alice Springs are likely to make Darwin a transport hub with Southeast Asia.

Darwin Attractions

Aquascene

Fish Feeding takes place at Aquascene, which is in Doctor's Gully, below the Y.M.C.A. The fish are wild and come in to be fed only at particular times, which depend upon the tides, so enquiry needs to be made in advance.

From the foot of Doctor's Gully, you can follow a path (not the road; the path is to the left of the road) up through lush tropical vegetation, at the top you will find yourself at the back of the Y.M.C.A., from where the road runs down to the Gully. 28 *Doctors Gully Road. (08 8981 7837).*

Australian Aviation Heritage Centre

This is one of Australia's best displays of aircraft, it focuses on the role aviation has played in the Northern Territory. An American B52 bomber takes centre stage. 557 *Stuart Highway, (08 8947 2145).*

Australian Pearling Exhibition

The Australian Pearling Exhibition is near Stokes Hill. It tells the story of the pearling for which this region has been famous since the aborigines first traded pearls with the Macassan sailors who arrived from Celebes (Sulawesi) in Indonesia.

A highlight is the display of modern pearl jewellery. *Stokes Hill Wharf (08 8999 6573).*

Casuarina Coastal Reserve

This coastal strip, north of the suburb of Rapid Creek has a good sandy beach. There are a number of Aboriginal sites including a rock formation.



Botanic Gardens

The George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens are located 2km from the city centre. They have displays of orchids that thrive in the humid conditions as well as palms, mangroves and every species of baobab.

There is also an informative visitor's centre and Aboriginal plant trails. *Gardens Road, Fanny Bay (08 8981 1958).*

Charles Darwin National Park

A waterfront park close to the city and shows the mangrove habitats of Darwin Harbour. *Tiger Brennan Drive.*

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Chinese Temple

The Chinese have played a major role in the development of Darwin and the Chinese Temple is near the end of Woods Street. There is also a museum devoted to the history of the Chinese in Darwin.

Christ Church Cathedral

In the Esplanade is Christ Church Cathedral. The original was built in 1902, and in 1944 a porch was added, built by the armed forces using the stones of the old Post Office nearby, in memory of those who had lost their lives in the Territory during the war.

Cyclone Tracy completely destroyed the Cathedral, except for the porch, which is incorporated in the new cathedral built in 1975.

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East Point Reserve

East Point Reserve is just north of Mindil and Vestey's and has picnic areas and safe swimming. *East Point Road*.

Doctor's Gully

Doctor's Gully is just to the north of the Esplanade. It can be reached by road or by a path leading from the northern end of the grassy area beside the Esplanade.

The first Europeans to visit landed here. The area was originally market gardens, and then it became the site of the first hospital.

During the war it was a base for flying boats, and some remains of the wartime activities can still be seen at low tide.



Fannie Bay Goal

The name may be funny but, the history is anything but. This was Darwin's main prison from 1883 to 1979.

It is now a museum where you can view the cells and eerie gallows where the last hanging took place in 1952.

There is also a display on the Cyclone Tracy devastation. *East Point Road (08 8999 8290)*.

East Point Military Museum

There is an interesting display of WWII relics and the history of Darwin's war experiences. *East Point Road (08 8981 9702)*.

Darwin Crocodile Farm

A commercial crocodile farm where visitors are welcome at feeding time in the early afternoon. *40 Km south of Darwin on the Stuart Highway (08 8988 1450)*.

Indo Pacific Marine

The Indo-Pacific Marine is near Stokes Hill and displays living coral reefs all man made. *Stokes Hill Wharf (08 8981 1294)*.

Government House

Formerly known as The Residency and is still sometimes called by that name, Government House is an attractive old colonial style.

Building begun in 1870 and completed in its present form in 1879.

It was damaged by cyclones in 1897, 1937 and 1974, as well as by wartime bombs, but has survived all.

Holmes Jungle Nature Park

Adjacent to Crocodylus Park this 250 ha park features natural eucalypt woodland with pandanus palms and some monsoon rainforest. *Vanderlin Drive (08 8947 2305)*.

Old Courthouse and Police Station

The Old Courthouse and Police Station were built for the South Australian Government in 1884.

They suffered greatly from Cyclone Tracy, but have been restored, and are now used as the offices of the Northern Territory Administrator.

Lyons Cottage

This stone bungalow built in 1925 once housed the staff of the British Australian Telegraph Company and demonstrates a colonial style of architecture mostly found in India, Malaya and Singapore. After the Second World War, it was used by the Mayor of Darwin, John Lyons, and became known as Lyons Cottage. Early exhibitions of Darwin's history are located here now and old photographs. *Corner of Esplanade and Knuckey Street.*



Lammeroo Beach

There is a path from the grassy area to the west of the Esplanade which leads down to Lameroo Beach. The beach is fairly stony, but there are the ruins of some sea water baths down here, although only foundations remain now.

Mindil Beach

Mindil Beach is near the Casino and the closest beach of good quality to the central part of Darwin. It starts about two kilometres from the city centre. In the Dry Season, from May until October, this is the scene of a market every Thursday and Sunday evening, specialising in food from many countries, reflecting the diverse ethnic origins of the residents of Darwin, but including many other wares and entertainments also. Swimming is safe in this beach except for the wet season when the box jelly fish are present.

Old Town Hall

In a small park opposite the bus station are the ruins of the Old Town Hall. It was built in 1883 and survived until Cyclone Tracy in 1974.

Now it has been left as a ruinous reminder of the forces of nature. Who could imagine that a sturdy stone building could be almost totally destroyed by the winds of a single night? The Territory is indeed a place where one learns to respect nature.

Myilly Point Precinct

Located here are four pre-war houses which are the headquarters of the National Trust. This, the Myilly Point Precinct, was originally housing for high-ranking government employees.

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

The museum covers many aspects of the regions art, natural sciences, history and culture. Good collections of Aboriginal Art including bark paintings from Arnhem Land. There is also a display on the dramatic effects Cyclone Tracy had on the city in 1974. Highlights are the impressive Maritime Gallery and Sweetheart, the 5m stuffed crocodile. A neon lit exhibit shows the history of natural life in Darwin. The museum is set in a tropical garden on Darwin Harbour. *Conacher Street, Fannie Bay (08 8999 8201).*

Oil Storage Tunnels

After the Japanese had bombed the oil tanks on the hills in Darwin several times during the Second World War, it was decided that it might be a good idea to put the tanks underground where they would be less vulnerable. Therefore tunnels were constructed and underground storage areas built.

This was all done by hand and the underground storage areas were ready just as the war finished, and so were never used. Recently one of these tunnels has been opened to the public. It contains a collection of photographs depicting Darwin during the war years. *Kitchener Drive (08 8985 6333).*

Overland Telegraph Line

A memorial to the Overland Telegraph Line is situated on the Esplanade, not far from Parliament House. This is the point at which the undersea telegraph cable from Banjawangi in Java to Darwin was brought ashore in 1872, enabling the first telegraph messages to be exchanged between Australia and Britain.



Parliament House

At the southern end of the city is the Northern Territory Parliament House. This modern building, completed in 1994, is most imposing, especially considering that there are only 25 elected representatives meeting here. Parliament House also houses the State Library. *Smith Street (08 8946 1425).*

Old Admiralty House

This pre war house has survived all Darwin can throw at it, from cyclones to bombings.

Old Admiralty House was built as the residence of the North Australian Naval Commander and is a fine tropical style elevated building, its sturdy core survived Cyclone Tracy.

It is not open to the public. *Corner of Knuckey Street and the Esplanade.*

Stokes Hill Wharf

Stokes Hill Wharf is at the tip of the Darwin city area. On the way there, you will pass an artificial reef and fishing platform.

This is a working wharf, but the area also has restaurants, cafes, shops and entertainment.

Territory Wildlife Park

Territory Wildlife Park is a 400 hectare open range sanctuary, it has an aviary, an aquarium, natural lagoons and a nocturnal house.

The park is located 56km from Darwin along the Stuart Highway. *Cox Peninsula Road, (08 8988 7200).*



Kakadu

The Kakadu National Park lies some 300 kilometres east of Darwin and is said by some visitors to be the most beautiful place that they have ever seen. Certainly the escarpment forming the eastern boundary of the park is impressive, and some of the waterfalls, when flowing in the Wet, are awe-inspiring.



The route to Kakadu first follows the main road south from Kakadu, and then, after forty kilometres, turns off east, and soon reaches Humpty Doo. Here you can find Graeme Gow's Reptile World, a display of snakes and reptiles, including 25 of the world's most venomous snakes. The road crosses the Adelaide River after a further few kilometres. This is the place at which there are cruises on the river to see the jumping crocodiles.

Continuing, the Djukbinj National Park is on your left, and then you will come to the Mary River Crossing, with Mary River Park and, three kilometres on, Bark Hut. A little further on is the entrance to the Mary River Wetlands, less famous than Kakadu, but offering plenty of wildlife observation, bushwalking and fishing.

There are tours operating from here, especially bird watching tours, for several rare species are found in the area, attracted by the year-round water supply. There are also crocodile cruises every two hours. The scenery is less spectacular than that of Kakadu, but the area has a less touristic feel to it.

Everybody knows about Kakadu, but few know how beautiful the Mary River Wetlands can be too. Budget accommodation and camping are both available here.

Travelling on eastwards, you will soon come to the entrance to Kakadu. It is a vast area, so there are several places to stay and many more which one ought to visit.

The aborigines may have lived in this area for some 50,000 years and there are 5,000 sites throughout the park bearing witness to their culture, of which Nourlangie and Ubirr are two of the best known examples.

The Kakadu Park covers 19,804 square kilometres and also offers a huge range of wildlife to be observed.

Highlights of Kakadu are the art sites of Nourlangie and Ubirr, Bowali Visitor Centre at Jabiru, Warradjan Cultural Centre at Coinda, Jim Jim Falls, Twin Falls, Gunlom Falls, Yellow Waters and Mamukala.

Accommodation is available in Kakadu.

It is a very good idea to book such accommodation in advance. Camping is permitted at designated camp sites, of which there are about a dozen.

The main Kakadu tourist office is the Bowall Visitors Centre just south of Jabiru on the Kakadu highway.

Lots of information on Kakadu is available.

Katherine

Katherine is one of only two towns of any size between Darwin and Alice Springs. Leichhardt was the first European to reach here, in 1844, on his exploratory journey to Port Essington, but it was the explorer Stuart who gave the town its name in 1862.

He called the river here the Catherine, after the second daughter of his benefactor, James Chambers.

As throughout the Territory, it was the building of the Overland Telegraph Line which breathed life into the town. In 1878, Alfred Giles arrived with 12,000 sheep and 2,000 cattle and set up Springvale Station, eight kilometres outside Katherine.

It was the cattle which prospered here, as the conditions were too hot for sheep, and this was the start of the cattle industry in the Northern Territory.

The railway from Darwin arrived in 1917, but stayed on the northern side of the river. It was not until 1926 that a bridge was built and a station constructed on the south side, where the present town centre lies.



Katherine is the place where the road west to Broome, and eventually to Perth, diverges from The Track (Stuart Highway) south to Alice Springs.

The Track, until recent years, was just that a narrow strip of bitumen laid down by the American forces during the war as a tenuous link with the south.



Only in the last twenty five years has it become a highway of ample width for two vehicles for its entire length to Alice Springs.

Katherine's great attraction is the Katherine Gorge, 29 kilometres from the town. Actually, there is not just a single gorge, but a string of thirteen of them, and they are now a part of the Nitmiluk National Park.

The gorges are filled with water and cruises operate regularly on the river which flows through, although occasionally, at the height of the Wet Season, water levels become too high to permit cruises.

The cruises usually travel through at least two of the gorges, with a walk involved in between.

There is a Visitor Centre and there are walking tracks totalling 100 kilometres in length.

There are also aerial tours of the gorge, by light aircraft or by helicopter.

Within the town, there are a few things to see. There is a Museum near the Hospital, but that is some four kilometres from the town centre.

The building which houses the Museum was originally the terminal building at the Katherine airfield in 1944.

The most interesting exhibit is the Gypsy Moth aeroplane used by the first flying doctor, Dr. Clyde Fenton, in 1934.

There is a walking and cycling path which leads beside the river to a point near the Museum. On the way there, you will pass the School of the Air, which can be visited.

A little further along the river beyond the Museum is the site of the former Telegraph Station.

The Telegraph Pylons remain and can be seen at Knott's Crossing, which is the original crossing point of the river and the location of the first town.



Litchfield

To reach Litchfield, one travels south on the Stuart Highway beyond the point at which the Arnhem Highway goes off to the east. You will see a turn-off on the left to Lake Bennett, and soon afterwards there is a turning on the right to Batchelor and Litchfield National Park.

On the way down the Stuart Highway, you may notice some wartime airstrips used in the defence of Northern Australia. There is one, for example, at Coomalie Creek, just as you turn off for Batchelor. During the war years, Batchelor was an important place, with both Australian and American airmen stationed here.

After the war, Australia's first uranium mine was opened at Rum Jungle, just north of Batchelor, in 1949, and most of the present buildings in Batchelor were designed to accommodate the miners. The mine was closed in 1971.



Litchfield National Park is only 7% of the size of Kakadu, although it is still not tiny. However, it is much more possible to 'do' it in a day.

Litchfield, incidentally, was a member of the Finness exploration party which passed through here and named the various features. He was fortunate to be able to live on in history by having his name given to such a memorable and beautiful location. Litchfield was originally a mining area, from the late nineteenth century until the 1950s. The minerals found here are copper and tin.

When mining was no longer profitable, the area became a pastoral property. It was only in 1986 that it was proclaimed as a National Park. Admission to the park is free, but there is a fee for camping. Waterfalls are some of the main attractions, the most noteworthy being Wangi Falls, Buley Rockhole, Florence Falls, Tolmer Falls and Tjaynera Falls.

There are also groups of termite mounds ('ant hills'), such as you will find throughout the Territory, and one in particular resembles the tombs in a graveyard.

The 'Lost City' is a sandstone formation resembling a city with fortifications, statues and inhabitants, but it is not easily accessible without a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

There is no accommodation available within the park, but camping is permitted, for a fee, at designated camping areas. Accommodation is available at Batchelor and tours of the park are available from Batchelor.



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