

Northern Territory



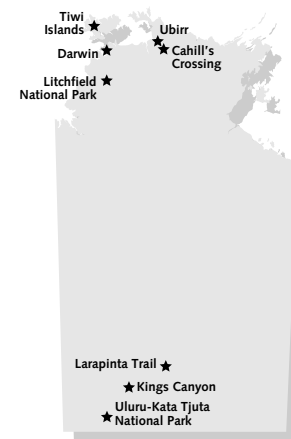
The Northern Territory (NT) is the kind of land where clichés are born. Its vast central desert regions mock polite attempts to penetrate it; the tropical north is a wild, untameable place, with cyclones whipping the coast and dumps of rain that cut road access to many settlements and sights. And then there are all of those deadly animals poised to snap, sting and strike.

Though there's access to the prolific natural areas, the place has a particular edge. There really are wild crocodiles in the waterways and another car might not come down the desert road for weeks. There are bottlenecks through which travellers are safely funnelled, but, equally, there are huge tracts of country that mightn't have seen a person in decades.

Crossing this vast country on a legendary road trip, or on a slow train, provides the chance to watch for wildlife and admire art, to hike through rainforest and rocky gorges, to sleep in a swag and eat bush foods.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spot crocs while driving over **Cahill's Crossing** (p826) on the East Alligator River – the border between the lily-laden wetlands of Kakadu and the open expanse of Arnhem Land – on the way to Injalak arts centre
- Wonder whether *mimi* spirits *were* responsible for the cheeky figures painted at an impossible height and angle at **Ubirr** (p824), one of Kakadu's rock-art sites
- Listen to a creation story from a Tiwi guide at the Patakijiyali Museum, then be surrounded by artwork at Tiwi Designs in Nguiu, Bathurst Island, one of the two **Tiwi Islands** (p812)
- Hear a cooee come back and back and back as it bounces around the immense chasm that is **Kings Canyon** (p859)
- See ghost gums growing out of ochre cliffs while walking through a billion-year-old gorge on a section of the epic **Larapinta Trail** (p853)
- Quell your excitement at seeing the colossal blips on the flat red horizon at **Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park** (p860)
- Catch a whiff of another exotic smell from a food stand, while weaving through crowds, buskers, rows of stalls selling services (Thai massage maybe?) and handcrafted goodies at one of the markets in **Darwin** (p810)
- Think how handy those waterproof cameras are while snapping another waterfall photo from a floating position in a crystalline waterhole at **Litchfield National Park** (p817)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 08

■ POPULATION: 202,800

■ AREA: 1,349,129 SQ KM

HISTORY

Most experts believe that Australian Aborigines have occupied the Australian landmass for around 60,000 years, although the central regions were not inhabited until about 24,000 years ago. The first significant contact with outsiders was an amicable one, occurring in the 17th century when Macassan traders from modern-day Sulawesi in Indonesia came to collect trepang (sea cucumber).

Early attempts to settle the Top End were mainly due to British fears that the French or Dutch might get a foothold in Australia. The Brits established three forts between 1824 and 1838, but all were short-lived. Then the desire for more grazing land and trade routes spurred speculators from Queensland and South Australia (SA) to explore the vast untamed north. With an eye to development, SA governors annexed the NT in 1863 (it became self-governing only in 1978).

From the mid-1860s to 1895 hundreds of thousands of sheep, cattle and horses were overlanded to immense pastoral settlements. Dislocation and hardship were bedfellows of the industry, with Aborigines forced from their lands and pastoralists confronted by a swath of difficulties. Some Aborigines took employment as stockmen or domestic servants on cattle stations, while others moved on in an attempt to maintain their traditional lifestyle.

In the early 1870s, during digging to establish the Overland Telegraph (from Adelaide to Darwin), gold was discovered. A minor rush ensued, with an influx of Chinese prospectors.

Though the gold finds were relatively insignificant, the searches for it unearthed a wealth of natural resources that would lead to mining becoming a major economic presence.

WWII had a significant impact on the Territory. Just weeks after the Japanese bombed Darwin, the entire Territory north of Alice Springs was placed under military control, with 32,000 men stationed in the Top End.

While the process of white settlement in the NT was slower, it had an equally troubled and violent effect as it did elsewhere in Australia. By the early 20th century, most Aboriginal people were confined to government reserves or Christian missions. During the 1960s Aboriginal people began to demand more rights.

In 1966 a group of Aboriginal stockmen, led by Vincent Lingiari, went on strike on Wave Hill Station, to protest over the low wages and poor conditions that they received compared with white stockmen. The Wave Hill walk-off (still celebrated annually at Kakarringi) gave rise to the Aboriginal land-rights movement.

In 1976 the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act was passed in Canberra. It handed over all reserves and mission lands in the NT to Aboriginal people and allowed Aboriginal groups to claim vacant government land if they could prove continuous occupation – provided the land wasn't already leased, in a town or set aside for some other special purpose.

Today, Aboriginal people own about half of the land in the NT, including Kakadu and

NORTHERN TERRITORY FACTS

Eat An appetiser of hand-ground green ants followed by barramundi baked in the ground. Desert? Dampier dripping with quandong jam

Drink Ice-cold beer out of a 'handle' (285mL) or 'schooner' (425mL)

Read *True North: Contemporary Writing from the Northern Territory*, edited by Marian Devitt

Listen to Local musos Birdwave (funk, rare groove), NoKTuRNL (rock, rap) or Phil O'Brien (camp-fire yarns)

Watch *Ten Canoes* (2006), 'One hundred and fifty spears, ten canoes, three wives...trouble.'

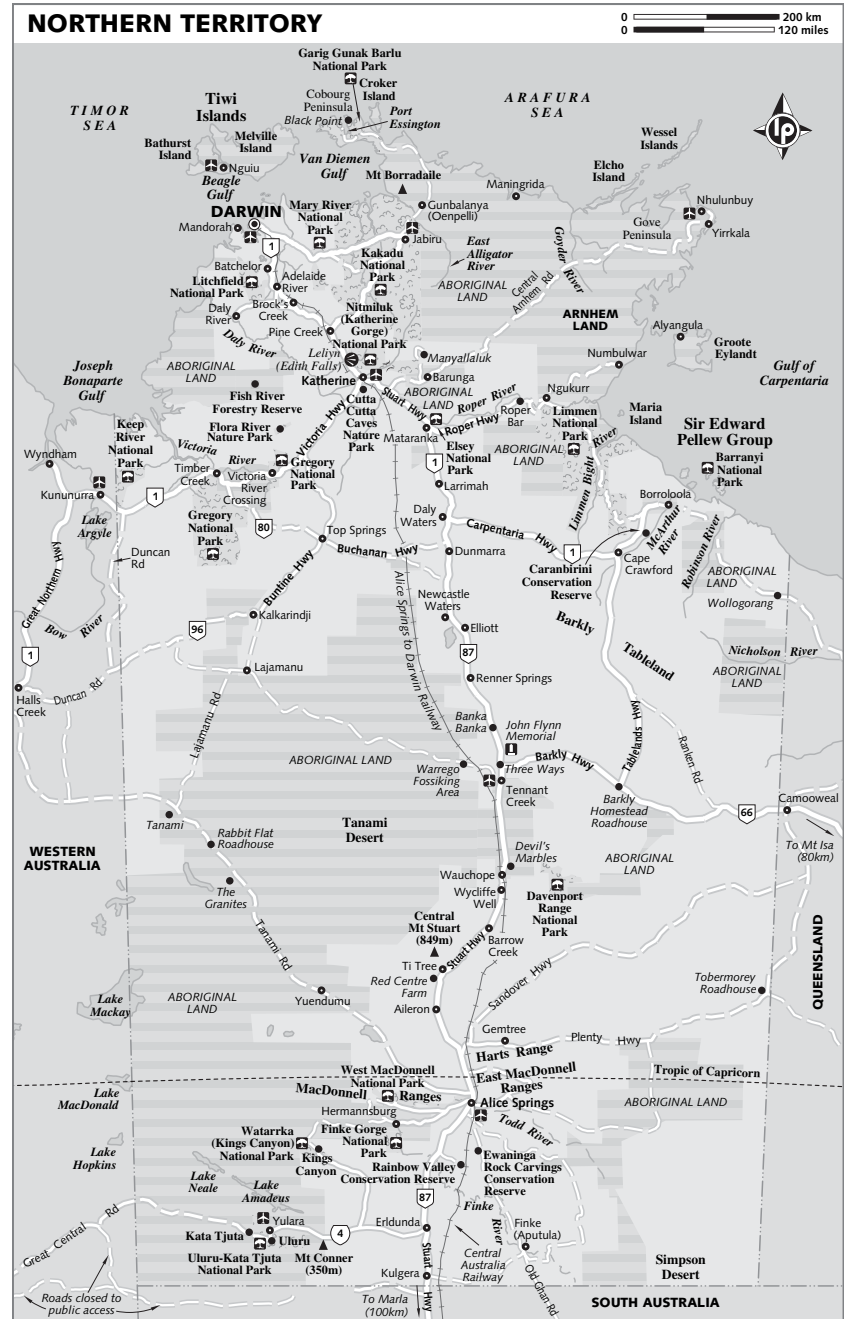
Avoid Swimming in the sea between October and May, and in any waterway without first seeking advice: marine stingers and saltwater crocodiles inhabit these waters

Locals' nickname Territorians, Top Enders, Centraliens

Swim at Wangi Falls waterhole beneath palm trees populated by roosting bats at Litchfield National Park (p817)

Strangest event Boat races; in Darwin's Beer Can Regatta (p804) they're in boats made from beer cans, while in the Alice's Henley-on-Todd (p846) they're on a river with no water

Kitschiest tourist attraction The 17.5m-high Anmatjere Man (whose left testicle is purported to be a time capsule) at Aileron roadhouse (p838)



Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, which are leased back to the federal government. Minerals on Aboriginal land are still government property, though the landowners' permission for exploration and mining is usually required, and landowners are remunerated. Around 30% of the Territory's 200,000 people are Aborigines.

While non-Aboriginal Australia's awareness of the need for reconciliation with the Aboriginal community has increased in recent years, there are still huge gulfs between the cultures. Entrenched disadvantage and substance abuse is causing enormous social problems within some indigenous communities. A report by the Crown prosecutor in 2006 revealed appalling sexual and violent abuses against women and children in remote NT communities. The federal government has responded with an audit of policing in indigenous communities and attempts to abolish the permit system (which limits access to Aboriginal lands). It also, with support from Aboriginal leaders and the NT government, continues to expand the availability of non-sniffable Opal fuel (see the boxed text, p794) and restrict the provision of alcohol.

It's often difficult for short-term visitors to make meaningful contact with Aborigines, as they generally prefer to be left to themselves. The impressions given by some Aboriginal people on the streets of Alice Springs, Katherine and Darwin, where social problems and substance abuse among a few people can present an unpleasant picture, are not indicative of Aboriginal communities as a whole. Tours to Aboriginal lands, most operated by the communities themselves, and visits to arts centres (such as at Yuendumu and Gunbalanya) are gradually becoming more widely available, as communities feel more inclined to share their culture. Benefits are numerous: financial gain through self-determined endeavour, and educating non-Aboriginal people about traditional culture and customs, which helps to alleviate the problems caused by the ignorance and misunderstandings of the past.

GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE

Although roughly 80% of the NT is in the tropics – the Tropic of Capricorn lies just north of Alice Springs – only the northern 25%, known as the Top End, has anything that resembles the popular idea of a tropi-

cal climate. It's a distinct region of savanna woodlands and rainforest pockets – in the northeast, the Arnhem Land plateau rises abruptly from the plain and continues to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Much of the southern 75% of the Territory consists of desert or semiarid plain.

The Top End's climate is described in terms of the Dry and the Wet, with year-round maximum temperatures of 30°C to 34°C and minimums between 19°C and 26°C. Roughly, the Dry lasts from April to September and the Wet from October to March, with the heaviest rain falling from January onwards. Indigenous Australians recognise between two and six seasons, which are observed through the movement and cycles of plant and animal species – including us tourists: 'when storm come now they all [go] back to their country' noted one traditional owner.

In the Centre temperatures are much more variable, plummeting below freezing on winter nights (June to August) and soaring above 40°C on summer days (December to March).

The most comfortable time to visit both the Centre and the Top End is June and July, though the Centre is pleasant as early as April. The Top End has its good points during the Wet – everything is green, and there are spectacular electrical storms and relatively few tourists. However, the combination of heat and high humidity can be unbearable, dirt roads are often impassable and some national parks are either totally or partly closed.

INFORMATION

Helpful websites:

Department of Planning & Infrastructure (www.dpi.nt.gov.au/whatwedo/roadreport) Road-conditions report.

Exploroz (www.exploroz.com) Fuel locations and pricing, weather forecasts and more.

Parks & Wildlife Service (www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks) Details on parks and reserves.

Top End Arts (www.topendarts.com.au) Learn what's what and what's on.

Tourism Top End (www.tourismtopend.com.au) Membership-based tour-booking organisation for the Top End.

Travel NT (www.travelnt.com/en) Official tourism site.

Permits

Permits are required to enter Aboriginal land, but sometimes they aren't necessary if you are using recognised public roads that cross

ABORIGINAL FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Most of the NT's city festivals have strong Aboriginal components, plus there's a bunch of annual Aboriginal celebrations to attend. Although these festivals are usually held on restricted Aboriginal land, permit requirements are generally waived for them; this applies to most of the festivals listed below. Bear in mind that alcohol is banned in many communities.

March

Tiwi Grand Final Held at the end of March on Bathurst Island, this sporting spectacle displays the Tiwis' sparkling skills and passion for football. Thousands come from Darwin for the day, which coincides with the **Tiwi Art Sale** (www.tiwiart.com). See p812 for more details on visiting the Tiwi Islands.

June

Barunga Festival For three days over the Queen's Birthday long weekend (mid-June), Barunga, 80km east of Katherine, displays traditional arts and crafts, dancing, music, and sporting competitions. Bring your own camping equipment; alternatively, visit for the day from Katherine.

Merrepen Arts Festival The Nauiyu community, on the banks of the Daly River, is the venue for this arts festival (www.merrepenarts.com). On the first weekend in June the Centre showcases its string bags, paintings and prints, while locals show off their sporting prowess in foot races and basketball and softball matches.

July

Oenpelli Open Day Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), in Arnhem Land, across the East Alligator River from Jabiru, has an open day in July (sometimes August). This event gives visitors a chance to buy local art, sample bush tucker and watch sport, concerts and dancing events.

August

Garma Festival This four-day festival (www.garma.telstra.com) is held in August in northeastern Arnhem Land. It's one of the most significant festivals, a large-scale celebration of Yolngu culture that includes ceremonial performances, bushcraft lessons, a *yidaki* (didgeridoo) master class and an academic forum. Serious planning is required to attend, so start early.

Aboriginal territory. However, if you leave the main road by more than 50m, even if you're only going into an Aboriginal settlement for fuel and provisions, you may need a permit.

The Central Land Council deals with all land south of a line drawn between Kununurra (Western Australia) and Mt Isa (Queensland); the Northern Land Council is responsible for land north of that line, and the Tiwi Land Council (Map p796) deals with Bathurst and Melville Islands. (Travellers can only visit the Tiwi Islands on a tour; the permit is included in the tour arrangements.) Permits can take four to six weeks to be processed, although for the Injalak arts centre at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) they are generally issued on the spot in Jabiru (\$13.20).

Central Land Council (Map p840; ☎ 08-8951 6211; www.clc.org.au/Permits; 33 Stuart Hwy, Alice Springs, PO

Box 3321, Alice Springs, NT 0871; ✉ permits issued 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

Northern Land Council (www.nlc.org.au); Darwin (Map p796; ☎ 08-8920 5100; 9 Rowling St, Casuarina, NT 0810); Jabiru (☎ 08-8979 2410; Flinders St, Jabiru, NT 0886); Katherine (Map p829; ☎ 08-8972 2799; 5 Katherine Tce, Katherine, NT 0850); Nhulunbuy (☎ 08-8987 2602; Endeavour Sq)

NATIONAL PARKS

The NT is all about its national parks; it has some of the largest and most famous natural areas in Australia. The **Parks & Wildlife Commission** (www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks) produces factsheets, available online or from its various offices.

Gregory (p833) Lying at the nexus between desert and tropics, this little-visited park has a network of walking trails featuring rock art. It's best accessed with a 4WD.

Kakadu (p819) Flush with well-preserved rock-art sites and diverse natural habitats, the World Heritage-listed Kakadu has a well-developed tourist infrastructure. Take a guided tour or walk and drive about independently. Open year-round, the park is almost entirely accessible by conventional vehicles.

Litchfield (p817) Magnificent rocky swimming holes, waterfalls and termitic mounds can be found in this park, just outside Darwin.

Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) (p831) This is one of the better parks for walkers, with little loops you could skip through in an hour to challenging slogs that take five days to complete. There are canoeing and swimming opportunities too.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta (p860) Famous for a certain rock, the park has tours, walking trails, and helicopter and camel rides.

Watarrka (Kings Canyon) (p859) This park is centred on the humbling hugeness of Kings Canyon.

West MacDonnell (p853) Spectacular gorge country in this region offers excellent bushwalking, including the renowned Larapinta Trail (p853).

ACTIVITIES

Bushwalking

The Territory's national parks offer well-maintained tracks of different lengths and degrees of difficulty, which expose walkers to various environments and wildlife habitats. Not to nag, but make sure you take lots of water, carry out rubbish and stick to the tracks.

Some of the better bushwalks:

Barrk Sandstone Bushwalk, Kakadu (p825)

Jatbula Trail, Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) (p832)

Ormiston Pound, West MacDonnell Ranges (p855)

Trephina Gorge, East MacDonnell Ranges (p852)

Valley of the Winds, Kata Tjuta (p863)

Fishing

No permit is required to fish the Territory's waterways, though there are limits on the minimum size and number of fish per person. **Travel NT** (www.travelnt.com) produces the excellent *Fishing the Territory* booklet (free from information centres), and publishes some info online. The **Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory** (www.afant.com.au) also has online info.

The feisty barramundi lures most fisher folk to the Top End, particularly to Borroloola, Daly River and Mary River. Increasingly, the recreational-fishing fraternity encourages catch and release to maintain sustainable fish levels. Loads of tours operate offering transport and gear.

Swimming

The cool waterfalls, waterholes and rejuvenating thermal pools throughout the NT are perfect spots to soak. Litchfield National Park, in the Top End, and the West MacDonnell Ranges, in the Centre, are particularly rewarding.

Saltwater crocodiles inhabit both salt and fresh waters in the Top End, though there are quite a few safe, natural swimming holes. Before taking a plunge, read the signs and seek local advice. If in doubt, don't risk it.

Box jellyfish seasonally infest the waters around Darwin; swimming at the city's beaches is safest from May to September, but see p797 before you take the plunge.

Wildlife Watching

The best places for guaranteed wildlife sightings, from bilbies to emus, is at the excellent Territory Wildlife Park (p816) outside Darwin and the Alice Springs Desert Park (p839).

If you prefer to see wildlife in the wild, there are few guarantees; many of the region's critters are nocturnal. One exception is at Kakadu (p819), where you'll certainly see crocodiles at Cahill's Crossing and numerous species of birds at its wealth of wetlands. In the arid Centre you'll see wallabies, reptiles and eagles. Good places to keep an eye out include the West MacDonnell Ranges (p853) and Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park (p859).

SEASONAL WORK

Most working-holiday opportunities in the NT for backpackers are in fruit picking, station handing, labouring and hospitality.

The majority of work is picking mangoes on plantations between Darwin and Katherine. Mango harvesting employs up to 2000 workers each season (late September to November). Station-work wannabes are generally required to have some skills (ie a trade or some experience), as with labouring and hospitality. Employers usually ask workers to commit for at least a month (sometimes three months).

Accommodation is generally provided for positions requiring the employee to live on site. It ranges from private quarters on a station to a patch of grass for your tent on a plantation. Many backpacker hostels offer cheaper rates for long-termers.

See opposite for volunteer opportunities.

THE CANE TOAD BANE

The warty-skinned cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) is a prolific breeder. Introduced to Queensland in the '30s, it has since threatened ecosystems in four northern states. Every stage of its much-maligned life, from egg through to adulthood, is poisonous to predators. The arrival of the treacherous toad is largely responsible for the rapid decline in numbers of the northern quoll (now nonexistent in Kakadu), and it's a serious threat to native frogs and goannas. Help **FrogWatch** (www.frogwatch.org.au) keep the toad count down. Perhaps join a community 'toad muster', collecting toads for the 'toad detention centre'. Here, toads are humanely killed (using CO2), frozen, and then delivered to the fertiliser factory, which mulches them into garden food. 'Toad Jus' fertiliser exploded onto the market in 2006, literally, with reports of unopened bottles exploding in storage. Manufacturers issued a warning to release the pressure by unscrewing the cap, and have since refined the fermentation process to rectify the problem.

TOURS

Even staunch independent travellers entrust some hard-earned time and money to a carefully selected tour. Tours can provide unmatched insights and access to the Territory, and they support local industry. See destination sections of this chapter for details of tours departing from those locations.

Community Project Travel

Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA; www.conservationvolunteers.com.au) Check the website for current programs, which run year-round throughout the region. Projects are nature based and include weeding, maintenance of walking tracks and wildlife surveys. It's free to join a day tour; bring lunch and water. Multi-day projects cost \$30 per night and include all meals, accommodation and project-related travel. Guided bushwalks (\$40) are also available on Saturday.

World Expeditions (www.worldexpeditions.com) Offers a limited number of projects (perhaps one annually), such as working with Yolngu rangers along the coast of Arnhem Land to remove rubbish (19–25 August 2007).

Indigenous Tours

Anangu (p861) Tours around Uluru guided by the traditional owners.

Aussie Adventure (p804) Co-runs trips with local communities to the Tiwi Islands and three-day tours to Kakadu, sleeping at Hawk Dreaming.

Kakadu Animal Tracks (p823) Enviro-focused bush-tucker tour in Kakadu; profits support the local Buffalo Farm, which donates food to local communities.

Magela Cultural & Heritage Tours (p824) Aboriginal owned; runs tours into Arnhem Land and around Kakadu.

Unique Indigenous Land Tours (p803) Aboriginal-owned and run tours to one or more destinations including Litchfield, Kakadu, Arnhem Land, Darwin and surrounds for bird and wildlife watching.

Rustic & Remote

Small-group and/or off-road adventures sleeping in a tent or swag.

Wayoutback Tours (p846) Uluru, Watarrka, Palm Valley and the West MacDonnells.

Willis' Walkabouts (☎ 08-8985 2134; www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au) Multi-day guided hikes, carrying your own gear, to Kakadu, Litchfield, Watarrka and the West MacDonnells.

Venture North (p804) Trips to the remote Cobourg Peninsula.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

For an overview of countrywide transport, see p1023. Quarantine restrictions require travellers to surrender all fruit, vegetables, nuts and honey at the NT–Western Australia (WA) border.

Air

International flights arrive at and depart from **Darwin International Airport** (DIA; ☎ 08-8920 1805; www.darwinairport.com.au). Airlines operating flights to their countries of origin and beyond:

Airnorth (www.airnorth.com.au) To/from East Timor.

Garuda (www.garuda-indonesia.com) To/from Indonesia.

Merpati (www.merpati.co.id) To/from Indonesia.

Qantas (www.qantas.com.au) To/from Asia and Europe.

Royal Brunei (www.bruneiair.com/australia) To/from Brunei.

Tiger Air (www.tigerairways.com) To/from Singapore.

The following domestic carriers have regular connections to other Australian states.

Airnorth (☎ 08-8920 4001; www.airnorth.com.au)

From Darwin to Broome and Kununurra.

Qantas (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com) Services all major Australian cities.

OPAL FUEL

Opal is an unleaded low-aromatic fuel developed by BP to combat petrol sniffing – an epidemic in many Aboriginal communities, particularly among boys and teenagers. In the 70 communities that switched to Opal, petrol sniffing virtually ceased. However, the regional government-subsidised roll-out of Opal has been painfully slow, and some petrol stations are refusing to stock it, claiming that there is no customer demand. Opal fuel is completely safe, though it provides slightly inferior fuel economy in some vehicles. Opal's proven success has prompted the government to consider making the supply of Opal compulsory. Meanwhile, consumers can contribute to curbing this humanitarian emergency by filling up with Opal, and asking for it at stations where it's not available.

Virgin Blue (☎ 13 67 89; www.virginblue.com) Services all major Australian cities.

For flights between NT centres, see the Darwin (p810), Alice Springs (p850) and Uluru (p867) sections.

Bus

Greyhound Australia (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) regularly services the main road routes throughout the Territory, including Kakadu and Uluru; see Getting There & Away in the relevant sections for details.

Backpacker buses cover vast distances while savouring the sights along the way. See p810 for info on buses to/from Darwin, and p850 for those to/from Alice Springs.

Car

Having your own vehicle in the NT means you can travel at your own pace and branch off the main roads to access less-visited places. To truly explore, you'll need a well-prepared 4WD vehicle and some outback nous. The **Automobile Association of the Northern Territory** (www.aant.com.au) can advise on preparation and additional resources; members of automobile associations in other states have reciprocal rights. Road conditions are reported on ☎ 1800 246 199 and www.dpi.nt.gov.au/whatwedo/roadreport.

Many roads are open to conventional cars and campervans, which, when shared between

two or more, can be an economical option. Vehicle hire and sales are available in the region's major cities.

Some driving conditions are particular to the NT. While traffic may be light and roads dead straight, distances between places are loooooong. Watch out for the four great NT road hazards: speed (there are no speed limits on the open road), driver fatigue, road trains and animals (driving at night is most dangerous). Note that areas self-designated as 'alcohol-free' do not allow *any* alcohol to be brought in, even if the alcohol is unopened. Roads are regularly closed during the Wet due to flooding.

Train

A trip on the famous **Ghan** (☎ 13 21 47; www.gsr.com.au) is one of the world's great rail adventures. You cross the country from Adelaide to Darwin, stopping at Alice Springs and Katherine. From Alice to Darwin in a seat/sleeper costs \$360/705, 1st class costs \$1100 and accompanying cars cost \$200.

The **Ghan** is met in Adelaide by the *Indian Pacific*, which travels to/from Sydney, and the *Overland*, which travels to/from Melbourne.

See the boxed text, p844, for the story of the jinxed *Ghan*.

The Ghan Timetable

depart Alice Springs	6pm Mon	6pm Thu
arrive Katherine	9am Tue	9am Fri
depart Katherine	1pm Tue	2.30pm Fri
arrive Darwin	5.30pm Tue	4.30pm Fri
depart Darwin	10am Wed	9am Sat
arrive Katherine	1.40pm Wed	12.40pm Sat
depart Katherine	6.20pm Wed	4.45pm Sat
arrive Alice Springs	9.10am Thu	11.15am Sun

DARWIN

☎ 08 / pop 70,005

People hailing from at least 56 countries make up the mellow, modern metropolis of Darwin. This sociable hub is where non-Aboriginal meets Aboriginal (Larrakia), where urban meets remote, and where industry meets idleness. The city attracts itinerant workers and visitors from around Australia, and its university and port bring students and sailors. The population ebbs and increases with the seasons. Forty percent of the population only

settled in the last 40 years, the majority, like you, intending only to stop by but ending up staying. Darwin's location on a tropical tip of the country's north coast means six subtle shifts of season, with a not-so-subtle disparity between the Dry and Wet – which can bring colossal storms.

Last century was a biggie for Darwin: barely recomposed after sustained WWII bombings, the city was razed by a cyclone. Its unique past and present (of rebuilding and regular rejuvenation) lends modern-day Darwin a very human spirit. It's palpable daily in the city's many outdoor public spaces, where crowds mingle at makeshift markets, at restaurants and pubs, and at its numerous festivals. Darwinites are also conscious of their natural surrounds – hardly surprising when you have Kakadu, Arnhem Land, Litchfield and the Tiwis in your back yard.

HISTORY

The Larrakia Aboriginal people lived for thousands of years in Darwin: hunting, fishing and foraging. In 1869 a permanent white settlement was established and the grid for a new town laid out. Originally called Palmerston, and renamed Darwin in 1911, the new town developed rapidly, transforming the physical and social landscape.

The discovery of gold at nearby Pine Creek brought an influx of Chinese, who soon settled into other industries. Asians and Islanders came to work in the pearling industry (documented at the Pearl Museum, p800) and on the railway line and wharf. More recently, neighbouring East Timorese and Papuans have sought asylum in Darwin.

During WWII, Darwin was the frontline for the Allied action against the Japanese in the Pacific. It was the only Australian city ever bombed, and official reports of the time downplayed the damage – to buoy Australians' morale. Though the city wasn't destroyed by the 64 attacks, the impact of full-scale military occupation on Darwin was enormous. More physically damaging was Cyclone Tracy. Christmas morning 1974 saw only 400 of Darwin's 11,200 houses still standing.

ORIENTATION

Darwin's centre is a compact, orderly grid at the end of a peninsula. The Stuart Hwy does a big loop entering the city and finally heads

south to become Daly St. The main shopping area is in and around the Smith Street Mall, while backpackers and boozers abound on Mitchell St. Darwin Harbour holds a clutch of tourist attractions, the port and vexed waterfront development. There's an equal amount of action in Darwin's northern suburbs, including Cullen Bay and Parap.

Darwin's airport is 12km northeast of the centre, while the train station is about 15km to the east; see p811 for transport details.

Maps

For detailed maps of the entire Territory, try **Maps NT** (Map p798; ☎ 8999 7032; Land Information Centre, 1st fl, Nichols Pl, cnr Cavenagh & Bennett Sts; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri).

INFORMATION

Aboriginal Darwin, by Toni Bauman, is both a guidebook and an alternative social history of Darwin; it makes an excellent travelling companion.

Bookshops

Angus & Robertson (Map p798; ☎ 8941 3489; Shop 18, Galleria Shopping Centre, Smith St Mall) Fiction, nonfiction and regional travel publications.

Bookworld (Map p798; ☎ 8981 5277; Paspalis Centrepoint, 48–50 Smith St) New releases.

NT General Store (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8242; 42 Cavenagh St) Good range of maps and travel guides.

Salvos (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8188; 49 Mitchell St) Op-shop with shelves of secondhand holiday reads.

Emergency

AANT Roadside Assistance (☎ 13 111)

Ambulance (☎ 000)

Fire (☎ 000)

Poisons Information Centre (☎ 13 11 26; ☎ 24hr)

Advice on poisons, bites and stings.

Police (☎ 000)

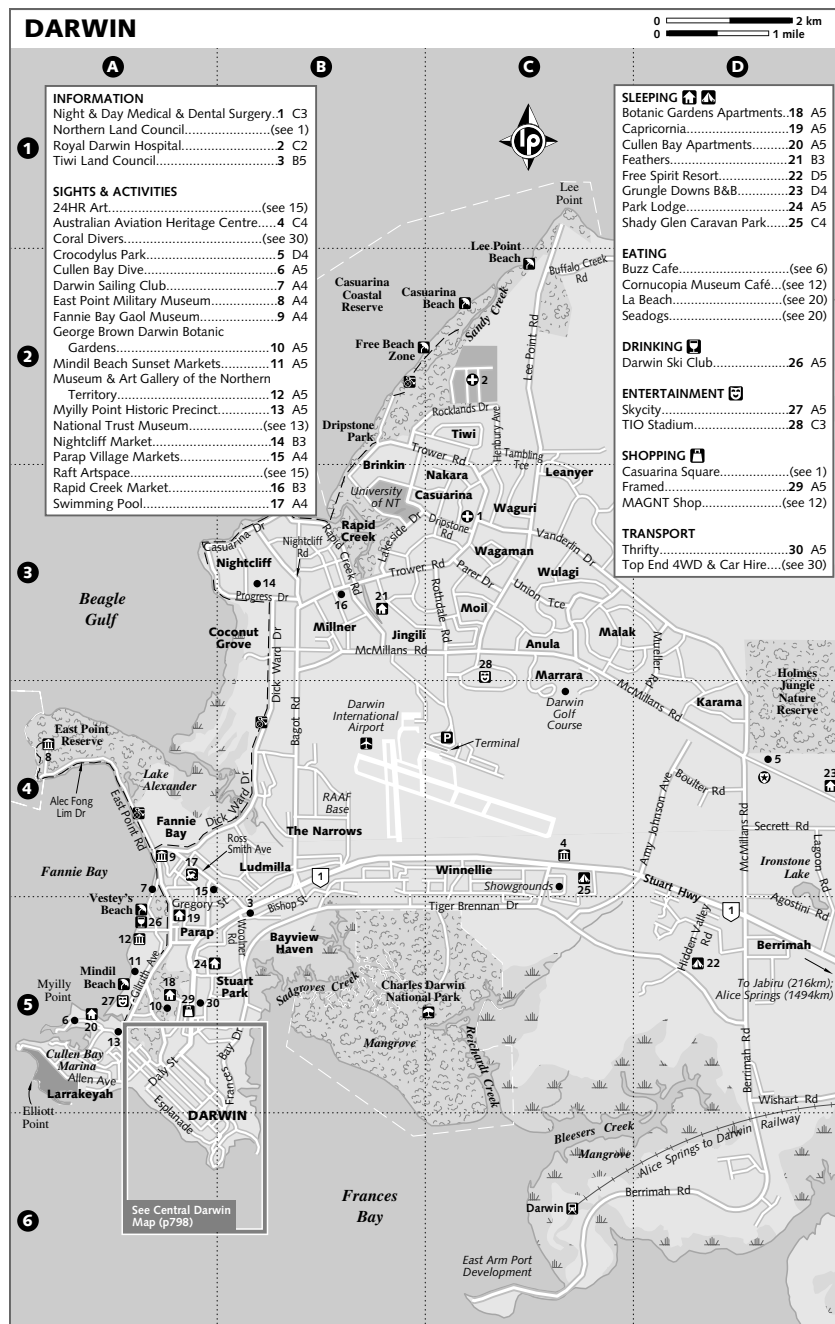
Internet Access

Internet cafés charge around \$3 to \$5 per hour. Most hostels have their own internet access. Some alternatives:

Global Gossip (Map p798; ☎ 8942 3044; 44 Mitchell St; ☎ 9am–11pm)

Northern Territory Library (Map p798; ☎ 8999 7177; Parliament House, Mitchell St; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri, 1–5pm Sat & Sun)

Saus IT (Map p798; ☎ 8941 0622; Shop 10, Paspalis Centrepoint, Smith St Mall; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–3pm Sat, 10am–3pm Sun)



Medical Services

Guardian Pharmacy (Map p798; ☎ 8981 9202; Smith St Mall; ☒ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun)

Night & Day Medical & Dental Surgery (Map p796; ☎ medical 8927 1899, dental 8927 9418; Shop 31, Casuarina Shopping Centre, Trower Rd, Casuarina; ☒ 8am-late Mon-Sat, 9am-late Sun)

Royal Darwin Hospital (Map p796; ☎ 8922 8888; Rocklands Dr, Tiwi)

Travellers Medical & Vaccination Centre (Map p798; ☎ 8981 7492; 1st fl, 43 Cavenagh St; ☒ appointments 8.30am-noon & 1.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri)

Money

There are several banks with 24-hour ATMs on or near the Smith St Mall. The following places change cash and travellers cheques.

American Express (Amex; Map p798; ☎ 13 13 98; Westpac Bank, 24 Smith St Mall)

Bureau de Change (Map p798; 69 Mitchell St; ☒ 9am-9pm)

Travelex (Map p798; ☎ 8981 6182; Shop 1a, Star Village, 32 Smith St Mall)

Post

Post office (Map p798; cnr Cavenagh & Edmunds Sts; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Poste restante service.

Tourist Information

The **visitor information centre** (Map p798; ☎ 8936 2499; www.travelnt.com/en; cnr Knuckey & Mitchell Sts; ☒ 8.30am-

5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) books tours and accommodation throughout the NT for service providers within its organisation. Top End national-park factsheets are available.

Free tourist publications include *Destination Darwin & the Top End*, which is published twice-yearly, and the *Top End Holiday Guide*, an annual guide to regional attractions.

Travel Agencies

Darwin has plenty of agencies, and most hostels and many hotels have their own tour desks. The following are reliable:

Backpackers World Travel (Map p798; ☎ 8941 5100; www.backpackersworld.com; Shop 9, 21 Knuckey St)

Flight Centre (Map p798; ☎ 8941 8002; 24 Cavenagh St)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Potentially deadly box jellyfish inhabit shallow coastal waters during the Wet (between October and May). In Darwin, though, the stinger season tends to be longer, making swimming risky year-round, hence the vinegar stations on Darwin's beaches. If stung, douse the wound with vinegar and get thee to a doctor.

SIGHTS

The Esplanade

Bicentennial Park runs the length of Darwin's waterfront and Lameroo Beach – a sheltered cove popular in the '20s when it housed the

Precinct; adult/child/family \$16/6/38; ☎ 10am-3pm). Each display is self-supporting, requiring no introduced filtration or food. Flesh-eating fish are fed, however, to prevent them from eating the other exhibits. Visitors watch an introductory film before taking a tour of the tanks; allow at least an hour. Readers recommend the **Coral Reef by Night show** (per person \$75; ☎ 7pm Wed, Fri & Sun), which includes a seafood dinner; book ahead.

AUSTRALIAN PEARLING EXHIBITION

In the same building as the aquarium, the **exhibition** (Map p798; ☎ 8999 6573; adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/17; ☎ 10am-5pm) has excellent displays on harvesting and farming pearls. It covers historic hard-hat diving and modern techniques used in today's pearling industry, which is the Territory's largest fisheries export earner.

Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

North of town, in Fannie Bay, is this superb **museum and gallery** (MAGNT; Map p796; ☎ 8999 8201; Conacher St, Fannie Bay; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun). Its good range of Top End-centric displays are well laid out in separate galleries. The Aboriginal art collection is a highlight, with carvings from the Tiwi Islands, bark paintings from Arnhem Land and dot paintings from the desert. The gallery also hosts visiting exhibitions, including the coveted National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (p804).

Considerable space in the museum is devoted to Cyclone Tracy. Experience the devastation first hand with photos, an actual recording (wind never sounded so menacing), and newsreel and radio coverage from the day.

You'll find a fleet of assorted boats in the Maritime Gallery. Collectively, they present a picture of the diverse activities in this seafaring region. Peering into a rickety Vietnamese refugee boat or a skinny canoe makes most visitors very appreciative of the ground around.

And what museum would be complete without a fusty collection of stuffed animals? Among the shelves, arranged with staged birds and animals, is Sweetheart. The cantankerous croc was killed accidentally while being removed from a popular fishing spot in 1979.

There's a good bookshop and café (Cornucopia, p808) on site. Buses 4 and 6 travel close by, or get there on the Tour Tub (p803).

Galleries

Darwin's commercial and public galleries are a fabulous (and free) way to appreciate the spirit of the Top End, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal. See something you like? Read the boxed text, p811, for tips.

24HR Art (Map p796; ☎ 8981 5368; www.24hrart.org.au; Vimy Lane, Parap Shopping Village; ☎ 10am-4pm Wed-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art.

Aboriginal Fine Arts Gallery (Map p798; ☎ 8981 1315; www.aaiia.com.au; 1st fl, cnr Mitchell & Knuckey Sts; ☎ 9am-5pm) A large display of works from the Central Desert region and Arnhem Land.

Karen Brown (Map p798; ☎ 8981 9985; www.karenbrowngallery.com; 1/22 Mitchell St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) Commercial gallery specialising in contemporary Aboriginal painting.

Maningrida (Map p798; ☎ 8981 4122; www.maningrida.com; 1/32 Mitchell St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) Retail outlet for the community arts centre located in Arnhem Land.

Raft Artspace (Map p796; ☎ 8941 0810; www.raftartspace.com.au; 2/8 Parap Pl, Parap; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sat) Commercial gallery specialising in works from northern Australia and Southeast Asia.

Tiwi Art Network (Map p798; ☎ 8941 3593; www.tiwiart.com; Shop 6, Air Raid Arcade; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) The office and showroom for three arts communities on the Tiwi Islands.

George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens

It doesn't take a botanist to appreciate the **botanic gardens** (Map p796; ☎ 8999 5535; Geranium St; admission free; ☎ 24hr) self-guided Aboriginal plant-use walk, children's educational garden and comprehensive exhibition of the Top End's naturally occurring botany. Ironically, the gardens were originally established for the planting of far-off species. Rice, tobacco, coffee and peanuts were among the original plantings, as the government gardener, Holtze, attempted to establish economically viable crops in the untamable tropics. These ample gardens are named after the former curator George Brown, who was also Darwin's mayor (1992-2002).

East Point Reserve

This spit of land north of Fannie Bay (Map p796) is an unpeopled patch of land reserved

CYCLONE TRACY

Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin at around midnight on Christmas Eve 1974. By Christmas morning, Darwin effectively ceased to exist as a city.

In six hours, Cyclone Tracy had killed 65 people and destroyed 60% of Darwin's buildings – none of which were engineered to withstand cyclone winds. Tracy took the city by surprise. Weeks earlier, Cyclone Selma had hovered around Darwin before changing course and dissipating. Most believed that Tracy would do the same. And, hey, it was Christmas. Surely nothing terrible could happen at Christmas.

Barbara James: 'Pearl and I were sitting under the piano, and the piano, of course, as soon as the walls started to disintegrate, the piano just started to topple like a thimble. And we walked down the corridor as the rest of the house blew away... We had to stop and stand on the back veranda while we watched the bedroom blow past us – all the furniture and stuff. And we just joined hands and went down the back steps.'

Since white settlement Darwin has suffered six devastating cyclones, and it sustained damage from WWII Japanese bombing. After each disaster, Darwin was rebuilt with an unwavering faith in the development of the country's north.

Throughout all disasters, the traditional owners, the Larrakia, believed that the actions of the settlers provoked the fury of Nungalingya (responsible for earthquakes, storms and cyclones). Hilda Jarman Muir, a Yanuwa woman who survived the cyclone, recalls: 'I believe some bush Aboriginal people warned the authorities that there was going to be a big storm. They could tell, from the birds.'

Darwin was rebuilt to the same precyclone plan to stringent building regulations. New buildings are clad – for protection against airborne debris – and roofs are anchored to the foundations. The codes, though, remain untested, as there's been no major storm since Tracy.

for nature. Forage along Fannie Bay Beach, picnic along its adjacent parkland, swim year-round in the jellyfish-free waters of Lake Alexander, or walk the 1.5km mangrove boardwalk (open 8am to 6pm), with signs describing Larrakia uses of mangrove plants. Watch for wallabies that emerge from the surrounding forest late afternoon for a feed.

On the point's northern side is a series of WWII gun emplacements and the small **East Point Military Museum** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 9702; adult/child/family \$10/5/28; ☎ 10am-5pm). Video footage of Darwin Harbour being bombed is surprising to most visiting Australians (for whom war is something that happens elsewhere); military buffs and historians will delight in displays of wartime weapons, photos and curios.

Fannie Bay Gaol Museum

This interesting **museum** (Map p796; ☎ 8999 8201; East Point Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-4.30pm) represents almost 100 years of solitude. Serving as Darwin's main jail from 1883 to 1979, the solid cells contain information panels that provide a window into the region's unique social history. Lepers, refugees and juveniles were among the groups of people confined here.

Myilly Point Historic Precinct

At the northwestern end of Smith St, in Burnett Pl, there are four houses that were built in the 1930s. Among the few to survive Tracy, these elevated buildings, known as Burnett houses, feature asbestos-cement louvres and casement windows, so that ventilation can be regulated according to the weather conditions. The precinct has a **National Trust museum** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 0165; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun). Indulge in a dainty high tea (\$8) on a Sunday afternoon.

Crocodylus Park

Ever wondered where cranky old crocs like Eric retire? (He was removed from Kakadu for nudging fishing boats and stalking anglers.) Or where all those skins for wallets, bags and shoes come from? This **park** (Map p796; ☎ 8922 4500; www.wmi.com.au/crocpark; McMillans Rd, Berrimah; adult/child/family \$25/13/65; ☎ 9am-5pm) houses hundreds of crocs, as well as a minizoo with big cats, monkeys and flightless birds. Tours, held at 10am, noon and 2pm, include crocodile feeding and access to the informative croc museum.

Take bus 5 from Darwin.

Australian Aviation Heritage Centre

The city's **aviation museum** (Map p796; ☎ 8947 2145; www.darwinsairwar.com.au; 557 Stuart Hwy, Winnellie; adult/child/family \$12/7/30; 🕒 9am-5pm) is crammed with aircraft and memorabilia, including a mammoth American B52 bomber and the wreck of a Japanese Zero fighter shot down in 1942. Guided one-hour tours take place at 10am and 2pm.

It's about 10km from Darwin's centre; buses 5 and 8 will get you there.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Darwin's series of off-road bike paths lead to many of the city's outer attractions. The main track runs from the northern end of Cavenagh St to Fannie Bay, Coconut Grove, Nightcliff and Casuarina. The *Making Tracks* cycle map is available from the visitors centre and online (www.darcity.nt.gov.au). Consider heading for Charles Darwin National Park, 5km southeast of the city, with a few kilometres of path around the park's wetlands, woodlands and WWII bunkers. (Take insect repellent for the midges.)

Most hostels hire out bicycles, as does **Darwin Scooter Hire** (Map p798; ☎ 0418-892 885; Mitchell St); the usual charge is \$15 to \$20 per day.

Diving

Darwin Harbour offers unique diving due to the wrecks from WWII and Cyclone Tracy, which are now encrusted with coral and support plentiful marine life. On the downside, Darwin's massive tides restrict dives to around four times each fortnight. Courses and individual trips are offered by **Cullen Bay Dive** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 3049; 66 Marina Blvd, Cullen Bay) and **Coral Divers** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 2686; www.coraldivers.com.au; Shop 3, 42 Stuart Hwy, Stuart Park).

Sailing

The **Darwin Sailing Club** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 1700; www.dwnsail.com.au; Atkins Dr, Fannie Bay) sails weekends in the Dry, with a twilight sail Wednesday. Call in to check if any crewing opportunities exist. See p804 for information on harbour cruises.

Swimming

Darwin has many beaches, but safe swimming is not possible between October and May because of box jellyfish (see p797). Popular beaches outside the stinger season

include **Mindil** and **Vestey's** on Fannie Bay (Map p796).

A stretch of the 7km **Casuarina Beach** (Map p796), beyond the northern suburbs, is a nude beach. You can swim year-round without fear of stingers in the western part of **Lake Alexander** (Map p796), an easy cycle from the centre at East Point. The main public **swimming pool** (Map p796; ☎ 8981 2662; Ross Smith Ave, Parap; adult/child \$3/1.50; 🕒 6am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) has a partly shaded 50m pool and a children's play pool.

WALKING TOUR

A walkabout in Darwin's centre will showcase revelatory markers that evidence some of the remarkable events and social groups that shape this creative, cosmopolitan city.

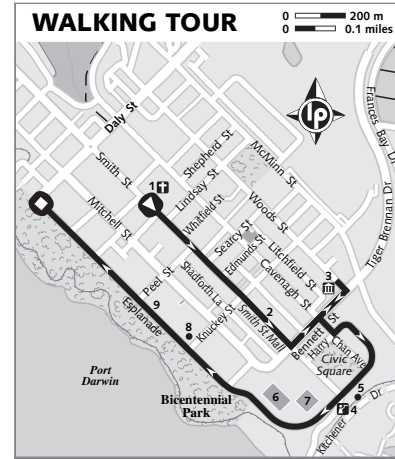
Begin at **St Mary's Cathedral (1)**, at the corner of Smith and McLachlan Sts, to see the larger than life-sized *Aboriginal Madonna*. Painted by visiting French artist Karel Kupka in the '60s, it depicts Mary and Child as Aboriginal, with a background of totemic abstract designs characteristic of the region's *rarrk* paintings.

Head southeast along Smith St to the **Smith Street Mall (2)**. You know you've reached the mall, marked as it is by seating shaded by banyan trees and decorated with tiles painted by Tiwi Islanders. Also on the concrete seating is a small tiled mural by Prince of Wales Midpul (1935-2002). Prince's highly regarded paintings interpreted ceremonial body marks. Prince was the son of King George Imabul and grandson of King Miranda - named by the early settlers in recognition of the men's status as Larrakia leaders. On the left of the Mall is the Star Village Arcade. The glassed-in 35mm movie projector hints at its past as the site of the Star Picture Theatre, which notably screened the world premiere of *Jedda* in 1955 - the first Australian film shot in colour, the first to star indigenous Australians and the first to go to the Cannes Film Festival.

Dotted along the Mall you'll see plaques engraved with historical snippets about the 'Great Hurricane' of 1897 (yes, there've been

WALK FACTS

Start St Mary's Cathedral
Finish The Esplanade
Distance 3km to 3.5km
Duration one to 1.5 hours



more than a few cyclones), pearly and Chinese settlement.

This is a nice segue to the **Chinese Museum & Chung Wah Temple (3)** (☎ 8941 0898; Woods St; admission by donation; 🕒 10am-2pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct), which explores Chinese settlement in the Top End. The sacred tree in the grounds is rumoured to be a direct descendant from the Bodhi tree under which Buddha sat when he attained enlightenment.

Southwest across the Esplanade, perched on the edge of the escarpment, is the **Survivors' Lookout (4)**, with WWII photos and views out over the harbour (twice the size of Sydney's). From here steps lead down to Kitchener Dr and the **WWII Oil-Storage Tunnels (5)** (p799). Heading west along the Esplanade, you'll pass **Government House (6)**; although damaged by every event since its genesis in 1877, it's in remarkably good nick.

Cross over to the **Supreme Court (7)**. Hearings are open to the public, but of more general interest is the foyer's magnificent floor mural, based on the *Milky Way Dreaming* painting by Nora Napaltjari Nelson, which hangs on the 4th floor - from where there's a terrific bird's-eye view down to the mural.

Perhaps pop into the **Speaker's Corner Cafe** (☎ 8981 4833; meals \$15; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), in Parliament House's Speaker's Corner courtyard, for a rant over a coffee with the Territory's polities. Then, continue north along the Esplanade for a look in at **Lyons Cottage (8)** (cnr Knuckey St; admission free; 🕒 10am-4.40pm). Built in 1925, it's Darwin's first stone residence, formerly

housing executives from the British Australian Telegraph Company (which laid a submarine cable between Australia and Java). Now it's a museum displaying Darwin in photos from the early days.

Continue along the **Esplanade (9)** (p797) and its bevy of sights, or head east along Knuckey St back to the centre of the city.

DARWIN FOR CHILDREN

Darwin is an outdoor city, so it's very child-friendly. Families love the festival atmosphere, food and performances at the city's **markets** (see the boxed text, p810), and to grease-up on fish and chips at **Stokes Hill Wharf** (p807), or picnic at **East Point Reserve** (p800). The **botanic gardens** (p800) features a great playground designed to teach kids about the evolution of plants.

Many of Darwin's attractions inspire kids' enthusiasm: they can feed fish at **Aquascene** (p799); interact with displays at the **Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory** (p800); get up close to all manner of wild animals at the **Territory Wildlife Park** (p816); squeeze the life out of your hand at **Crocodylus Park** (p801); and stick their faces into the viewing bubbles adorning the main tank at **Indo-Pacific Marine** (p799).

TOURS

Tours to all over the Territory depart from Darwin, though they're less frequent during the Wet. Basically, if you can imagine a trip, it generally exists. For inspiration or information, the visitor information centre and most places to stay can help. Where possible, contact the operator directly. A sample of tour types follows.

Around Darwin

Visiting the Tiwi Islands, 80km north of Darwin, is a fascinating stopover in a unique physical and social environment. See p812 for a list of tour operators to take you there.

Tour Tub (☎ 8985 6322; www.tourtub.com.au; tickets \$30; 🕒 9am-4pm) Hop-on, hop-off service circuiting the city; calls at stops along the Esplanade (includes entry to the oil-storage tunnels), the botanic gardens, the Museum & Art Gallery, Parap, East Point Reserve and Fannie Bay Gaol. Departs hourly from the Knuckey St end of the Mall.

Unique Indigenous Land Tours (☎ 8928 0022; www.uniqueindigitours.com.au; half-day adult/child \$88/66) Aboriginal-owned and operated; explores bush foods and medicines in Charles Darwin National Park and visits Karawa Park arts centre.

Wildlife Spectacular (☎ 1300 556 100; www.aatkinings.com; full day \$150) Takes in Territory Wildlife Park, Darwin Crocodile Farm, a jumping-croc cruise along the Adelaide River and the Fogg Dam Nature Reserve.

HARBOUR CRUISES

Most harbour cruises operate from the Cullen Bay marina, last two to three hours, depart daily (except during the Wet), and include nibbles and a glass of wine for around \$50.

Anniki (☎ 8941 4000; www.australianharbourcruises.com.au) Three-hour sunset cruises on this historic pearling lugger depart at 5pm (adult/child \$50/30).

City of Darwin Cruises (☎ 0417-855 829; www.darwincruises.com) This outfit's 20-seat catamarans do two-hour sunset cruises (\$55 per adult), plus a range of longer options; cruises depart from Stokes Hill Wharf.

Darwin Harbour Cruises (☎ 8942 3131; www.darwinharbourcruises.com.au; adult/child \$80/53) The three-hour sunset dinner cruise aboard the *Tumlaran* (seating up to 45) departs from Stokes Hill Wharf.

Territory Trips

Adventure Tours Australia (☎ 1300 654 604, 8309 2277; www.adventuretours.com.au) Backpacker tours throughout the Territory, ranging from one to 10 days.

Aussie Adventure (☎ 1300 721 365; www.aussieadventure.com.au) Small-group tours (up to 25) take in Kakadu (including the three-day Aboriginal-run Hawk Dreaming camp), the Tiwi Islands, Alice Springs and Uluru.

Goanna Eco Tours (☎ 1800 003 880, 8927 2781; www.goannaecotours.com.au) Runs a one-day tour (adult/child \$110/95) that includes a jumping-croc cruise, Litchfield National Park and lunch.

Kakadu Dreams (☎ 1800 813 269; www.kakadudreams.com.au) Backpacker bus tours to Litchfield (from \$80, including jumping-croc cruise \$100) and Kakadu from two to five days.

Sacred Earth Safaris (☎ 8981 8420; www.sacredearthsafaris.com.au) Multiday camping safaris (from two to 13 days) covering Kakadu, Litchfield and Nitmiluk National Parks, plus the remote Cobourg Peninsula.

Venture North (☎ 8927 5500; www.northernaustralia.com) Five-day camping tours to Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula.

Wilderness 4WD Adventures (☎ 1800 808 288, 8941 2161; www.wildernessadventures.com.au; 3/5 days \$465/765; ☑ year-round) Small-group 4WD camping tours into Kakadu, visiting some out-of-the-way spots; all meals included.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

July and August go off in Darwin, when most of the city's festivities kick off.

Beer Can Regatta (www.beercanregatta.org.au) A cheerfully odd event in mid-July featuring races for boats made entirely from beer cans, off Mindil Beach.

Darwin Cup Carnival (www.darwincup.com.au) The running of the Darwin Cup in July or August is the highlight of this racing carnival.

Darwin Fringe Festival (www.darwinfringe.com.au) Local performing- and visual-arts festival in June or July.

Festival of Darwin (www.darwinfestival.org.au) A superb arts festival, with a program highlighting Darwin's multicultural mix, taking in all art forms and staged mostly at outdoor venues over two weeks. Ticketed and free events.

National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) The country's premier indigenous art prize entrants go on show annually (usually from August to October) at the MAGNT.

Royal Darwin Show (www.darwinshow.com.au) This agricultural show, beginning on the fourth Friday of July, features all manner of rides and competitions; one for the kids.

WordStorm (www.ntwriters.com.au) The annual NT Writers' Festival event, in May, includes song, storytelling, visual-art collaboration, theatre, performance poetry, history, biography, poetry and fiction.

SLEEPING

Accommodation prices are a fickle thing in seasonal Darwin, with no absolute consensus on the calendar for high, low, shoulder and peak times – event days attract premium rates at some places. Our prices are indicative of the most you'd expect to pay between May and September (the official high season). Prices usually drop by 40% from December to March. Overall, prices are generally a little steeper in Darwin than elsewhere in the Territory.

Backpacker hostels fluctuate the least, and prices differ little between places – concentrated as they are in a small stretch of bar-heavy Mitchell St. They also offer the best value for cheap longer-term accommodation; we indicate which places offer weekly rates. Many places pick up from the bus or train stations or the airport if prearranged, and most turn the air-con on only at night.

Hotels are strange beasts. Does anyone ever actually pay rack rates? (Anyone paying with their own credit card, that is, rather than the corporate card.) Hotels do insist on quoting inflated prices; never underestimate the potential to find excellent rates on web-booking sites (see p992 or www.ntstandby.com.au) or by phoning directly for a stand-by rate.

Budget

Cavenagh (Map p798; ☎ 1300 851 198, 8941 6383; www.thecavenagh.com; 12 Cavenagh St; dm 12-share \$18, 4-share with bathroom \$27, d \$130; ☎ ☑ ☑) Casual and convenient, the Cavenagh combines a motel, a bar, a backpackers, a bottle shop and a Mediterranean restaurant. Rooms had a recent overhaul, including the backpacker quarters and neighbouring motel building. Motel rooms have rampaging colours and super-sized TVs and are well insulated from the hubbub of the downstairs bar. It all converges onto a popular pool area: great for exhibitionists (and pervs).

Frogshollow Backpackers (Map p798; ☎ 1800 068 686, 8941 2600; www.frogs-hollow.com.au; 27 Lindsay St; dm from \$22, d from \$60; ☎ ☑ ☑) This relaxed hostel has a peaceful pocket of parkland opposite, and is located a mere amble away from the CBD action. Otherwise quiet, it has a loud lime-and-purple paint scheme, which creates a diversion from the ageing fixtures in the communal kitchen and lounge. Rooms are small but sufficient; besides, there's reason to bask by the pool or in one of two bubble tubs. Long-term rates available.

Banyan View Lodge (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8644; www.banyanviewlodge.com.au; 119 Mitchell St; dm \$25, s \$50-55, d & tw \$65-70; ☎ ☑ ☑) Run by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Banyan's a generous joint, welcoming all travellers and funnelling profits into community projects. Dorms sleep four (female-only dorms available), and all rooms are fan cooled, with the option of air-con (which costs extra). Though located on the main drag, it's away from the fray and enveloped by tropical palms and flowering plants.

Youth Shack (Map p798; ☎ 1300 793 302, 8923 9790; info@youthshack.com.au; 69 Mitchell St; dm \$25, d with/without bathroom \$80/56; ☎ ☑ ☑) The only thing bigger than the exuberant greeting at reception is the hostel itself. Almost 100 modest rooms (dorms sleep three to four) run off multiple corridors stacked over three levels. Communal areas include the heavy-duty kitchen (easily handling the procession of two-minute-noodle chefs), an open-sided dining area and a stark rooftop pool. The complex's vast concrete surfaces recently received a fresh layer of paint or floor-covering, making this a tidy choice in the thick of the Mitchell St maelstrom.

Melaleuca on Mitchell (Map p798; ☎ 8941 7800; www.momdarwin.com; 52 Mitchell St; dm \$30, d with/without bathroom \$105/85; ☎ ☑ ☑) It's a perpetual pool

party on this hostel's sensational deck, complete with island bar and spa. Squeals of delight and splashing sounds invite envy from the main-street thrum and lend the place a whiff of exclusivity. Rooms are modern-austere but comfortable and secure. Dorms sleep from four to six, there's a ladies-only level and long-term rates are available in the low season.

Park Lodge (Map p796; ☎ 8981 5692; www.parklodge.net.au; 42 Coronation Dr, Stuart Park; s/d from \$50/60; ☎ ☑ ☑) Ah, the serenity of the suburbs. An easy cycle away from the city, this peaceful retreat is shrouded in garden. The simple rooms are furnished with practicalities, including sink, kettle and small fridge. There's a communal kitchen, a spacious lounge area and a sparkling pool. Monthly rates also available.

Ashton Lodge (Map p798; ☎ 8941 4866; 48 Mitchell St; r \$55, with air-con \$65, with bathroom, air-con & TV \$90; ☎ ☑ ☑) New in '06, this little tower of budget rooms is pushed up behind the Wisdom bar and restaurant (p809) in the city's hub of hospitality. And wisdom says you get what you pay for. The cheapest of the Ashton's cheap rooms are windowless hatches, while more exxy rooms have more space, light and 'things'. Cooking in the guests' kitchen will help to save your pennies, which you can then feed into the washing machines for your laundry.

Midrange

Along with the following places, you might consider a motel-style unit or self-contained cabin offered in a caravan park (see p807) – good for the kids to run around the large fenced grounds or to regroup after weeks sleeping in the van.

Barramundi Lodge (Map p798; ☎ 8941 6466; www.barramundilodge.com.au; 4 Gardens Rd, The Gardens; s/d \$45/85; ☎ ☑ ☑) Within lost-ball distance from the golf course, and between the city, botanic gardens and Mindil Beach, this spick-and-span hotel makes a good catch, inside and out. Cutting edge it ain't (what's wrong with paisley anyway?); rather, it gains an edge for value rooms with TV, kitchenette and shared bathroom.

Capricornia (Map p796; ☎ 8981 4055; 3 Kellaway St, Fannie Bay; d \$90; ☎ ☑ ☑) Ask if there's a copy of the hotel's namesake lying around – an Australian classic by Xavier Herbert. This low-rise motel is like a well-thumbed book: it's been around a while and has seen better days, but it's still good. Rooms are tired but

tidy and come with a fridge. It's located about 5km from town, handy to the NT Museum & Art Gallery.

Value Inn (Map p798; ☎ 8981 4733; www.valueinn.com.au; 50 Mitchell St; d from \$95; 🏠 🚿 🚿) The Value Inn guest reckons you'd be mad to fork out a fortune for a hotel room when you'll hardly be in it. Much better to spend the cash while out and about: day-tripping or trawling all the bars and restaurants on either side of the motel. Conditions are cramped; luggage usually occupies the last patch of floor space.

Grungle Downs B&B (Map p796; ☎ 8947 4440; www.grungledowns.com.au; 945 McMillans Rd, Knuckey Lagoon; d from \$110, cottage from \$200; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Love Grungle Downs, love its resident dogs – two strapping ridgebacks with acres of space on which to gambol about with other creatures like birds and lizards. This rural retreat, 13km from town, has four rooms in the main house that share facilities, plus a gorgeous self-contained cottage. Splash about in the generous pool or loll in the lounge.

Asti (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8200; 7 Packard Pl; d from \$120; 🏠 🚿) There's nothing distinctive about this stolid block of motel units; it's just your run-of-the-mill motel, with modest rooms stocked with the usual mod-cons. Staying here puts you a 10-minute walk from town.

Quest Darwin (Map p798; ☎ 8982 3100; www.questdarwin.com.au; 55 Cavenagh St; studio \$130; 🏠) Sure it's one of a chain, but Quest has self-contained apartments that are consistently good value. It's like having your own handsome city pad, but better, cos someone cleans it for you daily. There are rooms to suit everyone, including families and people with limited mobility.

Steeles at Larrakeyah (Map p798; ☎ 8941 3636; www.steeles-at-larrakeyah.com.au; 4 Zealandia Cres, Larrakeyah; d from \$140, studio \$165; 🏠 🚿 🚿) There's little better than having friends to stay with on holiday – inside tips and all that. The next best thing, then, would be to stay at this B&B, where the owners are long-time Territorians with tips and tales. Steeles' two rooms and self-contained studio are home-style comfy and have their own separate entrances. It's a 10-minute waterfront stroll from the city.

Frontier Hotel (Map p798; ☎ 8981 5333; www.frontierdarwin.com.au; 3 Buffalo Ct; d \$140-185; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Put your head down as you head up to the room, lest the tentacles of gambling grab you from the downstairs sports-themed bar and gaming room at this high-rise hotel. Rooms here are early-20th-century corporate stylish – anonymous

and no-fuss. Some, though, have a magnificent outlook.

Darwin Central Hotel (Map p798; ☎ 8944 9000; www.darwincentral.com.au; 21 Knuckey St; d from \$145; 🏠 🚿) About as cutting-edge as Darwin gets, Darwin Central is a smart international high-rise hotel. Rooms range from studio-style through to family and self-contained. Clean lines, feature walls in courageous colours and bathrooms with baths are common characteristics of the contemporary rooms here. Though central to everything, it has its own dining options and plunge pool.

Cullen Bay Apartments (Map p796; ☎ 8981 7999; www.cullenbayresortsdarwin.com.au; 26 Marina Blvd, Cullen Bay; r from \$150; 🏠 🚿) These high-rise serviced apartments are the best of a string of similar complexes fronting pretty Cullen Bay. A couple of kilometres from the city centre, Cullen Bay has its own little sophisticated scene, all of it focusing on the water – much like the more coveted rooms here.

Palms City Resorts (Map p798; ☎ 1800 829 211, 8982 9200; www.citypalms.com; 64 The Esplanade; motel r from \$155, villa from \$170; 🏠 🚿) Thick patches of tropical gardens provide welcome padding for this resort's 90-odd rooms. Accommodation comes in two styles: motel (in standard and superior sizes) and duplex villas – all with balconies and barbies. It's a cheerful, comfortable place excellently positioned opposite the waterfront.

Top End

Botanic Gardens Apartments (Map p796; ☎ 8946 0300; www.botanicgardens.com.au; 17 Geranium St, Stuart Park; motel d \$150, apt \$200-270; 🏠 🚿) The lush tropical gardens fanning up around spacious apartments are outdone only by the neighbour, the city's botanic gardens. The motel rooms are serviceable, but the apartments are sensational, with private balconies, full kitchen and laundry. Cool off in one of two pools or entertain the little ones in the on-site playground.

Crowne Plaza Darwin (Map p798; ☎ 1800 891 107, 8982 0000; www.crowneplaza.com; 32 Mitchell St; d from \$180; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Darwin's only five-star hotel is a slick operation. It delivers all you'd expect from a luxury hotel: marble bathrooms, handsome design, and beds big enough to build on. On-site eateries are an option, as is 24-hour room service. A block back from the waterfront, the 12-storey tower sees over the top of neighbouring buildings, with views to the sea.

our pick Feathers (Map p796; ☎ 8985 2144; www.feathersanctuary.com; 49a Freshwater Rd, Jingili; cabins \$275; 🏠) Brilliantly designed cabins with sophisticated furnishings and outdoor bathrooms, set in a landscaped field with corolling birds: this opulent B&B is a rare bird indeed. A 10-minute drive from town, the natural setting – with waterhole and wandering birds – could have you believing you're a million miles away.

Camping & Caravanning

Free Spirit Resort (Map p796; ☎ 8947 1422; www.freespiritresorts.com.au/hvtp; 15 Hidden Valley Rd, Berrimah; unpowered/power sites \$25/35, bunkhouse \$48, cabins \$106-160; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Pull in to pitch or park among this place's plush palms and lush lawns. Or move in to one of the cabins, ranging from basic to deluxe. Budgeters can bed down in the bunkhouse, a small, basic room sharing the park's amenities. Located 10 minutes' drive from town.

Shady Glen Caravan Park (Map p796; ☎ 8984 3330; www.shadyglen.com.au; cnr Farrel Cres & Stuart Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$26/28, r \$60, cabins \$80-140; 🏠 🚿) This leafy park has excellent facilities, including a camp kitchen and a licensed shop. Regulars prop here for a week or more; weekly rates available. It's a 10-minute drive from downtown Darwin.

EATING

There's cheap nosh in the Transit Centre arcade (Map p798) and at the bustling markets, and most of the pubs (p808) serve meat-and-three-veg type meals. The standard and variety of eateries in Darwin top that of anywhere else in the NT. There are plenty of options around Mitchell St and the city centre, or head down to the Wharf Precinct or Cullen Bay for water views.

City Centre & Wharf Precinct

Stokes Hill Wharf has an arcade with a bunch of fish and chippers: join a queue and find a seat on the pier with your beeper, which will flash and beep when your order's ready.

Relish (Map p798; ☎ 8941 1900; 35 Cavenagh St; meals \$5-10; 🍳 breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) This excellent little local café, located off the main drag, serves super coffees and food with flair. Among the artwork, gig posters and things hanging from ceiling frames is the blackboard menu. On it you might find sandwich grills and wraps or pesto eggs and frittata. Regulars equally run

in for the morning's coffee or spend hours slouched at a corner table with art-school buddies.

Roma Bar (Map p798; ☎ 8981 6729; 30 Cavenagh St; meals \$5-13; 🍳 breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri, lunch Sat & Sun) You've got to love a café with a breakfast menu that gives equal billing to pancakes, smoked-salmon croissants, dhal, and straight-up cereal (\$2.50) and toast (\$3). Lunch won't be pinned down either, flitting between seafood and veg tempura, pies, and parcels of beef rending. It's a sleek-looking modern place that promotes local arts happenings.

Vietnam Saigon Star (Map p798; ☎ 8981 1420; 60 Smith St; mains \$11-18; 🍳 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) The Saigon Star is a typical Vietnamese eatery with a typically extensive menu, including a dozen sauces multiplied by beef, pork, chicken and seafood. Vegetarians are catered for, and you can get away with eating lunch for a tenner.

Tim's Surf'n'Turf (Map p798; ☎ 8981 1024; 10 Litchfield St; dishes lunch \$10, dinner \$15-18; 🍳 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily) Never mind the dodgy signature dish – steak topped with creamy prawns (nature never intended cows and prawns to meet) – this casual side-street place is a local fave. Office workers loosen the top button and settle in to the cheerful courtyard for bargain \$10 lunches: salads, sandwiches and schnitzels. Dinners include NT pin-ups: croc and barra, plus pastas and parmas.

Go Sushi (Map p798; ☎ 8941 1008; 5/28 Mitchell St; mains \$12-25; 🍳 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Week-day lunchtime sees the city's office workers climb aboard the sushi train. It's yum cha Japanese style: super-fresh sushi, handrolls and sashimi (\$3.50 to \$5.50) delivered automatically via conveyor belt. Plucked plates as they stream past or order a full meal from the mains menu, which stays loyal to familiar standard dishes.

our pick Nirvana (Map p798; ☎ 8981 2025; 6 Dashwood Cres; mains \$15-18; 🍳 dinner) It looks like a fortress from outside (no windows and a drawbridge-like door; enter via Smith St). Inside, though, is a den of dining rooms staffed by friendly young things delivering bloody good Thai, Malaysian and Indian dishes. Booth seating out back is more intimate, and recommended should you not happen to like the band (usually jazz and blues) that might be playing; see p809 for more on the music. (Tip: Tuesday is 'jam night', when any old Joe can get up and have a go.)

Hanuman (Map p798; ☎ 8941 3500; 28 Mitchell St; mains \$17-26; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner daily) Best to dress up a little for a meal at what's widely regarded as Darwin's best restaurant. You don't need to go to too much fuss, though: everyone looks gorgeous in this barely-there lighting. Thai-inspired dishes arrive in an aromatic whirl of coconut milk, lemongrass, lime, chilli and tamarind. And it's all complemented by an internationally flavoured drinks list.

Moorish Cafe (Map p798; ☎ 8981 0010; 37 Knuckey St; mains \$20-30; 🍷 Mon-Sat) This refined café-restaurant is a favourite with lunching ladies, who probably come for the special (three tapas plus a glass of sangria for \$20). Mains include tagines, a sumac-crusting barramundi dish and a Mediterranean vegetable stack. Service is spot-on and coffee is good. Evening entertainment includes belly dancing (Saturday), salsa dancing (Thursday) and flamenco guitar (Tuesday).

Crustaceans (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8658; Stokes Hill Wharf; mains \$25-55; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) If you're a sucker for sunset views and seafood, then this tourist-oriented place may woo you. At the end of Stokes Hill Wharf, this hundred-odd-seater restaurant serves whole fish, lobster, prawns and bugs, all conservatively prepared so as not to scare the visitors. Barra might be grilled and served with mash and steamed veg, or prawns might come in a creamy garlic sauce.

Cullen Bay & Fannie Bay

Cullen Bay's eateries centre on the marina, full of yachts bobbing listlessly below million-dollar apartments.

Cornucopia Museum Café (Map p796; ☎ 8981 1002; Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Conacher St, Fannie Bay; mains \$12-20; 🍷 brunch & lunch) Appended to the museum and gallery, this café makes for a good stop while you're in the 'hood. Maybe share a trio of dips, commenting on how good a dip would be, while overlooking Vestey's Beach. Try a salad or pasta special, remarking on how special that collection of artwork you've just walked around is. It's also good for a late breakfast, for the children and for meaty mains.

Seadogs (Map p796; ☎ 8941 2877; Marina Blvd, Cullen Bay; mains \$12-20; 🍷 dinner Tue-Sun) This old dog does few new tricks, focusing on comfortable Italian: pizza, pasta, risotto, parmigiana, scallopini and...what's this? A much-loved interloper: schnitzel. Families and groups of

friends add to the hubbub in the courtyard, and it's possible to do takeaway (in case you want to take your Italian to the water's edge).

Buzz Cafe (Map p796; ☎ 8941 1141; The Slipway, Cullen Bay; mains \$17-30) There's certainly a buzz about this café, and it's usually associated with the men's toilets (which have the ladies regularly sneaking in for a look). Being located on the water keeps Buzz busy – it's in its 10th year. And its extensive drinks and food menus (best described as upmarket café fare) have plenty of safe options for those I-just-want-a-steak-and-beer moments and for the children, as well as more adventurous dishes for a big night out.

La Beach (Map p796; ☎ 8941 7400; Shop 6, 51 Marina Blvd, Cullen Bay; mains \$26-35; 🍷 dinner daily) Looking for a seafood splurge? It's La Beach's speciality, as is adding a French accent to Top End water lovers. Expect pearl-meat starters, plus barra, buffalo and croc in an array of creamy sauces. And choose from a stellar selection of Australian and New Zealand wines – and champagne, of course – to toast that magnificent over-the-water sunset.

Self-Catering

Not a market day? Then try the major supermarkets: **Coles** (Map p798; ☎ 8941 8055; Mitchell Centre, 55-59 Mitchell St; 🍷 24hr) and **Woolworths** (Map p798; ☎ 8941 6111; cnr Cavenagh & Whitfield Sts; 🍷 to midnight).

DRINKING

Shoulder to shoulder along Mitchell St, most places try to differentiate themselves from the next with live music, food, big tellies – anything. It's easy to shuffle between them to see which you best like the look of until around 1am on Friday and Saturday night. Beer would have to be Darwin's signature drink, distinguished perhaps by the volume consumed.

Tap (Map p798; ☎ 8981 5521; 58 Mitchell St; meals from \$15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Opened in '06, the Tap is not sceney, just scenic: open to the Mitchell St parade with mostly outdoor seating – some beneath the boughs of an enormous old melaleuca tree. Its techno-lit bar is well stocked with booze, and off to the side you can order greasies like fish and chips and burgers till 10pm.

Victoria Hotel (The Vic; Map p798; ☎ 8981 4011; 27 Smith St Mall) If the walls could talk at this old-

timer, they'd regale you with decades' worth of drinking stories swirling around in its two stories. Hordes stop into this old stone hotel, including bubbly twentysomethings occupying the balcony and upstairs pool tables, busloads of tour groups and locals who like the company.

Darwin Ski Club (Map p796; ☎ 8981 6630; Conacher St, Fannie Bay) Most locals get through the working day with the knowledge that, before nightfall, they'll be standing beachside on a beautiful big patch of lawn watching the sun set on another Darwin day. Join the club – really: visitors gain a free membership to this waterski club on arrival. The ante is upped at weekends, usually with live music. With no neighbours, who's complaining?

Shenanigans (Map p798; ☎ 8981 2100; 69 Mitchell St; mains from \$12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Step out of the heat of the street into a warmth of a different kind – the kind that comes from being in familiar, hospitable surrounds. You may not have been to this one, but we've all been to one Irish-themed pub before. So prop yourself at a barrel and consider guzzling a Guinness or tucking into pub grub at this always-heaving joint.

Duck's Nuts (Map p798; ☎ 8942 2122; 76 Mitchell St; meals \$7-20) Commanding a corner of the main street, Duck's Nuts is as confident as it is slick. The shiny, curvaceous décor creates an ambient space, leaving plenty of space for the night-outers to show off their tans and compare travel tales. Its pared-back surrounds also allow Duck's to slip seamlessly between breakfast bar, serving coffee and pastries, to bustling bistro and lounge-like vodka bar.

Fox'n'Fiddle (Map p798; ☎ 8942 1844; 85 Mitchell St) Hands up those who think shouting at a shellfish counts as entertainment? Then hurry on down for the 6pm hermit-crab races, which are usually followed by bands most nights, bingo at 'lucky seven' o'clock on Tuesday, or come on Monday for something even more trivial: quiz night.

Wisdom (Map p798; ☎ 8941 4866; 48 Mitchell St; meals \$9-25) One of the new breed of bars emerging along the main drag, this sparkling place has street-side seating (more outside than in), and offers all-day meals. The kitchen fires up early for breakfast, and continues through to lunch and dinner. On the site of former dentists' rooms (hence the name), remember to brush after your meal.

ENTERTAINMENT

Find the latest listings in the Friday edition of the *Northern Territory News*, or check What's On Darwin (www.whatsondarwin.com).

Nightclubs

Discovery (Map p798; ☎ 8942 3300; 89 Mitchell St; admission \$5-10; 🍷 9pm-late Fri & Sat) Join the queue of youngsters for this huge casual club and get ready to take your cue from the DJ driving the mixing decks.

Throb (Map p798; ☎ 8942 3435; 64 Smith St; admission usually \$10; 🍷 from 11pm Fri & Sat) Darwin's only camp and carefree club, Throb can get flirty. Ladies, gents and transgenders come out of the woodwork and out of themselves, especially on one of the many dress-up nights.

Live Music

August and September jumps with the **NT Music Festival** (www.musicnt.com.au), an annual event staging live, original music from around the Territory.

Happy Yess (Map p798; www.happyyess.com; 5 Bennett St; 🍷 Thu-Sat) Excellent: original local music, poetry, film and performance.

Lost Arc (Map p798; ☎ 8942 3300; 89 Mitchell St) Cover bands Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday attract an older crew.

Nirvana (Map p798; ☎ 8981 2025; 6 Dashwood Cres) Great original local and touring bands. Enter via Smith St.

Fox'n'Fiddle (Map p798; ☎ 8942 1844; 85 Mitchell St) Pub-rock bands Thursday to Sunday.

Vic (Map p798; ☎ 8981 4011; 27 Smith St Mall) Cover and original bands regularly; check gig guides.

Other Venues

Brown's Mart (Map p798; ☎ 8981 5522; www.brownsmart.com.au; Harry Chan Ave) Look in to see who or what is currently in residence at this multiform venue-for-hire. It's often at the centre of local events, so you could luck into anything from a short-film night, stand-up or a concert.

Darwin Entertainment Centre (Map p798; ☎ box office 8980 3333; www.darwinentertainment.com.au; 93 Mitchell St; 🍷 box office 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri & from 1hr before performances) Comedy, theatre, musicals, gala fashion events and major concerts all take to the stages inside this newly refurbished performing-arts complex.

Skycity (Map p796; ☎ 8943 8888; www.skycitydarwin.com.au; Gilruth Ave) Darwin's flashy casino has all-night table games and hungry gaming machines, song and dance at Sweethearts bar, and a flush of restaurants and bars for you to spend your winnings or cheer up in if the chips are down.

Cinemas

Deckchair Cinema (Map p798; ☎ 8981 0700; www.deckchaircinema.com; Jervois Rd, Wharf Precinct; single feature adult/child \$13/6, double feature \$20/9; 📺 Apr–Nov) Recline in a deckchair, catch whiffs of frangipani and watch an A-grade movie under the stars. Bring in some dinner, snacks or soft drink; alcohol is available to purchase at the bar, as are sweets and snacks. Jervois Rd is off Kitchener Dr.

Darwin City Cinemas (Map p798; ☎ 8981 3111; 76 Mitchell St; adult/child \$14/11) It's the air-con as much as the blockbuster films that appeals here. You could stay cool for the day and make your way around the five screens, subsisting on popcorn and ice cream.

Sport

The **Northern Territory Football League** (www.aflnt.com.au) is the local Australian Rules league, loved for its pace and the players' agility and guts. Go see a game; the season is during the Wet, and venues vary, but games are mostly played at TIO Stadium (Map p796) in the northern suburb of Marrara.

The other footballs, rugby (www.ntru.rugby.net.com.au) and soccer (www.footballnt.com.au), also have matches at Marrara Sporting Precinct.

SHOPPING

You don't have to walk far along the Mall to find a souvenir shop selling Territory-themed titbits: jewellery, pottery, tea towels, T-shirts and cane-toad coin purses (most of it made in China). Also in oversupply are outlets selling Aboriginal arts and crafts (see p800 and the boxed text, opposite). Darwin's fabulous markets (see below) sell unique handcrafted items, like seed-pod hats, kites and original photos. Books also make decent souvenirs; see p795 for booksellers.

Framed (Map p796; ☎ 8981 2994; www.framed.com.au; 55 Stuart Hwy, Stuart Park; 🕒 9am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 11am–

4pm Sun) An enormous collection of contemporary arts and crafts from around Australia.

Casuarina Square (Map p796; ☎ 8920 2345; 247 Trower Rd, Casuarina) This shopping complex has 200 mainstream retail outlets, plus cinemas and a foodcourt. Buses 4 and 5 travel the 20 minutes north of Darwin.

Mitchell Centre (Map p798; ☎ 8981 5688; 55–59 Mitchell St) A midsize complex sporting, among other things, a pharmacy, a phone shop and Flight Centre.

NT General Store (Map p798; ☎ 8981 8242; 42 Cavenagh St) This store has shelves piled high with camping and bushwalking gear, as well as a range of maps.

MAGNT Shop (Map p796; ☎ 8999 8201; Conacher St, Fannie Bay; 🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun) The gallery and museum shop has a range of educative books and locally produced souvenirs for adults and children.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

See p793 for international airlines operating from Darwin's airport. Direct daily domestic services are operated by the following airlines. Smaller routes are flown by local operators; ask your travel agent.

Airmorth (☎ 1800 627 474; www.airmorth.com.au) Links Darwin with Broome, Kununurra and the Gove Peninsula.

Jetstar (☎ 13 15 38; www.jetstar.com.au) To Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne.

Qantas (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) To Adelaide, Alice Springs, Brisbane, Cairns, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney.

Virgin Blue (☎ 13 67 89; www.virginblue.com.au) To Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

Bus

You can reach/leave Darwin by bus on three routes: the Queensland route through Three Ways to Mt Isa; the WA route from Broome and Kununurra; or straight down the Track (the Stuart Hwy) to Alice Springs. **Greyhound**

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

As the sun descends to the horizon, residents and tourists descend on **Mindil Beach Sunset Markets** (Map p796; www.mindil.com.au; Mindil Beach; 🕒 5–10pm Thu & 4–9pm Sun May–Oct). There are buskers and bands, sizzling woks and steaming waffle irons, and streams of stalls stocking handmade goodies and offering hand-delivered services like Thai massage.

Similar markets, on a smaller scale, operate at **Parap Village** (Map p796; ☎ 8942 0805; Parap Rd, Parap; 🕒 8am–2pm Sat), **Nightcliff** (Map p796; Progress Dr, Nightcliff; 🕒 8am–2pm Sun) and **Rapid Creek** (Map p796; Rapid Creek Rd, Rapid Creek; 🕒 5–10pm Fri, 8am–2pm Sun).

BUYING ABORIGINAL ART

Taking home a piece of Aboriginal art can create an enduring connection with Australia. For Aboriginal artists, painting is an important cultural and economic enterprise. An authentic piece will come with a certificate indicating the artist's name, language group and community, the work's title, its story, and when it was made. You may also check that the selling gallery is associated with a regulatory body, such as the **Australian Commercial Galleries Association** (www.acga.com.au) or **Art Trade** (www.arttrade.com.au). Buying direct from Aboriginal arts centres (see www.ankaaa.org.au or www.aboriginalart.org) is generally cheaper and guarantees authenticity. Where possible, buy direct from arts centres or their city outlets; this ensures authenticity, and you can be certain that the money goes directly to the artists and their community; you also get to view the works in the context in which they were created.

You can check that a souvenir is legitimate by reading the packaging. It should attribute the piece to an Aboriginal artist and his/her origin.

Australia (Map p798; ☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au; Transit Centre, 69 Mitchell St; 🕒 information counter 6am–3.45pm Mon–Fri, to 1.30pm Sat & Sun) runs daily services via Katherine on all of these routes.

Backpacker-type buses offer good alternative transport, as they stop at many sights along the way. **Desert Venturer** (☎ 1300 858 099; www.desertventurer.com.au; per person \$520) makes four-day trips between Darwin and Cairns year-round.

Car & Campervan

If you're planning to buy or sell a car, you can go to a dealership (see Motor – Used in the *Yellow Pages*), check noticeboards at hostels and internet cafés, or try the **Traveler's Car Market** (Map p798; ☎ 0418-600 830; Peel St; 🕒 8am–4pm), where you play dealer, sitting with your vehicle.

Darwin has numerous car-rental operators; most offer a range of vehicles, including 4WDs:

Avis (Map p798; ☎ 8981 9922; www.avis.com.au; 89 Smith St) Also at the airport.

Budget (Map p798; ☎ 8981 9800; www.budget.com.au; cnr Daly St & Doctors Gully Rd)

Europcar (Map p798; ☎ 8941 0300; www.europcar.com.au; 77 Cavenagh St)

Hertz (Map p798; ☎ 8941 0944; www.hertz.com.au; cnr Smith & Daly Sts)

Thrifty (Map p796; ☎ 8924 0000; www.rentacar.com.au; 64 Stuart Hwy, Stuart Park)

Top End 4WD & Car Hire (Map p796; ☎ 8941 2922; www.topend4wd.com.au; 1 Westralia St, Stuart Park)

Hiring a campervan for a week or two of touring can be worthwhile when you consider that cooking facilities and accommodation are included.

Backpacker Campervans (☎ 1800 670 232; www.backpackercampervans.com) Unlimited kilometres on a variety of vehicles, including a 4WD option.

Britz (☎ 8981 2081; www.britz.com) Huge range of limitless-kilometre vehicles.

Kea (☎ 1800 252 555; www.keacampers.com) A fleet of fully self-contained vehicles (including bathrooms) as well as a 4WD camper.

Wicked (☎ 1800 246 869; www.wickedcampers.com.au) Unlimited kilometres in budget vans (with CD player and bed linen); there's an esky instead of a fridge.

Train

Bookings for the *Ghan* are recommended and can be made through **Trainways** (☎ 13 21 47; www.gsr.com.au); see p794 for a timetable.

Darwin's train station (Map p796) is 15km east of the centre, down Berrimah Rd. A shuttle bus meets all services; it departs from the Transit Centre (Map p798) and costs \$10.

GETTING AROUND

Darwin is flat, relatively compact and blessed with bike paths. Cycling to outlying sights is easy; see p802 for bike-hire places.

To/From the Airport

Darwin International Airport (Map p796; ☎ 8920 1805) is 12km northeast of the city centre. The **airport shuttle bus** (☎ 8981 5066) will pick you up or drop you off almost anywhere in the city centre for \$9.50/17 one way/return. A taxi from the airport to the city centre is around \$25.

Car

For driving around Darwin, small cars are cheap enough (around \$35 per day) and there's plenty of parking on Darwin's inner-city streets. Most companies offer only 100km

free (per day). Some companies do deals that give you enough mileage to get to Kakadu and back with three or four days' rental. There are also plenty of 4WD vehicles for rent, but you usually have to book ahead.

See p811 for car-rental agencies in Darwin.

Public Transport

Darwinbus (☎ 8924 7666; City Bus Interchange, Harry Chan Ave; ♿ information counter 8am-12.45pm & 1.45-5pm Mon-Fri) runs a comprehensive service from its small depot.

You can travel for three hours on any bus for adult/child \$2/50c (under-fives free). Buy tickets on the bus.

Most buses claim 'easy access' in that they can lower their steps to the curb. Bus 4 (to Fannie Bay, Nightcliff, Rapid Creek and Casuarina) and bus 6 (to Fannie Bay, Parap and Stuart Park) are useful for getting to Mindil Beach, the Museum & Art Gallery, Fannie Bay Gaol Museum and East Point. Buses 5 and 8 travel along the Stuart Hwy to Berimah.

The **Tour Tub** (☎ 8985 6322; www.tourtub.com) minibus tours Darwin's sights throughout the day and you can hop on and off along the route (see p803).

Taxi

There's a taxi rank outside Woolworths on Cavenagh St. If you can't flag one down around town, phone **Radio Taxis** (☎ 13 10 08) or **Yellow Cabs** (☎ 13 19 24).

AROUND DARWIN

There are loads of great targets for Darwin day-trippers, either travelling independently or by joining a tour (see p803), or for those on an extended itinerary looking for an interesting side trip on the way in or out of town.

HOWARD SPRINGS NATURE PARK

The main attraction at this sizable **nature park** (admission free; ♿ 8am-8pm) is its spring-fed freshwater pool. Safe for swimming year-round, with a separate toddlers' area, and just 20 minutes from town, it usually generates enough excitement to stir the surrounding trees. Some quiet can be found in the forest that fringes the 1.8km walking track.

From Darwin, turn left 24km down the Stuart Hwy, beyond Palmerston, and continue for 11km.

The neat **Howard Springs Holiday Park** (☎ 08-8983 1169; www.big4howardsprings.com.au; 170 Whitewood Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/26, budget r \$45, cabins \$90-100; ♿ ♿) rivals van parks closer to Darwin for value.

DARWIN CROCODILE FARM

For the much-admired residents at the **crocodile farm** (☎ 08-8988 1450; www.crocfarm.com.au; Stuart Hwy; adult/child \$10/5.50; ♿ 9am-4pm, tours 2pm), having great skin is a definite shortcoming. At any one time, about 30,000 crocodiles are harvested here, primarily for their pelts, which are made into bags, boots and belts. The tourist area of the farm (blessedly separate from the abattoir) displays some 5m-long males (fed for the 2pm tour), smaller captives and a mini-museum.

TIWI ISLANDS

The Tiwi Islands – Bathurst and Melville – are two large, flat islands about 80km north of Darwin and are home to the Tiwi Aboriginal people. The islands' main settlement is Nguui (new-yoo) in the southeast of Bathurst Island. The settlement was founded in 1911 as a Catholic mission, and Christianity is still an important aspect of Tiwi life – almost as much so as football, the other 'religion'. Ninety of the islands' 2600 people play: the highest participation level for football in Australia. It's a highly sociable game credited with alleviating some of the islands' social problems that contribute to an average life expectancy of only 48 years. The Tiwi are renowned for playing a lightning game, with at least a dozen of the country's top-level players hailing from here. The game came to the islands in 1941, introduced by Brother Pye (who celebrated his 100th birthday in December 2006). The Tiwi Grand Final (in March; see the boxed text, p791) is one of the Territory's most anticipated events. In 2006 an all-Tiwi team (the Bombers) joined the NT Football League.

Isolated from mainland developments until relatively recently, Tiwi culture retains several unique traits. Well known are the *pukumani* (taboo) burial poles: ironwood trunks carved and painted with symbolic and mythological figures that are ceremonially placed around graves. The Tiwi produce distinguished art for sale, mainly bark painting, textile screen-printing and pottery, using traditional designs and motifs. Visitors can buy directly from the arts centres.

Travellers rave about trips to the Tiwis, which are only permitted via a tour.

Fly-in tours by **Tiwi Tours** (☎ 1300 721 365, 08-8922 2777; www.aussieadventure.com.au; 1 day \$370, 2 days \$645) are conducted by Tiwi guides. They'll talk and walk you through the exhibits and stories represented at the Patakijiyali Museum, a dance performance, lunch, a *pukumani* burial site, a church with an inimitable Tiwi-decorated altar and the Nguui arts centre – Tiwi Design. Overnight tours also take in the island's coast and wilderness, camping outdoors and eating bush tucker.

Tiwi Islands Adventure (☎ 08-8941 1991; www.seacat.com.au/ArafuraPearl.htm; day tours \$235-255) is a ferry service that hooks up with the one (and only) land-tour operator, as with Tiwi Tours (sights covered are the same). The ferry ride takes two hours each way (so there's less time on the island – you see the burial site from the van window), but there's a bountiful lunch spread and morning tea, and a feature film is screened on the upper deck. Tours depart Cullen Bay ferry terminal at 8am between March and November.

One for art enthusiasts, **Tiwi Art Tours** (☎ 08-8941 3593; www.tiwiart.com; day tours \$500) runs limited tours (roughly one a month) that include

three arts centres: Tiwi Design on Bathurst Island, and Munupi and Jilamara on Melville; the return flight is included.

ARNHEM HIGHWAY

The Arnhem Hwy branches off towards Kakadu 33km southeast of Darwin. About 10km along the road, in the small agricultural hub of Humpty Doo, the **Humpty Doo Hotel** (☎ 08-8988 1372; cnr Zamia Rd & Arnhem Hwy; mains \$12-20; ♿ lunch & dinner), with its bricked bar and hoseable concrete floor, cares little if you stop here or not, and therein lies its appeal. It's yer dinkum Aussie pub – no neat-casuals, please.

About 15km beyond Humpty Doo is the turn-off to the stunning **Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve**. Bring your binoculars for a closer look at the varieties of water birds that call these significant wetlands home. Three nature walks (from 2km to 3.6km) lead around the rim and along the dam wall. Lotus lilies and bird numbers are richest between December and July.

Window on the Wetlands Visitor Centre (☎ 08-8988 8188; ♿ 8am-7pm), 3km past Fogg Dam, has interpretive displays introducing the nature of the vast (and rare) wetland areas all around

COMMUNITY ART CENTRES IN THE TIWIS *Tristan Mungatopi*

Melville and Bathurst Islands, the Tiwi Islands, being separated from the mainland, have distinct and unique forms of art, lifestyle and culture. The islands are a short flight from Darwin and are serviced by two to three flights daily. Despite the Tiwi Islands proximity to the mainland, until European settlement in the early twentieth century, there was little contact with other Aboriginal tribes on the mainland. The *pukumani* (burial) poles are unique to the Tiwi Islands. The three main settlements on the Tiwi Islands are Pirlangimpi and Milikapiti on Melville Island and Nguui on Bathurst Island. The Tiwi Islanders have retained much of our language which is spoken within the communities in normal day-to-day communication.

Aboriginal art has achieved popularity throughout the world. Tiwi art is celebrated by critics and collectors internationally. A centre for the various forms of art exists in each community. Guides and artists are available to explain their work and interact with travellers at each centre and displayed works are available for sale.

Munupi at Pirlangimpi has grown steadily over the last ten years with a variety of mediums. Shirt printing, dressmaking and painting have been carried out for many years. Currently, pottery, carving, printing on fabric, lino-print and etchings are developing an individual style. Art lovers and travellers alike love the rich vibrant colours.

Jilamara at Milikapiti has achieved nationwide acclaim for its painting and printed fabrics. Its artists are well represented in art galleries, museums and private collections throughout the world.

Tiwi Designs, at Nguui, is the largest enterprise, which has grown from a workshop under the Roman Catholic presbytery to significant and extensive studios and workshops. Prints in all media, carving, pottery and painting have much to offer those discovering the art form of Tiwi culture.

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you. The upstairs viewing platform, with telescopes, reveals flat river floodplains in every direction.

The Arnhem Hwy traverses five of the Top End's eight rivers whose floodplains join to create the unique wetlands environment for which the region is famous. Before crossing the muddy Adelaide River, consider cruising along it on a jumping-croc cruise.

These cruises involve feeding wild animals (discouraged by environment groups). The whole thing is a bit of a circus, but seeing an enormous croc rise from the water is startling; so, too, are the birds that swoop and dive around the boat to catch their morsels midair.

About 2km past Window on the Wetlands, along an unsealed road, is the **Jumping Crocodile Cruise** (☎ 08-8988 4547; www.jumpingcrocodile.com.au; adult/family \$30/70, incl transport from Darwin \$65; 🚗 tours 9am, 11am, 1pm & 3pm). At the river crossing is the bigger operation, the **Adelaide River Queen** (☎ 08-8988 8144; www.jumpingcrocodilecruises.com.au; adult/child \$36/20; 🚗 cruises 9am, 11am & 3pm Nov-Mar, plus 1.30pm Apr-Oct). Nature-based croc- and bird-watching cruises (without intervention) operate from Mary River (see right) and at Kakadu (19km away).

MARY RIVER REGION

The locals won't like us for letting on about this area's stunning **national park** – often overlooked for its world-famous neighbour, Kakadu. The Mary River and its wetlands teem with birds, barramundi and crocodiles, but rarely tourists. Boat ramps, camp sites, viewing platforms and tours assist access to the unique waterways and wilderness here. Conventional vehicles can access the park during the Dry.

North of the highway, the partly sealed Point Stuart Rd leads to a number of riverside viewing platforms and to **Shady Camp**. Grassy camp sites under banyan trees here are beautiful, but come prepared to ward off armies of mosquitoes. The causeway barrage stopping freshwater flowing into saltwater here creates the ideal feeding environment for barramundi, and the ideal fishing environment for those inclined. Half-day **boat hire** (☎ 08-8978 8914) available from here starts at \$90.

A few kilometres before the Mary River Crossing is Bird Billabong, with a 1.4km (1.5-hour loop) woodlands walk. There's a small picnic area at Mary River Crossing (beside the highway, near Bark Hut Inn).

Sleeping & Eating

Basic public **camping grounds** (adult/child \$3.30/1.65) are at Couzens Lookout and Shady Camp.

Bark Hut Inn (☎ 08-8978 8988; Arnhem Hwy, Ananburroo; unpowered/power sites \$16/22, dongas s/d from \$45/60; 🚗 🚚) This landmark roadhouse has seen the surrounding wetlands change from hunting grounds to sanctuaries over the decades. Its décor, of boar and buffalo heads, recalls the good ole days. Tour groups stop here to refuel (mains \$15 to \$20) and look at the mini-menagerie. There are better places to stay than the shipping-containersque dongas.

Mary River Park (☎ 1800 788 844, 08-8978 8877; www.maryriverpark.com.au; Mary River Crossing; unpowered/power sites \$18/25, dm from \$30, cabins from \$120; 🚗 🚚) Among the wildlife-watching fraternity this bush retreat is legendary. And punters with a passing interest may convert after joining one of the expertly guided tours, including croc-spotting (adult/child \$38/25) and a sunset stargazing dinner cruise (\$65).

COEXISTING WITH CROCODILES

The rotting pig's leg hanging low over brackish water on the path to Kakadu's Jim Jim Falls was actually a good sign. No pig's leg meant we had a croc in our midst. For all but those of us on the way to a swim, the prospect of seeing a saltwater crocodile in the wild is an exhilarating one. And an integral Top End experience.

For crocodiles and people to coexist, and to satisfy travellers' expectations of safely watching them in the wild, calculated management is required. Animals considered a threat to people are relocated: to unpopulated areas or to one of the Territory's five crocodile farms. Each year up to 250 animals are removed from Top End waterways, including Darwin Harbour. 'They can't all be removed', says Garry Lindner, Kakadu's crocodile-management officer. 'So we have to replicate the Aboriginal precontact predator pressure, to teach them people are not to be messed with. If you get crocs that are offensive but not bad enough to remove, you've got to reinsert the fear of man by harpooning and releasing them.'

Lindner also surveys croc numbers in Kakadu, guesstimating that there are around 6000. Elsewhere, croc numbers are regulated, with eggs (up to 50 in one nest) collected from the wild, then incubated at a farm (where at age three they're made into fashion items). In areas where there's a lot of human activity, Parks officers set baits (like pig's legs), buoys and traps. Heed warning signs and ask locally before swimming or paddling in any Top End waterway.

All accommodation is comfortable, from a quiet patch of grass for your tent to a cosy cabin, with continental breakfast included. Lunch and dinner are also available (mains \$15 to \$22).

Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge (☎ 08-8978 8914; www.pointstuart.com.au; unpowered/power sites \$20/24, dm \$25, d from \$70; 🏠 🚻 🚿) Access this old station home where the buffalo once roamed via a 1.5km road off Point Stuart Rd, 5km north of Mistake Billabong. This lodge also caters to groups, and there are grass-cushioned camp sites, comfy cabins and a handsome bar-bistro (mains \$18 to \$24). Two-hour wetland cruises (\$35) run on demand.

Mary River Houseboats (☎ 08-8978 8925; Corroboree Billabong; 6-/8-berth houseboats for 2 days \$530/600) For groups (or a family) of four or more, there's little better than your own little house on the Mary: cruising, croc-spotting, fishing... A \$300 bond is required, and houseboats are only hired out during the Dry. The turn-off to the houseboat berth is 1km east of Corroboree Park, then it's 20km along an unsealed road.

STUART HIGHWAY TO LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

Territory Wildlife Park & Berry Springs Nature Park

All of the Territory's unique ecosystems are represented at the **Territory Wildlife Park** (☎ 08-8988 7200; www.territorywildlifepark.com.au; Cox Peninsula Rd; adult/child \$20/10; 🕒 8.30am-6pm, last admission 4pm). You'd have to travel far, wide and long to see

a fraction of the species on show in the faithfully recreated habitats here. Walk among kangaroos and emus in the semi-arid enclosure, dip beneath a billabong at the aquarium and gain night vision in the nocturnal house. Enclosures are well labelled, identifying each species, so you can tell your woollybutts from your fat-tailed dunnarts. You can see threatened species, such as the bilby and the northern quoll, and threatening species like spiders and snakes. There's the chance to feed stingray and barra, plus there's a birds-of-prey presentation (10am and 3pm daily).

Close by is **Berry Springs Nature Park** (admission free; 🕒 8am-6.30pm), a beautiful series of spring-fed swimming holes shaded by paperbarks and pandanus palms and serenaded by abundant birds. Facilities include a kiosk, a picnic area with BBQs, toilets, changing sheds and showers.

The turn-off to Berry Springs is 48km down the Track from Darwin; it's then 10km to the park.

Batchelor

☎ 08 / pop 730

The government once gave Batchelor's blocks of land away to encourage settlement in the little town. That was before they discovered uranium and the nearby Rum Jungle mine developed, which closed in '71 after almost 20 years. These days, Batchelor exists as a service centre for neighbouring Litchfield, and is home to the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous

Education. Art students' work goes on show at the community-based **Coomalie Cultural Centre** (☎ 8939 7404; cnr Awillia Rd & Nurdina St; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 8am-2.30pm Sat Apr-Sep) biannually, as does the work of visiting artists-in-residence. A tourist information van stocked with fliers, including national-parks info, is usually parked opposite the General Store.

SLEEPING & EATING

Banyan Tree Caravan & Tourist Park (☎ 8976 0330; www.banyan-tree.com.au; Litchfield Park Rd; unpowered/power sites \$19/23, budget s/d from \$40/45, cabin s/d from \$90/95; 🏠 🚻 🚿) If something goes bump in the night it's likely just a mango falling from the stand of trees and banana palms populating this lush park. The deep-green grass and foliage attracts more than holidaymakers: bring a torch to spot the owl that hunts out of the barn-sized camp kitchen. Accommodation options include value budget rooms and self-contained cabins, and the small restaurant can cook up a hearty plateful (meals \$13 to \$18; open for lunch and dinner).

Litchfield Tourist & Van Park (☎ 8976 0070; www.litchfieldtouristpark.com.au; Lot 2916 Litchfield Rd; unpowered/power sites \$18/24, cabins \$75-95) This converted van park has many of the features it had in its previous incarnation as a golf course: lots of green, birdies (real ones) and a great set-up. The cubbylike cabins on stilts come with kitchen and the option of a private bathroom; ask for the secluded one on the hill. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are available (meals \$12 to \$20).

Batchelor Butterfly & Bird Farm (☎ 8976 0199; www.butterflyfarm.net; 8 Meneling Rd; d from \$70, mains \$12-18; 🏠 🚻 🚿) Flit from a tour of the butterfly enclosure (adult/child \$7/3.50) to the peaceful lunch room for a homemade meal chosen from a variety of veg-friendly options. Ultra-cosy guest rooms share a bathroom, a fully equipped kitchen and a lounge.

Batchelor General Store (☎ 8976 0045; Nurdina St; 🕒 8am-6.30pm) This well-stocked store also serves as the town's post office, video library and lunch spot (open 7am to 3pm Monday to Friday and 9.30am to 1pm at weekends) – with homemade pies and made-to-order sandwiches.

LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

This magnificent park is something to write home about. Four waterfalls drop over a wide sandstone plateau, spilling into idyllic waterholes surrounded by patches of rainforest.

People come for the sensational swimming, bushwalking and camping – and, boy, *do* they come on weekends.

The two routes to Litchfield (115km south of Darwin) from the Stuart Hwy join up and loop through the park. The southern access road via Batchelor is all sealed, while the northern access route, off the Cox Peninsula Rd, is partly unsealed and may be impassable in the Wet.

About 17km after entering the park from Batchelor you come to what look like tombstones. Only the very tip of these remarkable **magnetic termite mounds** is used to bury the dead; at the bottom are the king and queen, with workers in between. Metal objects won't fly from your person to these world-exclusive magnetic mounds; rather, less dramatically, they're perfectly aligned north to south, designed to regulate the temperature, so the termites' thin skins can cope with the extreme seasonal changes.

Another 6km further along is the turn-off to **Buley Rockhole** (2km), where water cascades through a series of rockpools big enough to lodge your bod in for a pleasant hour or so. This turn-off also takes you to **Florence Falls** (5km), which is accessed by a 15-minute walking trail leading to a deep, beautiful pool surrounded by monsoon forest. There's a walking track (45 minutes, 1.6km) between the two places that follows Florence Creek.

About 18km beyond the turn-off to Florence Falls is the turn-off to the spectacular **Tolmer Falls**, which is for looking only. A 1.5km loop track (45 minutes) offers beautiful views of the valley.

It's a further 7km along the main road to the turn-off for Litchfield's most popular attraction, **Wangi Falls**, 1.5km up a side road. The Wangi (*wong-guy*) Falls flow year-round, filling an enormous swimming hole bordered by rainforest and roosting fruit bats. Bring swimming goggles to spot local fish. It's immensely popular with families during the Dry, but water levels in the Wet can make it unsafe; look for signposted warnings.

The park offers plenty of bushwalking, including the **Tabletop Track** (39km), a circuit of the park that takes three to five days to complete depending on how many side tracks you follow. You can access the track at Florence Falls, Wangi Falls and Walker Creek. Overnight walkers should register (call ☎ 1300 650 730).

Sleeping & Eating

There is excellent public **camping** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/15.40) within the park. Grounds with toilets and fireplaces are located at Florence Falls, Florence Creek (4WD required), Buley Rockhole, Wangi Falls (better for vans than tents) and Tjaynera Falls (Sandy Creek; 4WD required). There are more basic **camp sites** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) at Surprise Creek Falls (free) and Walker Creek, with its own swimming hole, where camping involves bushwalking to a series of sublime, isolated riverside sites.

Litchfield Campground & Monsoon Cafe (☎ 08-8978 2077; www.monsooncafe.com.au; Litchfield Park Rd; unpowered sites \$12, permanent tent d \$50) Pitch your own on a shaded patch or bed down in one of the on-site safari-style tents. Bush camping options are available here, just north of the Wangi Falls turn-off. The licensed Monsoon Cafe (meals \$8 to \$20) serves nine types of burger, as well as salads and milkshakes.

Litchfield Safari Camp (☎ 08-8978 2185; www.litchfieldsafaricamp.com.au; Litchfield Park Rd; unpowered/powered sites \$18/28; tent 'cabin' \$95; 🚻) Near Litchfield Campground, this is a good place to unhitch the van.

The Wangi Falls **kiosk** (meals \$3.50-9; 🕒 8am-6pm May-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Apr) can sort you out for ice cream and snacks.

ADELAIDE RIVER TO KATHERINE

Adelaide River

☎ 08 / pop 180

Blink and you'll miss this tiny town, once an important point on the Overland Telegraph Line and supply depot during WWII, lying 111km south of Darwin. The town's War Cemetery is an important legacy: a sea of white crosses commemorates those killed in the 1942-43 air raids on northern Australia.

A beautiful property 3km from town, **Mt Bundy Station** (☎ 8976 7009; www.mtbundy.com.au; Haynes Rd; unpowered/powered sites \$16/18, s \$25, d & tw \$50-150; 🚻 🚿) is threaded with walking trails and saturated with peace and quiet. The spotless bunkhouse has a fully equipped kitchen, and the cosy rooms (mostly twin share) are fantastic value. Giddy-up on an hour-long horse ride (\$30).

The local pub, **Adelaide River Inn** (☎ 8976 7047; Memorial Tce; unpowered/powered sites \$12/17, cabins \$70; 🚻), is hiding behind the roadhouse. It has comfortable rooms and serves mountainous mains, such as burgers and barra and chips

from the pleasant bistro with outdoor dining (meals \$10 to \$22). Charlie the water buffalo, who starred in *Crocodile Dundee*, now occupies a very different watering hole, standing (stuffed) atop the bar.

Daly River

☎ 08 / pop 620

This small settlement, 109km west of the Stuart Hwy, centres on its river, which runs with barramundi being chased by fisher folk or saltwater crocs.

Much of the population belongs to the Nauiya Nanbiyu Aboriginal community. Regional artists exhibit at the **Merrepn Arts Centre** (☎ 8978 2533; www.merrepnarts.com; Nauiya community; 🕒 10am-4.30pm Mon-Fri Dry, 8am-noon Wet), reached via a turn-off to the west a few kilometres before town; no permit is required. There's music and dance, and sport and bush tucker displays during the arts festival, on the first weekend in June.

The camping ground at **Daly River Mango Farm** (☎ 8978 2464; www.mangofarm.com.au; unpowered/powered sites \$24/26, budget r \$100, cabins \$120-150; 🚻 🚿), on the Daly River 7km from the crossing, is shaded by a magnificent grove of 90-year-old mango trees. Other accommodation includes self-contained cabins (consider the stone one right on the river). Fishing advice, equipment (including boats) and day tours (\$280) are also available. The bistro (mains \$15 to \$25) is open Tuesday, Friday and Saturday.

Also on the banks of the river, **Woolianna** (☎ 8978 2478; www.woolianna.com.au; Woolianna Rd; unpowered/powered sites \$22/26, unit d per person \$170; 🕒 Apr-Dec; 🚻 🚿) has a beautiful, shady green lawn for camping, beds in multi-bedroom self-contained units, and lots of mango trees. It's 15km down a dirt road that's signposted just before town.

When you're sick of fish, eat something from the small, meat-heavy menu in the open-air courtyard at **Daly River Roadside Inn** (☎ 8978 2418; Daly River Rd; mains \$14-25; 🕒 lunch & dinner), or quench your thirst on a hot day at the tiny, pool table-equipped front bar.

Pine Creek

☎ 08 / pop 470

It'll take some imagination to conjure images of sleepy Pine Creek as the furiously productive site it was during the gold rush in the 1870s. To help, though, some old timber and corrugated-iron buildings survive from that

BONZA BACK ROADS: WATERS OF WAGIMAN COUNTRY

Just south of Adelaide River, Dorat Rd (the old Stuart Hwy) does a scenic, little-trafficked loop south through the traditional territory of the Wagiman before rejoining the main road after 52km. It's beautiful country, endowed with thermal springs, gorges and waterfalls.

Robin Falls tumbles through a monsoon-forested gorge, though you'll have to look hard during the Dry, when it dwindles to a trickle. The falls are a short, rocky scramble 15km along Dorat Rd. To reach the searing waters of **Tjuwalyin (Douglas) Hot Springs Park**, which are watched over by Wagiman women, turn south from Dorat Rd onto Ooloo Rd and continue for 35km. The springs are a further 7km down a dirt track (usually OK for 2WD vehicles). The park includes a section of the Douglas River that burbles up with several hot springs – a bit hot for a dip at 40°C to 60°C; head 200m up or downstream where the waters merge. The **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/15.40) has toilets, BBQs and drinking water.

Butterfly Gorge Nature Park is 17km further along a 4WD track accessible only in the Dry. Swim across the main hole and through the narrowest of gorges to the upper pools; clamber across the crinkled pink rock walls to discover one of the Territory's more peaceful and pristine places. As the name suggests, butterflies sometimes gather in the gorge.

time. The Kakadu Hwy branches off the Stuart Hwy at Pine Creek, connecting it to Cooinda and Jabiru.

Dating from 1888, the **railway station** (off Main Tce; admission free; 🕒 daily) has local-history displays, including photos and information panels on the old Darwin-Pine Creek railway (1889-1976), and a lovingly restored steam engine. **Pine Creek Museum** (Railway Pde; adult/child \$2.20/free; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), housed in the 1889 repeater station, is dedicated to recalling the area's mining and Chinese population, displaying fossils, old bottles and relics.

About 3km south of Pine Creek on the Stuart Hwy is the turn-off to pretty **Umbrawarra Gorge Nature Park**, with a safe swimming hole and a little beach. It's 22km southwest along a dirt road (OK for 2WDs in the Dry; often impassable in the Wet). There's a basic **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70); bring plenty of water.

The **Pine Creek Hotel-Motel** (☎ 8976 1288; 40 Moule St; d \$85; 🚻) has standard motel rooms at its rear. A lengthy list of dinners and some great-value lunches are served in the dining room (meals \$8 to \$24).

The beautiful B&B **Bonrook Country Stay** (☎ 8976 1232; www.bonrook.com; Stuart Hwy; d \$60-120; 🚻 🚿) is just 8km south of town on a wild-horse sanctuary that also attracts birds and wallabies. The immaculate rooms are simple and TV-free, and the grounds are lush.

Tentatively modelled on an American diner, with red-vinyl booths and Hollywood memorabilia adorning the walls, **Mayse's** (☎ 8976 1241; 40 Moule St; meals \$9-18; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) is named

after local publican Mayse Young, who spent 50 years behind the bar. Meals range from all-day breakfasts to pizzas.

KAKADU & ARNHAM LAND

KAKADU NATIONAL PARK

You've probably absorbed many of the images and information that abounds about this NT icon. You would have heard that it's Australia's largest national park, sheltering a variety of habitats and wildlife, including saltwater crocodiles. And it's well known that the park is World Heritage listed. But experiencing the extraordinary natural and human histories kept at Kakadu defies anything you've read (including this). Even old-hand nature buffs will find for the first time seed pods, insects and animals unique to the area. The 2000 million-year-old rocks tell 20,000-year-old stories: of the existence of long-extinct giant kangaroos and thylacines. There are hundreds of square kilometres of park, so allow at least three days to discover a smidgen.

The park is joint managed by Parks Australia and the traditional owners, the Bininj in the north and Mungguy in the south, who have lived in Kakadu for at least 50,000 years. There are several settlements in the park, and much of Kakadu is Aboriginal land, leased to the government for its current use. About one-third of the park rangers are Aboriginal people.

Enclosed by the park, but not part of it, are several tracts of land designated for other purposes, principally uranium mining at Ranger (see the boxed text, p823).

Geography

The circuitous Arnhem Land escarpment, a dramatic 30m- to 200m-high sandstone cliff line, forms the natural boundary between Kakadu and Arnhem Land and winds 500km through eastern and southeastern Kakadu.

Creeks cut across the rocky plateau and, in the wet season, tumble off it as thundering waterfalls. They then flow across the lowlands to swamp Kakadu's vast northern flood plains. From west to east, the rivers are the Wildman, West Alligator, South Alligator and East Alligator (the latter forming the eastern boundary of the park). Such is the difference between the Dry and the Wet that areas that are perfectly dry in September will be submerged in 3m of water come December. As the waters recede, some loops of wet-season watercourses become cut off but don't dry up. These are billabongs, which are often carpeted with water lilies and attract water birds.

The coastal zone has long stretches of mangrove swamp, important for halting erosion and as a breeding ground for bird and marine life. The southern part of the park is dry lowlands with open grassland and eucalypts. Pockets of monsoon rainforest crop up throughout the park.

Over 80% of Kakadu is savanna woodland. It has more than 1000 plant species, many still used by Aboriginal people for food and medicinal purposes.

Climate

The average maximum temperature in Kakadu is 34°C, year-round. The Dry season is roughly April to September, and the Wet, when most of Kakadu's average rainfall of 130mm falls, is from October to March. The transition from Dry to Wet transforms the landscape. As wetlands and waterfalls swell, unsealed roads become impassable, cutting off some highlights like Jim Jim Falls.

Local Aboriginal people recognise six seasons in the annual cycle:

Gunumeleng (October to December) The build-up to the Wet. Humidity increases, the temperature rises to 35°C or more and mosquitoes reach near-plague proportions. By November the thunderstorms have started, billabongs are replenished, and water birds and fish disperse.

Gudjewg (January to March) The Wet proper continues, with violent thunderstorms, and flora and fauna thriving in the hot, moist conditions.

Banggereng (April) Storms (known as 'knock 'em down' storms) flatten the spear grass, which during the course of the Wet has shot up to 2m high.

Yegge (May to June) The season of mists, when the air starts to dry out. The wetlands and waterfalls still have a lot of water and most of the tracks are open.

Wurrngeng (June to mid-August) The most comfortable time, weather-wise, is the late Dry, beginning in July. This is when wildlife, especially birds, gather in large numbers around shrinking billabongs, and when most tourists visit.

Gurrung (mid-August to September) The end of the Dry and the beginning of another cycle.

Wildlife

Kakadu has about 25 frog species, 51 fresh-water fish species, 60 types of mammals, 120 types of reptile, 280 bird species (one-third of native Australian species) and at least 10,000 insect types. This list is frequently added to, and some rarer species are unique to the park.

Only a small fraction of these creatures reveal themselves to visitors, since many are nocturnal or are few in number. So take advantage of walks led by park rangers (mainly in the Dry) or nature-based tours. Cruises of the East Alligator River and Yellow Water Billabong enable you to see the water life.

BIRDS

Kakadu's abundant water birds and their beautiful wetland homes are a highlight of Kakadu. This is one of the chief refuges in Australia for several species, including the magpie goose, green pygmy goose and Burdekin duck. Other fine water birds include pelicans, darters and the jabiru, with its distinctive red legs and long beak. Herons, egrets, cormorants, wedge-tailed eagles, whistling kites and black kites are common. The open woodlands harbour rainbow bee-eaters, kingfishers and the endangered bustard. Majestic white-breasted sea eagles are seen near inland waterways. At night, you might hear barking owls calling – they sound just like dogs. The raucous call of the spectacular red-tailed black cockatoo is often considered the signature sound of Kakadu.

At Mamukala, 8km east of the South Alligator River on the Arnhem Hwy, is a wonderful observation building, plus bird-watching hides and a 3km walking track.



FISH

You can't miss the silver barramundi, which creates a distinctive swirl near the water's surface. It can grow to over 1m in length and changes sex from male to female at the age of five or six years.

MAMMALS

Several types of kangaroo and wallaby inhabit the park; the shy black wallaroo is unique to Kakadu and Arnhem Land. You may see a sugar glider in wooded areas in the daytime. Kakadu has 26 bat species, four of them endangered.

REPTILES

Twin Falls and Jim Jim Falls have resident freshwater crocodiles, which have narrow snouts and rarely exceed 3m, while the dangerous saltwater variety is found throughout the park.

Kakadu's other reptiles include the frilled lizard and five freshwater turtle species, of which the most common is the northern snake-necked turtle. Kakadu has many snakes, though most are nocturnal and rarely encountered. The striking Oenpelli python was first seen by non-Aboriginal people in 1976. The odd file snake lives in billabongs. They have square heads, tiny eyes and saggy skin covered in tiny rough scales (hence 'file'). They move very slowly (and not at all on land), eating only once a month and breeding once every decade.

Rock Art

Kakadu is one of Australia's richest, most accessible repositories of rock art. There are more than 5000 sites, which date from 20,000 years to 10 years ago. The vast majority of these sites are off-limits or inaccessible, but two of the finest collections are the galleries at Ubirr and Nourlangie.

The rock paintings have been classified into three roughly defined periods: Pre-estuarine, which is from the earliest paintings up to around 6000 years ago; Estuarine, which covers the period from 6000 to around 2000 years ago, when rising sea levels brought the coast to its present level; and Freshwater, from 2000 years ago until the present day.

For local Aboriginal people, these rock-art sites are a major source of traditional knowledge and represent their archives. Aboriginal people rarely paint on rocks any more,

as they no longer live in rock shelters and there are fewer people with the requisite knowledge. Some older paintings are believed by many Aboriginal people to have been painted by *mimi* spirits, connecting people with creation legends and the development of Aboriginal law.

As the paintings are all rendered with natural, water-soluble ochres, they are very susceptible to water damage. Drip-lines of clear silicon rubber have been laid on the rocks above the paintings to divert rain. As the most accessible sites receive up to 4000 visitors a week, boardwalks have been erected to keep the dust down and to keep people at a suitable distance from the paintings.

Orientation

Kakadu National Park stretches more than 200km south from the coast and 100km from east to west, with its main entrance 153km east of Darwin.

The sealed Arnhem Hwy stretches 120km east from the Stuart Hwy to Kakadu's entrance, and another 107km to Jabiru. The sealed Kakadu Hwy turns south off the Arnhem Hwy shortly before Jabiru, and leads to Nourlangie, Cooinda and Pine Creek (on the Stuart Hwy).

Our text runs through the major visitor areas from north to south.

Information

About 200,000 people visit Kakadu between April and October, so you can expect some tour-bus action at emblematic sites like Ubirr and Jim Jim Falls. If you're taking a tour, join the earliest one where possible for some relative quiet. Consider spending some time in the south of the park – it's less visited but inimitably impressive.

Pick up an excellent (and free) *Visitor Guide & Maps* booklet from Bowali visitor centre. Fuel is available at Kakadu Resort, Cooinda and Jabiru. Jabiru also has a supermarket, a post office, a Westpac bank and a divine public swimming pool.

Accommodation prices in Kakadu vary tremendously depending on the season – resort rates can drop by as much as 50% during the Wet.

Bowali Visitor Information Centre (☎ 08-8938 1121; Kakadu Hwy; ☎ 8am-5pm) has walk-through displays that sweep you across the land, explaining Kakadu's ecology from Aboriginal

MINING OVER TIME

There are four active mining leases in the Kakadu region, but only one project, Ranger, is operating – until 2020. Ever since the discovery of uranium in the region there have been protracted negotiations between government, mining interests and traditional owners.

In the early 20th century mineral prospectors wanted to open up the Koolpin Gorge (Jar-rangbarmmi) area to uranium mining, but to the Jawoyn (traditional owners) this is 'sickness country'. Elders said that if people disturb the country they will become unwell, and so they declined permission to mine.

In 1971, mining on the Jabiluka lease, 20km north of Ranger, looked set to start under an agreement negotiated with the local Mirrar people. Development was delayed until 1996 due to oscillating federal government policy, by which time concern had grown that Aboriginal elders had been coerced into signing the agreement. The Mirrar and environmental groups protested against the mine, with Energy Resources Australia (ERA), which owns the lease, announcing in 2004 that there would be no development of Jabiluka without the consent of the Mirrar.

Despite the Australian government's support of increased uranium mining and exports, it's unlikely that Kakadu's leases will mine beyond the current terms at Ranger. Mining uranium in a World Heritage-listed park against the wishes of the traditional owners is an enormous responsibility, and an equally large contradiction of interests.

In 2006 the government allocated \$7.3 million over four years to rehabilitate old uranium mines in the south of the park, removing shafts, pits, old tracks and some hazardous materials left there from the mid-60s.

and non-Aboriginal perspectives. The helpful staffed info window has 'Park Notes' fliers on all walks, with superb information about plants, animals and salient features you might encounter on each walk, explaining their uses and significance. The 'What's On' flier details where and when to catch a free and informative park ranger talk. The onsite **café** (☎ 9am-5pm) is good for an ice cream or coffee, and the **Marrawuddi Gallery** (www.marrawuddi.com) is good for a souvenir, stocking music, paintings and craft by the countrymen and women of Kakadu and Arnhem Land. The centre is about 2.5km south of the Arnhem Hwy intersection.

The **Northern Land Council** (☎ 08-8979 2410; www.nlc.org.au; Flinders St; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) in Jabiru issues permits (\$14) to visit the Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre (p826) in Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), a 30-minute trip into Arnhem Land that crosses the East Alligator River.

Tours

Most trips require some notification that you'll be joining them, so book at least a day ahead if possible; operators generally collect you from your accommodation. For tours departing Darwin, see p804.

Arnhemlander (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8979 2411; www.arnhemlander.com.au; adult/child \$185/150; ☎ May-Oct) Excellent Aboriginal-owned and guided day tours

interpreting Kakadu and Arnhem Land landscape and art. Weekday tours also visit Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Arnhem Land. Departs Aurora Lodge at 7.45am and Gagudju Lodge Cooinda at 8am. **Guluyambi** (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8941 9611; 1hr 45min cruise adult/child \$40/20; ☎ 9am, 11am, 1pm & 3pm May-Nov) Launch into an Aboriginal-led river cruise from the upstream boat ramp on the East Alligator River near Cahill's Crossing.

Kakadu Air (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8979 2411; www.kakaduai.com.au; 1hr flight \$195, 30min chopper flight \$225) The rivers, Arnhem Land escarpment and wetlands look amazing from up here. Departs Jabiru airport.

Kakadu Animal Tracks (☎ 08-8979 0145; www.animaltracks.com.au; adult/child \$150/110; ☎ May-mid-Oct) Poke around the mud with Patsy on her home turf looking for turtles and digging for water chestnuts, which become part of the exciting ground-cooked bush-tucker dinner on the wetlands. Highly recommended. Departs Gagudju Lodge Cooinda at 1pm.

Kakadu Culture Camp (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8941 9611; <http://kakaduculturecamp.com>; ☎ Apr-Oct) Aboriginal-owned and operated; two-hour night cruise (\$50/30 adult/child, at 6.20pm daily) and bush tucker and boat cruise (\$150/110 adult/child, from 5pm to 10pm Tuesday). Tours depart from Jabiru.

Lord's Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris (☎ 08-8948 2200; www.lords-safaris.com) Runs to Jim Jim and Twin Falls (\$150/120 adult/child, from June to November); pick-up from Jabiru at 6.45am and Cooinda at 7.30am. Also art- and nature-based tours of Arnhem Land (\$190/150

adult/child; Monday to Saturday May to November); pick-up from Jabiru at 8am and the Border Store at 8.45am.

Magela Cultural & Heritage Tours (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8941 9611; adult/child \$195/160) This Aboriginal-owned outfit does various small-group 4WD tours from Jabiru (6.45am), visiting Arnhem Land escarpment country and less-visited rock-art sites, plus a boat cruise on Inkiju billabong.

Yellow Water Cruises (☎ 08-8979 0145; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; ☽ Apr–Nov) This is a highlight for most – cruise the South Alligator River spotting wildlife. Purchase tickets from Gagudju Lodge Cooida, where a shuttle bus can deliver you to the departure point. Two-hour cruises (\$50/25 adult/child) depart at 6.45am, 9am and 4.30pm. One-and-a-half-hour cruises (\$43/22 adult/child) leave at 11.30am, 1.15pm and 2.45pm.

Ubirr & Around

It'll take a lot more than the busloads of visitors here to disturb Ubirr's inherent majesty and grace. Layers of paintings, in various styles and from various centuries, command a mesmerising stillness. Part of the main gallery reads like a menu, with images of kangaroos, tortoises and fish painted in X-ray, which became the dominant style about 8000 years ago. Predating these are the paintings of *mimi* spirits: cheeky, dynamic figures who, it's believed, were the first of the Creation Ancestors to paint on rock. (Given the lack of cherry-pickers in 6000 BC, you have to wonder who else but a spirit could have painted at that height and angle.) Look out for the yam-head figures, where the head is depicted as a yam on the body of a human or animal; these date back around 15,000 years.

The magnificent Nardab Lookout is a 250m scramble accessed from the main gallery. Surveying the exotic floodplain, watching the sun set in the east and the moon rise in the west like they're on an invisible set of scales gradually exchanging weight is humbling to say the least.

Ubirr (☽ 8.30am–sunset Apr–Nov, 2pm–sunset Dec–Mar) is 39km north of the Arnhem Hwy via a sealed road. On the way you'll pass the turn-off to **Merl campground** (adult/child \$5.40/free; ☽ Dry) with an amenities block, and the **Border Store** (☎ 08-8979 2474; ☽ 7am–7pm Apr–Dec) selling a range of groceries and takeaway food.

WALKS

About 2km south of the highway, departing the East Alligator Upstream Picnic Area, the **Bardedjilidji Sandstone walk** (1½ hours, 2.5km)

has interpretive signs explaining the sandstone outliers and wetland habitats. Just past the Cool Cave, the **Sandstone and River walk** (four hours, 6.5km) branches off, covering forests, sandy beaches and part of the Manlikarr Clan estate: stick to the path and look out for crocs.

Jabiru

☎ 08 / pop 1100

Jabiru was established to accommodate workers from the Ranger uranium mine. It's Kakadu's major service centre, with a bank, a newsagent, a medical centre, a supermarket, a bakery and a service station. About 6km east are Jabiru airport and the Ranger uranium mine.

You'll likely come through here, if not for the excellent Bowali visitor centre (p822), then for the stellar 50m **outdoor swimming pool** (☎ 8979 2127; adult/child \$3/1.30; ☽ 10am–6pm Mon, Wed & Fri, noon–6pm Tue, Thu & Sun, 10am–4pm Sat), with lounges beneath palms festooned with fruit bats.

SLEEPING & EATING

Lakeview Park (☎ 8979 3144; www.lakeviewkakadu.com.au; Lakeside Cres; 3-share dm YHA members only \$20, r \$85–180; ☽) Architecturally designed cabins and louvred bush bungalows are ensconced among the palms and tropical gardens. Double rooms share bathroom and kitchen area, while cabins are self-contained. This classy accommodation is great value. Guests are allowed free entry to the town pool nearby, and Lakeview is around the corner from the supermarket and bakery.

Kakadu Lodge & Caravan Park (☎ 1800 811 154, 8979 2422; www.auroraresorts.com.au; Jabiru Dr; unpowered/powered sites \$22.50/27.50, budget r \$140, cabins \$210–255; ☽ ☎ ☎) Pitch pleasantly among the powered sites, where curlew dash across the lush lawns at night 'crying' (you'll get used to it); avoid the dust-bowl unpowered area over by the relic of a volleyball court and school grounds. The weeny camp kitchen is often overcrowded and its fridge overstuffed. Amenities blocks are clean and in plentiful supply. Lodge rooms sleep four and share a bathroom and kitchen between 30-odd rooms. Cabins are self-contained and can sleep up to seven. Meals are available (dinner mains \$18 to \$23).

Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn (☎ 1300 666 747, 8979 2800; www.holidayinn.com; Flinders St; d \$170–290; ☽ ☎ ☎) Viewed from the air, this hotel forms the shape of a 250m crocodile, arguably

a pointless design feature considering most visitors arrive by car. The rooms are lush and large, if a little humdrum. The high-ceilinged Escarpment Restaurant serves creative up-market mains (\$25 to \$30) with bush-tucker embellishments.

Superb made-to-order sandwiches on home-baked bread wait on the door at **Kakadu Bakery** (☎ 8979 2320; Gregory Pl; ☽ 7am–2pm Sun–Fri, to 1pm Sat), or you can self-cater at **Foodland** (Jabiru Plaza; ☽ 9am–5.30pm Mon–Fri, to 3pm Sat, 10am–2pm Sun). All nonguests are welcome to dine at the resorts' restaurants.

Nourlangie Area

The sight of this looming outlier of the Arnhem Land escarpment makes it easy to understand its ancient importance to Aboriginal people. Its long red-sandstone bulk, striped in places with orange, white and black, slopes up from surrounding woodland to fall away at one end in stepped cliffs. Below is Kakadu's best-known collection of rock art.

The 2km loop takes you first to the **Anbangbang rock shelter**, used for 20,000 years as a refuge and canvas. Next is the Anbangbang Gallery, featuring Dreaming characters repainted in the '60s. From here it's a short walk to **Gunwarddeharde lookout**, with views of the Arnhem Land escarpment.

Nourlangie is at the end of a 12km sealed road that turns east off Kakadu Hwy, 21km south of Arnhem Hwy. Seven kilometres south is the turn-off to **Muirella Park campground** (adult/child \$5.40/free), with BBQs and excellent amenities.

WALKS

Anbangbang Billabong (One hour, 2.5km; possible only during the Dry) Begins 1km north of Nourlangie car park and loops through paperbark swamps.

Bark Sandstone Bushwalk (Six to eight hours, 12km) Often rated as the park's best walk, this is an exemplary way to appreciate Kakadu's extraordinary diversity. Starts from Anbangbang Gallery at Nourlangie.

Bubba Wetland Walk (Two hours, 3.5km; possible only during the Dry) Not the most scintillating walk; loops round a small lake.

Nawurlandja Lookout (Takes 30 minutes, 600m) Begins 1km north of Nourlangie car park to overlook the woodlands.

Jim Jim Falls & Twin Falls

Jim Jim Falls, a sheer 215m drop, is awesome after rain – so they say, but it's inaccessible

in the Wet when it rains, so we'll have to take their word for it. It shrivels to a drip in the Dry, but you can usually swim in its inky pool and bask on the bank. Twin Falls flows year-round (no swimming), but half the fun is getting there, involving a little boat trip and an over-the-water boardwalk.

These two iconic waterfalls are along a 4WD track that turns south off the Kakadu Hwy between the Nourlangie and Cooida turn-offs. It's about 57km from the turn-off to Jim Jim Falls (the last 1km on foot) and a further 10 corrugated kilometres to Twin Falls. The track is open in the Dry only and can still be closed into late May; it's off-limits to most rental vehicles (check the fine print).

Yellow Water & Cooida

This little hub has a schmick resort, a popular wetlands (see Yellow Waters Cruises, opposite) and a cultural centre. The **Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre** (☎ 08-8979 0051; ☽ 9am–5.30pm Sep–Jun, 7.30am–6pm Jul & Aug) depicts creation stories and has a very classy permanent exhibition that includes clap sticks, sugar-bag holders and rock-art samples. You'll be introduced to the moiety system (internal tribal division) and skin names, and there's a minitheatre with a huge selection of films from which to choose. Warradjan is an easy walk (15 minutes, 1km) from the Cooida resort.

For facilities, **Gagudju Lodge Cooida** (☎ 08-8979 0145; www.gagudju-dreaming.com; unpowered/powered sites \$15/35, budget r per person \$32, lodge d \$250; ☽ ☎ ☎) is the best resort in the park. Like most places, though, it can become stretched. There's a shady camping ground, tiny budget rooms (two- to three-share) and comfortable motel-style lodge rooms, plus excellent eateries. The casual open-air **Barra Bar & Bistro** (meals \$15–20; ☽ lunch & dinner) serves café-style fare, while the upmarket **Mimi Restaurant** (mains \$25–35; ☽ dinner Apr–Sep) delivers local produce, such as barramundi and emu prepared with bush fruits and spices.

The turn-off to the Cooida accommodation complex and Yellow Water wetlands is 47km down the Kakadu Hwy from the Arnhem Hwy intersection. It's then 4.5km to the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre, a further 1km to the Yellow Water turn-off and another 1km to Cooida. Just south of the Kakadu Hwy, 2km south of the Cooida turn-off, is the National Parks **Mardugal Park campground** (adult/child \$5.40/free) – an excellent spot with shower and toilets.

Cooinda to Pine Creek

This southern section of the park sees far fewer tour buses. Though it's unlikely you'll have dreamy **Maguk** (Barramundi Gorge; 45km south of Cooinda and 10km along a corrugated 4WD track) to yourself, you might time it right to have the glorious natural pool and falls between just a few of you. Conventional-vehicle drivers fear not: 40-odd kilometres further south is the turn-off to **Gunlom** (Waterfall Creek), another superb escarpment waterfall and plunge pool. It's located 37km along an unsealed, though easily do-able, gravel road. Walk the steep Waterfall Walk (one hour, 1km) here, which affords incredible views.

YURMIKMIK WALKS

On the road to Gunlom is the start of a series of interconnected walks leading first through woodlands and monsoon forest to Boulder Creek (45 minutes, 2km), then on to the Lookout (1½ to two hours, 5km), with views over rugged ridges, and Motor Car Falls (four hours, 7.5km).

Getting There & Around

Without your own wheels it's still possible to explore Kakadu independently. You can combine transport to Jabiru, Ubirr and Cooinda with a couple of tours, such as a trip to Jim Jim Falls, the Yellow Water cruise and an Aboriginal cultural tour.

Greyhound Australia (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au; one-way/return \$66/132; Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat) buses between Darwin and Cooinda via Jabiru leave Darwin at 8am and Jabiru at 11.25am, and arrive at Cooinda at 12.40pm.

ARNHEM LAND

The entire eastern half of the Top End is the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, a vast ochre-coloured frontier (about the size of Portugal) with a population just over 17,000, who are mostly Yolngu people. Most people live on outstations, combining traditional practices with modern Western ones, so they might go out for a hunt and be back in time to watch the 6pm news. Outside commercial interests and visits are highly regulated through a permit system, designed to protect the environment, the rock art and ceremonial grounds. **Balanda** (white people) are unaware of the locations of burial grounds and ceremonial lands. Basically, you need a specific purpose for enter-

ing, usually to visit an arts centre, in order to be granted a permit. If you're travelling far enough to warrant an overnight stay, you'll need to organise accommodation (which is in short supply). It's easy to visit Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) and its arts centre, just over the border, either on a tour or independently. Elsewhere, it's best to travel with a tour, which will include the necessary permit(s) to enter Aboriginal lands.

TOURS

Cast yourself into the mythological territory of Arnhem Land, in the hands of professional operators.

Arnhemlander (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8979 2411; www.arnhemlander.com.au; adult/child \$185/150; ☹ May-Oct) Crosses over into Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Arnhem Land. Tours depart from Kakadu.

Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris (☎ 08-8927 5240; www.arnhemland-safaris.com) Safari camp at Mt Borradaile, north of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), with meals, guided tours and fishing provided. The daily price per person is \$500 (minimum two people).

Lord's Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris (☎ 08-8948 2200; www.lords-safaris.com) Highly recommended small-group tours from Jabiru and the Border Store.

Magela Cultural & Heritage Tours (☎ 1800 089 113, 08-8941 9611; adult/child \$195/160) Tours depart from Jabiru.

Venture North (☎ 8927 5500; www.northernaustralia.com; 4-day tour adult/child \$1345/1114; ☹ Tue & Thu) Rare opportunity to cruise the stunning Cobourg Marine Park; meals included.

Gunbalanya (Oenpelli)

☎ 08 / pop 1500

The drive alone is worth it. Crossing the mud-grey river, riddled with crocodiles, to the other side, with blooming lilies and peculiar rock formations, is the closest you'll come to feeling like Dorothy when she lands in Technicolor Oz. An 18km dirt road from Cahill's Crossing in Kakadu traverses the awesome East Alligator River flood plain, which rivals anything within Kakadu itself, to the small Aboriginal township of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli). The **Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre** (☎ 8979 0190; www.injalak.com; ☹ Mon-Sat) displays Aboriginal artworks available to buy. It's both shop-front and workplace, with artists weaving, painting and whittling on the veranda most mornings. All sales of these authentic pieces directly benefit the community. If there're a few of you, a local guide will take you on a

two-hour tour (bookings essential; per group \$120) of Injalak Hill (adorned with rock art) and the wetlands at the back of the centre.

The **Northern Land Council** (☎ 8979 2410; Flinders St, Jabiru) issues permits (\$13.20) to visit Injalak, usually on the day of application. It'll also provide tide times for the East Alligator, which is impassable at high tide.

Cobourg Peninsula

The entire wilderness of this remote peninsula forms the **Garig Gunak Barlu National Park**, which includes the surrounding sea. In the turquoise water you'll likely see dolphins and turtles, and – what most people come for – a threadfin salmon thrashing on the end of your line. **Cobourg Adventures** (☎ 08-8979 0455; www.cobourgbeachhuts.com.au; Smith Point) is an excellent outfit that organises activities and tours, including fishing (full day for two \$550) from its eco-resort-style set-up (doubles \$220). It also arranges permits on your behalf; book well ahead.

On the shores of Port Essington are the stone ruins and headstones from Victoria settlement – Britain's 1838 attempt to establish a military outpost.

At Black Point (Algarlarlgarl) there's a **ranger station** (☎ 08-8979 0244) with a visitor information and cultural centre, and the **Garig Store** (☎ 08-8979 0455; ☹ 4-6pm Mon-Sat), which sells basic provisions, ice and camping gear; credit cards and Eftpos are accepted.

Two permits are required to visit the Cobourg Peninsula: for a transit pass to drive through Aboriginal land contact the **Northern Land Council** (www.nlc.org.au; passes \$13.20); for permission to stay overnight in the National Park contact the **Parks & Wildlife Commission** (☎ 08-8999 4814; PO Box 496, Palmerston, NT 0831; per vehicle \$235).

There's a good, shady camping ground about 100m from the shore at **Smith Point** (unpowered sites free). Facilities include shower, toilet, BBQs and limited bore water; generators are allowed in one area.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The quickest route here is by private charter flight, which can be arranged by accommodation providers. However, this will leave you without transport when you arrive. The track to Cobourg starts at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) and is accessible by 4WD vehicles only from May to October. The 270km drive to Black Point from the East Alligator River takes about four hours.

Eastern Arnhem Land

The wildly beautiful coast and country of Eastern Arnhem Land (www.ealta.org) is really out of the way. About 4000 people live in the region's main settlement, Nhulunbuy, built to service the bauxite mine. The 1963 plans to establish a manganese mine were hotly protested by the traditional owners, the Yolngu people; though mining proceeded, the case became an important step in establishing land rights. Some of the country's most respected art comes out of this region too, including bark paintings, carved *mimi* figures, *yidaki* (didgeridoo), woven baskets and mats, and jewellery.

Nambara Arts & Crafts Aboriginal Gallery (☎ 08-8987 2811; Melville Bay Rd, Nhulunbuy) sells art and crafts from northeast Arnhem Land and often has artists in residence. **Buku Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre & Museum** (☎ 08-8987 1701; www.yirrkala.com; Yirrkala; museum admission \$2), 20km southeast of Nhulunbuy, is one of Arnhem Land's best.

A minimum of two permits are required to visit. Overland travel through Arnhem Land from Katherine requires a permit (free); contact the **Northern Land Council** (www.nlc.org.au). The **Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation** (☎ 08-8987 3992; www.dhimurru.com.au; Arnhem Rd, Nhulunbuy) issues recreation permits (\$22, valid for two months) for visits to Nhulunbuy and particular recreation areas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Airnorth (☎ 1800 627 474; www.airnorth.com.au) flies from Darwin to Nhulunbuy and the Gove Peninsula. **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) also flies between Darwin and Gove. Overland, it's a nine-hour 4WD trip and only possible in the Dry. The Central Arnhem Hwy to Gove leaves the Stuart Hwy 52km south of Katherine.

KATHERINE TO ALICE

The Stuart Hwy from Darwin to Alice Springs is still referred to as 'the Track' – it has been since WWII, when it was literally a dirt track connecting the Territory's two main towns, roughly following the Overland Telegraph Line. This stretch of highway has a few notable diversions, such as Mataranka's thermal pool, Tennant Creek's Nyinkka Nyunyu cultural centre, the Devil's Marbles and the self-proclaimed alien centre of Australia (uh-huh).

KATHERINE

☎ 08 / pop 8900

Though it's the Territory's third-largest town, there's a sense that the surrounding subtropics could take it over any minute. Katherine is located on a lush river, and you only have to move a block from the main drag's takeaways, supermarkets and banks to see the encroaching bush festooned with thousands of flying foxes.

Essentially a large country town, Katherine is the region's hub, with a population made up of Jawoyn and Dagoman indigenous folks, farmers, and personnel from the nearby Tindal air force base.

Katherine has long been an important stopping point, as its namesake river is the first permanent source of running water north of Alice Springs – that's about 1200km. The town is a good place to regroup on the long drive north or south, west down the Victoria Hwy to WA or east to Cairns in Queensland; see the boxed text, p831. It's also the gateway to the gaping gorge and sweeping sandstone country of Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park.

Orientation & Information

Katherine's main street, Katherine Tce, is the Stuart Hwy on its way through town. Giles St, the road to Nitmiluk National Park, branches off to the northeast in the middle of town.

Katherine Art Gallery (☎ 8971 1051; 12 Katherine Tce; per hr \$6) Has internet access.

Katherine Hospital (☎ 8973 9211; Giles St) About 3km north of town, with an emergency department.

Police station (☎ 8973 8000; Stuart Hwy) About 500m southeast of town.

Visitor information centre (☎ 8972 2650; www.krta.com.au; cnr Stuart Hwy & Lindsay St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) Stocks information on all areas of the NT, plus National Parks notes.

Sights & Activities

Katherine Low Level Nature Park is a great spot on the banks of the Katherine River, just off the Victoria Hwy 4km from town. It has a popular dry-season swimming hole linked to crystalline thermal pools and town by a tree-lined shared cycle- and footpath.

The 'classroom' of the **School of the Air** (☎ 8972 1833; www.schools.nt.edu.au/ksa; Giles St; adult/child \$5/2; ☎ Mar-Nov) covers around 800,000 sq km, with primary school-aged kids living on remote stations and in Aboriginal com-

munities having lessons delivered via radio and web hook-ups. Guided tours run at 9am, 10am, and 11am Monday to Friday; bookings preferred.

Katherine Outback Heritage Museum (☎ 8972 3945; Giles St; adult/child \$3.50/1; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat, 2-5pm Sun Mar-Oct, 10am-1pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Feb), in the old airport terminal building 3km northeast of town, has old photos, machines and artefacts telling of the region's floods, flying doctors and pastoral pursuits. The neighbouring park has picnic tables and a BBQ.

In 1879 Ernest Giles rode in with 12,000 sheep and 2000 cows and horses to establish **Springvale Homestead** (☎ 8972 1355; www.springvalehomestead.org.au; Shadforth Rd), purported to be the Territory's oldest station. You're welcome to wander around the homestead and its vast grounds or take the free tour at 3pm (except Monday) from May to September.

It's been a lot of years since the engine displayed at the **Railway Museum** (Railway Tce; admission \$2; ☎ 1-4pm Mon-Fri May-Oct) ran out of steam. Housed in the original station building (1926), historical displays also reveal the function of the humble railway throughout WWII.

Tours

Gecko Canoeing (☎ 8972 2224; www.geckocanoeing.com.au) Excellent eco-accredited guided canoeing trips from one to 10 days. Beginners and experienced paddlers welcome.

Katherine Town Tour (☎ 0411-858 752; www.katherinetowntour.com; per person \$30) Day trips to Leliyn (Edith Falls).

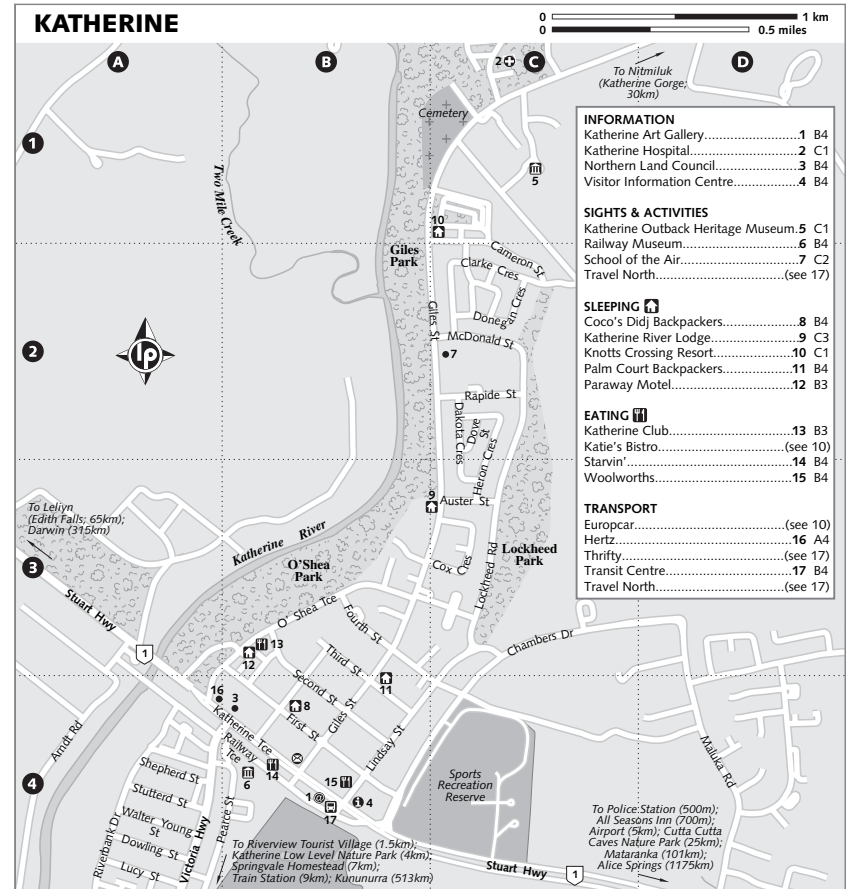
Manyallaluk (☎ 1800 644 727; adult/child \$165/80, self-drive \$125/70) Members of the nearby Manyallaluk community spend the day showing visitors how to weave, spear, paint and circular breathe to play the didj.

Travel North (☎ 8971 9999; www.travelnorth.com.au; Transit Centre, Katherine Tce) Meets the *Ghan* arrivals, with three tour options (one to three days) taking in Katherine, Mataranka and Kakadu, dropping off in Darwin.

Festivals & Events

Katherine Country Music Muster (www.kcmm.com.au; May) Expect more than country music; competitions include bush poetry ('We were gathered at a barbie down at Bazza's by the bay...') and the unique beauty contest for cars, Beaut Utes.

Katherine District Show (www.katherineshow.org.au; July) The annual agricultural show includes a rodeo, dog trials and a watermelon-eating competition.



Sleeping

There're scarce budget options and no such thing as luxury among Katherine's modest accommodation offerings.

BUDGET

Coco's Didj Backpackers (☎ 8971 2889; coco@21firstst.com.au; 21 First St; unpowered sites \$18, dm \$16; ☎) Young Japanese guys cycling around Australia doss in their tents in the front yard, while German mates looking for adventure pay for their beds in labour hours. This unapologetically downbeat place is small and personal, with 16 beds in the owner's house. The garage is a treasure trove of Aboriginal paintings and didgeridoos (for sale) – the good stuff, not tourist tat.

Palm Court Backpackers (☎ 1800 626 722, 8972 2722; cnr Third & Giles Sts; dm \$22, d \$52; ☎) Like a human-sized pigeonhole, this converted motel stacks in roosting budget travellers: up to 10 per room, shoulder-to-shoulder, layer upon layer. Elbows in to slot into the communal kitchen-pool area. It's affiliated with Travel North, and courtesy buses shuttle to and from the Transit Centre.

Riverview Tourist Village (☎ 8972 1011; www.riverviewtouristvillage.com.au; 440 Victoria Hwy; unpowered/powered sites \$19/24, backpacker r \$28, cabins \$65-90, motel r \$75; ☎) Lots of mature trees shade this pretty park, and guests can access Katherine's thermal pools via a 500m path at the back of the property. Facilities include free BBQs, and rooms are well maintained. Backpacker rooms

fill up fast during the mango-picking season (October to November).

MIDRANGE

Katherine River Lodge (☎ 8971 0266; www.katherine-riverlodge.net; 50 Giles St; d \$80-90; 🍷 🍷 🍷) You'll struggle to find a better-value sleep than in these straight-up rooms. (You may also struggle up three flights of stairs if you have a lot of luggage.) It's in a quiet location backing onto the river, and one neat block mirrors another, with palm-shaded pool and parking in between. Other amenities include a laundry and a tired communal kitchen (which could drive you to dine in the on-site eatery, mains \$15 to \$20).

Paraway Motel (☎ 8972 2644; www.parawaymotel.com.au; O'Shea Tce; d \$95-155; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Tap across the tiles from the queen-sized bed to the spa bath in the executive room bathroom or to make a cuppa, available in all rooms. This neat motel sits quietly back from the centre of town, though is still handy to the shops. The on-site restaurant serves stone-grilled dinners (\$18 to \$22) nightly.

Knotts Crossing Resort (☎ 1800 222 511, 8972 2511; www.knotscrossing.com.au; cnr Giles & Cameron Sts; unpowered/power sites \$20/25, cabins \$80-95, d \$130-150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Back up to a boxlike cabin (with or without a bathroom) or pull in to one of the bricked motel rooms. The 100-plus places to sleep spread across this popular leafy resort are mostly occupied during the Dry. Many regard the on-site restaurant as the town's best (see Katie's Bistro, right).

All Seasons Inn (☎ 8972 1744; www.accorhotels.com.au; Stuart Hwy; d \$145; 🍷 🍷 🍷) As plush as it gets, this 100-room hotel gives itself three stars. Spacious rooms come with a kettle and in-house movies. The poolside ambience is a bit lacking (no lounges) and the on-site restaurant does a decent à la carte dinner (mains \$16 to \$20). As it's part of an international chain, cheaper rates are almost always available (especially online). Find it beside the highway about 3km south of town.

Eating

Starvin' (☎ 8972 3633; 32 Katherine Tce; meals \$8-18; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) The local pizza-and-pasta joint might not warrant a dress-up, but it'll fill a hole. This licensed place does universally recognised varieties of pasta, salad and gourmet pizza.

Katherine Club (☎ 8972 1250; cnr Second St & O'Shea Tce; mains \$16-19; 🍷 lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Sign

yourself in as a member for the night and you're signing up for generous serves of schnitzel, fish and chips or a vegetable parcel, plus unlimited access to the salad bar. Kids are catered for (meals \$7), drinks are good value (respectable wines under \$5 a glass), available from one of four bars, and a band plays Friday night.

Katie's Bistro (☎ 8972 2511; cnr Giles & Cameron Sts; mains \$19-28; 🍷 dinner) The dozen or so main courses on the menu here might include barramundi bouillabaisse or Chinese-spiced duck, pasta or laksa. Part of the Knotts Crossing Resort, the bistro can cater to the masses, both in the dining room and out in the garden.

Woolworths (☎ 8972 3055; Katherine Tce; 🍷 7am-10pm) Self-caterers, this is the cheapest place to stock up for hundreds of kilometres; it includes a bottle shop and a bakery.

Getting There & Around

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) buses travelling between Darwin and Alice Springs, Queensland or WA stop at Katherine's **Transit Centre** (☎ 8971 9999; Katherine Tce). Sample trips from Katherine include Alice Springs (\$225, 15 hours), Darwin (\$76, four hours) and Kununurra (\$115, five hours).

Car-rental outfits include **Thrifty** (☎ 8972 3183; Transit Centre, 6 Katherine Tce), **Hertz** (☎ 8971 1111; cnr Katherine & O'Shea Tces) and **Europcar** (☎ 8971 2777; Knotts Crossing Resort, cnr Giles & Cameron Sts).

For taxis, call **Katherine Taxis** (☎ 8972 1777).

The *Ghan* train travels between Adelaide and Darwin, stopping at Katherine; see p794 for the timetable. The train station is off the Victoria Hwy, 9km southwest of town. **Travel North** (☎ 8971 9999), based at the Transit Centre, runs shuttles between the station and town.

AROUND KATHERINE

Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park

Turn your back on the searing sun and dip down 15m below terra firma into this maze-like cave system. The hour-long guided stroll traverses a boardwalk and highlights limestone features and facts: unseen residents of the caves include endangered bat species and a see-through prawn. Cutta Cutta is a Jawoyn name meaning 'many stars'; the crystal-encrusted ceiling sparkles under artificial light like the night sky. **Tours** (☎ 08-8972 1940; adult/child \$13/6.50) depart at 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm and 3pm; numbers are limited, so book ahead. The park is 25km south of Katherine.

Manyallaluk

Formerly the 3000-sq-km Eva Valley cattle station, **Manyallaluk** (☎ 08-8975 4727) abuts the eastern edge of Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park. The land is owned by the Jawoyn Aboriginal people, some of whom lead highly regarded cultural tours (see p828) that drop into the community **Art & Craft Centre** (🍷 afternoons Mon-Fri Apr-Nov) – all visitors welcome. The centre sells paintings, weavings and articles such as clap sticks and seed necklaces. No permits are needed to visit Manyallaluk; alcohol is prohibited.

Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park

The Katherine River, which begins in Arnhem Land, cuts through rugged sandstone country in Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge). Over centuries the river has left a series of gorges in its wake known as Katherine Gorge, and it's what the hordes are here to see. There're a variety of ways to experience the park: from inside a canoe to sipping a café latte from the Nitmiluk Centre café balcony. A well-established network of hiking trails lead to the mighty gorge (many with a rewarding swim at the end); the park is excellent for hikers. Swimming in the gorge is safe except when it's in flood. Usually the only crocodiles around are the freshwater variety, more often seen in the cooler months.

The difference in water levels between the Wet and the Dry is immense. During the Dry the gorge waters are calm, but from November to March they can become a raging torrent, when swimming and canoeing are restricted.

INFORMATION

The **Nitmiluk Centre** (☎ 08-8972 1253; www.nitmiluk-tours.com.au; Katherine Gorge; 🍷 7am-7pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm

Oct-Mar) has informative displays on the park's geology, wildlife, traditional Jawoyn owners and European history. There's also a **Parks & Wildlife desk** (☎ 08-8972 1886) dispensing advice and park notes for walkers. Register here between 7am and 1pm for overnight walks and camping (\$3.30 per night); a \$50 deposit is returned upon deregistration at Edith Kiosk.

The centre also encompasses a **café** (mains \$12-20; 🍷 breakfast & lunch), serving meals mostly from the grill, and an obligatory souvenir shop.

LELIYN (EDITH FALLS)

Dip into the waterfall-fed plunge pool at the base or earn your swim by walking to one of two upper pools among the rocks. The Leliyn Trail (2.6km loop, 1½ hours) climbs to the upper pool, from where the Sweetwater Pool Trail (8.6km return, three to five hours) leads off; there's camping here, though you'll need to register at the kiosk.

The Parks & Wildlife **campground** (☎ 08-8975 4869; adult/child/family \$8.80/4/20), at the main pool, has toilets and showers. Pay fees at the **kiosk** (🍷 8am-6pm), which sells breakfasts, snacks and simple supplies.

Reach Leliyn via a turnoff from the Stuart Hwy 45km north of Katherine, from where it's 20km along a sealed road.

BUSHWALKING

The park has around 120km of marked walking tracks, ranging from 2km stretches to 66km multi-night hikes. Overnight hikers must register at the Nitmiluk Centre. Visit the centre for the full range of walks and to pick up a map.

Barrawei Lookout (3.7km, one hour) A short climb for views of the gorge.

CROSS-COUNTRY DRIVES

Katherine is an Australian axis. From here you can head north-south, traversing the NT and SA on what's dubbed the Explorers Way – after John Stuart, who travelled it first in 1862 (roughly 3000km, from Adelaide to Darwin). Katherine is also a midpoint for west-east travel from WA through to Queensland on the east coast. They call this the Savannah Way (www.savannahway.com.au), running 3855km from Broome to Cairns.

These are legendary road trips: they're big, they require careful planning and they'll be remembered forever. Before driving off into the big-sky country...yes, here comes the warning...ensure that you and your vehicle are prepared. That means knowing where fuel is available en route, carrying one or two spare tyres and plenty of water, only driving during daylight hours to avoid wildlife, investing in a satellite phone, and having enough music available so that you're not stuck listening to the one CD you bought from the last roadhouse for a week.

Butterfly Gorge (12km, 4½ hours) A shady walk through rainforest leads out to the main gorge and a deep swimming spot.

Jatbula Trail (66km, five days) Hike over the Arnheim Land escarpment from Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park to Leliyn (Edith Falls). Denis (☎ 0411-858 752) does transfers (up to 4 people for \$100) from Leliyn back to Katherine or Nitmiluk.

Jawoy Valley (40km, overnight) A wilderness loop trail leading into a valley with rock outcrops bearing Aboriginal paintings.

CANOEING

A leisurely paddle is the best way to appreciate the peace and beauty of the gorge. You can stop any time for a swim, and you may even spot a freshwater crocodile sheltering near the bank. In the Dry you'll have to carry your canoe over rocks to get from one gorge to the next.

Nitmiluk Tours (☎ 1800 089 103, 08-8972 1253; www.nitmiluktours.com.au) hires out single/double canoes (\$35/55 for a half-day, \$47/71 for a full day); hire includes life jackets and a waterproof drum to keep possessions dry. You can also hire single/double canoes overnight for \$95/143 (plus \$3.30 for an overnight camping permit and a \$60 refundable deposit). The canoe shed is at the boat ramp by the main car park, 500m beyond the Nitmiluk Centre.

GORGE CRUISES

Another way to get out on the water is with a cruise, also run by **Nitmiluk Tours** (☎ 1800 089 103, 08-8972 1253; www.nitmiluktours.com.au). The two-hour cruise (\$45/17 adult/child) goes to the second gorge and visits a rock-art gallery. It leaves at 6.20am (including breakfast \$48/44), 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm and 5.30pm (including dinner \$75/68). The four-hour trip (adult/child \$63/28) goes to the third gorge and includes a swim and refreshments. It leaves at 9am, 11am and 1pm. Finally, there's an eight-hour trip (\$105) that takes you up to the fifth gorge, and involves a 5km walk and a BBQ lunch. It departs at 9am. All trips leave from the boat ramp, 500m from the Nitmiluk Centre.

HELICOPTER FLIGHTS

Buzz over the gorge with **Sky Safari** (☎ 1300 146 743, 08-8972 2345; www.skysafari.com.au). A 10-minute sweep of three gorges costs \$70, while a 20-minute flight through all 13 gorges costs \$160. Book at the Nitmiluk Centre.

SLEEPING

Apart from bush-camping sites established for overnight walkers, there are permanent campgrounds at Leliyn (p831) and at **Nitmiluk Caravan Park** (☎ 08-8972 1253; unpowered sites adult/child \$9.50/6, powered sites \$24). Situated beside the gorge entrance, this busy park has plenty of grass and shade, plus BBQs and a laundry. Wallabies and goannas come calling. You need to book and pay at the Nitmiluk Centre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

It's 30km by sealed road from Katherine to the gorge. **Travel North** (☎ 08-8971 9999; www.travelnorth.com.au; one way/return \$15/22) shuttles to Nitmiluk depart Katherine's Transit Centre for the gorge at 8am and 12.15pm, returning to town at 9am, 1pm and 5pm. **Nitmiluk Tours** (☎ 1300 146 743; www.nitmiluktours.com.au; adult/child return \$23/12.50) also runs a transfer service to Nitmiluk, picking up from your accommodation at 8am and 12.15pm (and 4pm April to September) and returning to Katherine at 9am and 5pm (and 1pm April to September).

KATHERINE TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The bitumen Victoria Hwy stretches 513km, linking Katherine to Kununurra in WA. It winds through diverse landscapes, with extensive tracts annexed as cattle stations in the 1880s, these becoming the economy's backbone in the post-war recovery period of the 1950s. In 1966 Wave Hill Station became the focus for Aboriginal land rights when 200 Aboriginal workers walked off the job to protest living and working conditions. The resulting campaign, led by Vincent Lingiari, resulted in the Gurindji community gaining title to the land – albeit 20 years later.

A 4WD will get you into a few out-of-the-way national parks accessed off the Victoria Hwy, or you can meander through semiarid desert and lush sandstone outcrops until bloated boab trees herald your imminent arrival in WA. All fruits, vegetables, nuts and honey must be left at the quarantine-inspection post on the border. WA time is 1½ hours behind NT time.

Flora River Nature Park

Limestone tufa (spongy rock) outcrops form bars across the mineral-rich Flora River, acting as dams; the effect is a series of pretty cascades running with glowing blue-green water. This interesting, scenic little park is a

mixture of savanna and woodland. There's a **campground** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) at Djarung with an amenities block. The Flora River has crocs, so there's no swimming.

The park turn-off is 90km southwest of Katherine; the park entrance is a further 36km along a good dirt road.

Victoria River Crossing

The low sandstone cliffs surrounding this spot where the highway crosses the Victoria River (192km southwest of Katherine) create a dramatic setting. Much of this area forms the eastern section of Gregory National Park. The **Victoria River Wayside Inn** (☎ 08-8975 0744; Victoria Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$15/20, s/d \$35/65, motel d from \$80) is west of the bridge. It also has a shop and a bar, and boat cruises and fishing tours (BYO gear) can also be arranged. Breakfast, lunch and dinner (meals \$15 to \$22) are available.

Timber Creek

☎ 08 / pop 300

Situated 286km southwest of Katherine, tiny Timber Creek is the only town between Katherine and Kununurra. It has a pretty big history for such a small place, with an early European exploration aboard the *Tom Tough* requiring repairs to be carried out with local timber (hence the town's name). The expedition's leader, AC Gregory, inscribed his arrival date into a boab, which is still discernable (and explained in detail through interpretive panels) at **Gregory's Tree**, 15km northwest of town.

The town's **old police station** (admission \$2.50; ☎ 9-11am Mon-Fri May-Oct), established to smooth relations with pastoralists and indigenous people, is now a museum displaying old police and mining equipment.

Max's Tours (adult/child \$60/30) operates a 3½-hour cruise that motors along the Victoria River spotting crocs, water birds and the escarpment of the Yambarran Ranges. Trips run at 4pm Monday to Saturday from April to September; book at the **Croc Stock Shop** (☎ 8975 0850; www.maxsvictoriarivercruise.com; Victoria Hwy). Fishing tours can be booked through **Beverley's Booking Centre** (☎ 8975 0850).

Enormous trees shade the 'Circle F' camping area at **Timber Creek Gunamu Tourist Park** (☎ 8975 0722; Victoria Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$14/20, d from \$70; ♿ ♿), which is bordered by a creek (not safe for swimming). The complex includes the Timber Creek Hotel and Wayside

Inn (both have bars and bistros). The Wayside's motel rooms are better (though more expensive) than those at the hotel. The Park's **shop** (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) stocks a good range of staple items.

Gregory National Park

The remote and rugged wilderness of this little-visited national park will swallow you up. Covering 12,860 sq km, it sits at the transitional zone between the tropical and semiarid regions. The park consists of old cattle country and is made up of two separate sections: the eastern (Victoria River) section and the much larger Bullita section in the west. Some parts of the park are accessible by 2WD; to travel on any of the rough-as-guts 4WD tracks you need to be self-sufficient and to register (call ☎ 1300 650 730) and leave a \$50 credit-card deposit – refunded upon deregistration.

The **Parks & Wildlife office** (☎ 08-8975 0888; ☎ 7am-4.30pm) in Timber Creek, about 1km west of town, can provide park notes and a map to the various walks, the historic homestead and ruggedly romantic original stockyards, camping spots and rough tracks – a must before heading in. This is croc country; swimming isn't safe.

Keep River National Park

This remote park is noted for its stunning sandstone formations, beautiful desolation and rock art. Pamphlets detailing walks are available at the start of the excellent trails. Don't miss **Nganalang** (500m, 10 minutes), with an estimated 2500 rock carvings and numerous painted images. **Junumum** (3km, 1½ hours) is a comfortable walk through the gorge; look for Aboriginal art on the steep red walls and enjoy the frenetic bird life near the permanent waterholes.

The park entrance is 3km shy of the WA border. You can reach the park's main points by conventional vehicle during the Dry. A **rangers station** (☎ 08-9167 8827) lies 3km into the park from the main road, and there are basic, sandstone-surrounded **campgrounds** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) at Gurrandalng (15km into the park) and Jarnem (28km). Tank water is available at Jarnem.

MATARANKA

☎ 08 / pop 300

The small settlement of Mataranka regularly swells with towel-toting visitors shuffling to the thermal pool or the spring-fed Elsey

National Park. If you see Mataranka referred to as the 'capital of the Never Never', it's a reference to the 1908 autobiographical novel *We of the Never Never*, about life as a pioneering woman on nearby Elsey Station – for which the deeds of title have since been returned to the Mangarayi indigenous owners.

Sights & Activities

Mataranka's crystal-clear Rainbow Springs **thermal pool**, shrouded in rainforest, is 10km from town. The warm, clear water dappled by filtered light leaking through overhanging palms rejuvenates a lot of bodies on any given day; it's reached via a boardwalk from Mataranka Homestead Resort and can get mighty crowded. About 200m away (follow the boardwalk from the resort) is the **Waterhouse River**, where you can rent canoes for \$10 per hour.

Outside the resort entrance is a replica of the **Elsey Station Homestead**, constructed for the old-style epic (some would say bland) film of Jeannie Gunn's famous story of her early-20th-century stint in the Top End.

The **Never Never Museum** (Stuart Hwy; adult/child \$2.50/2; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), back in town, has displays on the northern railway, WWII and local history.

Elsey National Park adjoins the thermal pool reserve and offers peaceful camping, fishing and walking along the Waterhouse and Roper Rivers. **Bitter Springs**, a serene palm-fringed thermal pool within the national park, is accessed via Martin Rd from Mataranka. The almost unnatural blue-green colour of the 34°C water is due to dissolved limestone particles – so too the water's bitter taste, and name.

Sleeping & Eating

Mataranka Cabins (☎ 8975 4838; www.matarankacabins.bigpondhosting.com; Martins Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/20, cabin d \$90; 🏠) Located on a tropical fruit farm a few hundred metres from the Bitter Springs car park, this place has a front yard housing an amazing colony of termite mounds. Camping is in quiet bush surrounds, and each modern, self-contained cabin has an open-plan layout and a small deck.

Mataranka Homestead Resort (☎ 8975 4544; Homestead Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$18/22, dm \$17, d from \$90; 🏠) Just 100m from the thermal pool, this 'resort' is more like an outback pub, but with far more accommodation options. Dorms are clean but scruffy and are fan

cooled; air-con is reserved for motel rooms and cabins. The resort bistro is in the bar area, so you can down a few beers over a steak, fish or chicken dish (mains \$12 to \$22; open for lunch and dinner).

Jalmurark Campground (John Hauser Dr; adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16) This tranquil camping ground is at 12 Mile Yards on the Roper River. It's 12km down John Hauser Dr, accessed from the road to Mataranka Homestead Resort. There's a walking track leading 4km to Mataranka Falls. You can hire canoes here from \$6 per hour.

Stockyard Gallery (☎ 8975 4530; Roper Tce; meals \$5-10; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Framed by bougainvillea and other blooming plants, this fine gallery-café serves light meals like toasted sandwiches, muffins and cheesecake. Browse the contemporary paintings or inquire about local information, as this is also the town's de facto visitor information centre.

Getting There & Away

Greyhound Australia (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) buses stop in Mataranka en route to Katherine and Alice Springs. **Travel North** (☎ 1800 089 103; www.travelnorth.com.au) runs half-day tours (adult/child \$85/70, including lunch) from Katherine.

BARKLY TABLELAND & GULF COUNTRY Roper Highway

Not far south of Mataranka on the Stuart Hwy, the mostly sealed single-lane Roper Hwy strikes 175km eastwards to **Roper Bar**, crossing the paperbark- and pandanus-lined Roper River where freshwater meets saltwater. It's passable only in the Dry and keen fisher folk stop here, with accommodation, fuel and supplies available at the **Roper Bar Store** (☎ 08-8975 4636; unpowered sites \$16, donga d \$65). Roper Bar is an access point to both Borroloola (head south along the rough-going Nathan River Rd through Limmen National Park – high-clearance with two spares required) and into southeastern Arnhem Land. Continuing east along the highway for 45km leads to the Aboriginal community of Ngukurr, home to 900 people from nine different language groups and cultures. This cultural diversity informs the unique works on show and available to buy from the **Ngukurr Arts Centre** (☎ 08-8975 4656; www.ngukurrarts.com; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri); no permit is required to visit the centre.

Carpentaria & Tablelands Highways

Just south of Daly Waters, the sealed Carpentaria Hwy (Hwy 1) heads 378km east to Borroloola, near the Gulf of Carpentaria, and one of the NT's top barramundi fishing spots. After 267km the Carpentaria Hwy meets the sealed Tablelands Hwy at Cape Crawford. At this intersection is the legendary **Heart-break Hotel** (☎ 08-8975 9928; unpowered/powerd sites \$12/20, dm/s/d \$40/65/75; 🏠). Pitch the tent on the shaded grassy lawn, and then park yourself on the wide veranda with a cold beer. Breakfast, lunch and dinner (meals \$10 to \$22) are available.

From here it's a desolate 374km south across the Barkly Tableland to the Barkly Hwy and **Barkly Homestead Roadhouse** (☎ 08-8964 4549; www.barklyhomestead.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/24, budget s/d \$65/75, motel s/d \$85/100; 🏠). Then it's 210km west to Tennant Creek and 252km east to the Queensland border.

Borroloola

☎ 08 / pop 700

Borroloola is akin to heaven for fishing fans, but unless you're keen on baiting a hook (the barramundi season peaks from February to April) or doing remote road trips, then you'll be driving a long way for its own sake – which could be worse. The town's colourful history is displayed at **Borroloola Museum** (☎ 8975 4149; Robinson Rd; admission \$2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), within the 1887 police station.

Cape Crawford Tourism (☎ 8975 9611; www.capecrawfordtourism.com.au; tours \$200) runs three-hour tours, including a helicopter ride to see the otherwise inaccessible Lost City sandstone formations.

The local pub, **Borroloola Hotel** (☎ 8975 8766; Robinson Rd; meals \$8-26; ☎ lunch & dinner), serves the usual pub fare of burgers, chops and mixed grills within a lounge bar that's heavily reinforced with steel mesh. Accommodation is available (singles/doubles \$60/75).

Just down from the pub, the **McArthur River Caravan Park** (☎ 8975 8734; Robinson Rd; unpowered/powerd sites \$18/22, cabins \$100; 🏠) has clean, shaded sites and cabins. Fishing tours can be organised from here.

MATARANKA TO TENNANT CREEK Larrimah

☎ 08 / pop 13

Once upon a time, the railway line from Darwin came as far as Birdum, 8km south of tiny Larrimah. Its **museum** (Mahoney St; admission

by donation; ☎ 7am-9pm), in the former telegraph repeater station opposite the Larrimah Hotel, tells of the town's involvement with the railway and WWII.

Larrimah Hotel & Caravan Park (☎ 8975 9931; Mahoney St; unpowered/powerd sites \$6/10, s/d \$28/40; 🏠) is a cheerfully rustic and quirky pub offering very basic rooms, rather bare camping sites and meals. **Fran's Devonshire Teahouse** (☎ 8975 9945; Stuart Hwy; meals \$4-12; ☎ breakfast & lunch) is in Fran's house, where she hand-makes pies and pastries. Devotees travel long distances down the Stuart Hwy for these. It's hard to miss due to its tangle of roadside signage.

Daly Waters

☎ 08 / pop 25

About 3km off the highway and 160km south of Mataranka is Daly Waters, an important staging post in the early days of aviation – Amy Johnson landed here on her monster flight from England to Australia in 1930. But most come (and mostly backpacker buses come) to Daly Waters to take the so-called 'waters' at the **Daly Waters Pub** (☎ 8975 9927; unpowered/powerd sites \$10/15, s/d \$35/50, cabins \$65-95; 🏠 🏠). The walls are plastered in foreign currency, T-shirts, farming equipment, underwear...pretty much everything except wallpaper. It also lays claim to being the 'oldest pub in the Territory', as its liquor licence has been valid since 1893. It's a highly social place with reasonable accommodation and a busy kitchen (meals \$5 to \$18).

Daly Waters to Three Ways

Heading south, you encounter the fascinating one-time droving town of **Newcastle Waters**, 3km west of the highway. Its atmospheric, historic buildings include the Junction Hotel, cobbled together from abandoned windmills in 1932. South of the cattle town of **Elliott**, the land just gets drier and drier and the vegetation sparser. The mesmerising sameness breaks at **Renner Springs**, where the generally accepted dividing line between the seasonally Wet Top End and the Dry Centre exists.

Banka Banka (☎ 08-8964 4511; bankabankastn@bigpond.com; Stuart Hwy; unpowered sites adult/child \$6/3), a historic cattle station 100km north of Tennant Creek, supplies a grassy camping area, marked walking tracks (one leading to a tranquil waterhole) and a small kiosk selling refreshments, including beer. You'll need to be self-sufficient for meals.

HAPPY CAMPERVANNING HOW-TO

Putting around the NT presents a few unique considerations for campervanners. So, if you've just driven in from Queensland or you're at the start of your northern odyssey, be prepared for:

- no speed limits on unpopulated parts of the Stuart Hwy – never mind those flashes whooshing by on your right; sit back and enjoy the scenery.
- the 'friendly finger' from fellow campervanners – raising the index finger from the steering wheel to acknowledge a kindred spirit.
- driving during the day to best avoid wildlife that wanders onto roads, including crocodiles who've become road victims in recent times in Kakadu.
- a few parks (or parts thereof) and routes (eg the Mereenie Loop; see p857) being out of bounds – accessible by 4WD only.

Three Ways

Three Ways, 537km north of Alice, is the junction of the Stuart and Barkly Hwys, from where you can head south to Alice, north to Darwin (988km) or east to Mt Isa in Queensland (643km). **Threeways Roadhouse** (☎ 08-8962 2744; Stuart Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$16/20, donga s/d \$40/50, motel d \$80-100; 🚰 🚰) acts as an information centre, and has a bar and restaurant (meals \$6 to \$18), fuel and decent accommodation.

TENNANT CREEK

☎ 08 / pop 3010

Tennant Creek town services an enormous region made up of million-acre cattle stations and Aboriginal communities. The Warumungu people know Tennant Creek as Jurnkurakurr, the intersection of a number of Dreaming tracks.

Local lore speaks of Tennant Creek being founded on beer: first settled when the drivers of a broken-down beer-laden wagon settled in to consume the freight. The truth is somewhat more prosaic: Tennant Creek was founded on gold in the early 1930s, with mining leases only ceasing operations in the last year or two. Though not representative of the broader community, Tennant Creek wears an air of despair, with many buildings either in a state of disrepair or having boarded-up windows and security screens.

Information

Police station (☎ 8962 4444; Paterson St)

Tennant Creek hospital (☎ 8962 4399; Schmidt St)

Visitor information centre (☎ 8962 3388; www.barklytourism.com.au; Peko Rd; 🕒 9am-5pm May-Sep, to 5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat Oct-Apr) Located 2km east of town at Battery Hill.

Sights & Activities

The contemporary focus of the exhibitions in the **Nyinkka Nyunyu** (☎ 8962 2221; www.nyinkka.nyunyu.com.au; Paterson St; adult/child \$10/5; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) gallery and museum make this one of the best cultural centres in the Centre. Excellent dioramas, prints and paintings produced by local artists show Aboriginal culture as a living culture, rather than a static one that stopped evolving after the boomerang. Dioramas depict the night patrol bus or the experience of working on local mines. These mingle with other displays of contemporary art and old artefacts – some recently returned by state museums. The attached shop stocks highly prized paintings, plus postcards and more.

The artwork at Nyinkka Nyunyu comes from the **Julalikari Arts Centre** (☎ 8962 2163; www.julalikariarts.com; North Stuart Hwy; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), or 'Pink Palace' – a women's arts centre where the ladies come to produce their inimitable work; visitors are welcome.

Gold-bearing ore was originally crushed and treated at what's now **Battery Hill Mining Centre** (☎ 8962 1281; Peko Rd; tours adult/child/family \$20/12/52; 🕒 9am-5pm), 2km east of town. Tours of the gold battery go underground at regular intervals and take about an hour. For \$5 extra you can pan for gold, and \$5 more gains you entry to the Minerals Museum, for geology buffs, and the Social History Museum, tracing local life up to the '60s. While you're here, ask for the key to the old **Telegraph Station**, which is just off the highway about 12km north of town. The green-roofed stone buildings look as isolated and forlorn as they must have 135 years ago when they were built. This is one of only four of the original 11 stations remain-

ing in the Territory (the others are at Barrow Creek, Alice Springs and Powell Creek). The station's telegraph functions ceased in 1935 when a new office opened.

A bicycle track runs from town north along the highway for 5km to the **Mary Ann Dam** turn-off – a top spot for a dip or picnic.

Sleeping & Eating

Safari (☎ 8962 2207; Davidson St; dm \$18, backpacker d \$40, motel d \$85) The motel and backpacker building face off on either side of Davidson St, with reception in the motel. Though the shared kitchen, lounge and bathrooms at the backpackers are a tad tatty, it's good value. Motel rooms over the road are basically fitted, with phone, TV and fridge.

Desert Sands (☎ 8962 1346; www.desertsands.com.au; Stuart Hwy; d \$85-95; 🚰 🚰) This multistorey complex at the southern end of town offers terrific value for money. The budget prices snag you a scrupulously clean room with its own fully equipped kitchen, TV (with in-house movies) and a bathroom with a washing machine.

Bluestone Motor Inn (☎ 8962 2617; www.bluestonemotorinn.com.au; Stuart Hwy; d \$100; 🚰 🚰) The schmickest place in town, the Bluestone has handsomely furnished rooms set back from the street and padded with well-established plants.

Outback Caravan Park (☎ 8962 2459; Peko Rd; unpowered/power sites \$18/22, cabins \$55-80; 🚰 🚰) Lots of trees and birdsong distinguish this friendly caravan park, which has a camp kitchen and a well-stocked kiosk. You may even be treated to some bush poetry and bush tucker, courtesy of Jimmy Hooker, at 7.30pm (\$2).

Anna's Restaurant (☎ 8962 2617; www.bluestonemotorinn.com.au; Stuart Hwy; 🕒 dinner) At Bluestone Motor Inn, Anna's is super: beer and lemon myrtle-battered barra or perhaps salmon-and-watermelon salad.

Ta Rah Cafe (☎ 8962 3790; Transit Centre, 151 Paterson St; meals \$7-14; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) Inside the Transit Centre, this pretty place greets passengers with espresso, cakes, gourmet pies, berry crepes and roast of the day. It's by far the best option for brekky.

Memories Restaurant (☎ 8962 2474; Tennant Creek Memorial Club; Schmidt St; mains \$15-18; 🕒 lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily) The Club is like a bunker (no windows); inside is a refuge for families, pokie players and casual drinkers. You might just be able to see over your piled-high plate, stacked with steak or fish and chips, to the

wall photos remembering the Queen's 1963 visit and the mayor meeting Di and Charles in 1983.

Getting There & Away

All long-distance buses stop at the Transit Centre on Paterson St. **Greyhound** (www.greyhound.com) tickets are sold at the Thrifty counter. Fares from Tennant Creek to Alice Springs/Darwin are \$145/200.

To rent a car, contact **Thrifty** (☎ 8962 2358; Transit Centre, 151 Paterson St) or **Hertz** (☎ 8962 2459; Outback Caravan Park, Peko Rd). Bike rental is available at **Bridgestone** (☎ 8962 2361; 52 Paterson St) for \$5/10 per half-/full day.

TENNANT CREEK TO ALICE SPRINGS

The huge granite boulders in precarious piles beside the Stuart Hwy, 105km south of Tennant Creek, are called the **Devil's Marbles**; Karlwe Karlwe is their Warumungu name, for whom the site is associated with many stories and traditions. According to scientists, the 'marbles' are the rounded remains of molten lava eroded over aeons. A 20-minute self-guided walk loops around the main site; look for bottle-shaped mud nests of fairy martins on the underside of the overhanging boulders. The **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) has remarkably hard ground, pit toilets and fireplaces.

At Wauchope (*war-kup*), 10km south of the Devil's Marbles, are the well-kept rooms of the **Wauchope Hotel** (☎ 08-8964 1963; Stuart Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$12/16, s \$30, d \$35-70; 🚰 🚰). The budget rooms are dongas and the costlier rooms more spacious, with en suite. Meals from the restaurant (dinner \$15 to \$20; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) are more than satisfactory.

At **Wycliffe Well Roadhouse & Holiday Park** (☎ 1800 222 195, 08-8964 1966; Stuart Hwy; unpowered/power sites \$20/25, donga d \$35-60, cabins \$95; 🚰 🚰 🚰), 17km south of Wauchope, you can fill up with fuel and food (dinner \$15 to \$20; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) or stay and spot UFOs that apparently fly over with astonishing regularity. The place is decorated with alien figures and newspaper clippings ('That UFO Was Chasing Us!'), with an international doll collection in the back room to boot. On a more down-to-earth note, the park has a pleasant lawn camp site, a kids' playground, a café and an outstanding range of international beer.

Heading south, you reach the **Barrow Creek Hotel** (☎ 08-8956 9753; Stuart Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$6/10, s from \$25, d from \$50), one of the highway's oddball outback pubs. In the tradition of shearers who'd write their name on a bank-note and pin it to the wall to ensure they could afford a drink when next they passed through, travellers have left notes, and photos and bumper stickers and knick-knacks... Dinner is available (meals \$12 to \$18).

The highway continues through **Ti Tree**, where you'll find the **Red Sand** (☎ 08-8956 9738; www.redsandart.com.au; Stuart Hwy) art gallery and café. The work comes mainly from Utopia, a community northeast of Alice Springs set up on traditional land reclaimed in 1977 from the former Utopia station. The community has nurtured some fine indigenous artists, particularly female painters.

Twelve kilometres south of Ti Tree, the **Red Centre Farm** (Shatto Mango; ☎ 08-8956 9828; www.redcentrefarm.com; Stuart Hwy; ☎ 8am-7pm) sells unique Territory-style wine – made from mangoes. If that sounds a bit hard to swallow, try the other mango products, such as toppings, marinades and ice cream.

Aileron (☎ 08-8956 9703; www.aileronroadhouse.com.au; Stuart Hwy; unpowered sites \$17, dm \$30, motel s/d \$80/90; ☎), 135km north of Alice, continues the grand Australian tradition of building very big things by the side of the road to pull up drivers. Naked Charlie Quartpot, the Anmatjere man, cuts a fine figure at the back of the property. The owner's personal collection of Namatjira watercolours (at least 10 by Albert) is displayed around the roadhouse's bar and dining area. With all that entertainment, it's only polite to stay for a meal (\$12 to \$22) or at least admire the art over a drink.

About 70km north of Alice, the Plenty Hwy heads off to the east towards the **Harts Range**. The main reason to detour is to fossick in

the gemfields about 78km east of the Stuart Hwy, which are well known for garnets and zircons. You're guaranteed to get lucky at the popular **Gemtree Caravan Park** (☎ 08-8956 9855; www.gemtree.com.au; Gemtree; unpowered/powerd sites \$18/22, cabins \$65).

ALICE SPRINGS

☎ 08 / pop 26,490

The thriving outback town of Alice rises out of an endless expanse of red dirt and rugged ranges from all sides. What began 135 years ago as a simple telegraph station has developed into a modern low-rise metropolis. It's famous for its remote location, and many local business operators have a franchise on the outback look, dressing buildings with corrugated iron and other rustic touches. It's the main town to that most popular monolith to the south, so tourists can outnumber locals six to one. Though the saying goes that residents only qualify as 'locals' if they've seen the Todd River flow three times – which can take at least 20 years.

Alice is populated by Aussie characters (where else would you find the biggest boat race on a dry river bed?) and is a national hub for Aboriginal art, with a glut of galleries and arts-related events. And, in case all those cafés and shopping centres make you forget how isolated it is, a number of sights serve as pertinent reminders, such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service Base and the School of the Air.

Though Pine Gap's not on the tourist radar, a significant pocket of Alice's population works for the CIA at this nearby US installation. The highly secretive satellite-tracking station has been listening in to the world since 1966. Most of the estimated 1000 workers,

apparently, call themselves gardeners. And, judging by all those manicured lawns fronting cosy suburban houses, they are quite good gardeners too.

ORIENTATION

The centre of Alice Springs is a compact and uniform grid just five streets wide, bounded by the (usually dry) Todd River on one side and the Stuart Hwy on the other.

Todd St is the main drag, and it's a pedestrian mall from Wills Tce to Gregory Tce. Greyhound Australia buses pull in on the corner of Gregory and Railway Tces.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Big Kangaroo Books (Map p842; ☎ 8953 2137; 79 Todd Mall) Lots of local literature and nonfiction titles, including guidebooks and autobiography.

Boomerang Book Exchange (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5843; 2 Gregory Tce) A broad assortment of preloved books.

Dymocks (Map p842; ☎ 8952 9111; Alice Plaza, Todd Mall) Everything from popular fiction to esoteric nonfiction (such as palmistry).

Helene's Books & Things (Map p842; ☎ 8953 2465; 113 Todd St) Bursting with well-thumbed secondhand paperbacks.

Emergency & Medical Services

Alice Springs Hospital (Map p840; ☎ 8951 7777; Gap Rd)

Ambulance (☎ 000)

Fire (☎ 000)

Police station (Map p842; ☎ 000, 8951 8888; Parsons St)

Internet Access

Alice's internet cafés charge between \$3 and \$5 per hour.

Adventcha Net (Map p842; ☎ 8952 2255; Shop 3, 79 Todd Mall) Spiffy new machines.

Backpackers World Travel (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0666; cnr Gregory Tce & Todd St)

Todd Internet Cafe (Map p842; ☎ 8953 8355; 82 Todd St)

Money

Major banks with ATMs are located in and around Todd Mall in the town centre.

Post

Post office (Map p842; ☎ 13 13 18; 31-33 Hartley St; ☎ 8.15am-5pm Mon-Fri) All the usual services are available here.

Tourist Information

Visitor information centre (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5800; www.centralaustralian tourism.com; Gregory Tce; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) This very helpful centre can load you up with stacks of brochures and the free visitors guide. Updated weather forecasts and road conditions are posted on the wall, and national-parks information is also available. Central Australian Tourism also has a counter at the airport.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Avoid walking alone late at night on poorly lit backstreets. Catch a taxi back to your accommodation if you're out late.

SIGHTS

Alice Springs Desert Park

Like a kind of Noah's Ark, the **Alice Springs Desert Park** (☎ 8951 8788; www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au; Larapinta Dr; adult/child/family \$18/9/40; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) has gathered up all the creatures of central Australia and put them on display in one accessible location. So, should the travel itinerary not allow weeks of camping in desert, woodlands and river ecologies to glimpse a spangled grunter or splendid fairy-wren, come here, where sightings are guaranteed.

The predominantly open-air exhibits faithfully recreate the animals' natural environment – with the exception of handy little information boards that explain seasonal effects and Aboriginal management. The excellent nocturnal house includes threatened species such as the bilby and ghost bat. Owls, eagles and other birds of prey swoop for food daily at 10am and 3.30pm in the Nature Theatre.

Audio guides are available in English, German and Japanese.

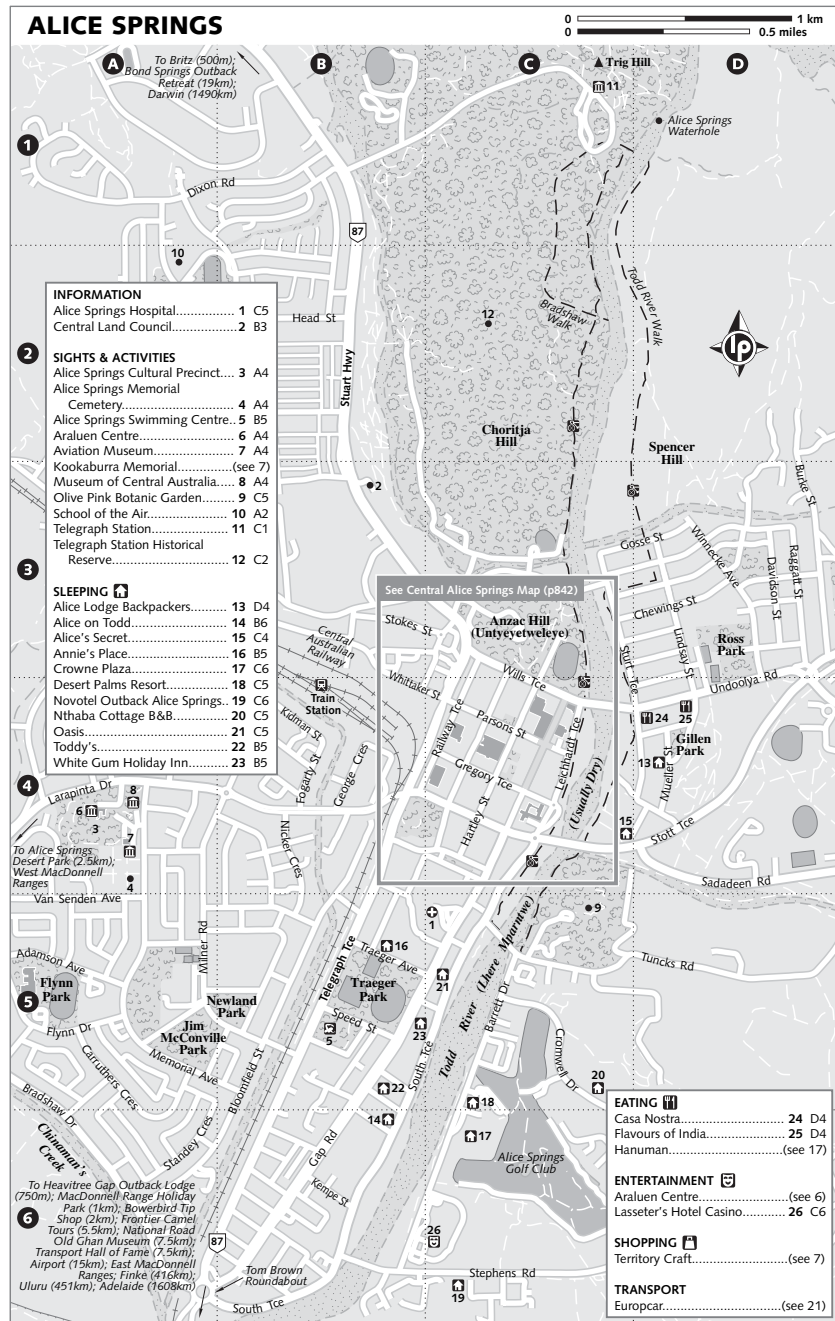
It's an easy 2.5km cycle out to the park. Alternatively, **Desert Park Transfers** (☎ 8950 3030; adult/child \$30/24) does return trips; the price includes the park entrance fee.

Alice Springs Cultural Precinct

The **precinct** (Map p840; ☎ 8951 1120; www.ascp.com.au; cnr Larapinta Dr & Memorial Ave; precinct pass adult/child/family \$9/6/25; ☎ most attractions 10am-5pm) combines a natural-history collection, a stellar arts centre, a cemetery, a sculpture garden, sacred sites and an aviation museum, all connected by a walking path. You can wander around freely outside, accessing the cemetery and grounds, but a precinct pass provides entry to the exhibitions and displays.

BONZA BACKROAD: TANAMI TRACK

The Tanami is a rewarding trip for travellers wanting to veer off the beaten track. Heading 1000km through some of the Territory's most remote country, the track connects with Halls Creek in WA, with a few roadhouses along the way. The Tanami Desert is the traditional homeland of the Warlpiri people and home to the **Bush Mechanics** (www.bushmechanics.com), famous for their ability to resuscitate bush-bombs; they can fix a flat tyre with a shoelace and fashion a new clutch plate from an old boomerang. Permits aren't required for travel on the Tanami Track or to visit the Yuendumu community (population 740), about 220km up the track. The community arts centre, **Warlukurlangu** (☎ 08-8956 4133; www.warlu.com; Yuendumu; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri), is a locally owned venture representing over 150 artists working primarily in acrylics.



ARALUEN CENTRE

Alice Springs' **art gallery** (Map p840) shows off an enviable collection of works spanning decades. Permanent exhibitions include the Albert Namatjira Gallery – the Territory's largest collection of the famous watercolourist's works – plus paintings by Albert's mentor Rex Battarbee and other artists from the Hermannsburg School. Other galleries exhibit acrylics from the central desert region, plus European-style oils and outdoor sculptures.

MUSEUM OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Deftly designed displays at this **museum** (Map p840) recall the days of megafauna – when hippo-sized wombats and 3m-tall flightless birds roamed the woodlands of 20,000 to 50,000 years ago. Meticulously pinned insects, pieces of meteorite, stuffed reptiles and marsupials, and indigenous artefacts provide a window into the Centre's past.

Upstairs, the **Strehlow Research Centre** (☎ 8951 1111) commemorates the anthropological work of Professor Theodor George Henry Strehlow among the Arrernte people, particularly at the Hermannsburg Mission where he was born, with a small display of Arrernte artefacts.

KOOKABURRA MEMORIAL & AVIATION MUSEUM

A small circular building houses the wreck and story of the **Kookaburra** (Map p840), a tiny plane forced to make an emergency landing in the Tanami Desert in 1929 while searching for Charles Kingsford Smith and his copilot, Charles Ulm, who had gone down in their plane, the *Southern Cross*. Keith Anderson and Bob Hitchcock perished in the desert, while Kingsford Smith and Ulm were rescued.

The nearby **Aviation Museum** (Map p840) is in the Connellan Hangar, Alice's original aerodrome. There are exhibits on pioneer aviation in the Territory and, of course, the famous Royal Flying Doctor Service (the old plane out the front belonged to John Flynn, founder of the service).

ALICE SPRINGS MEMORIAL CEMETERY

The **cemetery** (Map p840) is adjacent to the aviation museum and contains the graves of some prominent locals. The most famous is that of **Albert Namatjira** (1902–59); it's the sandstone one in the middle section to the left as you enter the cemetery. The headstone features a terracotta tile mural of three of Namatjira's

Dreaming sites in the MacDonnell Ranges. Other graves located in the cemetery include that of **Harold Lasseter** (1880–1931), the eccentric prospector whose fervent search for the folkloric reef of gold (Lasseter's Reef) claimed his life. (Ironically, the casino is named after Harry.) The grave of anthropologist **Olive Pink** (1884–1975), who campaigned for Aboriginal rights, is also here.

Olive Pink Botanic Garden

There's no room for ornament in the hardy native shrubs and trees that thrive in this semi-arid **botanic garden** (Map p840; ☎ 8952 2154; www.opbg.com.au; Tunks Rd; admission free, donations appreciated; ☼ 10am–6pm). Living with drought and heat, intermittent burning, poor soils and grazing (animal and human) requires a specific set of skills from desert plants, which usually necessitates thorns instead of flowers. A meandering walkway leads through the garden, which is signposted with plant information and significant details. From Meyers Hill there are fine views over Alice and Ntjarlkarle Tyaneme – one of the first sites created by the caterpillar ancestors (the name indicates that this was the place where caterpillars crossed the river). The Garden Café (gourmet sandwiches and tarts) and small visitors centre are both open until 4pm.

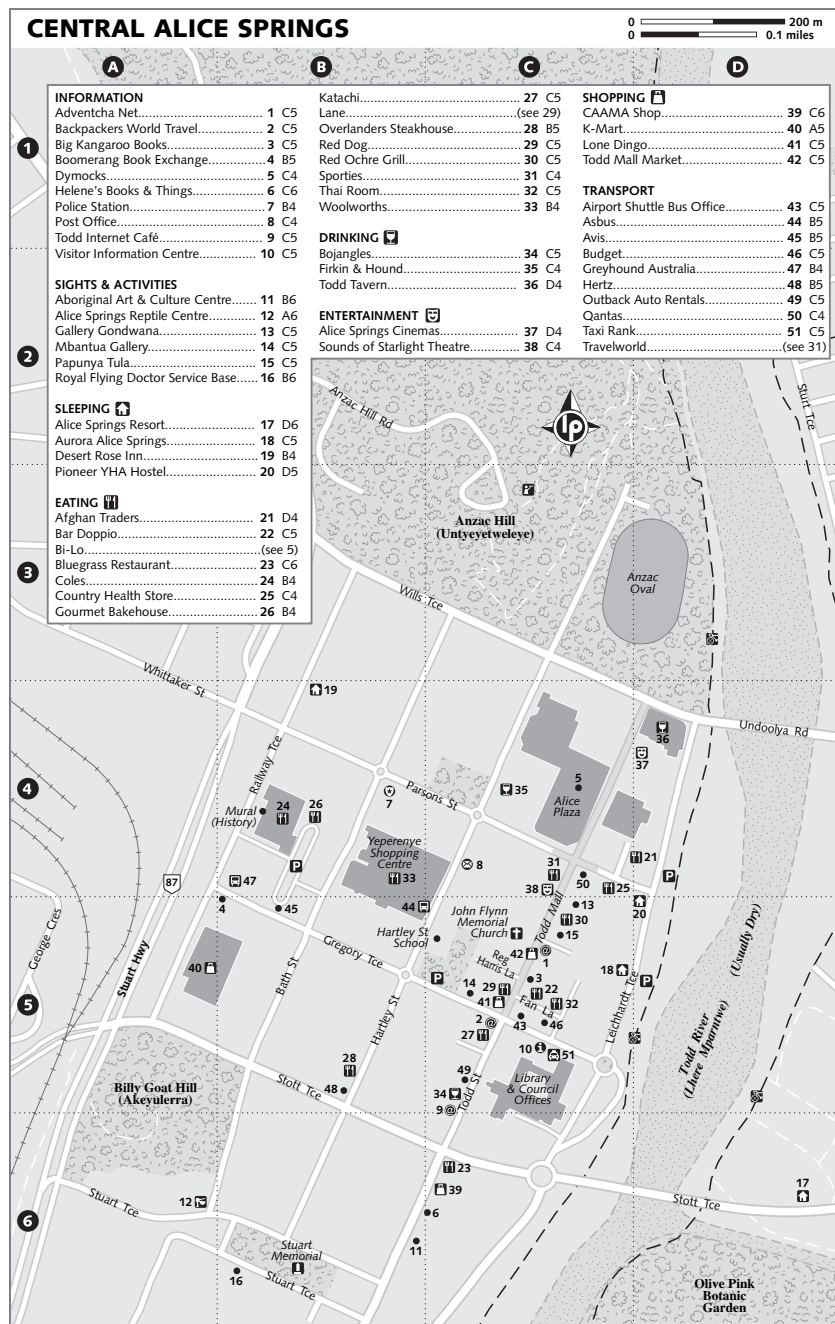
Galleries

Alice is the centre for Aboriginal arts from all over central Australia. Araluen (left) is the Alice's main public gallery, but there are plenty of commercial galleries that exhibit work.

The Western Desert art movement began at **Papunya Tula** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 4731; www.papunya.tula.com.au; 78 Todd St; ☼ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) in 1971, and today this Aboriginal-owned centre displays some of the most sought-after art. Papunya Tula works with around 150 artists, most painting at the centre's Kintore Studio.

The **Gallery Gondwana** (Map p842; ☎ 8953 1577; www.gallerygondwana.com.au; 43 Todd Mall; ☼ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat) has a quality range of works from leading Central and Western Desert artists, including work from Yuedumu and Utopia.

With an enormous collection of works from Utopia, plus pots from Hermannsburg and art books, **Mbantua Gallery** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5571; www.mbantua.com.au; 71 Gregory Tce; ☼ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–5pm Sat) makes for a great wander. The



permanent collection upstairs (adult/child \$4.40/3.30) interprets Aboriginal mythology and customs, and displays more paintings.

Royal Flying Doctor Service Base

These dedicated doctors make house calls in an area covering around 2.3 million sq km. So, it's for more than a headache that they fly out to remote stations and communities. Entry to Alice's **Royal Flying Doctor Service base** (RFDS; Map p842; ☎ 8952 1129; www.flyingdoctor.net; Stuart Tce; adult/child \$7/3.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is on a half-hour tour; they run continuously all day. Tours include a 10-minute video, a squiz at an operational control room, and a wander through a museum with historical displays that include ancient medical gear. The café (meals \$5 to \$15, open 9am to 4.45pm Monday to Saturday) in the original communications base serves great pies, salads and desserts.

Alice Springs Reptile Centre

Ever wondered how, in the movies, they happen to be in the right place at the right time to film that lizard scampering across screen? It's a setup. And many of the stars are here, in their dressing rooms, glass-fronted for us all to see. The **reptile centre** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 8900; www.reptilecentre.com.au; 9 Stuart Tce; adult/child \$12/10; ☎ 9.30am-5pm) provides a rare opportunity to see the enormous, magnificently patterned perentie lizard, plus thorny devils, bluetongues, bearded lizards and pythons. A purpose-built fossil cave evidences reptiles' long history with the land. Handling takes place at 11am, 1pm and 3.30pm.

School of the Air

Using a combination of satellite-linked webcams and HF radio, the **School of the Air** (Map p840; ☎ 8951 6834; www.asso.nt.edu.au; 80 Head St; adult/child/family \$6.50/4/16; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-4.30pm Sun) broadcasts lessons to children living on remote outback stations – over an area of 1.3 million sq km. Informal tours of the facility (included in admission price) begin with an interesting video screening, and you can watch a live broadcast (8.30am to 2pm Monday to Friday) during school terms.

Telegraph Station Historical Reserve

Laying the Overland Telegraph Line across Australia's harsh Centre was no easy task, as you'll discover at the small museum at the

evocative **Telegraph Station** (Map p840; ☎ 8952 3993; Heritage Dr; adult/child \$7.50/4.30; ☎ 8am-5pm). The old stone station dates to the early 1870s and operated until 1932. It later served as a welfare home for Aboriginal children of mixed descent, until 1963. Guided tours operate between 9am and 4.30pm (April to October); phone for times. There's also an informative station map that guides you through restored homestead buildings, a blacksmith shop and the telegraph station itself. The spring called Alice (Thereyurre to the Arrernte Aboriginal people), a semipermanent waterhole in the Todd River after which the town is named, is just behind the station. It's all set on 450 hectares of shady land embellished with picnic tables, free BBQs and walking trails.

It's an easy 4km walk or cycle north to the station from Todd Mall; follow the path on the western side of the riverbed.

Old Ghan Museum & Heritage Railway

Behind every good railway museum there's a team of dedicated volunteers. The **Old Ghan Museum** (☎ 8955 5047; Norris Bell Ave; museum adult/child/family \$6/4/15, train trip \$25/15/50; ☎ 9am-5pm) is no exception, displaying a collection of *Ghan* locomotives and carriages, plus memorabilia. The museum fires up an old engine to take visitors down the single-gauge track and back, on Sunday at 11am (returns 12.30pm).

The museum's located 10km south of Alice Springs on the Stuart Hwy.

National Road Transport Hall of Fame

Transport tragics, the **National Road Transport Hall of Fame** (☎ 8952 7161; Norris Bell Ave; adult/child/family \$10/5/22; ☎ 9am-5pm) is for you. Check out the chassis on the first Kenworth to come off the production line in 1971, and learn all you've ever wanted to know about road transport in the Territory. The enormous shed is jammed with restored Macks and a vintage car collection, as well as a couple of road trains and the bush-basher used by Lasseter's descendants in an unsuccessful attempt to find his elusive gold reef.

ACTIVITIES Ballooning

Fancy sailing through the desert skies at sunrise? **Outback Ballooning** (☎ 1800 809 790, 8952 8723; www.outbackballooning.com.au; flights \$255) floats above Alice for 30 minutes, which includes breakfast and transfer from your accommodation.

THE GHAN

Cutting across the middle of Australia on the *Ghan* is one of Australia's great railway adventures. Choosing to choo-choo up the Centre provides that warm, fuzzy feeling from travelling on a relatively sustainable means of transport, but it also puts you on the path of an extraordinary saga that started in 1877.

It took more than 50 years for the Adelaide–Darwin railway line to reach Alice Springs, with the final 1500km of track to Darwin only ready for an inaugural trip in 2004. The reason the project was so protracted was the placement of the original line. Because all the creek beds north of Marree were bone dry, and because nobody had seen rain, it was presumed that there wouldn't be rain in the future. In fact, the initial stretch of line was laid across a flood plain and, when the rain came, even though it soon dried up, the line was simply washed away. In the century or so that the original *Ghan* line existed, this was a regular occurrence.

Compounding the problem were the facts that the line's foundations were flimsy, the grading was too steep and the track meandered hopelessly, which explains why the old *Ghan's* top speed was a flat-out 30km/h. Early rail travellers went from Adelaide to Marree on the broad-gauge line, changed there to narrow gauge as far as Oodnadatta, then made the final journey to Alice Springs by camel train. Afghani cameleers pioneered outback transport and it was from them that the *Ghan* took its name.

In 1929 the line was extended to Alice Springs, but the *Ghan* was still chronically slow and unreliable. Worst of all, heavy rainfall could strand it at either end or even in the middle. Parachute drops of supplies to stranded train travellers became part of outback lore and on one occasion the *Ghan* rolled in 10 days late.

By 1980 a new standard-gauge line had been laid from Tarcoola (northwest of Port Augusta) to Alice Springs, in a spot where rain wouldn't wash it out. In 1982 the old *Ghan* made its last run and the old line was subsequently torn up. The most recent hiccup was in 2006, when the *Ghan* collided with a truck at a level crossing, damaging the line and disrupting services for months.

Bushwalking

Going bush around Alice is what it's all about: being leanly self-sufficient in the big-desert country. For a town taster, several strolls radiate from the Olive Pink Botanic Garden and the Telegraph Station, which marks the start of the first stage of the Larapinta Trail (see p853).

Alice Springs Bushwalkers Association (☎ 8953 1956; <http://home.austarnet.com.au/longwalk>) is an informal group of local bushwalkers that schedules a wide variety of weekend walks in the area; check out the website.

Camel Riding

Guided by their Afghani masters, camels were the main form of transport through the desert before roads and railways. Subsequently left to their own devices, there are now 30,000 camels roaming wild, so there's a plentiful supply for camel farms.

Frontier Camel Tours (☎ 8953 0444; www.camelstours.com.au; Ross Hwy; 1hr rides adult/child \$45/25; ☎ 9am–5pm) stages one-hour rides, with extra options to lollap at sunset, in the morning with breakfast (\$85/50 adult/child) or the evening including dinner (\$110/80). Prices include transfers

from Alice, and you're also free to wander around the mini-museum on site.

Pyndan Camel Tracks (☎ 0416-170 164; www.cameltracks.com) offers one-hour rides (\$35/20 adult/child), as well as half-day jaunts (\$80 per person) and overnight plods (\$140 per person all-inclusive) where you can roll out the wagon and sleep under the southern sky.

Cycling

Alice is a flat town, so grab a bike and plenty of water and be off with you: down the track along the Todd River to the Telegraph Station, out to the Cultural Precinct or the Alice Springs Desert Park, or along the track to Simpsons Gap. **Alice Bike Hire** (☎ 0407-324 697) offers half-/full-day rental for \$15/25, including delivery and collection, plus a lock and a helmet. Several accommodation places also hire out bikes.

Swimming

If the pool at your lodgings has become too familiar, consider using the lap lane at the **Alice Springs Swimming Centre** (Map p840; ☎ 8953 4633; Speed St; adult/child \$3.30/1.70; ☎ 6am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat & Sun).

WALKING TOUR

Hidden among the shopping plazas and shop-fronts are a number of heritage buildings that testify to the Alice's outback beginnings. Starting in Todd Mall, you'll find the **John Flynn Memorial Church (1)**, built in 1956 and named after the man who founded the flying doctor service. Next door, the theme continues at **Adelaide House (2)**; (☎ 8952 1856; Todd Mall; adult/child \$5/2; ☎ 10am–4pm Mon–Fri, to noon Sat), built in the 1920s as the town's first hospital and now a memorial museum to Flynn. Walk north and take a left on Parsons St. On the left is the squat **Residency (3)**; cnr Hartley & Parsons Sts; admission by donation; ☎ 10am–2pm Mon–Fri), dating from 1926–27. It was originally the home of central Australia's first governor and has been refurbished to reflect the period.

Across the road is the Old Courthouse, which was in use until 1980 and now houses the **National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame (4)**; (☎ 8952 9006; www.pioneerwomen.com.au; 27 Hartley St; adult/child \$2.20/free; ☎ 10am–5pm Feb–mid-Dec), a thought-provoking tribute to pioneering women from all over Australia, with a special section on outback heroines.

Turn left onto Hartley St and walk 150m; just south of the car park is the **Hartley St School (5)**; (☎ 8952 5950; admission free; ☎ 10.30am–2.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–12.30pm Sat) and National Trust office. Historical displays here include a re-created early classroom.

Back on Parsons St, to the west, is the original **Stuart Town Gaol (6)**; Parsons St; adult/child \$2.20/free; ☎ 10am–12.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–noon Sat Mar–



WALK FACTS

Start John Flynn Memorial Church
Finish Railway Tce mural
Distance 1km
Duration 1 hour

(Nov), squeezed between the modern law courts and the police station. It was the town's main jail from 1909 to 1938; if you walk down the path behind the jail, a mural tells the history of local policing. Continue along Parsons St, turn left at Railway Tce and you'll come to another giant **mural (7)** on the back wall of the supermarket, which depicts the history of Alice Springs.

ALICE SPRINGS FOR CHILDREN

If the idea of handling a 3m-long python at the **Alice Springs Reptile Centre** (p843) doesn't charm the kids, nothing will. **Alice Springs Desert Park** (p839) has an impressive collection of creatures on show, or kids can ride high on a humped friend on a **camel tour** (opposite).

Baby Equipment Hire (☎ 0413-239 997; www.babyehire.com.au) delivers porta-cots, backpacks and prams to your accommodation.

TOURS

Around Alice

Aboriginal Art & Cultural Centre (Map p842; ☎ 8952 3408; www.aboriginalart.com.au; 125 Todd St) Runs a half-day Aboriginal desert-discovery tour (\$94/56 adult/child) that includes morning tea and a dance performance.

Dreamtime Tours (☎ 8955 5095; www.rstours.com.au) Operates the popular 'Dreamtime & Bushtucker Tour' (\$80/40 adult/child), which gives you a chance to meet some Warlpiri Aboriginal people and learn a little about their traditional life. You can tag along on the same tour with your own vehicle for \$60/30.

Foot Falcon (☎ 0427-569 531; www.footfalcon.com; 2hr guided walking tour \$35) Alice Springs town tour.

Departing Alice

Adventure Tours Australia (☎ 1300 654 604, 08-8309 2277; www.adventuretours.com.au) Backpacker tours throughout the Territory, ranging from one to 10 days.

Emu Run (☎ 08-8953 7057; www.emurun.com.au) Operates tours (one to three days) to all major points of interest (MacDonnell Ranges, Uluru, Kings Canyon, Palm Valley) from Alice Springs.

Ossies Outback 4WD Tours (☎ 08-8952 2308; www.ossies.com.au) Multi-day 4WD trips, including a two-day

trip to the East MacDonnells (Arltunga and Ruby Gap) for \$445.

Outback Experience (☎ 08-8953 2666; www.outbackexperience.com.au) Day trips to Chambers Pillar and Rainbow Valley (\$150), and the East MacDonnells (\$130).

Palm Valley Tours (☎ 08-8952 0022; www.palmvalleytours.com.au) Day tours depart daily, taking in Palm Valley National Park and Hermannsburg (\$115, including lunch); better two-day tours depart weekly (\$300), spending longer in Palm Valley and traversing the Mereenie Loop.

Sahara Outback Tours (☎ 08-8953 0881; www.saharatours.com.au; 3-day tour \$540) All-inclusive camping tours (max 24 people) to Kings Canyon and Uluru.

Tanamart (☎ 08-8952 4475; www.tanamarttours.com.au; half day from \$95) Specialised tours to the area's Aboriginal art communities.

Trek Larapinta (☎ 08-8953 2933; www.treklarapinta.com.au) Guided multi-day walks along sections of the Larapinta Trail, including Ormiston to Mt Sonder (three days and two nights \$600).

Wayoutback Tours (☎ 1300 551 510, 08-8952 4324; www.wayoutback.com.au; all-inclusive \$270-750) Excellent two-, three- and five-day tours taking in Palm Valley, the West MacDonnells, Uluru, Kata Tjuta and Watarrka (Kings Canyon).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Most of the local community gets involved in Alice's annual antics.

Alice Springs Cup (www.alicespringsturfclub.org.au) In May, find yourself a hat and gallop down to the Pioneer Park Racecourse for the main event.

Finke Desert Race (www.finkedesertrace.com.au) Motorcyclists and buggy drivers vie to take out the title of this crazy June race 240km from Alice along the Old South Rd to Finke; the following day they race back again.

Alice Springs Beanie Festival (www.beaniefest.org) This four-day festival in June–July, held at Araluen, celebrates the humble beanie (knitted woolen hat) – handmade by women throughout the central desert.

Camel Cup (www.camelcup.com.au) A carnival atmosphere pervades during the running of the Camel Cup at Blatherskite Park in mid-July.

Alice Springs Rodeo Bareback bull riding, steer wrestling and ladies' barrel races are on the bill at Blatherskite Park in August.

Alice Desert Festival (www.alicedesertfestival.com.au) A cracker of a festival, including a circus program, music, film, comedy and the highly anticipated Desert Mob art exhibition at Araluen. It's on in September.

Henley-on-Todd Regatta (www.henleyontodd.com.au) Drawing the biggest crowds of all, this series of boat races in September on the dry bed of the Todd River is a typically Australian light-hearted denial of reality. The boats are

all bottomless; the crews' legs stick through and they run down the course.

SLEEPING

Tourism has dragged Alice out of the outback and into being a well-developed hub. Hence, there's lots of sleeping options, though they tend towards functional rather than fancy. If you're breezing into town unannounced, go straight to the internet and check for last-minute rates, which often bring top-end places into midrange reach.

Budget

Toddy's (Map p840; ☎ 1800 027 027, 8952 1322; www.toddys.com.au; 41 Gap Rd; dm \$15-19, d \$50-75; ☎ ☎ ☎) Lodging here is like being in a backpacker bubble: a self-contained central complex buzzing with folk at the bar, at the kiosk buying laundry powder, checking out tour brochures, hiring bikes or making their way to the communal kitchen. And the bubble just got bigger, with the acquisition of a converted motel next door. Dorms range from four- to eight-share and doubles come with or without bathrooms.

Alice's Secret (Map p840; ☎ 1800 783 633, 8952 8686; www.asecret.com.au; 6 Khalick St; dm \$18-21, s \$40, d \$48-60; ☎ ☎ ☎) With every wall panel painted a different colour and windows dressed with red-striped awnings there's a 1950s cheerfulness to this place – enhanced by the caravan permanently parked in the back yard. Only 10 rooms keep things sedate, though it can flare up with fire-twirling lessons. A tidy kitchen and TV lounge add to the domestic bliss.

Alice Lodge Backpackers (Map p840; ☎ 1800 351 925, 8953 1975; www.alicelodge.com.au; 4 Mueller St; dm \$18-20, s/d from \$40/50; ☎ ☎ ☎) Friendly staff are as accommodating as the variety of room options at this small, low-key hostel. The old house has mixed and female dorms with three to six beds. And the back fence is lined with caravans – in case you needed reminding you were on holiday. The (usually dry) river lies between the site and town, a 10-minute walk away.

Annie's Place (Map p840; ☎ 8952 1255; www.anniesplace.com.au; 4 Traeger Ave; dm \$18, d \$50-60; ☎ ☎ ☎) The too-busy-for-you reception and hard-sell on the hostel's Uluru tour raises the heckles of some guests. But the splashing sounds from the pool around which these large and light-filled rooms (with bathroom and fridge) sit soon settles things. Bumper \$5 dinners in the café-bar are great value – and they equal less time spent in the poky communal kitchen.

Pioneer YHA Hostel (Map p842; ☎ 8952 8855; www.yha.com.au; cnr Parsons St & Leichhardt Tce; dm/d \$24/60; ☎ ☎ ☎) There's character in this city hostel, which retains hints of a previous life as the open-air Pioneer Picture Theatre. The same leisurely atmosphere pervades, with the screen replaced by a pool. Rooms are bare bones, but there's plenty of local-sights information at reception and a lounge to keep you from spending too long staring at the ceiling.

Desert Rose Inn (Map p842; ☎ 8952 1411; www.desertroseinn.com.au; 15 Railway Tce; backpacker r \$40, tw & d \$56-60, tw & d with bathroom \$75-95; ☎ ☎ ☎) You've got to love a place that plays a straight hand. It may not be the prettiest of places any more – it bears a kind of public-service functional air – but functional it is. Backpacker rooms are two share, with actual beds (no bunks). Located at the top of town, and with communal kitchen and lounge, the Rose is a bargain.

Midrange

See p848 for information on comfortable motel units and cabins at camping resorts.

White Gum Holiday Inn (Map p840; ☎ 8952 5144; 17 Gap Rd; s/d \$80/90; ☎ ☎) These low-rise self-contained motel rooms are marooned in an earlier era, but, fittingly, so are the rates. Helpful staff extend good old-fashioned manners and keep the place shipshape. Located on the main road into town, White Gum is good for stay-at-home types looking to self-cater.

Aurora Alice Springs (Map p842; ☎ 1800 089 644, 8950 6666; www.auroraresorts.com.au; 11 Leichhardt Tce; d from \$100; ☎ ☎ ☎) Hotels don't come more central than this. A few flights up, there's just enough distance between you and the street-level brouhaha. Routine rooms (with fridge, bathroom and phone) enclose a concrete courtyard for fair-weather lazing, and meal deals are offered at the downstairs Red Ochre Grill (p848).

Oasis (Map p840; ☎ 8952 1444; www.allseasons.com.au; 10 Gap Rd; r \$100; ☎ ☎ ☎) Holidaymakers buzz in and out of this motel complex's layers of rooms to the huge shade-covered pool, sports-themed bar or well-rated restaurant like bees in a hive. International-flavoured rooms might have you thinking you've seen this place before, and – judging by the dated décor – maybe a few decades earlier.

Alice on Todd (Map p840; ☎ 8953 8033; www.aliceontodd.com; cnr Strehlow St & South Tce; studio/1-2-bedroom apt from \$105/130/160; ☎ ☎ ☎) These spiffy self-contained apartments are a treat to wake up

in. Fall out of bed into the kitchenette to prepare a piece of toast and coffee, taken on the balcony before facing the world, and come home to splash off the dust in the jellybean-shaped pool. A small children's play area plus bike hire are available for guests.

Desert Palms Resort (Map p840; ☎ 1800 678 037, 8952 5977; www.desertpalms.com.au; 74 Barrett Dr; r from \$120; ☎ ☎ ☎) True to its name, this soothing resort is padded with palms, with several scenically marooned in the middle of the swimming pool. The high-ceilinged A-frame villas, framed by bougainvillea, have kitchenettes, bathrooms and balconies. It's languidly located between the river and the golf course, and the only disturbance here is the desert breeze rustling the palm fronds.

Nthaba Cottage B&B (Map p840; ☎ 8952 9003; www.nthabacottage.com.au; 83 Cromwell Dr; s \$100-125, d \$125-155; ☎ ☎ ☎) Lovers of Laura Ashley will love settling into this pretty cottage with its floral furnishings, Victorian-inspired sitting room and gorgeous garden setting. The less-expensive room in the main house has its own entrance and bathroom. More choices confront the guest at breakfast: do you go the full fry-up or rein it in to a lighter, fruitier meal?

Novotel Outback Alice Springs (Map p840; ☎ 1300 656 565, 8952 6100; www.novotel.com.au; 46 Stephens Rd; d from \$130; ☎ ☎ ☎) On the fancy side, with rooms large enough for a couch and writing desk, and bathrooms with baths, the Novotel makes a superb temporary home on the range – backing as it does onto the MacDonnell Ranges. Play tennis or loaf around the pool; both court and pool are privately penned in by natural surrounds.

Top End

Alice Springs Resort (Map p842; ☎ 8951 4545; www.voyages.com.au; 34 Scott Tce; s/d from \$75/150; ☎ ☎ ☎) With a circle of rooms arranged around a swath of gum trees, this stylish spot with hundreds of rooms has a country-club air. Handsome rooms become handsomer the higher up from 'standard' you go, and the on-site restaurant and bar mean guests need only leave the grounds when they're good and ready.

Crowne Plaza (Map p840; ☎ 1300 666 545, 8950 8000; www.crowneplaza.com.au; 82 Barrett Dr; d from \$150; ☎ ☎ ☎) First-class facilities and service put this place at the top of the range. Choose from the garden-view rooms or the better range-view room – each comes with balcony (to

view said view), TV, minibar, safe, free movies and bathtub. A pleasant pool and spa, a well-equipped gym and sauna, tennis courts, and Alice's most upmarket restaurant, Hanuman (right), complete the picture.

Bond Springs Outback Retreat (Map p842; ☎ 8952 9888; www.outbackretreat.com.au; d incl breakfast \$230-280; ♿ ♿) Experience the combination of outback station life and imported luxury at this retreat, about 20km from town. Two private self-contained cottages are on offer, which are refurbished stockman's quarters. The enormous property provides occasion for walks, including mooching around the original station school, which operated through the School of the Air.

Camping & Caravanning

Most camping grounds are on the outskirts of Alice.

Heavitree Gap Outback Lodge (Map p842; ☎ 1800 896 119, 8950 4444; www.auroraresorts.com.au; Palm Circuit; unpowered/power sites \$18/20, dm \$25, d \$130-140; ♿ ♿) Several eucalypt-studded acres make a shady place to pitch or park. The bulk of business here is in the rooms: four-bed dorms, and lodge and kitchenette (the latter is smaller, dowdier and costlier, though the kitchen can come in handy). There's a knees-up at the barn-sized on-site pub most nights.

MacDonnell Range Holiday Park (Map p842; ☎ 1800 808 373, 8952 6111; www.macrange.com.au; Palm Pl; unpowered/power sites \$26/30, cabins \$85-160; ♿ ♿) The children can cavort in the adventure playground, BMX track and basketball court. The adults can kick back around the pool, BBQ or comfy cabin. Those not in the family way will also find this immaculate park convenient, with camp kitchen, beaut shower blocks and laundry. Budget cabins are without bathroom and linen.

EATING

Alice has a reasonable range of eateries, and most places make an effort to cater to vegetarians. Most hotels have restaurants – it's a touristy town, after all – and many eateries serve up local meats (roo and emu). Most pubs (opposite) do decent meals too.

Restaurants

Thai Room (Map p842; ☎ 8952 0191; Fan Arcade, Todd Mall; mains \$10-15; ♿ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Perky Thai flavours of tamarind, garlic, basil and coconut milk make the perfect palate

freshener in Alice's dry climate. The modest menu mixes its signature spices with a variety of meats or straight veg. There's no need to frock up, and the window display at the photo gallery opposite Thai Room makes for good scenery.

Red Ochre Grill (Map p842; ☎ 8952 9614; Todd Mall; mains \$11-30; ♿ lunch & dinner) You know those gastronomic travellers' tales that make the listener wide-eyed with disbelief? Y'know: eating fried grasshoppers in Bangkok, trying snake blood in Thailand...well, this could be the Alice's answer. The gumnut-smoked emu is sure to make the folks back home squint. Camel, crocodile and kangaroo are infused with native berries, fruits and herbs. So there's no chance you'll say, 'It tasted like chicken'.

Flavours of India (Map p840; ☎ 8952 3721; 20 Undoolya Rd; mains \$13-16; ♿ dinner) There's no Bollywood-esque drama in the décor of this humble family restaurant. While covering old favourites (beef vindaloo), the menu includes tandoori dishes and a smattering of non-Indian meals (if you really must have a prawn cocktail). The long list of rice and breads shouldn't be overlooked to sop up every last saucy drop.

Casa Nostra (Map p840; ☎ 8952 6749; cnr Undoolya Rd & Stuart Tce; mains \$13-23; ♿ dinner Mon-Sun) Choose your pasta and match it with a long list of classic Italian sauces and specials: from bolognese and pesto to a chef's secret-recipe sauce (with a kick that gives away the chilli). Thin-crust pizzas and mains dishes also arrive on the red-and-white-checked tablecloths among the plastic grape vines. BYO booze.

Hanuman (Map p840; ☎ 8953 7188; Crowne Plaza, 82 Barrett Dr; mains \$16-30; ♿ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily) Expertly prepared Thai dishes are what brings well-heeled diners to this hotel restaurant. Teens in Mandarin-collared coats take service seriously, doing your pouring from a broad selection of wines and beers. A formal, low-light ambience keeps things sedate but steady.

Overlanders Steakhouse (Map p842; ☎ 8952 2159; 72 Hartley St; mains \$20-30; ♿ dinner) A local institution for big steaks, be they buffalo, kangaroo, crocodile or camel. And why stop at just one? Amid the drover's décor (saddles, branding irons and the like) you can have four courses, including a platter of Aussie meats, the Drover's Blowout – best shared.

Bluegrass Restaurant (Map p842; ☎ 8955 5188; cnr Stott Tce & Todd St; mains \$20-30; ♿ dinner Wed-Mon) Let the relaxed staff guide you to a table or intimate booth in the lovely, low-lit interior

of the historic CWA (Country Women's Association) building, or out into the leafy courtyard. The eclectic blackboard menu changes regularly to optimise seasonal produce, which always includes a number of veg options.

Cafés

Katachi (Map p842; ☎ 8952 0680; 1/78 Todd St; snacks \$4-10; ♿ 9.30am-late) Sit in a low-slung chair to savour some of the Alice's better coffee while thumbing through a glossy and listening to world music playing at this sparse but soulful café. Sushi and sweet things (muffins, cakes and desserts) could entice you over from the adjoining clothing store.

Lane (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5522; 58 Todd Mall; dishes \$6-35; ♿ lunch & dinner) The licensed Lane has most bases covered, with a stylish restaurant and casual outdoor seating in the hub of the Mall, plus a big menu featuring bistro dishes, smaller tasting plates and dishes in between. Choose from wood-fired pizzas, tapas, salads or mains like garfish with tempura veg.

Red Dog (Map p842; ☎ 8953 1353; 64 Todd Mall; meals \$7-12; ♿ breakfast & lunch) Join the throng at this Australian-decorated place dishing out budget breakfasts (pancakes or the whole-hog 'bushman's breakfast'), burgers and steaks. The ice-cream and lolly counters usually have a child or three jammed up against them.

ourpick Bar Doppio (Map p842; ☎ 8952 6525; Fan Arcade, Todd Mall; mains \$8-13; ♿ breakfast & lunch) Alice's locals duck down this laneway for huge and wholesome home-style breakfasts (eggs any style, pancakes), pita pizzas, burgers, pies and salads. It's also a favoured meeting place for well-made coffee or fresh-pressed juice, either in the shade of the covered arcade or inside with local-events fliers wallpapering the walls.

Sporties (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0953; Todd Mall; snacks \$10-15, mains \$15-25) It may not strictly be a pub, but with sporting paraphernalia adorning the bar (which serves cold beer on tap) it may as well be. Street seating provides pole position to spectate while hoeing into a focaccia or baguette, pasta, or a pub-style meat-and-three veg meal.

Self-Catering & Quick Eats

Large supermarkets include **Coles** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5166; Bath St; ♿ 24hr), **Woolworths** (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0988; Yepereny Shopping Centre; ♿ 7am-midnight Mon-Sat, to 10pm Sun) and **Bi-Lo** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 6110; Alice Plaza, Todd Mall; ♿ 7am-9pm).

Gourmet Bakehouse (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0041; Coles Complex, Bath St; ♿ 7am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) has an excellent made-to-order sandwich bar, pies, cakes and sourdough bread. **Afghan Traders** (Map p842; ☎ 8955 5560; Leichtodd Plaza, 7 Leichardt Tce) is replete with organic and other health foods – follow the laneway behind the ANZ bank, or duck through Springs Plaza from Todd Mall. Also bursting with vitality is the **Country Health Store** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 5157; 20 Parsons St).

DRINKING

Bojangles (Map p842; ☎ 8952 2873; www.boslivesaloon.com.au; 80 Todd St) Swing open the saloon doors to boots, barrels and bones, with a snake slithering through the eye sockets of a cow skull. It's all affecting a Wild West air, which travellers love. Grab a handful of peanuts from the barrel by the door and side up to a communal table with a beer in hand. Then settle in for some Territory tucker (mains \$15 to \$35; open lunch and dinner): camel and stout pie perhaps, or roo fillet, fish or a veggie dish.

Firkin & Hound (Map p842; ☎ 8953 3033; 21 Hartley St) This is a low-lit, subdued Brit tavern; it's a pleasant place to sink a chilly brew from the 10 on tap or down some pub grub. The cosy dining room (mains \$12 to \$25; open lunch and dinner) at the rear emphasises UK fare like beef-and-Guinness pie and beef Wellington, plus some trans-Atlantic competition like American ribs.

Todd Tavern (Map p842; ☎ 8952 1255; www.todd-tavern.com.au; 1 Todd Mall) Locals fall in and out of this no-fuss Aussie pub with regularity. More than just a bar, the Todd has pokies, plus the Pub Caf – one monster meal here should set you up for the week (meals \$8 to \$20). The usual burgers and snacks are on offer, as well as buffet specials such as the Sunday roast.

ENTERTAINMENT

The gig guide in the entertainment section of the *Centralian Advocate* (published every Tuesday and Friday) lists what's on in and around town.

Araluen Centre (Map p840; ☎ 8951 1120; www.araluen-centre.com.au; Larapinta Dr) This fine arts centre, part of the Alice Springs Cultural Precinct (p839), stages theatre, music and dance by local and touring performers.

Alice Springs Cinemas (Map p842; ☎ 8952 4999; Todd Mall; adult/child \$14/9.50) Latest-release movies make themselves at home here. All

tickets are discounted on Tuesday (\$9.50/7.50 adult/child).

Lasseter's Hotel Casino (Map p840; ☎ 8950 7777; www.lassetershotelcasino.com.au; 93 Barrett Dr) Lasseter's is filled with flashing lights and musical blips. Along with the usual slot and table games, there's the classic Aussie two-up ring (from 9pm Friday and Saturday). The casino is named after a man who died a terrible death in his quest for riches – go figure.

Sounds of Starlight Theatre (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0826; www.soundsforstarlight.com; 40 Todd Mall; adult/concession/family \$30/25/90; ☎ 8pm Tue, Fri & Sat) This is a unique 1½-hour musical performance evoking the spirit of the outback with music made by didgeridoo and various Latin American instruments.

SHOPPING

Alice is the centre for Aboriginal arts and crafts from all over central Australia; see if the budget can handle purchasing a piece from one of the Alice's many good galleries (see p841). Trawl Todd Mall for tea towels, T-shirts, mini souvenir road signs ('Kangaroos next 14km') and beer-can holders.

Todd Mall Market (Map p842; ☎ 0432-800 466; Todd Mall; ☎ 9am-1pm every 2nd Sun Feb-Dec) Craft stalls, sizzling woks serving Asian food, clothing racks, Aboriginal art, jewellery and knick-knacks make for interesting mooching. Buskers and music keep children entertained too.

Territory Craft (Map p840; ☎ 8952 4417; www.territorycraft.org.au; Alice Springs Cultural Precinct, Larapinta Dr; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon & Wed-Fri, to 3pm Sat & Sun) This is a retail gallery for Territorian artists working with glass, enamel, fibre and various other materials. Visit the studio out the back to see how the wares are made, and to talk to the artisans.

CAAMA Shop (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association; Map p842; ☎ 8951 9710; www.caama.com.au; 101 Todd St) This place stocks Aboriginal books, CDs and cassettes, painted ceramics, and various products with local Aboriginal designs.

Bowerbird Tip Shop (☎ 8952 0555; Commanage Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Wed-Mon) Op-shoppers and foragers will love the Tip Shop, which proves that one person's trash is another's treasure. Sculptures fashioned from found objects are interspersed with salvaged stuff.

For general items, try **K-Mart** (Map p842; ☎ 8952 8188; Bath St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 8am-8pm Thu, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun). For camping and hiking gear, head to **Lone Dingo** (Map p842; ☎ 8953

3866; cnr Todd Mall & Gregory Tce; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), which hires out all manner of camping gear, including sleeping bags and camping stoves, maps, GPS systems, and Emergency Positioning Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Qantas (Map p842; ☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au; cnr Todd Mall & Parsons St) flies daily between Alice and Adelaide, Darwin, Melbourne, Perth, Sydney and Yulara (Uluru).

Bus

Greyhound Australia (Map p842; ☎ 13 14 99, 8952 7888; www.greyhound.com.au; cnr Gregory & Railway Tces) has daily services from Alice Springs to the following destinations.

Destination	Duration (hr)	One-way adult fare
Adelaide	21	\$250
Cooper Pedy	8	\$150
Darwin	21	\$280
Katherine	15	\$225
Tennant Creek	6	\$140
Uluru	5	\$90

Backpacker buses cover the distance while savouring sights along the way. **Desert Venturer** (☎ 1800 079 119; www.desertventurer.com.au) makes three-day runs (\$340 per person, food kitty \$75) between Cairns and the Alice on Tuesday and Saturday. **Groovy Grape Getaways Australia** (☎ 1800 661 177; www.groovygrape.com.au) has a two-day Alice-Adelaide run via Cooper Pedy (\$165, departs Alice 6am Saturday), plus five- and seven-day camping trips from Adelaide to Alice Springs. The **Wayward Bus Touring Company** (☎ 1300 653 510, 8410 8833; www.waywardbus.com.au) has a 3½-day 'Just the Centre' trip (\$480 per person, departs noon daily) taking in Kings Canyon, Uluru and Rainbow Valley. It also does an eight-day Alice-Adelaide tour (\$980 per person, departs Alice 7am Saturday) and Alice-Darwin in three days (\$375 per person, departs 6am Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).

Car & Motorcycle

Alice Springs is a long way from everywhere. From Mt Isa, in Queensland, it's 1180km; from Darwin to Alice Springs is 1490km (15 hours); and from Alice Springs to Yulara

via the sealed Lasseter Hwy is 441km (4½ hours).

These are outback roads, but you're not yet in the real, outer outback, where a breakdown can mean big trouble. Nevertheless, it's wise to have your vehicle well prepared, particularly as you won't get a mobile phone signal outside Alice or Yulara. Carry drinking water and emergency food at all times.

Most of the car-rental companies in Alice Springs have 4WDs for hire. Rentals don't come cheap, as most firms offer only 100km free a day, which won't get you far. Prices drop by about 20% between November and April.

Alice Camp 'n' Drive (☎ 8952 0099; www.alicecampndrive.com) Provides 2WD vehicles fully equipped for camping (swags, sleeping bags etc), with unlimited kilometres. **Avis** (Map p842; ☎ 8953 5533; www.avis.com.au; Shop 21b, Coles Shopping Complex, Gregory St) Also has an airport counter.

Britz (☎ 8952 8814; www.britz.com.au; cnr Stuart Hwy & Power St) Campervans and cars; also at the airport.

Budget (Map p842; ☎ 13 27 27, 8952 8899; www.budget.com.au; Shop 6, Capricornia Centre, Gregory Tce) Also at the airport.

Europcar (Map p840; ☎ 13 13 90; www.europcar.com.au; 10 Gap Rd)

Hertz (Map p842; ☎ 8952 2644; 76 Hartley St)

Outback Auto Rentals (Map p842; ☎ 8953 5333; 78 Todd St) Local operator.

Train

In Alice, tickets for the classic, Australia-crossing *Ghan* can be booked through **Trainways** (☎ 13 21 47; www.trainways.com.au) or **Travelworld** (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0488; 40 Todd Mall). Discounted fares are sometimes offered, especially in the low season (February to June). Bookings are recommended on this popular route. See p794 for a timetable and fares.

The train station (Map p840) is at the end of George Cres off Larapinta Dr.

GETTING AROUND

Alice Springs is compact enough to get to most parts of town on foot, and you can reach quite a few of the closer attractions by bicycle (see p844).

To/From the Airport

Alice Springs airport is 15km south of the town. It's about \$30 by taxi. An airport shuttle meets flights and picks up and drops off at city accommodation for \$13/20 one way/return; contact its **office** (Map p842; ☎ 8953 0310; Gregory Tce).

Bus

The public bus service, **Asbus** (☎ 8952 5611), departs from outside the Yeperenye shopping centre on Hartley St. Buses run about every 1½ hours from 7.45am to 6pm Monday to Friday, and from 9am to 12.45pm on Saturday. The adult/child fare for all routes is \$2.20/1.10. There are three routes of interest to travellers: 1 has a detour to the cultural precinct, 3 passes the School of the Air, and 4 passes many southern hotels and caravan parks along Gap Rd and Palm Circuit. The visitor information centre has free timetables.

The **Alice Wanderer Centre Sightseeing** (☎ 1800 722 111, 8952 2111; www.alicewanderer.com.au; adult/child \$38/30; ☎ 9am-4pm) bus does a loop around the major sights, including the old telegraph station, the School of the Air, the Old Ghan Museum and the Cultural Precinct. You can get on and off wherever you like. It runs every 70 minutes from opposite the visitor information centre on Gregory Tce, and you can arrange to be picked up from your accommodation. The Wanderer also does Larapinta Trail transfers; see its website for details.

Taxi

Taxis congregate near the visitors centre. To book one, call ☎ 13 10 08 or ☎ 8952 1877.

MACDONNELL RANGES

The MacDonnell Ranges, full of superb scenery, gorges and walking tracks, stretch themselves out to the east and west of Alice Springs. The sheer walls of the many gorges harbour rocky waterholes that nourish wildlife and spring wildflowers.

There are many places you can visit within a day, but, if you have time, immerse yourself in the local beauty by camping or staying at a homestead. Walks range from sightseeing strolls to the challenge of the Larapinta Trail. There's no public transport to either the East or West MacDonnell Ranges; see p845 for tours from Alice.

EAST MACDONNELL RANGES

The East MacDonnell Ranges stretch for 100km east of Alice Springs, intersected by a series of scenic gaps and gorges that see far fewer visitors than the West MacDonnell Ranges. The sealed Ross Hwy, accessible

through Heavittree Gap south of town, leads to most of the highlights. About 100km from Alice Springs, the dirt Arltunga Rd becomes Arltunga Tourist Dr (also known as Gardens Rd) northwest of Arltunga and rejoins the Stuart Hwy 50km north of Alice Springs, which is usually OK for 2WDs.

Emily & Jessie Gaps Nature Park

Both of these gaps are associated with the Eastern Arrernte Caterpillar Dreaming trail. **Emily Gap**, 16km out of town, is a pleasant spot with rock art and a fairly deep waterhole in the narrow gorge. Known to the Arrernte as Anthwerke, this is one of the most important Aboriginal sites in the Alice Springs area; it was from here that the caterpillar ancestral beings of Mparntwe originated before crawling across the landscape to create the topographical features that exist today. The gap is a sacred site with some well-preserved paintings on the eastern wall – in the Wet you may have to wade or swim to reach them. **Jessie Gap**, 8km further, is an equally scenic and usually much quieter place. Both sites have toilets.

Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve

Past Jessie Gap you drive over eroded flats before entering a valley between red ridges. **Corroboree Rock**, 51km from Alice Springs, is one of many strangely shaped outcrops scattered over the valley floor. Despite the name, it's doubtful the rock was ever used as a corroboree area, but it is associated with the Perentie Dreaming trail. The perentie is one of

the world's largest lizards, growing in excess of 2.5m, and takes refuge within the area's rock falls. However, you're unlikely to see one outside the Alice Springs Reptile Centre (see p843). The rock is looped by a walking track (15 minutes), and there's a toilet.

Trephina Gorge Nature Park

About 70km from Alice Springs you cross the sandy bed of Benstead Creek and shadow a lovely stand of red gums for the 6km from the creek crossing to the Trephina Gorge turn-off; it's then another 8km to the gorge. If you only have time for a couple of stops in the East MacDonnell Ranges, make Trephina Gorge Nature Park one of them. The contrast between the pale sand in dry river beds, the red and purple tones of the valley walls, the white tree trunks, the eucalyptus-green foliage and the blue sky is spectacular. You'll also find deep swimming holes and abundant wildlife. Just before the gorge itself is **Trephina Bluff**. The Trephina Gorge Walk (45 minutes, 2km) loops around the gorge's rim. The Ridgetop Walk (five hours, 10km one way) traverses the view-ridden ridges from the gorge to the rockhole; the 8km return along the road takes about two hours.

Another main attraction is the delightful **John Hayes Rockhole**, 9km from the Trephina Gorge turn-off (the last 4km is 4WD only). From here there's the Chain of Ponds walk (1½ hours, 4km loop), which leads through the gorge, past rock pools and up to a lookout above the gorge.

There's a **rangers station** (☎ 08-8956 9765) and **camping grounds** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) at Trephina Gorge, the Bluff and John Hayes Rockhole.

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park

Nine kilometres along the continuation of the Ross Hwy past the Arltunga turn-off you come to the resplendent **Ross River Resort** (☎ 8956 9711; www.rossriverresort.com.au; camping per person \$10, bunkhouse \$22, cabin d \$100; ♿ ♿). Built around a historic stone homestead, timber cabins encircle a swimming pool. Plus, there's a store with fuel.

Shortly before the resort, a strictly 4WD-only track leads 11km south to N'Dhala Gorge. Around 5900 ancient Aboriginal rock carvings and some rare endemic plants decorate a deep, narrow gorge, although the art isn't easy to spot. There's a small, exposed **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70).

Arltunga Historical Reserve

Situated at the eastern end of the MacDonnell Ranges, 110km east of Alice Springs, is the old gold-mining ghost town of **Arltunga**. Its history, from the discovery of alluvial (surface) gold in 1887 until mining activity petered out in 1912, is fascinating. **Old buildings**, a couple of **cemeteries** and the many deserted **mine sites** in this parched landscape give visitors an idea of what life was like for miners here. There are walking tracks (the Government Works area has the best collection of remnant drystone buildings) and old mines to explore (now hosting bat colonies), so bring a torch.

The unstaffed **visitor information centre** (☎ 08-8956 9770; ☎ 8am-5pm) has many displays and old photographs of the gold-extracting process, plus a slide show on the area's history, and drinking water and toilets. There's no camping in the reserve itself, but the nearby **Arltunga Bush Hotel** (☎ 08-8956 9797; sites per adult/child \$8/4) has a camping ground with showers, toilets, BBQ pits and picnic tables. It's been a while between drinks for the hotel; it was due to reopen as a pub (open Thursday to Monday) at the time of writing, but it isn't planning to serve meals.

The 40km section of unsealed road between the Ross Hwy and Arltunga can be impassable after heavy rain. Including side trips, a complete loop from Alice Springs to Arltunga and back would be over 300km. From Arltunga it's possible to loop back to the Alice along the Arltunga Tourist Dr.

Ruby Gap Nature Park

This remote, little-visited park rewards visitors with wild and beautiful scenery. The sandy bed of the Hale River is purple in places due to thousands of tiny garnets. The garnets caused a 'ruby rush' here in the 19th century and some miners did well out of it until it was discovered that the 'rubies' were, in fact, virtually worthless garnets. It's an evocative place and is well worth the considerable effort required to reach it – by high-clearance 4WD. The waterholes at Glen Annie Gorge are usually deep enough for a cooling dip.

Camping (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) is permitted anywhere along the river; make sure to BYO drinking water and camp cooker. Allow two hours each way for the 44km trip from Arltunga. It's essential to get a map from Parks & Wildlife and to **register** (☎ 1300 650 730) in Alice Springs before setting out, and deregister upon return.

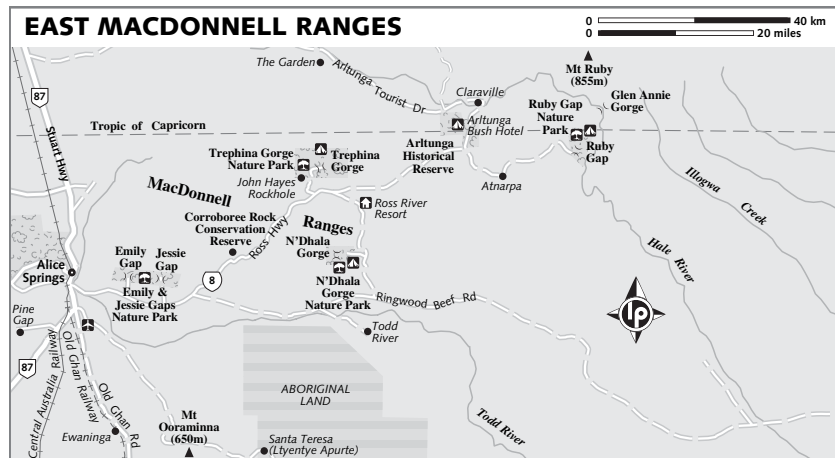
WEST MACDONNELL RANGES

Outstanding in the arid zone for their richness and diversity of plants and animals, the West Macs are a unique treat. Spectacular gorges and fine walks through stony spinifex country and ancient song lines define the West MacDonnell Ranges, which hold significance for Aboriginal people. Their easy access by conventional vehicle makes them especially popular with day-trippers. Heading west from Alice, Namatjira Dr turns northwest off Larapinta Dr 6km beyond Standley Chasm and is sealed all the way to Glen Helen Gorge, 132km from town. From the dirt road beyond, there is a turn-off south through Tylers Pass to Tnorala (Gosse Bluff), which meets up with the Mereenie Loop Rd. Larapinta Dr continues southwest from Standley Chasm to Hermannsburg (sealed), then the Mereenie Loop Rd (a 4WD road set to be sealed and renamed the Red Centre Way) loops all the way to Kings Canyon.

All the sites mentioned in this section lie within the **West MacDonnell National Park**, except for Standley Chasm, which is privately owned. There are ranger stations at Simpsons Gap and Ormiston Gorge.

Larapinta Trail

The Larapinta Trail is a 12-stage, 233.5km track of varying degrees of difficulty along the backbone of the West MacDonnells, stretching from the Telegraph Station in Alice Springs to



the craggy 1380m summit of Mt Sonder. The following sections each take one to two days to navigate and pass many of the attractions in the West MacDonnells:

- Section 1** Alice Springs Telegraph Station to Simpsons Gap (23.8km)
- Section 2** Simpsons Gap to Jay Creek (24.5km)
- Section 3** Jay Creek to Standley Chasm (13.6km)
- Section 4** Standley Chasm to Birthday Waterhole (17.7km)
- Section 5** Birthday Waterhole to Hugh Gorge (16km)
- Section 6** Hugh Gorge to Ellery Creek (31.2km)
- Section 7** Ellery Creek to Serpentine Gorge (13.8km)
- Section 8** Serpentine Gorge to Ochre Pits (13.4km)
- Section 9** Ochre Pits to Ormiston Gorge (28.6km)
- Section 10** Ormiston Gorge to Glen Helen Gorge (9.9km)
- Section 11** Glen Helen Gorge to Redbank Gorge (25.2km)
- Section 12** Redbank Gorge to Mt Sonder (15.8km return)

Detailed track notes and maps are available on the website of the **Parks & Wildlife Commission** (www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/walks/larapinta.html) and at the visitor information centre in Alice Springs (which charges \$44 for a complete set of notes and maps). Anyone attempting an overnight walk should register with the **Overnight Walker Registration Scheme** (☎ 1300 650 730).

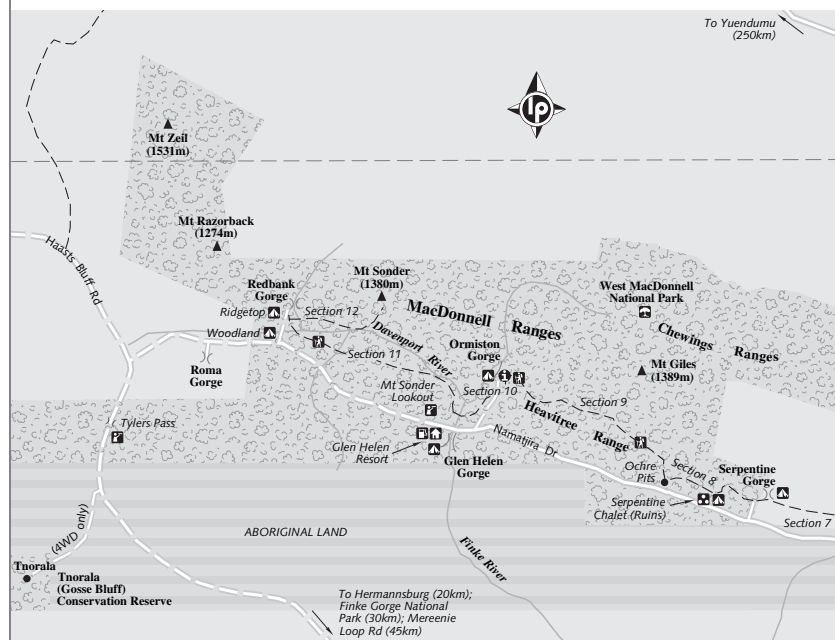
There's no public transport out to this area, but transfers can be arranged through the **Alice Wanderer Centre Sightseeing** (☎ 1800 722 111, 08-8952 2111; www.alicewanderer.com.au) bus; see the website for the various costs. For guided walks, including transport from Alice Springs, go through Trek Larapinta (p846).

Simpsons Gap

Westbound from Alice Springs on Larapinta Dr you soon come to **John Flynn's Grave**. The flying doctor's final resting place is topped by a boulder donated by the Arrernte people (the original was a since-retained sacred Devil's Marble). Opposite the car park is the start of the **cycling track** to Simpsons Gap, a pleasant three- to four-hour return ride.

By road, **Simpsons Gap** (🚗 5am-8pm) is 22km from Alice Springs and 8km off Larapinta Dr. It's a popular picnic spot and has some good walks. This towering gap in the range is the result of 60 million years of effort by a river – a river that rarely runs. There are often rock wallabies in the jumble of rocks either side of the gap. The visitor information centre is 1km from the park entrance.

WEST MACDONNELL RANGES



Standley Chasm (Angkerle)

Fifty kilometres west of Alice Springs is **Standley Chasm** (☎ 08-8956 7440; adult/child \$7.50/6.50; 🚗 8am-6pm). This towering corridor slices neatly through the rock and is bordered by tall cliffs that burn red in the noonday sun, which is when most camera-toting tourists arrive; early or late in the day is much more peaceful. The rocky path into the gorge (15 minutes) follows a creek bed lined with ghost gums and cycads. You can continue to a second chasm (one hour return). There's a kiosk, picnic facilities and toilets.

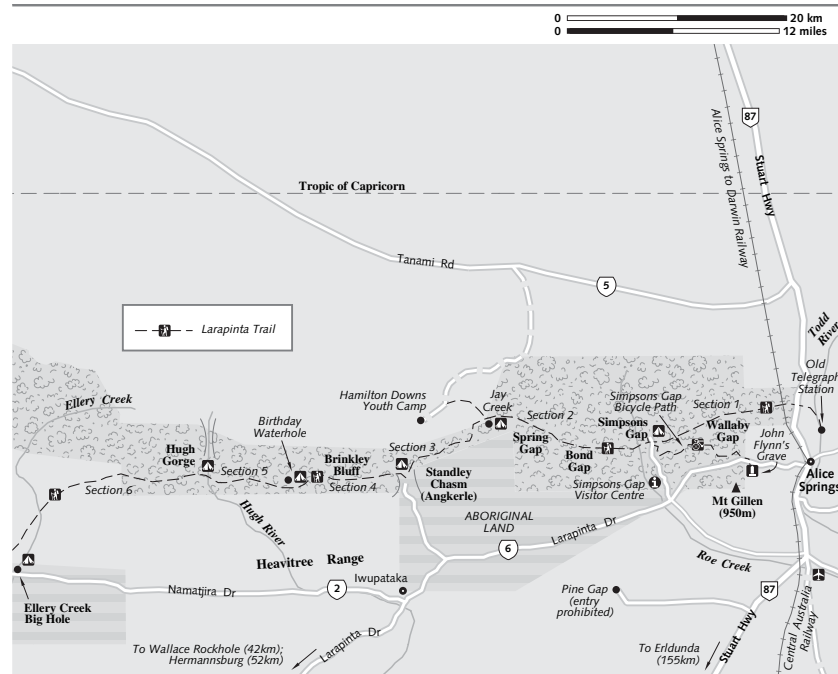
Namatjira Drive

Not far beyond Standley Chasm you can choose the northwesterly Namatjira Dr (which loops down to connect with Larapinta Dr west of Hermannsburg; 4WD only) or the more southerly Larapinta Dr (p856). West along Namatjira Dr is another series of gorges and gaps in the range. **Ellery Creek Big Hole** is 91km from Alice Springs and has a large permanent waterhole – a great (and popular) place for a swim on a hot day, but the usually shaded water is freezing. About 11km further, a rough

gravel track leads to narrow **Serpentine Gorge**, which has a waterhole blocking the entrance (no swimming) and a lookout at the end of a short, steep track.

The **Ochre Pits** line a dry creek bed 11km west of Serpentine and were a source of paints for Aboriginal people. The various coloured ochres – mainly yellow, white and red-brown – are weathered limestone, with iron-oxide stains creating the colouring.

The car park for the grand **Ormiston Gorge** is 25km beyond the Ochre Pits. It's the most impressive chasm in the West MacDonnells and well worth a couple of hours. There's a waterhole, and the gorge curls around to the enclosed **Ormiston Pound**. When the pound's waterholes dry up, the fish burrow into the sand, going into a sort of suspended animation only to reappear after rain. There are some excellent **walking tracks**, including the **Ghost Gum Lookout** path (20 minutes), which affords brilliant views down the gorge, and the excellent, circuitous **Pound Walk** (three hours, 7.5km). There's a **visitor centre** (☎ 08-8956 7799; 🚗 5am-8pm) and a **kiosk** (🚗 10am-4pm).



About 2km further is the turn-off to scenic **Glen Helen Gorge**, where the Finke River cuts through the MacDonnells. Only 1km past Glen Helen is a good **lookout** over Mt Sonder, which was a popular painting subject for Albert Namatjira; sunrise and sunset here are particularly impressive.

The road is gravel and often rough beyond this point, but if you continue northwest for 25km you'll reach the multihued, cathedral-like **Redbank Gorge**, a permanent waterhole 161km from Alice Springs.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are basic **camping grounds** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70) at Ellery Creek Big Hole, Redbank Gorge and 6km west of Serpentine Gorge at Serpentine Chalet (a 4WD or high-clearance 2WD vehicle is recommended to reach the chalet). The **camping area** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/15.40) at Ormiston Gorge is the ritziest in the West Macs, with showers, toilets, gas BBQs and picnic tables.

At the edge of the national park is the popular **Glen Helen Resort** (☎ 08-8956 7489; www.glenhelen.com.au; Namatjira Dr; unpowered/power sites \$20/23, dm/s/d from \$20/60/80; ♿ ♿). There's been a homestead on this superb site, with the sheer walls of the gorge as a spectacular backdrop, since 1905 – the current building dates mainly from the 1980s. This comfortable, remote retreat has a restaurant-bar (meals \$25 to \$33; open lunch and dinner) serving deftly prepared meals like roo with wattle sauce or barra grilled in bush spices. A five-minute helicopter flight (\$45) will have you hovering over Glen Helen Gorge, or you can fly over Ormiston Pound in 15 minutes (\$110). There's a two-person minimum.

SOUTH OF ALICE SPRINGS

It's worth diverting off the road south from Alice Springs to some of the Centre's more memorable attractions. There are also attractions to the east of the Stuart Hwy, but to visit most of these requires a 4WD.

LARAPINTA DRIVE

The low-lying James Ranges form an east–west band south of the West MacDonnell Ranges. While not as well known as the MacDonnells, the ranges border some of the Centre's top

attractions: Hermannsburg, Palm Valley and Kings Canyon.

Taking the alternative road to the south from Standley Chasm, Larapinta Dr crosses the Hugh River before reaching the turn-off to the Western Aranda community of **Wallace Rockhole**, 18km off the main road and 109km from Alice Springs.

You'll be virtually guaranteed some seclusion at the community-owned **Wallace Rockhole Tourist Park** (☎ 08-8956 7993; www.wallacerockhole.com.au; unpowered/power sites \$20/24, cabins \$130; ♿), situated at the end of an 18km dirt road branching off Larapinta Dr. Tours from here include a 1½-hour rock-art tour (\$15/13 adult/child) with billy tea and damper.

Back on Larapinta Dr, just west of Hermannsburg, is **Namatjira's House**. Albert Namatjira (1902–59), the Aboriginal artist whose European-style watercolours of the region were embedded with depictions of important Dreaming sites, lived in this two-room house (now in disrepair) in the '20s. Albert did much to change the extremely negative views of Aboriginal people that prevailed during his lifetime. He also paved the way for the Papunya Tula (p841) painting movement that emerged a decade after his death.

Hermannsburg

☎ 08 / pop 460

Only 5km beyond Namatjira's house you reach the Hermannsburg Aboriginal settlement, 125km from Alice Springs. Although the town is restricted Aboriginal land, permits are not required to visit the historic precinct and town shop.

Shaded by tall river gums and date palms, the whitewashed walls of the old **mission** (☎ 8956 7402; adult/child/family \$6/5/15; ☎ 9am–4pm Mar–Nov, 10am–4pm Dec–Feb) contrast with the colourful countryside, captured by the settlement's most famous inhabitants, the Namatjira family. This fascinating monument to the Territory's early Lutheran missionaries includes a school building, a church and various houses. One building is now a gallery with examples of Namatjira's work.

The **Kata-Anga Tea Rooms** (meals \$5–9; ☎ 9am–4pm), which serves Devonshire teas, sandwiches and strudel, displays historic photographs, plus a good range of traditional and water-colour paintings, and distinctive ceramic works by the Hermannsburg Potters that are available for sale.

HAILSTONE RIDGE

Near Hermannsburg is the unassuming Hailstone Ridge – a sacred site composed of rubble that resembles hailstones. Aranda legend says it cannot be disturbed without invoking the wrath of the land. When the NT Department of Transport and Infrastructure bulldozed part of the ridge for aggregate in 1975, tribal elders intervened and stopped the work. A month later, the worst hailstorm in living memory devastated the Hermannsburg area. It unroofed houses on two outstations, uprooted trees and littered the ground with dead birds.

Finke Gorge National Park

Well known for its rare palms, **Palm Valley** is the kind of country in which you expect to bump into a *Tyrannosaurus rex*: high red cliffs, majestic river red gums and hundreds of palms and cycads. Leaving the Finke River at its junction with Palm Creek, head west past an old ranger station and 1km further on you'll arrive at the Kalarranga car park. From here you soon pass the excellent **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$6.60/3.30/16), in a serene setting opposite red-sandstone ridges, with hot showers and flush toilets. It's a further 5km along a diabolical track.

Terrific walks include the **Arankaia walk** (2km loop, one hour), which traverses the valley, returning via the sandstone plateau; the **Mpulumkinya track** (5km loop, two hours), heading down the gorge before joining the Arankaia walk; and the **Mpaara track** (5km loop, two hours), taking in the Finke River, Palm Bend and a rugged amphitheatre (a semicircle of sandstone formations sculpted by a now extinct meander of Palm Creek).

A high-clearance 4WD is essential to get in here. If you don't have one, Wayoutback and Palm Valley Tours (p845) run tours from Alice.

Mereenie Loop Road (Red Centre Way)

From Hermannsburg you can continue west to the turn-off to Areyonga (no visitors) and then take the Mereenie Loop Rd to **Kings Canyon**. This is an excellent alternative route from Alice to Kings Canyon. Despite government plans to seal this rugged road (also referred to as the Red Centre Way), works had not yet started at the time of writing, and it's best

travelled in a high-clearance car, preferably a 4WD. (Discarded tyres and the occasional abandoned car serve as warnings along the entire loop.)

To travel the loop road you need a Central Land Council permit, as it passes through Aboriginal land. The permit includes the informative *Mereenie Tour Pass* booklet, which details the local Aboriginal culture and has a route map. The permits (\$2.20) are issued on the spot (usually only on the day of travel) at the visitor information centre in Alice Springs (p839), from Glen Helen Homestead, at Kings Canyon Resort reception and at Hermannsburg service station.

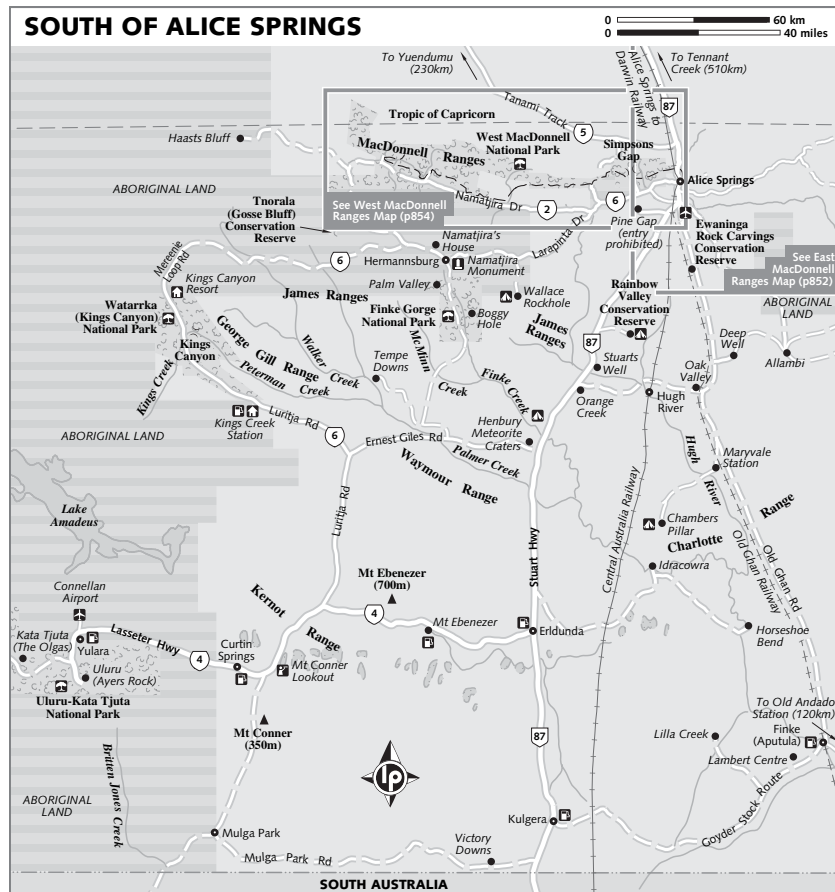
OLD GHAN ROAD

The 'Old South Rd', which runs close to the old *Ghan* railway line, is pretty rough and may require a 4WD after rain. It's only 39km from Alice Springs to **Ewanning**, where prehistoric Aboriginal petroglyphs are carved into sandstone. The rock carvings found here and at N'Dhala Gorge (p853) are thought to have been made by Aboriginal tribes who lived here before those currently in the Centre.

The eerie, sandstone **Chambers Pillar**, southwest of Maryvale Station, rises 50m above its surrounding plain and is carved with the names and visit dates of early explorers – and, unfortunately, some much less worthy modern-day graffitiists. To the Aboriginal people of the area, Chambers Pillar is the remains of Itirkawara, a powerful gecko ancestor. It's 160km from Alice Springs, and a 4WD is required for the last 44km from the turn-off at Maryvale Station. There's a basic **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70).

Back on the main track south, you eventually arrive at **Finke (Aputula)**, a small Aboriginal community 230km from Alice Springs. When the old *Ghan* was running, Finke was a thriving little town; these days it seems to have drifted into a permanent torpor, except when the **Finke Desert Race** (p846) is staged. Fuel is sold at the basic **Aputula Store** (☎ 08-8956 0968; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–4pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat), which is also an outlet for local artists' work, including carved wooden animals and seed necklaces.

From Finke, you can turn west along the Goyder Stock Rte to join the Stuart Hwy at Kulgera (150km), or east to Old Andado station on the edge of the Simpson Desert (120km). Just 21km west of Finke, and 12km north of the road along a signposted track, is



the **Lambert Centre**. The point marks Australia's geographical centre and features a 5m-high version of the flagpole found on top of Parliament House in Canberra.

RAINBOW VALLEY CONSERVATION RESERVE

This series of freestanding sandstone bluffs and cliffs, in shades ranging from cream to red, is one of central Australia's more extraordinary sights. A marked walking trail takes you past claypans and in between the multi-hued outcrops to the aptly named Mushroom Rock. Rainbow Valley is most striking in the early morning or at sunset, but the area's stupefying silence will overwhelm you whatever time of day you are here.

The park lies 22km off the Stuart Hwy along a 4WD track that's 75km south of Alice Springs. It has a basic **camping ground** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70).

STUARTS WELL

Climb onto a camel at Stuarts Well, 90km south of Alice Springs. At **Camels Australia** (☎ 08-8956 0925; www.camels-australia.com.au) you can take a short ride around the yard for \$5, a 30-minute jaunt for \$30 or a half-/full day for \$85/110. Multi-day safaris through the gaps and gorges of the James Ranges can also be arranged (\$150 per day, including meals, swag and camel).

Jim's Place (☎ 08-8956 0808; Stuarts Well; unpowered/power sites \$15/18, bunkhouse \$15-25, cabins s/d \$70/\$85)

is run by well-known outback identity Jim Cotterill, who along with his father opened up Kings Canyon to tourism. You might also catch Dinky the singing dingo – rescued and raised from a pup.

ERNEST GILES ROAD

The Ernest Giles Rd heads off to the west of the Stuart Hwy about 140km south of Alice. This shorter but rougher route to Kings Canyon is often impassable after heavy rain and is not recommended for conventional vehicles. The section along the Luritja Rd to Kings Canyon is sealed.

Henbury Meteorite Craters

Eleven kilometres west of the Stuart Hwy, a dusty corrugated track leads 5km off Ernest Giles Rd to this cluster of 12 small craters, formed after a meteor fell to earth 4700 years ago. The largest of the craters is 180m wide and 15m deep.

There are no longer any fragments of the meteorites at the site, but the Museum of Central Australia in Alice Springs (p841) has a small chunk that weighs 46.5kg.

There are some basic, exposed **camp sites** (adult/child/family \$3.30/1.65/7.70), on stony ground, which are pretty grim.

WATARRKA (KINGS CANYON) NATIONAL PARK

Continuing west along Ernest Giles Rd, or detouring from the Lasseter Hwy, brings you to the Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park, which keeps one of the most spectacular sights in central Australia – the yawning chasm of **Kings Canyon**.

Not much of a walker? The **Kings Creek Walk** (one hour, 2km return) is suitable for families, following the rocky creek bed to a raised platform with amphitheatrelike views of the towering canyon rim. Walkers are rewarded with humbling views on the **Kings Canyon Rim Walk** (three to four hours, 6km loop). After a steep climb up a 100m-high cliff face, the walk skirts the canyon's rim and then enters the **Garden of Eden** at about the halfway mark. Look for fossilised jellyfish on the rocks as you descend into the Garden of Eden: a lush pocket of cycads around a natural pool. The next section of the walk winds through a maze of giant beehive domes (vertigo sufferers might consider crawling along this section; keep well away from the unfenced edge

with a Dantesque drop-off). From May to October rangers lead walks (on Tuesday and Thursday from the Kings Canyon car park) explaining the canyon's geology and contact with intrepid explorers.

About 10km east of the car park, the **Kathleen Springs Walk** (one hour, 2.6km return) is a pleasant wheelchair-accessible track leading to a waterhole at the head of a gorge.

The **Giles Track** (overnight, 22km one way) is a marked track that meanders along the George Gill Range between the canyon and Kathleen Springs; register with the **Overnight Walker Registration Scheme** (☎ 1300 650 730).

You can reach Kings Canyon from Alice Springs via the as-yet-unsealed Mereenie Loop Rd (see p857), a drive of 325km – 4WD recommended. Emu Run, Adventure, Sahara Outback and Wayoutback tours (p845) depart Alice and stop here on the way to/from Uluru.

Scenic Flights

Most chopper pilots agree that Kings Canyon is the best sight for a flight in the entire Centre.

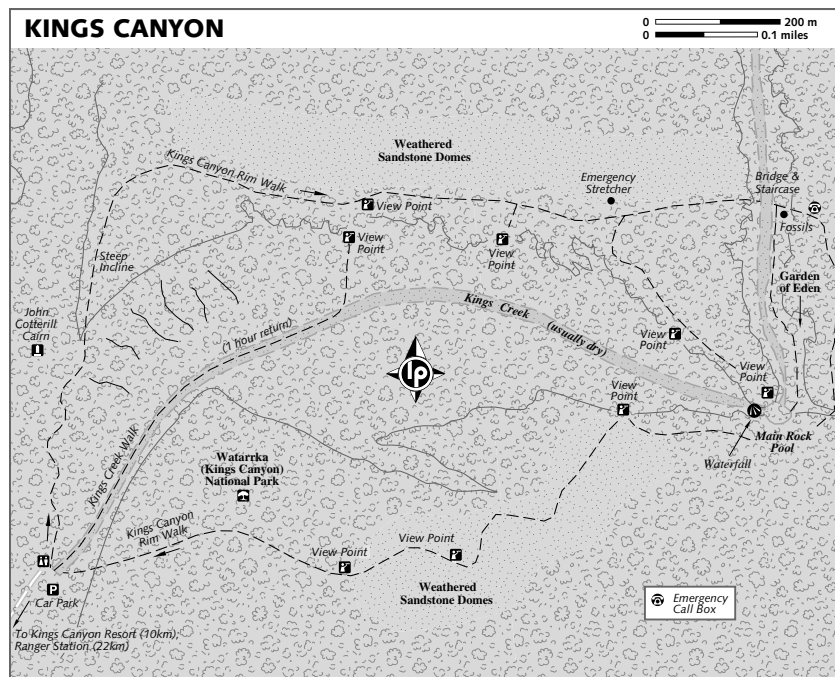
Kings Creek Station (☎ 08-8956 7474; www.kingscreekstation.com.au) Runs 30-minute flights over Kings Canyon for \$210.

Professional Helicopter Services (PHS; ☎ 08-8956 2003; www.phs.com.au/kings.htm) Pick-up from Kings Canyon Resort; PHS scoots above the canyon for eight minutes (\$70) or 15 minutes (\$115).

Sleeping & Eating

Kings Canyon Resort (☎ 1300 134 044, 08-8951 4545; www.kingscanyonresort.com.au; Luritja Rd; unpowered/power sites \$26/29, 4-share dm \$40, budget d \$100, r \$340-420; ♿ ♿ ♿) This sprawling resort, 10km from the canyon, caters to school groups, honeymooners, folks on a budget and people with no budget. Accommodation options start with a neat rectangle on the lawn for your tent to a deluxe room with an almost-outdoor spa in the most private part of the grounds. Eating and drinking options are as varied, with a café that also does takeaway (\$15 to \$20), a buffet dinner (\$45 per person) and an exclusive candlelit dinner for two in the wilderness (\$140 per person). Fuel is available, and there's an ATM at reception.

Kings Creek Station (☎ 08-8956 7474; www.kingscreekstation.com.au; Luritja Rd; unpowered sites \$26, cabin d incl breakfast \$120; ♿ ♿) Located outside the national park's eastern boundary, 35km from the



canyon, this station has camp sites set among desert oaks. Safari-style cabins (small canvas tents on solid floors) share a bathroom block and kitchen-BBQ area. There are camel rides (one-hour ride \$50), quad bikes (one-hour ride \$70) and, from March to October, a stock camp show with animal handling and whip cracking (\$20). Fuel, ice and limited supplies are available at the shop (open 7am to 7pm).

LASSETER HIGHWAY

The Lasseter Hwy connects the Stuart Hwy with Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, 244km to the west from the turn-off at Eirdunda. There are a couple of roadhouses along the way. Travellers have reported being flagged down by locals beside wrecked cars purporting to have run out of fuel. Keep going or offer fuel only if it's Opal (see the boxed text, p794), not available from the roadhouses on this stretch at the time of writing, but available in Yulara.

Mt Conner, the large mesa (table-top mountain) that looms 350m out of the desert, is the outback's most photographed red herring. On first sighting many mistake it for Uluru,

but other than being a large mass protruding from a flat plain it bears no resemblance. It has great significance to local Aboriginal people, who know it as Atila.

Curtin Springs (☎ 08-8956 2906; www.curtinsprings.com; Lasseter Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites free/\$15, s/d \$50/60, r with bathroom \$120, f \$170; ♿) is the last stop before Yulara, and the nearest alternative to Ayers Rock Resort. You can pitch for free or bed down in a well-maintained cabin. There's fuel, a store with limited supplies and take-away food (meals \$6 to \$20), plus a bar.

ULURU-KATA TJUTA NATIONAL PARK

One of the world's greatest natural attractions, this park has more to offer visitors than just the Rock. Along with the equally impressive Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), this entire area is of deep cultural significance to the traditional owners, the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara Aboriginal peoples (who refer to themselves as Anangu). The Anangu officially own the

national park, although it's leased to Parks Australia and jointly administered.

Many of the 500,000 annual visitors spend fewer than two days here, especially those on tours, which generally whiz through in 24 hours. Considering the 445 long, flat kilometres travelled from Alice to arrive here, and the numerous walks and organised activities on offer, it's worth at least that. The only accommodation is the Voyagers Ayers Rock Resort in the Yulara village, 4km from the park boundary. Aboriginals are conspicuously absent from the village, established to service an area famous for its Aboriginal significance. Tours of Uluru run by the Anangu (see right) are highly regarded as one of only a few windows into the laws and nature of this spiritually momentous place.

Information

The **park** (www.environment.gov.au/parks/uluru; adult/child \$25/free) is open from half an hour before sunrise to sunset daily (varying between 5am to 9pm November to March and 6.30am to 7.30pm April to October). Entry permits are valid for three days and available at the drive-through entry station on the road from Yulara.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre (☎ 08-8956 3138; ♿ 7am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, to 6pm Nov-Mar, information desk 8am-noon & 1-5pm) is 1km before Uluru on the road from Yulara. Don't miss it: displays and exhibits focus on *tjukurpa* (Aboriginal law, religion and custom) and the history and management of the national park. The information desk here is staffed by park rangers who can supply information leaflets and walking notes. The cultural centre also encompasses the Anangu-owned craft outlet **Maruku** (☎ 08-8956 2558; www.maruku.com.au; ♿ 8.30am-5.30pm), selling hand-crafted wooden carvings, bowls and boomerangs. **Walkatjara Art Uluru** (☎ 08-8956 2537; ♿ 8.30am-5.30pm) is also at the cultural centre, where you can sometimes see artists at work; its focus is paintings and ceramics. **Ininti Cafe & Souvenirs** (☎ 08-8956 2214; meals \$4-10; ♿ 7am-5.15pm) sells trinkets (think emu-embazoned ties) and a small range of books on Aboriginal culture and the park's flora and fauna. The attached café serves ice cream, pies and light meals. The **Liru Walk** (45 minutes, 2km) leads from the Cultural Centre to the start of the Base and Mala Walks.

There's also a visitor information centre in Yulara (see p865).

Tours

Most tour operators have desks at Yulara's Tour & Information Centre (p865) and depart from the resort unless otherwise stated.

BUS TOURS

The small-group operator **Discovery Ecotours** (☎ 08-8956 2563; www.ecotours.com.au) runs a five-hour Uluru circumambulation and breakfast for \$115/85 per adult/child; Spirit of Uluru is a four-hour, vehicle-based version for the same price. The Kata Tjuta & Dunes Tour includes a walk into Olga Gorge and sunset at Kata Tjuta for \$85/65.

AAT Kings (☎ 08-8956 2171; www.aatkings.com) operates the biggest range of coach tours. Choose from a range of guided walks and tours from Yulara or buy a tour pass from one day (\$175) to three days (\$300). Check the website or ask at Yulara's information centre.

CAMEL TOURS

Owned by Anangu Tours, **Uluru Camel Tours** (☎ 08-8956 2444; www.camel tours.ananguwaai.com.au; short rides adult/child \$10/6; ♿ 10.30am-noon) provides the opportunity to view Uluru and Kata Tjuta from a distance in a novel way: atop a camel (\$60, 45 minutes). Most popular, though, are the Camel to Sunrise tours (\$95, 2½ hours) and the sunset equivalent with champagne (\$95).

CULTURAL TOURS

ourpick Anangu Tours (☎ 08-8956 2123; www.ananguwaai.com.au), owned and operated by Anangu from the Mutitjulu community, offers a range of trips led by an Anangu guide and gives an insight into the land through Anangu eyes; tours depart from the Cultural Centre.

The daily, five-hour Aboriginal Uluru Tour (\$120/80 adult/child) starts with sunrise over Uluru and breakfast at the Cultural Centre, followed by a guided stroll down the Liru Walk (including demonstrations of bush skills such as spear-throwing).

The Kuniya Sunset Tour (\$90/65, 4½ hours) departs at 2.30pm (3.30pm between November and February) and includes a visit to Mutitjulu Waterhole and the Cultural Centre, finishing with a sunset viewing of Uluru.

Both trips can be combined over 24 hours with an Anangu Culture Pass (\$190/130). Self-drive options are also available for \$60/30. You can join an Aboriginal guide at 8.30am (7.30am from November to January and 8am

from February and October) for the morning walk or at 3.30pm (4.30pm from November to February) for the Kuniya tour.

Cave Hill Safari (☎ 08-8926 8010; www.ayersrockresort.com.au/cave-hill/; adult/child \$215/180) is a full-day 4WD tour to the Cave Hill Aboriginal community. Local guides retell creation stories, explain traditions and show rock-art sites. It's a rare opportunity to escape the crowds and to learn more about the traditional owners.

DINING TOURS

With **Sounds of Silence** (☎ 08-8957 7448; www.ayersrockresort.com.au/sounds-of-silence; adult/child \$145/75), snappily dressed waiters serve champagne and canapés on a desert dune with stunning sunset views of Uluru and Kata Tjuta. Then it's a buffet dinner (with emu, croc and roo) beneath the twinkling southern sky, which, after dinner, is dissected and explained with the help of a telescope. If you're more of a morning person, try the similarly styled **Desert Awakenings** (adult/child \$130/100). Neither tour is suitable for children under 10 years.

MOTORCYCLE TOURS

Sunrise and sunset tours to Uluru and Kata Tjuta can also be had on the back of a Harley Davidson. **Uluru Motorcycle Tours** (☎ 08-8956 2019; rides \$85-255) motors out to Uluru at sunset (\$155, 30 minutes).

SCENIC FLIGHTS

While the enjoyment of those on the ground may be diminished by the constant buzz of

light aircraft and helicopters overhead, for those actually up there it's an unforgettable experience. Prices are per person and include airport transfers from Ayers Rock Resort.

Ayers Rock Helicopters (☎ 08-8956 2077) A 15-minute buzz of Uluru costs \$105; to include Kata Tjuta costs \$210.

Ayers Rock Scenic Flights (☎ 08-8956 2345; www.ayersrockflights.com.au) Prices start from \$150 for a 40-minute flight over Uluru and Kata Tjuta; it costs \$370 for a two-hour flight that also takes in Lake Amadeus and Kings Canyon.

Professional Helicopter Services (PHS; ☎ 08-8956 2003; www.phs.com.au) Charges \$115 for its Uluru flight and \$220 for its 30-minute Uluru and Kata Tjuta flight.

ULURU (AYERS ROCK)

Nothing in Australia is as readily identifiable as Uluru (Ayers Rock). No matter how many times you've seen it on postcards, nothing prepares you for the hulk on the horizon – so solitary and prodigious. Uluru is 3.6km long and rises a towering 348m from the surrounding sandy scrubland (867m above sea level). If that's not impressive enough, it's believed that two-thirds of the rock lies beneath the sand. Sacred sites are located around the base of Uluru; entry to and knowledge of the particular significance of these areas is restricted by Anangu law. The landscape of Uluru changes dramatically with the shifting light and seasons. If your first sight of Uluru is during the afternoon, it appears as an ochre-brown colour, scored and pitted by dark shadows. As the sun sets, it illuminates the rock in burnished orange, then a series of deeper and darker reds

before it fades into charcoal. A performance in reverse, with marginally fewer spectators, is given at dawn.

Activities WALKING

There are walking tracks around Uluru, and ranger-led walks explain the area's plants, wildlife, geology and mythology. All the walks are flat and suitable for wheelchairs. Several areas of spiritual significance to Anangu people are off limits to visitors; these are marked with fences and signs. Photography of sacred sites is also forbidden.

The *Insight into Uluru* brochure (\$1), available at the Cultural Centre, details the self-guided Mala and Mutitjulu walks.

Base Walk (10km, three to four hours) A highlight for many, this track circumnavigates the rock, passing caves, paintings, sandstone folds and geological abrasions along the way.

Mala Walk (2km return, one hour) From the base of the climbing point, interpretive signs explain the *tjukurpa* of the Mala (hare-wallaby people), which is significant to the Anangu. A ranger-guided walk (free) along this route departs at 10am (8am from October to April) from the car park. **Mutitjulu Walk** (1km return, 45 minutes) A short walk from the car park on the southern side of Uluru. The *tjukurpa* tells of the clash between two ancestral snakes, Kuniya and Liru.

Uluru Climb (1.6km return, two hours) The Anangu ask that visitors respect Aboriginal law and culture by choosing not to climb Uluru. The path follows the traditional route taken by ancestral Mala men. The climb is often closed (sometimes at short notice) due to strong winds, rain, mist

and Anangu business, and on days forecast to reach 36°C or more.

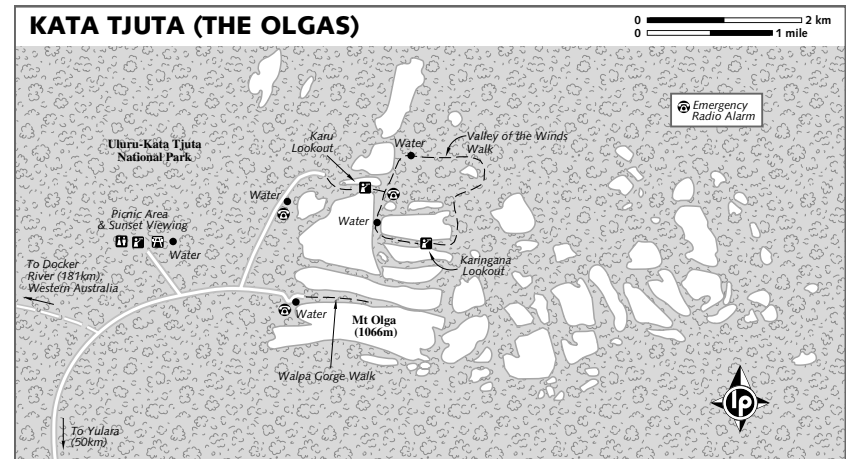
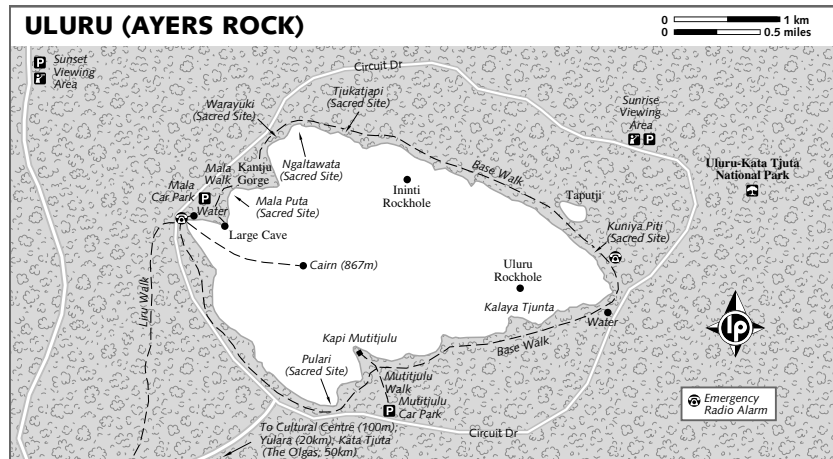
SUNSET & SUNRISE VIEWING AREAS

About halfway between Yulara and Uluru, the sunset viewing area has plenty of car and coach parking. The sunrise viewing area is strung out along the road on the eastern side of the rock: turn right at the T-intersection past the Cultural Centre.

KATA TJUTA (THE OLGAS)

A striking group of domed rocks cluster together to form small valleys and gorges known as Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) about 30km west of Uluru. Many visitors find them just as captivating as their prominent neighbour. The tallest rock, **Mt Olga** (546m, 1066m above sea level) is approximately 200m higher than Uluru. Kata Tjuta means 'many heads' and is of great *tjukurpa* significance, so climbing on the domed rocks is definitely not on.

The main walking track here is the unmissable **Valley of the Winds**, a 7.4km loop trail (two to four hours) that traverses varying desert terrain and yields wonderful views of surreal boulders. It's not particularly arduous, but take plenty of water and sun protection. Starting this walk at first light may reward you with solitude, enabling you to appreciate the sounds of the wind and bird calls carried up the valley. The short (2.6km return, 45 minutes) signposted track beneath towering rock walls into pretty **Walpa Gorge** is especially beautiful in the afternoon, when sunlight floods the gorge.



THE SORRY ROCKS STORY *Jasmine Foxlee*

Every day, rangers at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park receive parcels containing souvenired rocks and sand, sent by guilty tourists. These little 'pieces of place' come back from all over the world, including Germany, the US and Japan. More often than not, the parcels are accompanied by personal letters of apology. It is for this reason that the returned rocks at Uluru have become known to park staff as the 'sorry rocks'.

'We took this rock as memorabilia from our last holiday and since heard it is disrespectful. Please accept back the rock and our sincere apologies.' (October 2004)

The letters reveal that many visitors return the rocks because they recognise the error in their ways and wish to see the pieces of Uluru return home. A proportion (25%) of visitors returning rocks believe that they have been riddled with bad luck or even been cursed as a result of removing the rocks.

'I believe that my family is experiencing a lot of ill health and bad luck since then and although people may laugh at my superstitious nature I believe the stones are something to do with this.' (2000)

Anangu people, the Aboriginal traditional owners of Uluru, believe that rocks and sand belong at Uluru, not in the homes or pockets of visitors. Under *tjukurpa*, the Anangu law governing life and land, there are consequences for disobeying the law of the land. Anangu recognise no specific curse associated with removing rocks and sand but refer to the respect that should be shown to the land, especially as a visitor. Traditional owner Barbara Tjikatu acknowledges the returned rocks as a sign of respect. 'It is good that you've sent these letters back', she says, 'but please, please don't take any more – don't take anything from Uluru'.

Removing rocks and sand from the landscape is not only disrespectful to Anangu culture; it is also illegal. Under Australian law, visitors can be fined up to \$5000 for removing rocks, sand or soil from the park. When you visit Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, think about what it means to be a visitor to Anangu land. Buy your souvenirs from the galleries or shops, rather than taking 'pieces of place'. Consider alternatives to climbing Uluru, such as the spectacular walk around the base of the rock. This place has many wonderful experiences, and by respecting your hosts you'll leave with fantastic memories of the ancient majesty of the desert environment and its people.

Jasmine is a PhD student undertaking research at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.

There's a picnic and sunset-viewing area with toilet facilities just off the access road a few kilometres west of the base of Kata Tjuta. Like Uluru, the Olgas are at their glorious, blood-red best at sunset.

HEADING WEST

A lonely sign at the western end of the Kata Tjuta access road signals that there's a hell of a lot of nothing if you travel west – if suitably equipped, you can travel all the way to Kalgoorlie and on to Perth in WA. It's 181km to Docker River, an Aboriginal settlement to the west, and about 1500km to Kalgoorlie. You need a permit from the Central Land Council for this trip – for more information, see p1032.

YULARA (AYERS ROCK RESORT)

☎ 08 / pop 2080 (including Mutitjulu)

Yulara is the service village for the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and has effectively turned one of the world's least hospitable regions into an easy and comfortable place to visit. Lying

just outside the national park, 20km from Uluru and 53km from Kata Tjuta, the complex is the closest base for exploring the area's renowned attractions. The village includes a bank, a petrol station, emergency services, the resort's four hotels, apartments, a lodge, a camping ground and a supermarket. Yulara supplies the only accommodation, food outlets and other services available in the region. If it weren't in the middle of the desert within cooee of the rock you'd balk at the prices here; as it is, you're stuck with it.

Orientation & Information

Yulara is built around the vaguely circular Yulara Dr. The useful *Welcome to Ayers Rock Resort* flier is available at the visitor information centre and at hotel desks. Most of the village's facilities are in the shopping centre, including a post office and a local job vacancies board.

ANZ bank (☎ 8956 2070) Currency exchange and 24-hour ATMs.

Emergency (☎ police 8956 2166, ambulance 0420-101 403)

Internet access Available at the Tour & Information Centre and all accommodation.

Post office (☎ 8956 2288; Resort Shopping Centre; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) An agent for the Commonwealth and NAB banks. Pay phones are outside.

Tour & Information Centre (☎ 8957 7324; Resort Shopping Centre; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) Most tour operators and car-hire firms have desks at this centre.

Visitor information centre (☎ 8957 7377; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) Contains displays on the geography, wildlife and history of the region, and sells books and regional maps. Information is also available at the national park's Cultural Centre (p861).

Sights & Activities

Stroll through **Mulgara Gallery** (found off reception in the Sails in the Desert hotel), where quality handmade Australian arts and crafts are displayed. Each month brings a new artist in residence.

The **Night Sky Show** (☎ 8956 2563; www.ecotours.com.au; Discovery Ecotours, Tour & Information Centre; adult/child \$33/25) takes an informative one-hour look at the startlingly clear outback night sky with a telescope and an astronomer. Trips in English are at 8.20pm, with a further session at 7.20pm from May to August and 10.15pm from September to April. Prices also include pick-up from your accommodation; bookings are essential.

Sleeping

All of the accommodation in Yulara, including the camping ground and hostel, is owned by the Ayers Rock Resort. And unless the free camping at Curtin Springs station (p860) outweighs the risk of driving in the dark for sunrise/sunset at Uluru, there's no other option. Even though there are almost 5000 beds, it's wise to make a reservation, especially during school holidays. Bookings can be made through **central reservations** (☎ 1300 139 889; www.ayersrockresort.com.au). Substantial discounts are usually offered if you stay for three nights or more, and you can also save a reasonable amount through internet sites offering discount accommodation.

Outback Pioneer Hotel & Lodge (☎ 8957 7605; dm \$33-41, d \$180-400; ☎ ☎ ☎) With a lively barn-like bar and restaurant, this is the budget (budget for Yulara) choice for noncampers. Accommodation ranges from four-bed

mixed-sex dorms and 20-bed unisex dorms to budget rooms with/without bathroom and standard hotel rooms. Rooms are a decent size, and pricier ones are equipped with TV and fridge.

Lost Camel Hotel (☎ 8957 7605; d \$405; ☎ ☎ ☎) The funky (though small) rooms available at this boutique hotel come with very comfy beds and stereos – TV addicts, however, will have to head for the plasma screen at reception. A fine courtyard pool and a bar inspire you to do very little.

Emu Walk Apartments (☎ 8956 7714; 1-/2-bedroom apt from \$450/540; ☎ ☎) Comfort and uniformity are the chief characteristics of these modern apartments, each with a lounge room (with TV) and a well-equipped kitchen. The one-bedroom apartment accommodates four people, while the two-bedroom version sleeps six. Check in at the Desert Gardens Hotel reception.

Desert Gardens Hotel (☎ 8957 7714; r \$450-520; ☎ ☎ ☎) One of Yulara's originals, this ageing hotel is nothing special, though around 30 of its 84 rooms have views of the rock.

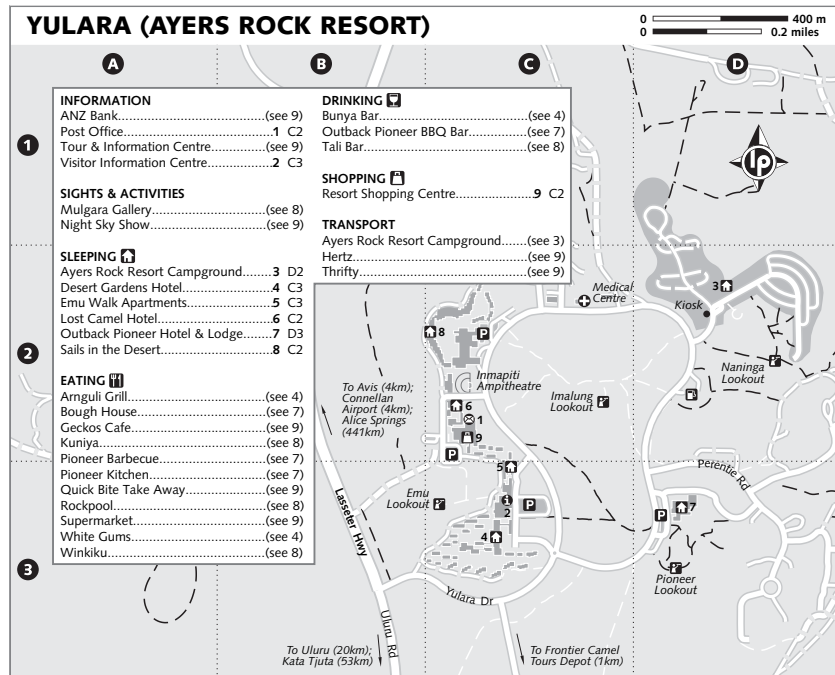
Sails in the Desert (☎ 8956 2200; d \$550, with spa \$640, ste \$880; ☎ ☎ ☎) This luxurious five-star hotel has several restaurants, a piano bar and plenty of sunbathing sites around the pool. Standard rooms are spread over three levels, so request an upper berth if you want a balcony to lean over. Deluxe spa rooms feature a balcony spa.

Ayers Rock Resort Campground (☎ 8957 7001; camp .ground@ayersrockresort.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites \$26/31, cabins \$150; ☎ ☎ ☎) A sprawling camping ground with good facilities, including a kiosk, free BBQs, laundry facilities, a camp kitchen and a pool. During the peak season it fills up with dusty campervans, tents and tourists, and the inevitable pre-dawn convoy heading for Uluru can provide an unwanted wake-up call. The cabins (shared facilities) sleep six people and are cramped and only really suitable for a family.

Eating

Most eateries in Yulara are part of an accommodation complex and have matching levels of swankiness: from silver service right down to aluminium tongs at the DIY BBQ. For a unique dinner on a dune, try the Sounds of Silence tour (p862).

Pioneer Barbecue (Outback Pioneer Hotel & Lodge; BBQ \$20-25, salad \$16; ☎ dinner) Kangaroo skewers,



veggie burgers, steaks and emu sausages are among the meats you can grill yourself at this lively tavern, and the deal includes all the salad you can eat. In the same complex are the Pioneer Kitchen (meals \$7 to \$9; open lunch and dinner), doing brisk business in burgers and kiddie meals, and the Bough House (breakfast \$20 to \$24, dinner \$40; open breakfast and dinner), a family-style place that piles buffet tables high with 'Australiana' foodstuffs.

Geckos Cafe (Resort Shopping Centre; mains \$16-28; ☺ lunch & dinner) The bright interior and courtyard tables of this licensed café make a popular meeting place. It serves a large range of salads and wood-fired pizzas (perhaps spiced prawn, banana and coriander aioli), plus more substantial dishes and snacks. The attached ice creamery serves shakes and gelati.

White Gums (☎ 8957 7888; Desert Gardens Hotel; dinner \$45; ☺ breakfast & dinner) A pleasant and low-lit restaurant, White Gums puts on a substantial evening buffet, including a large selection of salads. Also in the Desert Gardens Hotel is Arnguli Grill (☎ 8957 7888; mains \$30 to

\$45; open dinner), which has flame-grilled à la carte meat and seafood choices. Reservations are required for both eateries.

Rockpool (Sails in the Desert; 3 small plates \$45, plus dessert \$50; ☺ dinner) Located in the resort's port of call for upmarket dining, the Sails in the Desert hotel, Rockpool serves tapas-style dishes on the poolside patio. Also in the hotel, Winkiku (☎ 8956 2200; breakfast \$25 to \$35, dinner \$60; open breakfast and dinner) is a buffet specialist, with the evening spread dedicated to seafood and a meat-filled carvery; kids under 15 eat for free if accompanied by an adult. Yulara's most sophisticated restaurant, Kuniya (☎ 8956 2200; mains \$40 to \$50; open dinner), offers a tour of Australia on a plate, from Bathurst Island barramundi to Tasmanian crayfish; you're required to dress up, so leave the thongs and singlet by the pool. Reservations are required for Winkiku and Kuniya.

Quick Bite Take Away (☎ 8957 7768; Resort Shopping Centre; snacks \$5-12; ☺ 7am-9pm) This is the place for lunch on the run, with a range of quick fixes such as gourmet burgers, sushi packs, pies, and chicken and chips.

The well-stocked **supermarket** (☎ 8957 7395; Resort Shopping Centre; ☺ 8.30am-9pm) has a salad bar and delicatessen and sells picnic portions, fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, and camping supplies. It's good for perishables (like milk and lettuce); otherwise, stock up on staples in Alice.

Drinking

Outback Pioneer BBQ Bar (Outback Pioneer Hotel & Lodge; ☺ 10am-midnight) Modelled on a big iron shed, this rowdy bar is lined with long benches, with plenty of chances to meet other travellers and locals. It has pool tables, live music nightly (usually a touch of twang) and minimal dress standards.

Tali Bar (Sails in the Desert; ☺ 10am-1am) The cocktails (\$15) at this bar include locally inspired mixtures like 'Desert Oasis', or you can eschew these pretenders for a classic, well-shaken Manhattan. The piano gets a workout most nights from 8pm. Dress smart after sunset.

Bunya Bar (Desert Gardens Hotel; ☺ 11am-midnight) This is a rather characterless hotel bar, but it knows the importance of well-chilled beer, and the cocktails are several dollars cheaper than at Tali Bar.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Connellan airport is about 4km north from Yulara. **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) has direct flights from Alice Springs, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide and Sydney.

BUS

Greyhound Australia (☎ 13 14 99; www.greyhound.com.au) has weekday services between Alice Springs and Uluru (\$87, five hours). There's no direct service between Adelaide and Uluru; you have to overnight at Erldunda or go through to Alice Springs.

Australian Pacific Touring (APT) (☎ 1800 891 121; www.aptouring.com.au) does transfers between Alice Springs and Yulara (\$125, six hours), departing Alice at 6.30am and Yulara at 12.30pm.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The road from Alice to Yulara is sealed, with regular food and petrol stops along the way. Yulara is 441km from Alice Springs (241km west of Erldunda on the Stuart Hwy) and the direct journey takes four to five hours.

Renting a car in Alice Springs to go to Uluru and back is a reasonably priced option in a group; see p850 for a list of operators.

FOLLOWING LEN BEADELL'S LEAD *Simone Egger*

Forget roses and chocolates. Real romance lies in being on the road, though it doesn't escape the schmaltzy metaphors: driving your destiny, going somewhere, a journey of internal discovery as much as a physical one etc. Despite them, I'm still full of anticipation at the possibilities that the road represents, leading to unfamiliar towns, through varying terrains, to unknown experiences. That state of transit, in-between places, is a wonderful place. The getting there – wherever 'there' is – is 80% of the rapture of travelling. (Which is fortunate, seeing as 80% of time travelling in the NT is spent getting somewhere.)

Driving straight, for hours, over red ribbed roads in outback Australia is even more mesmerising. On the way through to WA the landscape seems limitless and featureless, except for that mountain we're heading towards. Mulga trees rush past the window; a camel lopes off in the distance. Almost at that mountain, the road diverts and heads towards another mountain. Always heading towards something, but never reaching it – it's a lesson in learning to love travel, the verb. Len called it his 'road-beautification scheme'.

Len Beadell made many of the outback's desert roads. The nuggety surveyor would flash a mirror back to the bulldozer, and the dozer driver would head at the mirrored marker, clearing a path for the grader that followed closely afterwards. Voila: a road. Len liked his roads straight (hence the Gun Barrel Hwy), but they were not without artistry. His roads deliberately framed mountains and sometimes trees; he once put a crook in a road to save an emu's nest (which he named Emu's Egg Bend). He fashioned road signs out of anything available, usually an old fuel-drum lid with holes he shot into it for hanging. He wrote books about it too, six of them, including his first, *Too Long in the Bush*, which illustrated his side interest in bush dentistry.

Len built thousands of kilometres of road before he died in 1995. But desert travellers will be following Len's lead for a long time yet while steering their dust-veiled 4WD to wherever.

Getting Around

A free shuttle bus meets all flights and drops off at all accommodation points around the resort, and the shopping centre, every 15 minutes from 10.30am to 6pm and 6.30pm to 12.30am daily.

Uluru Express (☎ 8956 2152; www.uluruexpress.com.au) falls somewhere between a shuttle-bus service and an organised tour. It provides return transport from the resort to Uluru (\$35/20 adult/child, \$40/20 for the sunrise shuttle). Morning shuttles to Kata Tjuta cost

\$50/25; afternoon shuttles include a stop at Uluru for sunset and cost \$55/30.

Hiring a car will give you the flexibility to visit the Rock and the Olgas as often and whenever you want. Car-hire companies **Hertz** (☎ 8956 2244) and **Thrifty** (☎ 8956 2030) have counters at the Tour & Information Centre in the resort shopping centre – both also have desks at the airport, as does **Avis** (☎ 8956 2487).

Bike hire is available at **Ayers Rock Resort Campground** (☎ 8957 7001; per hr \$7, per half-/full day \$15/20, deposit \$200; 🕒 7am-8pm).