

THE GREAT FRONTIER

DANCING TO ITS OWN UNIQUE SUN-BAKED TERRITORIAN BEAT, DARWIN AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ARE LIKE NO OTHER PART OF AUSTRALIA

WORDS FIONA HARPER

For starters, the Territory is home to Australia's largest national park (Kakadu), while the Finke River is said to be the world's oldest river, dating back a mere 340 million years. Indigenous Territorians themselves have lived off the land for 40-odd thousand years. More recently, Darwin is the hometown of popular Australian R&B singer-songwriter Jessica Mauboy. Take the time to get into the heart of the Territory and allow its wide-open spaces, starry night skies and down-to-earth people work their magic. Here's our pick of some of the region's top eats, adventures and secret finds.

8 TOP ADVENTURES

CROC HUNT
Celebrate the 30th anniversary of the classic *Crocodile Dundee* films by following Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee's famous footsteps. Kakadu Tourism offers the Spirit of Kakadu Adventure Tour, which includes visiting various natural

attractions highlighted in the films such as Gunlom Falls and the outback's beautiful billabongs. kakadutourism.com

GO INDIGENOUS
Limited to just 250 visitors each year, the four-day art, culture and historical Arnhem Land and Cobourg Peninsula adventure based at far-flung Cobourg Coastal Camp is a must-book. The tour covers ancient rock art little-seen by non-indigenous eyes. venturenorth.com.au

CRUISE UNDER THE STARS
Join The Alkogarrng Experience tour and cruise the Yellow Water Billabong with an indigenous guide who shares Dreamtime interpretations of the Milky Way. The 90-minute cruise explores Kakadu's unique landscape within the solar system and its connection to Aboriginal spiritual and cultural beliefs. kakadutourism.com

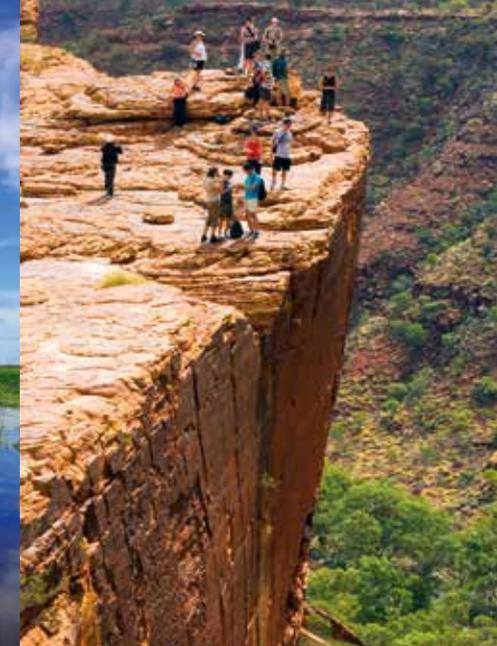
ABORIGINAL CELEBRATION
The inspiration behind Yothu Yindi's global hit song "Treaty",

Barunga is the home of one of Australia's most significant community festivals. Held on 10-12 June east of Katherine, it offers a rare chance to visit a remote community and experience culture, dance, art, sport and community. barungafestival.com.au

WETLANDS SAFARI
Zip on an airboat through the Mary River. It may be Australia's densest saltwater crocodile habitat, but besides crocs everywhere, you'll also spot buffalo and wondrous birdlife in this stunning, lush wetlands. tourismtopend.com.au

UNIQUE ISLANDERS
About 80km north of Darwin, the Tiwi Islands are renowned for being culturally and linguistically distinct from Arnhem Land Aborigines. Most islanders have a passion for football, fishing or fabrics, if not all three. Some like Tiwi Designs and the Rioli football family are household names. Join a multi-day tour from Darwin to see where famous footballers

The Top End is a mecca of wildlife, incredible landscapes and unique Indigenous rituals



GETTY IMAGES; TOURISM NT; BARUNGAFESTIVAL.COM

Clockwise from top: Cool off in a watering hole, learn about Aboriginal culture through ancient wall art, see nesting turtles and enjoy the raw, rugged outback

learnt their barefoot skills or pick up hand-dyed fabrics favoured by Whoopie Goldberg and Olivia Newton-John. sealinknt.com.au/tiwi-islands

BIG GAME FISHING

Cast a line in the Cobourg Peninsula's Garig Gunak Barlu National Park for some of the best sports fishing in Australia; think barramundi, mangrove jack and Spanish mackerel. Take a break from fishing for a history lesson on European settlers at Port Essington's Victoria Settlement or at historic Cape Don lighthouse. venturenorth.com.au

TREK THE OUTBACK

Hike through Kakadu across an ancient landscape with 40,000 years of Aboriginal history. Cool off in waterholes, dine under the stars beside a camp fire before falling asleep to the sounds of the bush in semi-permanent wilderness camps. worldexpeditions.com

8 SECRET FINDS

EXPLORE A GHOST TOWN

The ruins of 24 houses and a hospital are testimony to the ambitions of a colonial British government, which established Victoria Settlement in remote, hostile northern Australia during the 1830s. Approximately 570km northeast of Darwin, the settlement is accessed by 4WD only during the dry season (May - October). travelnt.com

SECRET WOMEN'S BUSINESS

With a history dating back thousands of years, the dilly bag – a traditional Australian Aboriginal bag – is a powerful and important symbol to the women of Arnhem Land. Learn about the cultural significance of dilly bags, kinship, and Yolngu philosophy with Yolngu women in the country – sorry fellas, it's for females only. lirrwitourism.com.au/womens-tours

BANUBANU RETREAT

A secluded island off the Gove coast in east Arnhem Land, Banubanu is powered by the sun and wind. It's about as remote as you can get – exactly the attraction for jaded city folk needing to recharge their souls and connect with nature. Expect long expanses of beach, while sports fishermen can target marlin, sailfish and Spanish mackerel. banubanu.com

TURTLE NESTING

Six out of seven marine turtle species inhabit Northern Territory waters. Witness the wonder of nesting females coming ashore to lay their eggs at Dundee Beach, 120km southwest of Darwin. travelnt.com

ARNHEM LAND SAFARIS

Davidsons Arnhem Land Safaris brings curious travellers into the last corner of ancient Australia. Stay in cabins right in the middle of pristine bush setting, go birdwatching in the wetlands, see rock art sites, and take a sunset trip to the floodplains. arnhemland-safaris.com



GOOD BUYS

For some unique NT finds, head to Darwin's first cinema – now converted into Star Village arcade in Smith Street Mall – where you'll find quirky boutiques like Vintage Twist and Embella Jewellery, and Pure Indulgence for homemade chocolate.

COOL DOWN, GET WET

In a parched landscape dominated by red dirt and choking dust, nothing's more refreshing than a dip in the crystal clear waters of Katherine thermal hot springs fed by the Katherine River on the edge of town. visitkatherine.com.au

Further afield, like many of the Territory's secret watering holes, you'll need a 4WD to access Tjaynera Falls. The upside is you'll probably have this little plunge pool all to yourself. parksandwildlife.nt.gov.au

TAKE HOME A TERRITORY ONE-OFF

Raw Cloth is a little gem hidden away in Darwin's northern suburb of Nightcliff. Passionate textile collectors and mother and daughter duo, Rhonda Dunne and Jo Dunne-Politis along with partner Kerrie Horgan, source 100 per cent cotton or raw silk from Finland, the Tiwis and across the Territory, even old kimonos and Indonesian batiks. These fabrics are crafted into bright and beautiful clothing that scream "one of a kind" for men, women and children. **Shop 3, 60 Aralia Street; +61 8 8985 2305**



Facing page, clockwise from top left: Soak in the Mediterranean vibe and drinks at Moorish Cafe; Char's inviting heritage home setting; grills at Ducks Nuts. Right: Yots Greek Taverna's succulent octopus

8 GREAT EATS

PEE WEE'S AT THE POINT

Having picked up gongs at the 2015 Gold Plate Awards and the Australian Good Food & Travel Guide 2016 Readers Choice awards, Pee Wee's is a winning combination of waterfront location and a cutting-edge menu. Try an entree of coconut-crusted crocodile tail cheekily described as "wild caught, wrestled by chef on the beach in front of Pee Wee's". peewees.com.au

DINAH BEACH CRUISING YACHT ASSOCIATION (DBCYA)

The DBCYA clubhouse debunks any notion of yachting being an exclusive pastime of the rich. Friendly and modest, the food is as honest and authentic as the yachties that prop up the bar each night. Try grilled barramundi for a bargain price at AUD18. dbcya.com.au

DUCKS NUTS

This place is a hit with locals who pre-order their morning coffee via the Ducks Nuts smartphone app. If you're in town on a Tuesday, you're in luck. It's AUD15 Schnitzel Night with nine toppings influenced by flavours around the world. They'll even throw in a free beer or wine. ducksnuts.com.au

ROAD KILL CAFE

"You kill it, we grill it" is the motto of this cafe at Darwin's Mindil Beach Sunset Markets. Sounding more gruesome than it actually is, this place is strictly for meat lovers though. Try the crocodile satay, and if you're game, camel,



buffalo, possum and wallaby satay along with similarly themed sausages.

CHAR RESTAURANT

Housed in heritage-listed Admiralty House on the Darwin Esplanade, Char offers great steaks and wicked desserts like chocolate indulgence with orange reduction, caramel sauce and blood orange sorbet. Add a chocolate martini for a complete chocolate fix. chardarwin.com.au

MOORISH CAFE

A tried-and-true winner for 14 years and Darwin's first tapas restaurant, Moorish channels Mediterranean influence with Spanish and north African flavours. Grab a friend and share spiced lamb strips with chimichurri, duck shanks with saffron caramelised onions or NT jewfish in coconut and lime. moorishcafe.com.au

YOTS GREEK TAVERNA

Darwin's warm climate goes well with Mediterranean-style cuisine, even more so when it comes with a dockside location overlooking bobbing yachts. Be tempted by traditional house-made lamb *gyros* served with warm pita bread, salad and tzatziki accompanied by a robust Barossa Valley shiraz. yots.com.au

HUMPTY DOO HOTEL

Humpty Doo Hotel is worth a visit purely for bragging rights and the obligatory souvenir t-shirt. If you're looking for good pub grub (think steak and chips or hearty steak burgers with lashings of caramelised onions) washed down with a cold beer in a pub full of raw Aussie characters, you'll find it here along the Arnhem Highway an hour south of Darwin.

 SilkAir flies five times weekly between Singapore and Darwin

DUCKS NUTS; MOORISH CAFE; YOTS GREEK TAVERNA; CHAR RESTAURANT