Outback Pocket Guide

Exploring Australia’s Outback State: the Northern Territory

Birgit Bradtke
Large cover photo: sandstone domes in Keep River National Park (near the NT/WA border) resemble the famous Bungle Bungle range in the Kimberley.
Top right insert: Chambers Pillar and Castle Rock in central Australia, south east of Alice Springs.
Outback Pocket Guide
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By Birgit Bradtke

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Thank you for downloading “The Australian Outback Pocket Guide, Exploring Australia's Northern Territory”.

I wrote this booklet to help you with the planning of your outback trip. I hope it will give you a good overview of the Australian Outback and the Northern Territory, the issues and decisions involved in a trip up here, and that it will answer your important questions. After reading it you should be able to decide

- when you will go,
- for how long you will go,
- how you will get around,

and most importantly, what you want to see and do while here.

To put the advice in this booklet into perspective, I think you should know a few things about me.

I have lived in north Western Australia, just across the border from the Northern Territory, for about 15 years. Originally I am from Germany, and I arrived in Australia as a tourist myself. I fell in love with the north and stayed.

What I fell in love with is the nature and freedom up here. I love the bush, I love camping and hiking, and I could spend weeks or months away from civilisation. In fact, I regularly do.

My websites and books are written for people who love the same things I do. This is not about mass tourism. Mass tourism is what we try to get away from best as we can.

Many of the big name attractions in the Northern Territory have become very commercialised. This may be less obvious to overseas visitors, since the number of people here, the distances, the landscapes, all that still adds up to a very impressive experience if this is your first visit, and a short one at that.

But if you are from Australia and love camping and four wheel driving, or if you are from overseas but are on a longer 4WDing and camping trip, then places like Kakadu or Ayers Rock can easily turn into somewhat disappointing experiences.

I write guide books that help you avoid that.

In some areas it's surprisingly easy to get away from people as long as you know where to go. In other areas you just have to arrive with the right expectations and make the most of it.

And if you have the time, you can make use of my information about some of the less known attractions in those areas. Less visited gorges, free bush camp sites... the places
that tend to make our trips so special, and that stick with us much longer than that Ayers Rock sunset or the Yellow Water cruise in Kakadu!

When you read that I call something "crowded", keep in mind that I am used to having a waterfall or gorge all to myself.

Australian nature and bush lovers will know exactly where I'm coming from. Overseas tourists will, after they spent a few weeks here, especially if they follow my directions. I hope you will have a chance to visit some of those special places.

I do hope that my websites and guide books will help you to experience the centre, the north and the north west the same way I do.

A few more comments:

If you feel this quick guide is lacking somewhere, don’t hesitate to let me know! Even a good product can always be improved.

Also, as explained, I am “German Australian”. I have been living in Australia for 15 years, but English will always be my second language. I apologize in advance for any grammatical oddities, clunkers and “Germanisms” that you may come across. (And I hope my random approach to punctuation does not distract from the information contained in these pages.)

Again, don’t hesitate to let me know about errors. Don’t think you can't complain just because the book is free. You are helping to make this little guide better for others!

Talking about others...

If you find this guide and the website useful, then please help others to find out about it. If you have a blog or website, please consider adding a link in a post, the blogroll or favourites. Every link helps.

Thank you!
How To Use This Guide

This guide is written in e-book format. You may be familiar with e-books, in which case you can skip this section and dive straight into the book. But for those of you who are not familiar with e-books, here are a few tips:

First of all, if you haven't saved it to your hard drive yet, look in the top left corner, where it says “Save a copy” (or where you see a little disk icon). Click it, browse to your desktop and click save. Now you can open the e-book from your desktop and read it on your screen any time you like. Or you can print it out and read it like any other book.

All my e-books are formatted and designed to be printed out. Of course! A travel guide that you can’t take with you is not much use, is it?

This Quick Guide can be printed out, too. But it is also designed to be read, and used, from your computer. And while you are still in the planning stage of your trip this can be very handy.

For example, you will come across links in this book. Some of them work just like links on the Web. They take you to webpages with more information. You will recognize such “external” links because they are usually written with the www in front, like this: www.TheOutbackGuide.com

Other links are internal links. They take you to a different part of this booklet. The links in the Table of Contents (TOC) on the previous page are internal links. Clicking on them takes you straight to that chapter. Try it.

And last but not least you may find email links. They will open your email editor so you can send a message to the provided address, e.g. a Tourist Information Centre.

Navigation
You have many options to get around this book. You can just scroll up and down, with your mouse or with the scroll bar on the right of the screen. You can use the little arrows at the bottom or top of the screen (depending on your version of e-book reader). You can use the jump links in the TOC. And, if you remember the page number you want to go to, you can type that at the bottom or top of the screen where you see the page numbers. Play around with everything a bit and see what you find most comfortable.

You can also adjust the size of the text by using the plus and minus signs at the top of your screen, or by changing the percentage number that’s displayed between the plus and minus sign.

And if none of this makes you feel comfortable while reading, just print the darn thing!
Part I: Introduction and Overview

Where or what is the Australian Outback?

Aussies can of course skip this intro, but it seems that for many visitors from overseas the idea of our outback is hard to grasp. Many think of it as a precise location, a certain number of square kilometres around Uluru and Alice Springs. Or So.

I guess in a way that's true. Over 1000 miles in any direction from Uluru or Alice Springs (located right in the middle of Australia), there is nothing but outback.

Australia is the most urbanized nation on earth.

Have a look at this map:

Every dot in it represents 1000 people. Not a town or anything, but 1000 people living in that whole area. (Keep in mind that the distance from east to west is about 4000 km/2500 miles.)

Our population is concentrated in the cities along the southern and eastern coast, or not far from them. The only other "populated" region is the area around the city of Perth on the southern west coast.

And that's it! The Australian Outback is just about everywhere else... 6.5 million square kilometres of it (or 2.5 million square miles), inhabited by fewer than 60,000 people.

The word outback stands for the emptiness, remoteness, and the huge distances of inland Australia. It also stands for a lifestyle that's characterised by lots of freedom and lots of hard work, for friendly, open, down to earth people who still go out of their way to help each other, real community where people depend on each other, and it stands for real characters.

And for travellers the word outback stands for red rocks and red sands, long drives and endless horizons, nature, adventure, camp fires and a million stars at night.
My guide books focus mostly on that last part, the outback for travellers. And each book covers one specific area of Australia.

You can't cover the whole continent in one holiday, and I can't cover the whole continent in one book. Want to make the most of your visit to the outback? Stick to one area, and have a really good look at that.

The little book you are looking at introduces you to the Northern Territory (NT). As the number plates proudly state, the NT is "the Outback State" of Australia.

Most Australian states have some outback regions, but the NT is truly all outback. And most of the big outback attractions you know are located here:

Uluru (Ayers Rock), the Olgas, Kings Canyon, the Devils Marbles, Kakadu, Litchfield and Katherine Gorge... The Northern Territory is where Crocodile Dundee lives, and a few thousand others just like him.

The Pocket Guide takes you along the Stuart Highway, the famous road that dissects Australia from north to south, from Darwin to Alice Springs and beyond.

I'll tell you what's where, how you get there, what there is to see and do and how much time it'll take.

Most people do not fly to the NT, i.e. Alice Springs or Darwin. Instead they start their trip in one of the bigger cities in the south. Therefore I have also included a section that gives you an overview of some other great outback drives, the long drives that take you to the Northern Territory in the first place.

I live in the north west of Australia, in the state Western Australia (WA), but just across the border from the Northern Territory.

There is a small town there called Kununurra.

The remote Kimberley region is to the west of me, and the Northern Territory to the east. This is my stomping ground and my backyard.

Welcome to my backyard and I hope you will like it here as much as I do!

PS.: I have (of course!) also a website about the Kimberley region:

www.kimberleyaustralia.com

And (of course!) it also includes a free pocket guide for download. You can grab it here:

www.kimberleyaustralia.com/kimberley-travel-guide.html
The Northern Territory

The Northern Territory covers the middle of the top half of Australia.

It is 1,349,129 square kilometres in size (520,902 square miles) and inhabited by 218,380 people (March 08 estimate). 31% of the NT population are of Aboriginal origin.

Darwin, pop. 120,900 as of June 2007, is the capital of the NT and is located on the tropical northern coast. By rights it is a city but it feels like a small country town.

The second biggest town in the NT is Alice Springs, 1500 km or 930 miles south of Darwin and more or less smack bang in the middle of Australia. 26,486 people live in Alice Springs (June 07), but the population numbers jump during the tourist season.

Darwin and Alice Springs are connected by the Stuart Highway, which then continues from Alice Springs towards Adelaide in South Australia (SA).

There are only two other small country towns of significant size along that road:

In Katherine (pop. 9,124) you can turn west towards Western Australia (WA), and in Tennant Creek (pop 3,427) you can turn east towards Queensland (QLD).

The other places marked are tiny, often just roadhouses, and most of the other roads you see are just tracks.

So let's do a first orientation. We'll drive from north to south and have a look at what there is to see and do:
A Quick Trip Across The Northern Territory

The "Top End"

Darwin is a fascinating mixture of cosmopolitan city and rough outback country town. It is located on the far northern coast, right on the edge of the turquoise Timor Sea. Darwin has an international airport that is well connected with several daily flights to different destinations in Asia and all major cities in Australia.

The tropical climate of Darwin and the ocean and beaches encourage an outdoor lifestyle that is hard to beat.

However, for most tourist Darwin is just the entry and jumping off point for their outback adventure. For others it is a temporary base while they do a quick loop through the three main national parks:

Leave Darwin and head south on the Stuart Highway. After 35 km/22 miles you reach the turn off for the Arnhem Highway, which takes you to Kakadu National Park. The Arnhem Highway is fully sealed, all the way to Jabiru, a small mining town inside Kakadu National Park.

Kakadu National Park has a second entrance further south. You can reach it by continuing the Stuart Highway to get to Pine Creek, 230 km/143 miles south of Darwin. The Kakadu Highway starts here, is also fully sealed, and also takes you to Jabiru.

In between those two turn offs, on the right (western) side of the highway, is Litchfield National Park. The main, sealed entry road into Litchfield starts 85 km or 53 miles south of Darwin.

Katherine Gorge is part of Nitmiluk National Park, 29 km or 18 miles from the small town of Katherine. You reach Katherine 91 km (57 miles) from Pine Creek/the Kakadu turn off. You are now 321 km or 200 miles from Darwin.

As mentioned, those three parks can be visited on a loop drive from Darwin. On the way down take the Arnhem Highway into Kakadu, leave the park on the Kakadu Highway. Drive to Katherine to see the gorge, and on the way up you take in Litchfield National Park. Or go the other way round.

(I'll talk about times required and possible itineraries in the next chapter.)

If you have ample time there is of course a LOT more to see and do in that region, but for now let's stick to the big picture and the well known attractions.

In Katherine you have two options to continue. You can turn west onto the Victoria Highway, and head towards the Western Australia border and the Kimberley.

There are two national parks on the way to the border:
The Gregory National Park is a large park that definitely requires a 4WD and an adventurous spirit to explore in depth.

The Keep River National Park is smaller, more accessible (though the roads are all unsealed) and has some nice bush walks.

Only 50 km/30 miles from the Keep River National Park is the border to Western Australia.

To continue from here, see the Kimberley Pocket Guide and my other website, www.KimberleyAustralia.com.

From Katherine to Alice Springs

Back to Katherine. If we continue south on the Stuart Highway we next get to the Mataranka Hot Springs, 105 km/65 miles south.

Just south of Mataranka is the turn off for the very remote Roper Highway (unsealed), part of the “Savannah Way” to the east coast.

And then you leave the wet tropics. Not the tropics in a geographical sense, as the tropic of Capricorn is way south near Alice Springs. But you do leave the tropical vegetation behind. The country now starts to dry up, you drive mostly through vast spinifex plains, dotted with rocky outcrops and small ranges. The road is mostly straight and there is a roadhouse/service station every hundred to two hundred kilometres or so (every hundred miles), all the way to Alice Springs.

595 km/370 miles south of Darwin is the turn-off for the sealed Carpentaria Highway, which also joins the remote, unsealed Savannah Way to the east.

The next intersection of note is another 375 km/233 miles further on, at Three Ways Roadhouse. You are now 970 km (603 miles) south of Darwin and this is your chance to drive east, all the way to Brisbane or Cairns, on a normal, sealed highway, the Barkly Highway.

Just south of Three Ways you find Tennant Creek. The biggest attraction of Tennant Creek is its gold mining history. And the fact that it is half way between Alice Springs and Katherine, which makes it a good overnight stop.

Another reason many people stop here is that the Devils Marbles are only 110 km or 68 miles to the south of Tennant Creek.

From the Marbles its another 400 km (250 miles) until you get to Alice Springs. You know you are nearly there when the road starts winding and climbing over the beautiful MacDonnell Ranges. The Tropic of Capricorn is marked with a monument, some 35 km/22 miles north of Alice.

You have now officially left the tropics.
The "Red Centre"

Alice Springs is the heart and the centre of the Australian Outback, both in a geographical and a metaphorical sense. The town sits right in the middle of the Australian continent, as far away as possible from every major city and every coast.

It's a fantastic place to explore early outback history and to see and learn more about the outback environment.

The town is located at a gap in the MacDonnell Ranges (called Heavitree Gap), right at foot of the range with beautiful views of it. Set aside a day or two to explore the historical attractions in town and to visit the Alice Springs Desert Park (a must).

Heavitree Gap splits the MacDonnell Range in two parts, the East and the West MacDonnells.

Each side can be visited in a day trip from Alice, but both sides also offer extended hikes and camping so you could easily spend a lot more time here.

The East MacDonnells are less developed. For some areas you even need a 4WD. The biggest attraction here is the beautiful Trephina Gorge, the remotest is Ruby Gap.

The West MacDonnells are easily accessible by 2WD and have become very touristy. (Note: this is from the perspective of someone who lives in a very remote area of Australia. A visitor from Europe or the US will experience it very differently!)

The main attractions here are Simpsons Gap, Standley Chasm, Ormiston Gorge and Glen Helen, and for the more active and adventurous Redbank Gorge and Mt. Sonder.

You can discover the whole range on foot on a two week hike along the famous Larapinta Trail.

You have two options to get from Alice Springs to the main attractions of central Australia and the Australian Outback: Kings Canyon, Kata Tjuta and of course, Uluru (Ayers Rock).

The first option is more popular: a dash down on the Stuart Highway to Erldunda Roadhouse, where you turn west and take the Lasseter Highway to Uluru, a 461 km distance all up (286 miles).

Kata Tjuta is also located in the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, about 50 km or 30 miles beyond Uluru.

Kings Canyon is a bit to the north, a 310 km (193 miles) drive from Uluru on a fully sealed road.

The second option to get here is the more attractive as it avoids backtracking the whole distance on the highway.
Drive into the West MacDonnell Range, and instead of turning around at Glen Helen (or Redbank Gorge) continue on the unsealed **Mereenie Loop Road**. This is a beautiful scenic drive of 225 km or 140 miles (from Glen Helen) and takes you directly to Kings Canyon. From Kings Canyon you can continue along the bitumen to Uluru/Kata Tjuta, as was mentioned above.

What I just described, the Stuart Highway - Lasseter Highway - Mereenie Loop Road circle, that is the main tourist loop through the area, but there is of course more to discover here. You can certainly get away from the masses. However, it takes more time and a 4WD to do so. You should also be set up to camp (unless you let a tour operator take care of everything.)

If camping and 4WDing is your thing, then you can visit the Finke National Park (Palm Valley and Boggy Hole), the historical Aboriginal community of Hermannsburg (home of famous painet Albert Namatjira), Chambers Pillar on the eastern side of the highway, Rainbow Valley, to name just a few of the less visited attractions.

**Onwards from Alice Springs**

4WDers can now leave Alice Springs and return to the north via the unsealed **Tanami Road**, crossing the Tanami Desert to get to Halls Creek in the Kimberley in Western Australia. (See [my other website](http://www.TheOutbackGuide.com) and [pocket guide](http://www.TheOutbackGuide.com) for info on the Kimberley).

Or they can take the unsealed **Great Central Road** to head from Uluru across the Victoria Desert towards Perth and the West Coast.

But most tourists will simply stay on the Stuart Highway and continue straight south. Leaving the Northern Territory behind you enter **South Australia**. A day's drive from Uluru or Alice takes you to the opal mining town of **Coober Pedy**, a fascinating and strange place where most people live underground.

From there it's another day's drive via **Port Augusta** to **Adelaide**, back to civilisation as you know it.

(The alternative to this two day drive on the bitumen is the unsealed **Oodnadatta Track**, starting from Marla 234 km (145 miles) north of Coober Pedy and taking in the **Flinders Ranges** before you get to Port Augusta.)

This was a quick trip to give you an idea where the big towns and attractions in the NT are located, and some sense of orientation. Of course there are other possibilities for routes and schedules, and a lot more things to see and do. We'll get to that.
Part II: General Information

Getting There

Visa Information
Unless you are an Aussie or a Kiwi (New Zealander) you need a visa to enter Australia.

For most tourists the ETA (electronic travel authority) replaces the old style paper visa and stamp in the passport. The ETA is included if you book a package holiday. It can also be arranged by your travel agent, or by your airline if you book your flight directly with them. So usually you don't have to worry about a thing, it's all done for you.

The ETA allows you to stay in Australia for up to three months.

If you want to stay in Australia for longer, or if for some reason you need to arrange your ETA yourself, you can find all the necessary information, download application forms, apply online and pay online at the very user friendly website of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs: www.immi.gov.au

Flying
Most overseas visitors to Australia fly to or from Sydney or Perth. Melbourne is another major airport, and those who have relatives here may also choose to land in Adelaide or Brisbane.

Cairns is another alternative international airport, used by visitors to the Great Barrier Reef.

Darwin in the NT is also an international airport. Many flights to/from Asia land here.

But Darwin is a fairly small airport, and sometimes you may find that if you fly long haul from overseas, even if flying via Asia, a flight to Sydney or Melbourne combined with a domestic flight to Darwin works out cheaper than flying to Darwin directly. This is especially true for the peak season. (That's June to August for Australia's north. More on that in the next chapter.)

The other two NT airports of interest to tourists are at Alice Springs and at Uluru.

You can fly to the Northern Territory domestically from any major Australian airports, daily. The main domestic carriers are Qantas (and its budget division Jetstar) and the budget carrier Virgin Blue. Virgin Blue fly to Darwin, but not to Alice Springs or Uluru.
Before you book a flight to Uluru to save time, consider that most extended Ayers Rock/Kings Canyon tours pick up and drop off at Alice Springs.

Organising a flight package with several domestic flights (or rather, getting a travel agent to do it for you) is often the best option for international visitors.

**By Train**

In February 2004 the Adelaide-Darwin Railway was finally completed, making it possible to travel to or from Darwin on the Ghan train. The 2979 km (1851 miles) trip is considered one of the great rail journeys in this world.

However, reviews from travellers are somewhat mixed. I would only use the Ghan if I had the time to combine the journey with longer stays in both the Alice Springs and the Darwin area.

You can read more about the Ghan here: [www.theoutbackguide.com/the-ghan.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/the-ghan.html)


**Driving**

Driving can be a very attractive option for those who have the time.

**From Adelaide to Alice Springs**

Apart from the Alice Springs area itself, the 1690 km (1050 miles) trip from Adelaide to Alice Springs along the Stuart Highway is not exactly studded with big name attractions. You can (and should!) visit the Flinders Ranges in the south, though that requires a big detour and some backtracking.

Other than that **Coober Pedy** is the main, if not the only big tourist attraction while still in South Australia. (Read about Coober Pedy at [www.theoutbackguide.com/coober-pedy.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/coober-pedy.html))

**Uluru, Kata Tjuta and Kings Canyon** are the main reason why tourists visit the Alice Springs area in the first place. The turn off to those attractions is not far from the border into the Northern Territory, 199 km (124 miles) south of Alice, so you would likely visit them on the way from Adelaide to Alice.

If you have a 4WD and a sense of adventure consider driving from Adelaide to Alice on the **Oodnadatta Track** instead of the main highway. It makes for a longer trip, but it is well worth it.
On the Stuart Highway you can drive from Adelaide to Alice Springs in two days if you don't want to explore more of the Coober Pedy area. (This does not allow for Uluru etc. More on that in the next chapter)

To go via the Flinders Ranges and the Oodnadatta Track allow five to seven days (or more), depending on your chosen route and how much you want to explore on the way.

**From Perth to Uluru**

The 1995 km (1240 miles) drive from Perth to Uluru via the Great Central Road is no longer the challenging adventure it used to be. The Great Central Road from Laverton to Uluru is unsealed but is an easy drive that could even be done in a 2WD, provided the road is dry. (4WD is strongly recommended.)

You could do this trip in three days if needed. As always, more time will make it more relaxed. You also may want to make detours and look at a few things on the Perth end of the trip. The three days would be a sensible pure driving time.

**From Perth to Darwin**

This trip first takes you up the west coast with its deserted beaches and magnificent reefs (which easily rival the Great Barrier Reef in beauty and species variety):

You can cover the over 2400 km (1490 miles) distance from Perth to Broome in two to three days. Take a week and you'll see a few things. I recommend no less than two weeks for that leg.

Here are a few places you will probably want to look at on the way:

- Pinnacles Desert
- Kalbarri
- Monkey Mia
- Coral Bay
- Exmouth
- Karijini National Park
- Millstream-Chichester National Park
- Eighty Mile Beach

From Broome you cross the wild and remote Kimberley region, truly the jewel of Australia. You can do so along the highway (taking in the famous Bungle Bungles) or on the unsealed Gibb River Road.

To find out more about the Kimberley region download the free Kimberley Pocket Guide...

www.kimberleyaustralia.com/kimberley-travel-guide.html

...and visit my website www.KimberleyAustralia.com
After crossing the border into the NT you pass Keep River National Park and Gregory National Park and you finally reach the Stuart Highway in Katherine, 321 km or 200 miles south of Darwin.

Make sure you take enough time for this whole trip. The distance on the highway is "only" 4161 km (2586 miles), but there is so much to see on the way, four weeks is the minimum I recommend, eight weeks is better. You can of course drive the distance in much less time but then you will have to skip many places and that would be a real shame.

From the Kimberley to Alice Springs

For people coming from the Kimberley, the Tanami Road is an interesting short cut from Halls Creek to Alice Springs (a distance of about 1050 km or 650 miles). You don't need to be a hard core adventurer to cross the Tanami Desert. Any reliable 4WD vehicle is up to the job, no matter how inexperienced the driver.

The trip usually requires two days and you can read more about it here: www.theoutbackguide.com/tanami-desert.html

From Cairns to Darwin

The route form Cairns to Darwin along the coast is part of the Savannah Way across Australia's tropical north. (The whole Savannah Way connects Cairns on the east with Broome on the west coast of Australia.)

To follow the coastal route you do need a 4WD vehicle. This is a rather remote part of Australia. You could avoid the roughest section (Normanton to Borroloola) if you feel that is too much for you or your car. Just stay south of it on the Flinders and Barkly Highway.

At the time of writing this I still haven't been on the Savannah Way (coastal route) myself. I had to cancel my 2010 trip because the wet season lasted too long and the roads did not open in time, so I will be over there early in the 2011 season. After that I can tell you more.

Some More Information

Below are links to some reader questions about those outback drives that I answered in the past.

The Big Picture
www.theoutbackguide.com/trip-to-australia.html
www.theoutbackguide.com/trip-to-the-outback.html
Adelaide - Alice Springs - Darwin
www.theoutbackguide.com/4wd-trip-coober-pedy-to-arkaroola.html

Cairns - Alice Springs

Cairns - Darwin
www.theoutbackguide.com/driving-from-cairns-to-darwin-savannah-way.html
www.theoutbackguide.com/driving-from-cairns-to-darwin.html
www.theoutbackguide.com/river-crossings-on-savannah-way.html

Perth - Alice Springs - Darwin

Sydney - Alice Springs - Perth
www.theoutbackguide.com/driving-from-sydney-to-alice-springs.html

By Bus
See the Greyhound website for current details on prices, passes and specials. (www.greyhound.com.au)
To give you an idea of what you're in for, here are the driving times for some of the longer trips:

Adelaide – Alice Springs: 20 – 21 hours
Alice Springs – Darwin: 21 – 22 hrs

Perth – Broome: 33 hrs
Broome – Darwin: 26 – 27 hrs

To get from the east coast (Cairns or Brisbane) to the NT (Alice Springs or Darwin) you have to go to Townsville first. You also change services again in Tennant Creek but there is no waiting time if going in this direction:

Townsville – Alice Springs: 27 hrs
Townsville – Darwin: 35 hrs

If you want to go in the other direction, from the NT to the east coast, you arrive at about 2 am in Tennant Creek (from Darwin or Alice Springs), and you leave for the 20 hrs drive from Tennant Creek to Townsville at 10 pm...

You can find all the timetables here:
(Scroll down to find time tables to download and print.)
The Best Time To Visit The NT

In a nutshell, the main tourist season starts around April and lasts into October. All official tourism information states that May to September is the best time to go. But there is a bit more to it all.

The Northern Territory spans very different climate zones. The "Top End" around Darwin, Kakadu and Katherine is tropical with a distinct wet and dry season. Your travels up here are more affected by the amount of rainfall than they are by the temperatures. (Though temperatures can become limiting, too, for a couple of months of the year. More below.)

The "Red Centre" around Alice Springs has a desert climate, characterised by big variations in temperatures. Rainfall is not as big an issues here, though it can affect your trip.

Let's cover those two parts of the country separately.

The best time to visit the Top End

Many Australia visitors from overseas are unfamiliar with the climate in Australia's tropical regions and the idea of a dry and a wet season. Even Australians from the southern parts often don't really know what to expect in the north at different times of the year.

(For some months of the year we don't know that ourselves! But the unpredictability of our wet seasons is a different issue.)

The north of Australia has no spring, summer, autumn and winter, but a distinct dry and wet season.

The dry season (May - September) is considered the best time for travel. Most roads are open and the weather is reliable. Clear blue skies and warm days with crisp nights and few insects. Beautiful.

Sometimes you hear that June to August is the very best time, because it is the coolest time of the year.

Well, that's correct, but they always neglect to tell you that mid June to mid August are the school holidays in Australia and that everything is packed! So do keep that in mind. If you can be here before or after the school holidays the weather will be just as nice, maybe a tad warmer, but you do avoid the biggest rush.

Early in the dry season (May to mid June) there is also still a lot of water coming down all those waterfalls. Most of them will dry up soon.
The early dry season is by far my favourite time of the year, when everything is still lush and green, lots of water everywhere, lots of wildlife and wildflowers...

The downside of that period is that after a big wet season a few unsealed roads may still be closed. Nobody can predict when exactly any roads will open! It all depends on the previous wet season.

Some attractions in Litchfield, Kakadu or Katherine may also be closed for another reason: saltwater crocodiles! Crocodiles move around in the wet season. After every wet season the rangers need to make absolutely sure that none have moved into any areas accessible to tourists, or capture and remove any that have.

The late dry season (late August into early October) is also a good time, especially for Kakadu. The big floodplains that you see during the wet have been reduced to isolated billabongs (permanent waterholes) and that is where all the birds and other wildlife congregate in huge numbers.

Mind you, by October it does indeed get uncomfortably hot. We are used to hot weather, but for people from colder climates I would recommend to avoid to travel that late. But September, especially the first half, is still a really good time of the year in my opinion. It all depends on your comfort levels.

The wet season is not so easy to explain...

October is not considered wet season. It is however part of the "build up" for the wet. What happens towards the end of the dry season is that the temperatures increase. A lot! (I have added some temperature tables at the end of this chapter).

This is the very last month of the tourist season, and there aren't many people around. It will get hot and hotter, even a bit humid, and you can see the first storm clouds piling up on the horizon. Afternoon showers can cool things down for a few hours, but don't count on it.

Over November the place gradually turns into one big sauna.

The risk of afternoon storms increases as the year progresses, but it's impossible to predict just how wet it will be. The rain falls in form of thunderstorms in the evenings, over night into the early mornings. If it rains at all... Some years the rain comes early, some years you think it will never happen.

If you plan to go camping take into account that the nights can be stifling. Long drives in cars without air conditioning become unbearable. Plan any walks for the early morning hours, go for a swim in the afternoon if possible, (or do your driving then if you have air con).

The best way to deal with the heat is to be active (within reason), to drink lots, and to not think about it. (Works fine in October, may get difficult by November...)

Early December may still look a lot like November, but eventually the real wet sets in.
If your only chance to come here would be during the wet season, does it make sense to visit the north during that time of the year? Or is it madness?

I think it makes sense. Many locals consider the wet season the best time of the year, and so do I. But it is important to understand that a wet season visit is a totally different experience from a dry season visit. Depending on what you are looking for it may not make sense for you.

And it is important to understand just how unpredictable the wet season is! We can't predict when it starts. Some years we get freak early storms in September, other years it hardly rains at all until March.

January to March is the soggiest time of the year. It can be very wet and the temperatures drop. Cyclones are always a possibility. In between cyclones it can be sunny and hot for weeks (Which means steamy! During the wet season overcast skies are definitely preferred!)

When a cyclone or tropical low pressure trough comes through you may experience up to a week of low, grey skies and non stop rain, at times very heavy.

Only the coastal towns need to worry about the destructive winds, but the rain and floods reach far inland. We can't predict when and where. Just that at some stage, somewhere, it will bucket for days and all the roads will be under water...

As soon as it starts raining the country explodes into life. The vegetation grows inches over night and all birds and other animals are frantically mating and breeding. The country looks beautiful during the wet. The colours are so intense, at times they seem fluorescent, the fresh, lush green and the glowing reds against the stormy skies.

The crocodiles are particularly active and aggressive. Spectacular to watch but also dangerous!

If you have a chance to see those waterfalls now, it will be a sight you never forget! The flooded wetlands in Kakadu are also impressive. So are the swollen rivers and the inundated roads.

I love the wet and the sense of adventure it brings. But you need to ask yourself how adventurous and more importantly how flexible you are. Does this sound like something you might enjoy experiencing? Can you handle the heat? How will it affect you if certain roads or tracks get cut off? If a wet season visit makes sense is something only you can decide!

**Let's now look at the end of the wet season.** When does it end? When is it ok to visit as a normal tourist who doesn't want to stew in a sauna, get rained on, eaten alive by mosquitoes and who doesn't want to be inconvenienced by closed roads?

Well, that's just as impossible to predict as the beginning of the wet. Usually by April the rain stops and things start drying up. But there is still a chance of a late cyclone in April (very rare).
And if there was a big one in March you will also find that most unsealed roads are still closed. Easter is a great time, but you will have to stick to the sealed roads and some places will only be accessible by scenic flight.

By May most roads will be open again, but not necessarily all. After a big or a late wet season the tracks in lower lying areas or those crossing big creeks can stay closed well into June. Every year is different, so all you can do is keep an eye on the road reports.

The Northern Territory is a lot more accessible than the Kimberley in Western Australia. Many roads in the NT are very weather proof and even in April, even during the wet season, there are many attractions that you can access, many things you can do.

Below is a table with average monthly maximum and minimum temperatures and rainfall figures for Kakadu National Park. (Temperatures are in °C.)

Keep in mind that those maximum and minimum numbers are monthly averages, and that on any given day the actual maximum or minimum may be 5 degrees above or below.

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<th>Temp (°C)</th>
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<td>214</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>13.7</td>
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The best time to visit the Red Centre

The climate in central Australia is supposed to be hot. That's the cliche of central Australia and "the Australian Outback". A terribly hot and inhospitable desert...

But it's not as hot as the north, and the centre is also nowhere near as humid. Even when it gets hot the heat is more bearable than up north.

I personally find the cooler months in the centre are much too cold for my comfort levels. Night frost is common during June/July and possible from May to September.
(But I'm from the tropics. Tourists from temperate climates find the cooler months are just perfect.)

October to March the average daily maximum temperature in Alice Springs is over 30°C. Most people find that day temperatures in the high thirties exceed their comfort level by a good measure. So I guess, yes, for that time of the year the center is a bit hot.

I still wouldn't say that you ought to schedule your visit to Alice Springs around the coolest months of the year. Why?

Because just as across the north, everything will be packed!

The tourist season in the centre officially starts in April, one month earlier than up north. And April is bearable. May it gets busy, and from June to August it's mad crazy, especially in Alice Springs and at Uluru.

September the town starts to empty and by October the masses have vanished. But it's hot... This pattern very much mirrors what's happening in the Top End. So let's look at the differences.

Rain is even more unpredictable in the central regions, and there is a lot less of it. Most of it falls between December and February. March and November see some, too. (November 2008 broke all previous records...)

But the average amounts are only about 10% of what you get up north. And even during the wettest time of the year, the average number of rainy days per month is only around five (compared to about 15 in the north). So rain just isn't the issue that it is in the Top End.

Since there is a lot less rain, an early season visit will not be handicapped by unsealed road closures as much as it would be up north. If you don't plan to get off the beaten track, this is no issue at all.

But four wheel drivers should look at the extremes as well, not just the averages, and remember what I said about the unpredictability. There are no guarantees, and often, when it rains it pours.

It is a shame that the rain is so unpredictable, because the Alice Springs area is beautiful just after one of those big rain events, when the Todd River turns into a real river (it's usually just a bone dry river bed) and the MacDonnell Ranges get covered in lush green, contrasted against the red rocks.

Since it's impossible to schedule that ahead, and since it doesn't happen every year, in my opinion April is an ideal time.
● The area may be a little bit green (it'll turn into a dust bowl soon enough),
● the gorges often have enough water to swim in,
● and you don't have to share them with too many bus loads of other tourists.
● The days aren't all that hot any more,
● and the nights aren't freezing yet.

May is still okay. You have to ask yourself what will bother you more: the heat or the masses?

If good sunset photos of Ayers Rock are your main goal I suggest late August/early September (few clouds in the sky, earlier it is is too busy, later it is too hot).

September is generally not a bad time. One thing it has over April is that the cold weather of the previous months got rid of the pesky flies.

I personally don't have a problem with the temperatures during the hotter months, because it is a much drier heat than up north. However, if you want to do a lot of hiking and exploring, then you better avoid the hottest months of the year, October to March. (And geez those flies get annoying...)

There is one more thing to keep in mind when planning a longer visit to the centre: where are you going next?

Travelling the Alice Springs area in April/May and then heading north works out perfectly. If you travel from north to south then you'll have to compromise somewhere. Either you hit the main tourist rush at one point, or it gets a bit warm.

Note: daily temperature maximums and nightly temperature minimums in Alice Springs can be 12 - 15 degrees above or below the average!

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<tr>
<th>Temp (°C)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>114</td>
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<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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How Much Time Should You Take?

How much time do you need to see everything? How much is enough?

The Red Centre

Many overseas tourists fly into Alice Springs or Uluru for one night, race out to see the rock, fly back to the coast. Tick. Australian Outback done.

I would suggest you devote at least a few days to the Alice Springs area.

Spending a night at Uluru gives you a chance to see a sunrise and sunset. Spend two nights and you have a chance to get a feel for the place, explore some of the Aboriginal culture, and a chance to visit Kata Tjuta and do the Valley of the Winds walk.

Allow a third night and spend it at Kings Canyon. The Kings Canyon rim walk gets regularly mentioned as THE highlight of a visit to the centre.

So to see Alice Springs itself and all those highlights you are looking at four to five nights minimum.

The West MacDonnell can be visited in a day trip from Alice Springs. If you have a 4x4 they can be visited on the way from Kings Canyon to Alice Springs (or vice versa). If you like hiking I suggest you spend at least one night in the West Macs.

The same goes for the East MacDonnell. You can visit them as a day trip, but they are well worth spending an extra night or several, especially if you have a 4x4 and love nature, camping and hiking.

So now we are at a week to ten days minimum.

There are more attractions in the area: Ruby Gap, Chambers Pillar, Palm Valley, Hermannsburg... To get off the beaten track a bit allow two weeks or more.

From Alice Springs to Darwin (or vice versa)

If you are in a rush you can do this with one night stop (around Tennant Creek/the Devils Marbles). You may want to spend a second night near Mataranka or Katherine.

With two nights you may be able to fit in a boat cruise in Katherine Gorge, but other than that this does NOT yet allow any time inside the northern national parks.

The Top End

The big three of the north, Katherine Gorge, Litchfield and Kakadu, can be visited on a round trip from Darwin or on the way between Darwin and Alice Springs.
Some people are content with only half a day in Katherine Gorge, allowing for a quick boat cruise. A full day lets you do some canoeing or hiking (or a longer cruise plus a stroll to the lookout).

If you love nature and getting away from the masses, allow time for either an overnight canoe trip or one of the longer hikes. (Full day, one night, two nights or three to five night walks are possible here.)

The main attractions in Litchfield are close together and can be covered in a single day. Most people will probably camp in the park for one night. If you love hiking and getting away from people, allow more. The Tabletop Range is easy to access and well worth exploring.

Kakadu requires time, there is no way around it. The reason most people consider Kakadu overrated is that they did not allow time to see anything. You can race through on the bitumen roads in one night/two days, but you won't see much. (You can even do day tours from Darwin, spending most of the day in a vehicle and then taking a quick scenic flight to get an overview.)

Two nights in the park is the absolute minimum, three nights is better and it is easily possible to spend five days to a week here.

I will talk about Kakadu schedules a bit more in the Kakadu chapter.

To combine those parks:

Two nights allow you a quick tour through Litchfield and Katherine Gorge, or a short visit to Kakadu.

Three nights make for a longer visit to Kakadu, or you combine Kakadu with either Litchfield or Katherine Gorge. It is possible to race through all three parks and some organised tours do. But if you self drive this is too much if you want to enjoy the trip and see a bit.

Four nights or more allow you to put together a reasonable schedule that includes all parks.

One week gives you a good look at the lot and allows for swimming, hiking, and an overall relaxed experience.

To put together an extended outback trip, just add up the times needed for the different areas, then add the times needed to get to the NT (from the previous chapter), and that gives you an idea how much time you need to allow all up.

Don't cram in too much. There is the very big temptation to try to see and do everything. Especially overseas visitors are prone to that, since many of them will only visit Australia once in their life.
Don't cram in too much. You risk making your holiday stressful and tiring. And it will be frustrating to see all those wonderful places and NOT have time to stop for a swim, to sit down and enjoy, to go for a walk and explore a bit, to have a beer and a chat with the locals...

To spend three or four weeks rushing each and every day, always under pressure, always running out of time, is that really what you want?

Also allow for a few days extra just in case something goes wrong somewhere. There are always little hiccups. If you don't have a minute to spare anywhere, then a little hiccup can quickly become a major hassle and drama and ruin the whole trip.

Don't cram in too much. Allow enough time.

Getting Around

Public Transport and Busses

Bus travel is a possibility, but certainly not the most attractive option to see a remote wilderness region. Having said that, thousands of backpackers and budget travellers arrive in the Northern Territory each year, and they get around just fine.

See the greyhound website for current details on prices, passes, specials, routes and detailed itineraries. (www.greyhound.com.au)

Self Driving

The best way to see the Northern Territory is to have your own wheels, period. Self driving is by far the most popular way to see this region and my websites and guide books are written mainly for self drivers.

I sometimes get questions from people who appear to think a drive from Adelaide to Alice Springs and/or Darwin is a challenging wilderness adventure. People, it's not. It's a long and often boring drive, along an excellent highway, with lots of traffic and with service stations every 200 km/125 miles at the very most. The same is true for the drive from Cairns to Alice or Darwin if you follow the highways.

The only thing you really have to take seriously in this part of the world are the huge distances. Most people underestimate the times required and the wear and tear of all the driving. It's very easy to end up spending most of your holiday in the vehicle.

But then again, those long drives on endless roads towards endless horizons are of course part of the outback experience...

Still, I suggest you do aim to strike a healthy balance.

For more tips regarding driving in the outback see the safety chapter (page 35).
2WD or 4WD?

The Northern Territory is a lot more accessible than the Kimberley region. Most roads to the big tourist attractions are sealed.

Even many of the unsealed roads are good enough for 2WD vehicles, provided they are dry. (And when they are wet they are often closed for 4WD, too.)

If you have your own 2WD and visit the NT between June and September, then you can see a lot.

You are more restricted in hired 2WD cars. You can not take a hired 2WD on unsealed roads, period. No hire company allows you to do so.

Also be careful when hiring smaller 4x4s or AWDs. Sometimes they need to stay on bitumen roads, too, or are only allowed on certain tracks and not on others. So ask questions and/or read the fine print.

You don't need a 4x4 to see Uluru, the Olgas and Kings Canyon.
You can see the West Macs in a normal car.
You can also see some of the East Macs, though for that trip it's nice to have a 4x4.

You can drive between Alice Springs and Darwin, visit the Devils Marbles and Mataranka, Katherine Gorge, most of Litchfield National Park and a lot of Kakadu in a 2WD.

But for some places you definitely need a proper high clearance 4x4 vehicle:

Finke National Park (Palm Valley and Boggy Hole), Ruby Gap and N’Dhala Gorge in the East Macs, Chambers Pillar near Alice Springs, Jim Jim Falls, Twin Falls and Koolpin Gorge in Kakadu...

There is no doubt that a 4x4 gives you more freedom, more opportunities to get away from people and that it gets you to some spectacular places that you would not see otherwise. It also makes a difference at the start of the dry when many creeks still have water in them.

If you plan to spend several weeks or even months here, if you like bush camping and hate crowds, you'd be well advised to take a 4x4.

But not having a 4x4 is not as restrictive as it first seems, and keep in mind there is another way to get away from people: just walk!

The Northern Territory offers many great opportunities for extended hikes. Most tourists are in far too much of a rush to take time to explore on foot.

If you don't have the option of taking a 4x4, don't feel you have to miss out on all the good stuff. Even in a hired 2WD you can still see some terrific and remote wilderness.
Tours

If you don't have your own transport, or if you have a 2WD, then you can see the less accessible places by joining a tour.

There is a huge selection available, both out of Darwin and Alice Springs. You can pick from half day, full day and several day tours, or do the whole NT as an organised trip.

All the places I write about, even the most remote areas, can be accessed as part of an organised tour. Even the extended hikes can be completed as part of an organised group trek.

Coach tours or 4wd tours, luxury tours or adventure camping tours, budget coach tours or camping luxury tours...
Yes, the number of tours to choose from is totally overwhelming.

Please do not write to me to ask for advice. I am not a travel agent, I have nothing to do with the tourism industry, I do not know many of the tour operators. I am a travel guide writer who writes guides for independent travellers. I can't help you with tours.
I am a big fan of the HEMA maps. It was easy to recommend the perfect map for the Kimberley, since the green HEMA regional map covers all of it beautifully and in great detail.

For the Northern Territory you have more than one option, and depending on your travel plans you may want to purchase more than one map.

**The NT State Handy Map** is exactly that: handy. It covers the whole NT. It's printed on both sides so you don't have to unfold a huge map every time you want to look up something. The scale is 1:1 900 000.

It shows road distances in sufficient detail, indicates all the remote roadhouses that sell diesel and unleaded, shows most campgrounds in national and nature parks, and it also has insert maps of Darwin and Alice Springs CBD as well as a larger Darwin map.

But it does not offer the fantastic detail that the HEMA regional maps have. The regional maps generally

- highlight all the attractions, reserves, national parks etc. and give you a short description of what there is to see and do,
- show exactly what services are available at the remote roadhouses, stores and wilderness camps (like bottle gas refills, drinking water, tyre repairs etc.),
- list GPS coordinates for every roadhouse, landmark, Aboriginal community, for anything that has a name,
- list phone numbers for wilderness camps, national park offices, shire offices, and other government departments, anything you might need on your trip, and so on. They are great maps for tourists, even doubling as a general travel guide.

For the NT there are several regional maps that might be of interest to you:

**Top End and Gulf** covers the top half of the NT and more, on a scale of 1:1 650 000.

And like the Kimberley map, this one is also available as the excellent **Top End and Gulf Atlas and Guide**.

The atlas and guide describes everything around Darwin, including Kakadu and Litchfield national parks, goes west towards the Western Australia border, south towards Tennant Creek, east into Arnhem Land, and traces the Gulf Track all the way from Queensland. Whether you get the map or the atlas/guide, this is a good one for the serious 4WDers.
Kakadu National Park: as all regional maps, this is a map and guide in one. All major roads and tracks through the park are marked and a matrix of facilities available at each attraction is included. You also get tips for what to see and do.
Scale: 1:390 000

If you are heading south from Darwin you might also want to get this one:

The Red Centre is a map and guide to the region around Alice Springs and Ayers Rock. It has inset maps of Uluru, Kata Tjuta, and Alice Springs, information on road conditions and best times to travel, and as always on the regional maps, lots of photos.
Scale: 1:750 000

And last but not least, for those planning to spend extended time in the city it might be worth getting the Darwin and Region Handy City Map.
Outback Safety

Driving in the Australian Outback - Major Highways

The highways that cross our country from north to south or from east to west are very well maintained bitumen roads. Examples are

- the Stuart Highway from Adelaide via Alice Springs to Darwin,
- the Lasseter Highway to Uluru,
- the Eyre Highway from Perth to Adelaide,
- the Barkly, Flinders and Matilda highways, connecting the east coast with the Stuart Highway,
- the Victoria and Great Northern Highway, connecting the Stuart Highway with the west coast and then following the coast.

Along these highways you find roadhouses where you can buy fuel, have a meal and get accommodation. The distance between the roadhouses is usually not much more than 200 km/125 miles, often much less.

Your Vehicle

If you are in a rental car your vehicle should be reliable and you shouldn't need to worry about any mechanical trouble. But if you drive your own car you should make sure that it is up to the drive.

Breaking down is not dangerous but it can be a major inconvenience and a costly one at that.

You will not get stuck without help, all the highways see plenty of traffic. But you have to keep in mind that you will be a long way from anywhere. Repairs are expensive and if you need parts you may have to wait for them to be flown or trucked in.

Make sure your car is reliable, have it serviced before you leave and carry at least one good spare tyre. Learn how to change it, and check it before you leave.

Driving Hazards

The biggest hazards in the Australian Outback are not spiders and snakes, they are driver fatigue, speeding and kangaroos (or other animals on the road).

Have frequent breaks, swap drivers, don't just push on. No matter where you go, the driving distances are huge. Don't underestimate the wear and tear of those long, monotonous drives.
Avoid driving at dawn, dusk and night time.
Driving at those times is particularly risky. The many flat kangaросл on the highways are testament to that. (Kangaroos are the most common animals on our roads, but you may also hit cattle, donkeys, camels, wild horses...) Hitting a kangaroo at speed can mean a total write off for the car and an extended hospital stay for the people in it, if not worse.

The Wet Season

One more thing to be aware of: if you are driving through northern Australia in the wet season, some roads might be flooded. The wettest months, and the biggest chances of floods, are January to March.
If you know that it rained a lot recently, drive accordingly. Even a little water on the road can cause a severe accident if you hit it unexpectedly and too fast.

Keep this story in mind, it appeared in our local newspaper:
A reader described driving back from Katherine to Kununurra and noticing a small sign at the side of the road, just before a bend:
"Slow Down, Traffic Hazard Ahead!" Good thing he did slow down, he said. Just around the bend he skidded to a halt, and his jaw dropped. There was the Victoria River, several metres above the bridge and over a kilometre wide!

Find out if the roads are open before you leave. That saves you waiting at the side of a river for days for the water to go down.

And last but not least, road shoulders may be very soft and boggy from the rain. Be careful when leaving the bitumen.

Driving in the Australian Outback - Unsealed Roads

Preparation
Many of the unsealed Australian Outback roads are well maintained gravel roads. This is particularly true for roads to major tourist attractions. Often 4x4 is not strictly necessary. (But required if you are hiring. See previous chapter about self driving).

But unsealed roads are vulnerable. High traffic leads to bad corrugations, the rattling is hard on your bones and hard on your car and trailer/van. Rain can cause wash outs, creeks can flood the road, and bog holes can remain long after.

If you want to leave the bitumen always find out about the present state of the road first.
Links to websites with current road reports are on this page:
www.theoutbackguide.com/outback_information.html

Another great source that compiles all available reports for Australia is here:
My detailed guide books also include an appendix with a big list of weblinks and phone numbers, contact details for every road report, remote roadhouse, national park, cattle station etc. so no matter where you go, you'll be able to get up to date, local information about the weather and road conditions.

Also make sure you have proper directions and a detailed, current map of the area.

**If you have no experience with 4x4 and are renting a car, make sure you know how to engage the four wheel drive.**

I'm sure you want to avoid a scenario like that of the couple from the Netherlands who got bogged in Litchfield National Park (not exactly a deserted part of Australia). They activated an emergency beacon (for life threatening situations only) which of course caused a huge rescue operation. The rescuers arrived, engaged the four wheel drive and drove the car out of the bog... **So, please!**

*(Read a similar story sent in by a reader: this first time 4x4 driver was brave enough to share his story publicly: www.theoutbackguide.com/longest-drive-out-of-the-chambers-pillar.html)*

Going into a really remote area? Let someone know where you are going and when you intend to be back/arrive at your destination. When you do arrive don't forget to check back in.

**Speed and Tyre Pressure**

When planning a big trip assume an average travel speed of no more than 50 kph on unsealed roads (that's about 30 mph). On a good stretch of road you will most likely go faster, but 50 kph takes the rough spots into account. (On a bad road it will be a lot less than that.)

If you are not used to driving on unsealed roads and tracks go slow! It is true that corrugations aren't felt as badly if you go fast enough. But keep in mind how little contact your wheels have with the road if you just fly over the top of these corrugations. You will have precious little control over your car, and you might just need it.

Think about your springs and shock absorbers, too. Spares are hard to come by in the middle of nowhere...

Another hazard that is made worse by speed is the danger coming from sharp edged rocks on the road. The faster you drive, the bigger your risk of a flat tyre.

Also drop your tyre pressure. The pressure for unsealed road should be about 10 psi below recommended pressures for driving on bitumen, you may go lower still on bad roads. This will make the ride a lot more comfortable, it is not as tough on your suspension, but most of all it protects your tyres from punctures. (Try to puncture an under inflated balloon and you'll understand why.)
Wildlife
I already mentioned wildlife in the previous chapter. The risk of wildlife or cattle on the road is even bigger on unsealed roads and in remote areas.

Cattle stations
A lot of the outback is station country.
(Cattle stations are ranches for you US readers, but ours are a LOT bigger than yours: www.theoutbackguide.com/australian-cattle-stations.html)
Public outback roads may cross privately owned station land and you may come across gates. They are there for a reason! If they are open, leave them open. If you find them closed make sure you close them again!

Wet weather
Many unsealed roads are impassable when wet and will be closed after rain. If you ignore the closed sign you risk a fine of $5000 and you may lose your licence.

An open road is no guarantee! The weather can change suddenly.
A downpour many kilometres away can make a creek swell enough to stop you from driving across.
Flats can be treacherous. They look dry on top, but underneath... bottomless mud. Take care, and if in doubt get out and walk across to check.

If a road is open for four wheel drive only (as opposed to the ubiquitous "four wheel drive recommended") then there is a good reason for it. Either deep water on the road, or rocks and boulders that require high clearance, wash outs that a normal car can't climb through, steep banks... You will need a four wheel drive vehicle.

Bogged
This booklet is intended for the average traveller, not the extreme 4x4 enthusiast. I will not go into details and the how to of recovery methods, but I will give you some general tips.

First of all, it happens to the best of us: we get bogged. So don't panic.
Get out, have a drink, look at the situation and your options. Whatever you do, stay with your vehicle, unless you know for sure that help is nearby, and you know for sure how to get there, and it's cool enough to walk.

Often it's not as bad as it looks. Here are a few tips that might get you out of trouble. This is a list of things I always have on board when going on longer drives in remote areas:

● Plenty of water and plenty of fuel
● A good high lift jack and something to use as a base plate for it.
● A long handled shovel.
● My trusty little compressor (which I also use as a tyre gauge).
● Two spare tyres.
● A tow rope and a snatching strap, a couple of shackles.
● Some tools.

First rule: don't spin the wheels and get yourself deeper into it! And make sure the car is indeed in 4x4 mode! You do know how to engage the four wheel drive, right?
If you are stuck in soft sand, deflate your tyres. Try 25 psi to start with, go lower if you need to. (You should reinflate the tyres when you get back on firm ground. If you can't, just drive very slowly.)

Sand or mud: use a shovel to dig away sand or mud in front or behind the wheels (and under the diff if necessary). Collect material to put in the wheel ruts to provide some grip. Stones, timber branches, grass... Use the jack on a plate (or it will just sink) to lift the car and put some materials under the wheels.
You might have to do this several times until you are back on firm ground.

While working make sure you drink enough, wear a hat and have breaks. Consider waiting for the cooler time of the day. You're not helping anyone if you get heat struck on top of getting bogged!

You might be lucky and someone else comes along in the meantime...

If You Break Down Or Get Lost

For most tourists this in not an issue at all.

This chapter is for people who travel into off the beaten track areas, maybe at a quieter time of the year. It's also for people who can't resist leaving the main track to check out what's along some side track, maybe in search of a nice bush camping spot, maybe in search of photographic opportunities...

There are reasons why people may leave the main track. What if you get lost or if you break down out there, in the middle of nowhere?

This is a serious concern. People have died after becoming lost or breaking down, and sometimes they were not far from civilisation at all.

There are only three simple rules you need to follow that will ensure you survive, even if you get stranded in the remotest, most inhospitable corner of all of Australia.

Before you leave:

**Australian Outback Survival Rule #1:**
Always, always, always let someone know where you're going, and when you intend to be back. If nobody notices you missing, nobody will go looking for you.

**Australian Outback Survival Rule #2:**
Take enough water. The single most important thing, the only one that really matters, is water. As long as you have water you will live. Simple. You can never carry too much water, and you can't survive without.

If you are stuck or lost:

Australian Outback Survival Rule #3:

Stay with your vehicle!! A vehicle is much easier to find in the bush than a person. Walking will cost energy that you might need, you will lose more moisture than if you just rest in the shade of your vehicle, and you can only take a few litres of water. A few litres will last a few hours, and that's the end of it. If it's hot and you run out of water your body overheats and you die. That does not take long at all if the temperatures are above 40 and you're in the sun!

Additional Precautions:

Know thy vehicle. And know what it can and can't do. Make sure you know how to drive the car. People nearly died when all they had to do to become unstuck was engage the four wheel drive. People have died because they didn't know that deflating the tyres some can get you out of soft sand. (Actually, they died because they left their car and tried to walk back. They would have survived if they had stayed with their vehicle.)

If you plan an extended trip into a remote area take a HF radio or satellite phone to call for help if something goes wrong, or an EPIRB (emergency position indicating radio beacon) which will let people know where to find you.

If you are lost or stuck: if you can, move your vehicle to an open area so it can be seen. Open the bonnet so it's obvious that you are in trouble, in case someone sees you without you noticing them. If you aren't alone take turns sleeping. It would be a shame if you missed getting rescued because you were asleep when the rescuers came...

If you can do so safely, light a fire and keep it going. If you can think of other things to increase your visibility (like making a sign with white rocks in the red sand) go ahead. But do it in the cool of the evening or early morning!

As long as you've let someone know about your trip they will eventually notice you missing, and rescuers will come. Preserve your energy, preserve water, and wait.

At the end of the day there are only three simple rules that you need to follow to survive, even if you get lost in the Australian Outback. The outback is no more dangerous than your city is. It's only that its hazards are unfamiliar to most people.

To venture off the track in the Australian Outback without following those rules is just like stepping out onto a busy road from between parked cars without looking left and right. Stupidity can kill you anywhere.
**Dangerous Animals in the Outback**

**Spiders**

To sum it up: forget about them.

The spiders in the Australian Outback are not deadly.

There is only one spider in Australia that could theoretically be called deadly, and that spider has not caused a death since an antivenom was introduced in 1980.

Before the introduction of the antivenom that spider killed fewer than one person every three years and those fatalities took typically 2 to 3 days. There is plenty of time to administer the antivenom if needed.

The spider in question is the Sydney Funnel-web spider. This large black spider is mostly found within a radius of 160 km from Sydney. (There have been occasional sightings further away.)

If you get bitten by a large black spider in the Sydney area you should take that bite seriously. You may need to see a doctor. (Though most people do not get any serious symptoms at all.)

You do not need to panic. There is antivenin and there is a lot of time to administer it. I repeat, nobody has died from a Funnel-web spider bite for over 28 years.

Another spider that often gets cited as terribly dangerous and deadly is the Redback spider. Redbacks are not dangerous and not deadly.

You can read more about those two spiders and others and see photos of them, here: www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_spiders.html

**Snakes**

Our snakes have a reputation of being the deadliest in the world. That is also utter nonsense.

Lack of information, wrong information, hype and sensationalism have given our snakes an image that they really don't deserve.

Snakes are fairly common in Australia but snake bites are are very, very rare.

If you look at statistics for snake deaths around the world, and compare the fatal snake bites per million inhabitants per year, then it quickly becomes apparent that our snakes are the LEAST dangerous in the world.

The deadliest snakes live in places like India, South America and Africa. More people die from snake bites in the US than in Australia.
(Note: as I said, you get those results when you compare the bites per million people. It's not because there are less people in Australia. Australian snakes really are not as dangerous as the hype would make you believe.)

Australian snakes are not aggressive. They are inoffensive and very shy. They don't stalk you, chase you, attack you or similar. To get bitten by a snake YOU have to sneak up on it and attack it.

The few snake bites that do happen in Australia are usually a result of people doing just that. Really. People try to capture and kill snakes, and they often do so when drunk (six foot tall and bullet proof). That's when most snake bites happen.

Not many people will get a chance to see a snake. Even though snakes are common in Australia, they aren't visible. They stay well out of your way if they can.

Now don't get me wrong. Many Australian snakes do produce very potent venom. If you did get bitten it could indeed be very serious. So don't fool around with them or try to catch them or similar. To avoid accidentally disturbing a snake, observe the following:

- **Don't touch** any snakes in Australia unless you know what you are dealing with and what you are doing.
- **Look** where you put your feet and your hands. Don't stumble around barefoot in long grass, don't reach into dark corners or anywhere you can't see.
- **Wear solid shoes** when bushwalking.
- If you need to go outside **at night use a torch**.
- Snakes don't like or seek human company. If given a chance a snake will flee. Just **give it a chance to flee**.

If you want to read more about snakes and snake bites, and about my own experiences with them, here are two pages from my website:

- [www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_snakes.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_snakes.html)
- [www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_venomous_snakes.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_venomous_snakes.html)

And here is an excellent in depth article by Brian Bush.

[Hypertext](http://members.iinet.net.au/~bush/myth.html)

Brian is the manager of *Snakes Harmful and Harmless*, a Western Australian company that provides educational lectures and displays on venomous snakes (and other reptiles) to groups, schools and in the context of Occupational Health & Safety courses for example for mining companies, all levels of government, the military, etc.

In other words, even if you don't want to believe me, you should trust Brian.

**Treating Snake Bites**

If you follow the advice above you will never need this information. (Even if you ignore the advice, it's extremely unlikely that you will.) But it is natural to be curious. I also thought you might feel safer armed with this knowledge.
Snake venom does not move in the bloodstream as many people assume. It moves in tiny lymphatic vessels under the skin. This means it is comparatively easy to restrict its movement and to delay onset of symptoms for many hours.

A pressure immobilisation bandage should be applied immediately. It will apply pressure over a wide area of the bitten limb. Bandage the limb about as firmly as you would a sprained ankle. An elastic bandage is ideal for this. **Do not cut off the blood flow!**

Place the bandage over the bite and wrap the limb, first away from the heart, then back towards the heart. The finished bandage should reach from just above the fingers or toes as far up the limb as possible with the available materials.

The limb should be immobilised using a splint. The person should avoid any movement. If help is far away someone needs to go and get help. The casualty **must not attempt to walk!** If you apply the bandage correctly and promptly you have many hours to get help.

- **Do not** wash the bite. Venom on the skin is needed to positively identify the snake and administer the correct antivenin.
- **Do not** cut bitten area.
- **Do not** suck venom out of wound.
- **Do not** use a constrictive bandage/tourniquet.
- **Do not** try to catch the snake.

And now forget about snakes. Just don't worry about them...

**Crocodiles**

Australia's north is crocodile country. (Crocodiles live mostly in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory as far inland as Katherine, as well as the coastal regions further east and the Cape York Peninsula).

We have two species of crocodiles here. The smaller and shy freshwater crocodiles and the huge, aggressive and dangerous saltwater crocodiles. Freshwater crocodiles are harmless unless provoked. Saltwater crocodiles eat people. This chapter is about saltwater crocodiles.

You can read more about freshwater crocodiles here... [www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_crocodiles.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/australian_crocodiles.html)...and more background information about saltwater crocodiles here: [www.theoutbackguide.com/saltwater-crocodiles.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/saltwater-crocodiles.html)

Saltwater crocodiles are the only animal species on the Australian continent that is truly dangerous. They are the largest reptiles in the world (in terms of weight). They can grow to over 6 metres and their jaws can exert a pressure of several tons.
The name saltwater crocodiles is misleading. Salties live just as happily in freshwater many hundred kilometres inland. Salties are very territorial creatures. Every grown male crocodile needs its own territory. The good thing is that they stick to that territory, and that the territory is water, so it's not difficult to stay out of their way.

All areas frequented by tourists are closely monitored. If there are crocodiles there will be warning signs. Some waterfalls or gorges may remain closed after the wet season until the park rangers are 200% sure that no crocodiles have moved in over the wet season.

Examples for this are the swimming area near the boat ramp in Katherine Gorge, or Wangi Falls in Litchfield National Park, or some areas of Kakadu.

Sometimes people arrive here in May or June and some of those places may still be closed. And then tourists get really cranky with us for "ruining" their holiday and stopping them from doing what they want to do. Would you really be happier if we let you swim with the saltwater crocodiles?

If you are told it's safe, then it's safe. If you are told it's not, then it's not.

There is no need to be paranoid, and there is no need to avoid the north of Australia as being too dangerous. It's not. All you need to do is observe the warnings. Don't swim and don't go near the water's edge, especially at night time. If you are in a less touristy area and not sure whether a waterhole is safe or not, stay away from the water.

For people planning to get off the beaten track and to go camping and fishing in the north, I recommend you read this page on my Kimberley website and stick to the guidelines I spell out there: www.kimberleyaustralia.com/kimberley-crocodiles.html

Money Matters

You are not leaving the 21st century behind when visiting the Australian Outback. There is the usual range of major banks in all towns. Your credit card will be accepted pretty much everywhere, you can find ATMs in all towns, and just about everybody who has a cash register offers EFTPOS (Electronic Funds Transfer/Point Of Sale).

There are some exceptions (some small businesses, bush campgrounds etc), so it is advisable to always carry some cash.

Costs

Australia in general is not a cheap destination and everything gets more expensive as you leave the populated areas on the coast. (Prices below are in Australian dollars.)

Transport:

Prices for hire vehicles vary too much to list everything. Factors are size of the vehicle, 2WD or 4WD, one way hire or return, camping gear included or not, how
long the trip is… Contact the hire companies for quotes or just do an internet search to get an idea for prices.

You can also do some more reading first and get some tips here:
www.theoutbackguide.com/campervan-hire-australia.html
And before you sign any hire contract, make sure you read this page:
www.theoutbackguide.com/cheap-travel-australia.html

Your biggest cost after that will likely be fuel. The further you move away from the main towns, the more expensive it gets. So don't do your budgeting on fuel prices that you saw quoted for Sydney or Brisbane!

You can look up NT fuel prices and price trends here:
www.exploroz.com/OntheRoad/FuelPrices/NT.aspx

Accommodation:
A hostel bed in a dorm room costs between $20 and $30 a night.
Simple cabins at campgrounds can be below $100 a night (for one or two people).
Twin or double rooms start from around $120 for budget rooms, and around $200 for standard rooms in hotels/motels. It goes up quickly from there.
(Prices are considerably lower between November and March.)

Search for accommodation prices in Australian cities and towns

Camping:
At campgrounds tent sites start from $15 a night, and caravan sites from $25 to $30.
Camping in most national parks is very affordable (below $10 pp), sometimes free.
Bush camping is often free and possible in many places.

If you like bush camping then you may want to look at Jan Holland’s books. I review them here:
www.theoutbackguide.com/camping-australia-guide-books.html

New!
As of late 2010 there is another great way to potentially shave a lot of money off the costs for your holiday. However, this is likely more for people who prefer accommodation and tours over an independent bush camping holiday, and the biggest savings will be available for people who want to see the eastern parts of Australia, too.

I won't write a long spiel about it here, but I suggest you check this page on my Kimberley website to see if this could be of use to you:
www.theoutbackguide.com/cheap-travel-australia.html
This part of the book is an abbreviated overview of some of the contents on my website.

This information, together with the photos and descriptions that you can find on my website, should give you a good idea of what you might want to see and do. It is not meant to replace a proper guide book.

(After the unexpected huge success of my Kimberley guide book, and because readers keep asking me, I am now writing a guide book to the Northern Territory. I hope to have it available by early 2010, but at this stage I can't promise anything.)

For now I will keep things short. I just want to share with you some thoughts on the individual destinations and attractions, regarding

- what a place has to offer,
- who might enjoy it, and who might not,
- how easy/difficult it is to get there,
- what there is to see and do.

The attractions and destinations are presented from north to south, very much in the same order as you would encounter them on a trip from Darwin to Alice Springs and Uluru.
Darwin

- 320 km/199 miles from Katherine
- 997 km/620 miles from Tennant Creek
- 1503 km/934 miles from Alice Springs
- 3042 km/1890 miles from Adelaide

"Darwin is the only capital city in Australia where you can cross the main street blindfolded at any time of the day."

I can't remember who wrote that, but I can assure you it's true.

With a population of 120,900 Darwin is small for a city, which makes it easy to get around. It also makes for a relaxed atmosphere. It's an interesting mixture of cosmopolitan city and rough frontier town.

Darwin is located on the far northern coast, right on the edge of the beautiful Timor Sea. The tropical climate and the ocean and beaches encourage an outdoor lifestyle that is hard to beat.

Its closeness to Asia makes Darwin a hub for international and domestic air travel and it is also an important port. In February 2004 the Adelaide-Darwin Railway was finally completed, making it possible to travel to or from Darwin on the Ghan train.

Darwin is also close to the most popular northern national parks, Kakadu and Litchfield.

For all those reasons Darwin is very busy with tourists during the dry season and it makes sense to book all accommodation and car hire well ahead. This is especially true if you travel during the school holiday period from mid June to mid August, or around any big events.

There are two services I use myself to read other people's reviews and experiences with accommodation, and to hunt down good accommodation deals:

I find that TripAdvisor usually has more reviews, Hotels Combined on average returns the best prices, but it's always worth checking the special deals at TripAdvisor.

**Darwin special deals at TripAdvisor**
**Darwin accommodation at Hotels Combined**

Many tourists only use Darwin as a jump off point for their trip and don't have much of a look around. I really like Darwin, but I think that approach is justified.

What you can find in Darwin you can probably find in other tropical ocean cities as well, if not more so. But what you can find just outside Darwin you won't find anywhere else in the world.
If you do have some time to explore Darwin, here are some of the most popular attractions:

- Mindil Beach Sunset Markets (extremely crowded during the season but still a must)
- The Wharf Precinct (for eating out, a little overrated)
- Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (free and highly recommended with great Cyclone Tracy display)
- WWII oil tunnels and East Point Military Museum (well worth it if you have even just a little interest in history)

For a complete list of all the things to see and do in and around Darwin, see my detailed guide book, Destination Top End.

**Kakadu National Park**

Kakadu National Park is in my eyes the most misunderstood national park in Australia. All the time you read and hear how "overrated" it is. It isn't. The park does not deserve that label.

There is already a page on my website that addresses the issue of "Kaka-do or Kakad-don't" and the perception of many people that Litchfield is much "better" than Kakadu.

[www.theoutbackguide.com/kakado-or-kakadont.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/kakado-or-kakadont.html)

The difference between those parks is not that one is better than the other. One is much bigger than the other. If you have little time, you can still have a good experience in Litchfield, but not in Kakadu. If you do have time, you can get a lot more out of a Kakadu visit than you can get out of a visit to Litchfield.

And no matter how much time you have, to really make the most of a visit to either, you need some really good information.

Let me tell you about an exchange I had with a reader of my other website, the Kimberley Guide.

The reader had submitted a terrific trip report, about their whole trip around Australia. The trip included the wild and remote Kimberley, the Top End, the Red Centre and the east coast.

"We found Kakadu a bit over rated. Jim Jim falls we skipped as we were told it was almost dry, Gumlom falls was lovely especially if you carry on beyond the first pool. After the Gibb River Road gorges and falls we found Litchfield to 'civilized', to 'touristic'."

When I expressed my feelings about this comment, he answered:
"Don't feel sorry for Kakadu and Litchfield, we did enjoy Gunlom Falls. The trouble also was for us that after all the exceptional things we saw out west and on the Gibb River Road nothing could compete."

Now, I live "out west", at the start of the Gibb River Road, so I know what he means. I love the remote wilderness here, that's why I live here. And I'm telling you, there are places in both Kakadu and Litchfield that easily compete. Easily.

The difference is that on the Gibb River Road you can follow the beaten path and you will find those awesome places. In Kakadu and Litchfield you have to make an effort to get away from the beaten path.

And that takes time. Which, by the way, the Gibb River Road would, too. The problem with Kakadu and Litchfield is that they have been made so accessible, it is easy to breeze through and miss all the good bits.

Pretend all the tourist infrastructure isn't there, take the dirt roads, visit the places that you have to hike a long way to get to (just like on the Gibb) and you find exactly the same wilderness that you can find "out west".

A visit to our wild west requires time and effort. Spend the same time and effort on Kakadu and Litchfield, and you will have the same experience.

(By the way, Gunlom Falls is lovely for the average tourist who doesn't have much time, and I was very impressed with it on my first Australia and Kakadu visit 15 years ago. These days I see it differently. There are many places in Kakadu that totally blow Gunlom out of the water. Totally!)

After that little interlude, lets get to some real information...

Kakadu National Park is considered a must see by most visitors to northern Australia, and so it should be. The park has a lot to offer.

There is only one caveat: you do need to take enough time. Kakadu is huge and most people grossly underestimate the time required to see it properly.

Yes, it's possible to drive through in a day or two and have a look at the "main points of interest". But that will NOT give you a glimpse of what Kakadu really is about. It only gives you a glimpse of the infrastructure that was created to accommodate visitors.

No wonder so many people come away with the feeling that this park is overrated.

To get the most out of a visit to Kakadu requires either a lot of time or some insider knowledge.
I can't give you more time than what you have available for your visit, but I can help with the insider knowledge!
So let's have a look at Kakadu...

First it helps to understand how the park is laid out and where those "main points of interest" are located.

This little map gives you a first idea:

As you can see, there are two main roads in and out. The northern road is the Arnhem Highway and starts just south of Darwin.

The southern road is the Kakadu Highway, it starts from Pine Creek, 230 km/143 miles from Darwin.

The two roads meet at Jabiru, a small mining and administrative town inside the national park.

Now, nearly all of Kakadu's big attractions, the Yellow Water wetlands, Nourlangie Rock, ALL the waterfalls and rock pools, ALL the longer hikes, all those are located along the southern road. Ubirr Rock, another name you may have already heard, is north east of Jabiru, on a road not shown here.

What that means is that to get to anywhere from Darwin you have to do a lot of driving through fairly open, monotonous savannah woodlands.

If you only spend one day or two in the park, this driving will take up an disproportionate amount of your time. You will likely also try to fit as many attractions as possible into your schedule. So all you will see is the main parking areas at each and the shortest walk to some lookout, usually crowded with a few bus loads of tourists.

If you then return to Darwin, you won't even have time to get to the really good areas in the south.

No wonder people come away disappointed!

Ok, now before I continue to tell you more about the individual attractions inside Kakadu, and about how you best fit them into a reasonable schedule, I suggest you do one thing.

Download and print the official visitor guide for Kakadu here:


At least print the large overview map it contains. The information about the individual attractions in the guide is not very detailed, but it does have very good maps of all the different areas and will make it much easier for you to follow me through the next chapters.
What to do if you have little time for Kakadu

I understand that not everybody is in a position to dedicate four or five days to Kakadu National Park. Australia as a whole is so huge, overseas visitors only have so many days available, and of course there is only so much money to go around... Let's look at how to tackle this problem if you have very little time available.

If all you have is one single day, Darwin to Darwin, skip Kakadu. End of story. You will get a lot more out of that day if you spend it in Litchfield.

Some people feel it is so important to see Kakadu, they will spend the whole day in a bus. They drive to Jabiru, take a scenic flight over the park from there, take the tourist boat cruise on Yellow Water and a quick look at the rock art at Nourlangie. Then they sit in the bus again for hours to drive back to Darwin. Others may fly to Jabiru and just do an organised bus sightseeing trip from there. They return to Darwin, happy with the experience and feeling that it was worth it.

There is nothing wrong with that if that kind of organised tourism is what you like. It just means that my websites and guides are probably not for you since they are written for people with different interests.

Ok, let's say you have two days available, Darwin to Darwin. In that case I suggest you focus your attention on the southern areas of the park. I also suggest you hire a 4WD vehicle for those two days.

If you are in your own vehicle, then this is less important. You can take your own 2WD on many of the unsealed roads in Kakadu. But you are not allowed to take hired 2WD vehicles on unsealed roads, now matter how perfectly smooth those are.

So, make sure you have a vehicle that is suitable for driving on well maintained, smooth unsealed roads. And instead of driving to Jabiru on the Arnhem Highway, access and leave the park via the old Jim Jim Road and/or Pine Creek.

Read up in detail on the attractions in the south, and pick what tempts you the most (from those you can access). My hit list would include Koolpin Gorge and Maguk and possibly the Jim Jim Falls/Twin Falls area. You may make a different selection. (More information on the individual attractions is included below and on my website.)

The key is to be selective and not try to cram it all in. And when you select, make sure you don't skip the southern area in favour of the touristy big name attractions.

If you have three days or more for Kakadu

This is where it starts to make sense to actually drive through the whole park, and even tick off most of the big name attractions. Just make sure you don't limit yourself to ONLY those. It is possible to spend three days inside Kakadu, and still never leave the crowded, concreted, main beaten track...
4WD or 2WD

I mentioned above that if you have only very little time available, then a 4WD will give you a better experience. I believe that is true for nearly everyone, no matter how much time you have available. Nearly.

If you don't like camping and don't mind a more touristy experience, with lots of people and facilities, then there is not much point in getting a 4WD. You can always hop on those one day tour buses that leave from inside the park and take you to Jim Jim and Twin Falls or Gunlom.

The other exception is if you visit at any time during the wet season. While I myself would definitely still want a 4WD vehicle, for the simple reason that it allows me to drive through very deep water (and I may encounter that anywhere in the north at that time of the year), you do have to realise that if unsealed roads are really wet they are closed to ALL vehicles. It makes no difference if you have a 2WD or 4WD, most unsealed roads will be closed. So at that time of the year think hard about what you want to see, what you can see, and if the extra expense for a 4WD is worth it or not.

For all other times of the year, remember that a hired 2WD is not allowed to drive on unsealed roads at all, whereas your own 2WD can get you to the places along the better maintained unsealed roads.

Places in Kakadu National Park that you can NOT access in a hired 2WD:

- Gunlom (good gravel road, ok for 2WD when creek is dry)
- Maguk (unsealed road with some sandy areas, may be ok for 2WD, depending on current conditions and your experience)
- Jim Jim Falls (good gravel road up to the camping area, then 10 km of strictly 4WD only track)
- Twin Falls (as Jim Jim Falls)
- Koolpin Gorge (good gravel road up to the gate, then 9 km of strictly 4WD only track)
- Yurmikmik Walks with Motor Car Falls and Kurrundie Creek Falls (good gravel road and a great wet season destination, usually ok for 2WD)

You also can not use the old Jim Jim Road (good gravel road, ok for 2WD when creeks are dry) or any of the free bush camping sites in Kakadu. All of those are along dirt roads.

The wet season in Kakadu

I already referred to the wet season several times. Most people are under the impression that you can or should visit Kakadu only during the main tourist season (May to September).
If you want all places to be accessible by road, then yes, go May or later. If you want the temperatures to be reasonable, go before September.
But what if your Australia visit falls into the time from October to April? Re-read the initial chapter about the wet season in Australia's north (page 23). That already explained most of the issues to consider.

And then go to my website and read through the existing reader pages about the topic:

- www.theoutbackguide.com/birding-kakadu.html (in the comments you'll find a detailed discussion about Kakadu in November/the start of the wet season)
- www.theoutbackguide.com/kakadu-in-the-middle-of-april.html (Kakadu in April, with links to wet season itineraries)

### Accommodation In Kakadu

Kakadu has several hotel and resort complexes, a couple of budget options for families and backpackers, and it has many, many campgrounds. The official visitor guide shows all of those, so just download and print that to see what's available where. All the accommodation is in the more touristy locations.

- Kakadu deals at Tripadvisor
- Kakadu accommodation at HotelsCombined

Campgrounds exist all through the park. There are two types of camping areas: the managed campgrounds ($10 pp per night) which have good facilities and powered sites, and bush camp sites with no facilities other than bush toilets and fire places. Some bush camp sites are still free (most now cost $5 pp per night), most are only accessible by 4WD, and if you don't like crowds, this is where you'll want to stay. Be aware though that at many bush sites alcohol is not permitted.

### Attractions and Things To Do

Here is an overview of what there is to see and do in Kakadu. This little guide does not have room to describe all the points of interest in detail, but you can read a little bit more about them on my website. The most detail can naturally be found in Destination Top End.

Kakadu is divided into seven areas and the main roads take you through them one by one. Lets drive through the park, from Darwin via Jabiru to Pine Creek...

### South Alligator Area

Main attraction - **Mamukala Wetlands**:

- short track leads to an observation platform on the edge of the wetlands
- 3 km walk lets you explore Mamukala further.
- Visit all year round, best time is Sep/Oct.
Other attractions in this area:
- 3.6 km walk through woodland, monsoonal forest and along the edge of Anggardbal billabong.

Further destinations for boating and bird watching can be found along the two 4WD tracks in this area.
- Two Mile Hole, Four Mile Hole and the West Alligator Head (north of highway along unsealed road towards coast)
- Birdwatchers can explore the shorter track to the Red Lily, Bucket and Alligator Billabongs south of the highway.

Jabiru Area

Jabiru is a town within Kakadu National Park, more of a strategic centre and starting point for a visit to Kakadu than an attraction in itself.

The one real attraction in this area is the Bowali Visitor Centre.

East Alligator Area

On the border between Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land (the largest Aboriginal reservation in Australia).

Main attraction - Ubirr Rock:
- 1 km circular walk to Aboriginal rock art sites.
- Free talks on Aboriginal art and culture by the rangers.
- 250 m climb to the top of the rock, views over Nardab floodplains and Arnhem Land. Popular for sunset.

Other attractions in this area:
- East Alligator River cruises
- Sandstone, river and rainforest walks of varying length.

A visit to the East Alligator Area requires a 40 km/25 miles side trip off the Arnhem/Kakadu Highway intersection at Jabiru.
Everything else, all the remaining attractions as covered below, are south west of Jabiru along the Kakadu Highway.
Nourlangie Area

Main attraction - Nourlangie Rock:

- 1.5 km circular to Aboriginal art sites and a big Aboriginal shelter.
- Short climb to lookout, views over Nourlangie and over Kakadu's escarpment.
- 2.5 km circular walk around Anbangbang Billabong

Other walks in the area:

- Barrk bushwalk: difficult 12 km circular walk, well worth it. Allow 6 - 8 hours and read the Barrk Walk Park Notes first (available at Bowali Visitor Centre).
- Several walks of varying length and difficulty, through varying habitats

Jim Jim Falls Area

This area can only be accessed in the dry season and only by 4WD.

Main attractions - Jim Jim Falls and Twin Falls

- Difficult 1 km return walk to Jim Jim Falls (deep plunge pool surrounded by 150 m high cliffs)
- A steep walk (at least 4 hrs return) to the top of the falls.

- Access to Twin Falls is via boat shuttle and a very short walk
- Steep 6 km return walk to a plateau above Twin Falls. Beautiful views and the pools along Twin Falls Creek make it more than worth the effort.

This is a beautiful area, although it can get very busy. I cover it somewhat on the website and in more detail in Destination Top End.

www.theoutbackguide.com/jim-jim-falls.html
www.theoutbackguide.com/twin-falls.html

Yellow Water Area

Main attraction - Yellow Water Wetlands

- Popular commercial boat cruises operate all year round, opportunity to view Kakadu's varied birdlife and other wildlife, including saltwater crocodiles. Very early morning is the best time.

Other attractions:

- Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre
- Several short walks
- Boat ramps are located at Jim Jim Billabong, Yellow Water and Mardugal Billabong.

Also: the Gagudju Lodge Cooinda store sells fuel, gas, food, souvenirs and takes bookings.
Mary River Area

Kakadu's southernmost area is my personal favourite area for several reasons: it is the least visited part of Kakadu, it is close to the highway which makes it easy to reach, it offers some magnificent bushwalks, and of course it is stunningly beautiful.

There are several main attractions here. All of them are also covered on my website:

- Gunlom (waterfall, plunge pools, short walks)
  [www.theoutbackguide.com/kakadu_national_park_gunlom_falls.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/kakadu_national_park_gunlom_falls.html)
- Maguk (waterfall, plunge pools, longer walks)
  [www.theoutbackguide.com/kakadu_national_park_maguk.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/kakadu_national_park_maguk.html)
- Koolpin Gorge (waterfalls, plunge pools, wilderness walks, spectacular!!)
  [www.theoutbackguide.com/koolpin-gorge.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/koolpin-gorge.html)

Other attractions:
- Yurmikmik Walks: longer and interconnected walks to Motor Car Falls and Kurrundie Creek Falls (great during or just after the wet season)
- Several other short walks and lookouts

Also: the Mary River Roadhouse just outside the park sells fuel, serves meals, and offers accommodation.

Litchfield National Park

- 115 km/72 miles from Darwin
- 265 km/165 miles from Katherine
- 950 km/585 miles from Tennant Creek
- 1450 km/900 miles from Alice Springs

The much smaller Litchfield National Park has long been overshadowed by its huge and hugely popular neighbour Kakadu.

But especially for time strapped tourists Litchfield has many advantages over Kakadu: it is close to Darwin, it's small, and a bitumen ring road takes you to all its main attractions, which are a lot closer together than Kakadu's.

That means you can easily visit Litchfield National Park on a day trip from Darwin, and you can spend most of the day exploring and swimming rather than driving.

There is of course a drawback as well. Because Litchfield is so easy to access the bigger attractions there can quickly become crowded. Most of the walks are very easy, as in concrete paths and boardwalks etc. Just like Kakadu it can easily end up feeling somewhat touristy.

And just as in Kakadu it only takes the right information to get away from the crowds and make it a real wilderness experience instead!
Getting there

Litchfield National Park is not far from Darwin, so it's ideally suited for day trips. There are three ways to access (or leave) the park:

- From Darwin follow the Stuart Highway for 85 km/53 miles to Batchelor and turn right. From there it is not far to the main park entrance. This is the most popular access route because it is all bitumen.

- Follow the Stuart Highway for only 46 km/29 miles. Turn right at the Berry Springs turn off. From there it is another 71 km/44 miles to the northernmost park entrance. This route includes 42 km/26 miles of unsealed road.

- The Southern Access Track can be reached via the Daly River Road. The access track is four wheel drive only and after a good wet season may remain closed well into June. This part of Litchfield National Park is obviously less crowded than the main sealed road. (By the way, I really love this little track.)

Because the main road is all sealed, the main attractions in Litchfield can be visited all year round. The unsealed roads are usually closed during the wet season (Nov - April), so some areas of the park are inaccessible then.

Wangi Falls is usually closed for swimming during and for some time after the wet. If the falls are flowing too strong the currents and whirlpools are too dangerous. Rangers also need to make absolutely sure that no crocodiles moved into the pool over the wet season.

Entry into Litchfield National Park is free. There are several campgrounds inside the park, only one has caravan sites (non powered). Fees apply for all campers (bush campers also). There are more caravan parks and accommodation options just outside the park.

Attractions and Things To Do

This is a very brief overview of the main points of interest inside Litchfield. The attractions are listed in the order that you will find them if driving through the park on the main bitumen ring road, coming from Bachelor.

You can read a bit more about everything here...
www.theoutbackguide.com/litchfield.html
...and a lot more in Destination Top End.

Magnetic Termite Mounds

Buley Rockholes
Series of cascades and plunge pools. Swimming, bushwalking, camping.
Florence Falls
Lookout, steep walk to bottom of falls and plunge pool. Swimming, bushwalking, camping.

Tolmer Falls
Lookout and bushwalk. No swimming. No access to bottom of falls.

Greenant Creek/Tjaebata Falls
Bushwalk to see the falls. No swimming.

Turn off for Southern Access Track
On the Southern Access Track are Sandy Creek Falls (Tjaynera Falls) and Surprise Creek Falls. At both you find falls and plunge pools, bushwalks and a bush campsite. Note that this beautiful track requires a high clearance 4WD.

Wangi Falls
Waterfall with big plunge pool, no walking required to access pool. Mostly boarded walk to top of falls and back down on other side. Kiosk, large campground with powered site.

Walker Creek
Individual campsites along Walker Creek all offer rapids and small plunge pool for swimming. Accessible only to bushwalkers.

End of bitumen ring road. (Turn around or continue to leave park on the unsealed road towards Darwin)

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The Tabletop Track is a 39 km circuit walk that takes about four days to complete. It can be accessed via link walks from Florence Falls, Greenant Creek, Wangi Falls or Walker Creek and it's possible to just do parts of it. This is a real wilderness walk, particularly beautiful at the start of the dry season.

Nitmiluk National Park - Katherine Gorge

• 346 km/215 miles from Darwin
• 706 km/439 miles from Tennant Creek
• 1212 km/753 miles from Alice Springs

No visit to the Top End is complete without a boat cruise, canoe trip or hike up the spectacular 12 km gorge, winding its way between red sandstone cliffs up to 70 metres high.

Katherine Gorge is part of Nitmiluk National Park. The 180,353 hectare park is probably my favourite national park in the Northern Territory. The scenery along the gorge is spellbinding, but most importantly (to me) it's very easy to get away from
people here and you don't need a big 4WD to do so. You just need to enjoy being active, doing a bit of exercise, either canoeing or walking.

If you are also equipped to bush camp for a night inside or along the gorge, then you will probably end up loving it here as much as I do.

**Getting There**

The small town Katherine is 317 km/195 miles south of Darwin. Nitmiluk/Katherine Gorge NP itself is 29 km/18 miles north-east of Katherine.
The Gorge Road (road into the park and to the park visitor centre) is sealed, no 4WD needed. Access may be restricted during the wet season (Nov - April) due to flooding.

Accommodation is available in Katherine:
Katherine accommodation at Tripadvisor
Katherine accommodation at HotelsCombined
Camper can stay at the excellent Nitmiluk Caravan Park at Katherine Gorge itself (next to the Nitmiluk National Park Visitor Centre).

Don't have your own transport? You can use the shuttle bus operating from Katherine. The bus leaves Katherine 8am, 12.15pm and 4 pm. It returns from Katherine Gorge National Park to town at 9am, 1pm and 5pm. Pick up locations are the BP Roadhouse (where the Katherine Tourist Information is located) or your hotel or motel.

The Gorge Road ends at the Nitmiluk National Park Visitor Centre, a good starting point. This is where the shuttle bus will drop you off.

The Nitmiluk Visitor Centre is the place to book a site in the caravan park, buy tickets for Katherine Gorge tourist boat cruises and get maps and information on walks in the park. The friendly staff and the park rangers can help you with all your questions about boating, camping, hiking and more.

**Attractions and Things to See and Do**

There are four ways to see the gorge or more of the park:

**Scenic flights and tourist boat cruises**

Fixed wing and helicopter scenic flights leave from the Katherine airfield, so you don't even need to make your way out to the gorge. Boat cruises of varying length leave from the boat ramp at the Nitmiluk Visitor Centre. Some cruises involve a short walk and the opportunity to swim in the gorge.

For more details about flights and cruises see the website:
www.theoutbackguide.com/katherine-gorge-cruises.html
(The Ghan train also stops in Katherine for several hours. The boat cruise is an optional excursion you can book when buying your ticket.)

**Canoeing**

This is the best way to see the gorge itself. It's the only way to explore the full length of all thirteen gorges (requires an overnight trip), and one of the best ways to get away from the tourist crowds.

Canoes can be hired at the Nitmiluk Visitor Centre. If you travel during peak season, make sure you book ahead as the number is limited.

Everything else you need to know is covered on the website: [www.theoutbackguide.com/katherine_gorge_canoeing.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/katherine_gorge_canoeing.html)

**Hiking/Bushwalking**

This is my other favourite way to see the park. There are over 100 km/60 miles of marked walking trails that wind through the park.

The walks along Katherine Gorge range from easy one to five kilometre walks to serious full day and overnight hikes. They take you to stunning views from lookouts at the rim of the gorge, to secluded swimming holes and waterfalls, through palm filled valleys and over rocky escarpments...

And then there is the Jatbula Trail, a three to five day hike, away from the gorge, along spring fed creeks and waterfalls, to Leliyn (Edith Falls) in the north western part of the park.


There is a lot more to the very Top End of the Northern Territory, beyond "the big three", Kakadu, Litchfield and Katherine Gorge. There is the whole Douglas/Daly region, the hot springs, Butterfly Gorge Nature Park, Umbrawarra Gorge, Crab Claw Island, the coastal areas to both sides of Darwin, Mary River National Park, the Mataranka region, the Roper region...

Some of those places are much harder to get to than others, some are real local secrets. (Well, maybe not so secret any more, since I cover everything in Destination Top End.)

But all of them have one thing in common. Tourists bypass them in their quest to tick off as many main points of interest as possible in their available limited time.

I'll also have to bypass them in this little introductory guide, so let's move on...
Katherine to Broome

In Katherine you have to decide if you want to continue your journey south, or if you want to head towards the west coast and Broome on the Victoria Highway.

It's about 475 km/295 miles from Katherine to the border into Western Australia. The turn off to Lake Argyle is just on the other side of the border, and Kununurra, the gateway to the East Kimberley, is another 35 km/22 miles from there.

The Victoria Highway sees a lot less traffic than the Stuart Highway, the drive from Katherine to Kununurra is very scenic, and there is one nature park (Flora River, a remote and beautiful gem) and two more national parks before you reach the border.

Gregory National Park

Gregory National Park is a 13,000 square kilometre (over 5000 square miles) wilderness area starting 200 km or 125 miles west of Katherine. The highway cuts right through the eastern part of the park, so everybody can enjoy the views of the dramatic escarpments.

Two shorter walks up into the escarpment can be accessed more or less directly from the highway. Both start not far from the Victoria River Roadhouse (the roadhouse is just under 200 km/125 miles from Katherine). Both are well worth a stop and look.

Beyond that Gregory is a park for wilderness and four wheel driving enthusiasts. There are mostly rough tracks and only bush campsites within the park, only accessible during the dry season. You can traverse the whole park to get to the unsealed Buntine Highway south of it or connect to/from the Buchanan Highway (also unsealed) to the east.

The attractions in the park are the flora and fauna, gorges, rugged sandstone and limestone terrain, big rivers (fishing, boating and big crocodiles), and signs of a rich Aboriginal and pastoral past. In other words, remote outback wilderness and outback history.

If you want to stop in the area, camping, accommodation, meals and boat tours are also available at the Victoria River Roadhouse. So is more information about the park.

By the way, this is the area where you start to see the first boab trees.

If you think you'd like to see more of Gregory National Park, you can read more about it here:

www.theoutbackguide.com/gregory_national_park.html

A visitor centre (usually unmanned) and a ranger station are in Timber Creek, on the western side of the park, 286 km/178 miles from Katherine. Timber Creek is also the last roadhouse before you reach Western Australia.
Keep River National Park

Keep River National Park is located about 470 km/292 miles from Katherine, 40 km from Kununurra (25 miles), three kilometres east of the Northern Territory/Western Australia border, only just still in the Northern Territory.

However, the landscapes in this picturesque little park are definitely Kimberley landscapes. The sandstone formations are similar to those you find in the Bungle Bungle range and there are a couple of terrific walks through them.

Access is on an unsealed road, but during the dry season it should be ok for 2WD vehicles. There are also two bush campsites in the park, both in great locations, next to the two best walks.

Keep River National Park is so close to Kununurra, it can easily be explored on a day trip from there. That's why, although it's in the Northern Territory, I cover the park in detail in Destination Kimberley.

You can also read about it on my website:
www.theoutbackguide.com/keep_river_national_park.html

The Western Australia - Northern Territory Border

Many travellers are not aware of our agricultural quarantine until they reach the checkpoint at the Western Australia - Northern Territory border.

You can not bring fresh fruit, vegetables and some other things into the Kimberley or Western Australia!

My Kimberley website and the Destination Kimberley guide book have more information:
www.kimberleyaustralia.com/western-australia-quarantine.html

Katherine to Alice Springs

From Katherine the Stuart Highway continues, due south, with precious few bends or curves, for 1178 km or 732 miles to Alice Springs.

Mataranka

Tourist development (accommodation, camping, bar and restaurant) at the hot springs bubbling out of the ground, 105 km or 65 miles south of Katherine. Relax in the pool at the thermal springs or go for walks along the river.
What few tourist know is that the Mataranka Thermal Pool and Resort is part of a larger national park, and that the Elsey National Park has a lot more to offer, including more hot springs, other swimming spots and nicer, quieter bush camping sites.

South of Mataranka you leave the tropical vegetation of the Top End behind and the countryside changes into something more like the classic Australian Outback scenery: vast plains of spinifex, endless horizons, rocky outcrops, red soil and sand.

The long drive is interspersed with some quirky outback roadhouses, several interesting unsealed turn offs (including the Central Arnhem Road and also the Savannah Way which crosses the Stuart Highway) and eventually you get to Threeways Roadhouse. This is where you can turn east and head towards Queensland. Or you stay on the Stuart Highway and continue your drive towards the Red Centre and Alice Springs.

I cover all of the above in Destination Top End, but from Threeways onwards you will be somewhat on your own as I do not offer a detailed guide book for the Red Centre yet. (It is however in the works.)

Just south of Threeways is Tennant Creek:

**Tennant Creek**

The next town, Tennant Creek, is 650 km/404 miles from Katherine

Tennant Creek is a historical gold mining town. It's tiny, but since there is no other town within hundreds of kilometres, Tennant Creek is an important centre for the whole area. You find all the essentials here: accommodation and food, fuel and mechanical repairs, visitor centre, medical services...

**Main attractions**

- The fact that it's about half way between Katherine and Alice, making it an obvious overnight stop.
- Historical Telegraph Station
- Devils Pebbles (rocky outcrop, important Aboriginal site, marked walking trail, authorised bush camping)
- Battery Hill Gold Mine (museum, self guided and guided tours through the mine)

...and of course the Devils Marbles, 110 km/68 miles south of Tennant Creek (half day and day tours to the Devils Marbles are available from Tennant Creek):

**The Devils Marbles**

- 110 km/68 miles south of Tennant Creek
- 760 km/472 miles south of Katherine
A photo of the two most famous Devils Marbles adorns pretty much every Australian Outback tourism brochure available. You never see anything else but that one famous picture, so most people think that's all there is to the area. Two big rocks defying gravity, balanced on their rounded short sides... Sure, a great view and photo.

But the Devils Marbles Conservation Reserve is 1802 hectares in size and there are lots of marbles here! The highway cuts right through the reserve. You don't have to go out of your way to see the famous two marbles. In fact, if all you want is that one picture then you don't even have to get out of your car. There's a very convenient parking bay right there.

But there is a lot more. It's a fascinating area and you can walk and climb all through it, discovering new views, seemingly impossibly balanced rocks and boulders, sheltered caves and crevices...
There is also a basic campground with fire pits and bush toilets (no showers or water).

To find out how the Devils Marbles were formed, see many photos and read more about what there is to see and do in the area, see my website: www.theoutbackguide.com/devils-marbles.html

Alice Springs

- 1503 km/934 miles from Darwin
- 1183 km/735 miles from Katherine
- 506 km/314 miles from Tennant Creek
- 688 km/428 miles from Coober Pedy
- 1539 km/956 miles from Adelaide

Alice Springs calls itself the Outback Capital. And as much as I am a fan of Australia's far north and the tropical regions, there is no denying that Alice Springs is the heart and the centre of the Australian Outback, both in a geographical and a metaphorical sense.

Alice Springs is located smack bang in the middle of the continent, and that makes it the best place to go if you want to experience the classic Australian Outback but have little time.

The historical sites and attractions of "The Alice" make it the perfect place to get a feel for what it used to be like, over hundred years ago, when the first explorers and then the first settlers ventured into the red heart of Australia.

Alice Springs, population 26,500, is a modern town with all the usual comforts and facilities, so you won't have to endure any of the hardships they had to deal with.

The town gets extremely busy during the main tourist season. I prefer to be here well before the masses arrive (ideally before May, definitely before mid June).
If travelling during the tourist season, make sure you book well ahead.

There are two services I use myself to read other people's reviews and experiences with accommodation, and to hunt down good accommodation deals.

I find that Tripadvisor usually has more reviews, Hotels Combined on average returns the best prices, but it's always worth checking the special deals at Tripadvisor.

Alice Springs special deals at Tripadvisor
Alice Springs accommodation at HotelsCombined

**Attractions and Things to See and Do**

Alice Springs itself, although tiny compared to the cities on the coast, has a lot to offer. It takes a few days to see everything properly.

To me there are two main aspects that make up the attraction of Alice Springs: nature and history.

**Nature:**
- Alice Springs Desert Park (a must)
- Alice Springs Reptile Center (great if you never had any close contact with lizards or snakes)
- Olive Pink Botanic Gardens
- Telegraph Station Historical Reserve (combines nature and history)
- Simpsons Gap (in the West MacDonnell Ranges but not far from town)

**History:**
- Royal Flying Doctor Service
- John Flynn Memorial Church and Adelaide House (honouring the man whose big vision and tireless work was the foundation of the RFDS)
- National Pioneer Women's Hall Of Fame (housed in the historical Alice Springs goal)

Those were just some of my favourites. To read more about them and to find more cultural, historical and natural attractions in Alice see my website:


**The MacDonnell Ranges**

Alice Springs is situated at a gap in the MacDonnell Ranges, called Heavitree Gap. It's a narrow gap that the Stuart Highway, the Ghan railway line and the Todd River all squeeze through.
The gap splits the range in two parts, called the West and the East MacDonnell Ranges, or West and East Macs for short.

The West MacDonnell Ranges

The West MacDonnell National Park draws a large number of visitors. Only Ayers Rock and Kings Canyon see bigger crowds. There are several reasons why this area is so popular. To start with it's simply gorgeous. Ranges, gorges and waterholes, flora and fauna, hiking and swimming, everything one could hope for in a place like this.

The other reason is that the West Macs are so accessible. The area is close to Alice Springs, the road is all sealed, and everything is well developed with many tourist facilities.

Attractons and Things To Do

**Simpsons Gap** - t/o 18 km/11 miles from Alice Springs, cycle path from Alice Springs, visitor centre, picnic facilities, several walking tracks, good area to see Black-footed Rock-wallabies.

**Standley Chasm** - t/o 42 km/26 miles from Alice Springs, privately owned (entry fee), short walk to view narrow chasm (best colours around lunch time but also biggest crowds), option to explore further to second chasm, campground and kiosk.

**Ellery Creek Big Hole** - 91 km/57 miles from Alice Springs, deepest waterhole in the West Macs, great for swimming (very cold!), good destination for family day trips and picnics, also 3 km walking trail and basic bush campsite.

**Serpentine Gorge** - 104 km/65 miles from Alice Springs, two alternative walking tracks to small waterhole, steep climb to impressive lookout, no swimming!
Ochre Pits - 115 km/71 miles from Alice Springs, an area where the Aboriginals mined ochres for their ceremonies and for trading with other groups. Interpretive displays and short walking track into pits to view coloured layers in the walls.

Ormiston Gorge - t/o 128 km/80 miles from Alice Springs, permanent waterhole for swimming, narrow and spectacular gorge, walking tracks along rim or river bed, longer walking track through Ormiston Pound (huge natural amphitheatre) and beyond, visitor centre, campground, kiosk. Very popular destination.

Glen Helen - 132 km/82 miles from Alice Springs, short walk to scenic permanent waterhole, "Outback Lodge" (only accommodation option in West Macs).

Redbank Gorge - t/o 152 km/94 miles from Alice Springs, access road was still unsealed in 2007, this is my favourite place in the West Macs (followed by Ormiston Gorge), spectacular series of 17 gorges with freezing water, accessible by canoe, inflatable boat/mattress or similar, walk down to gorge for a quick dip at first pool, great walk to the top of Mt. Sonder.

Continue beyond the Redbank Gorge t/o to access the unsealed Mereenie Loop Road and drive to Kings Canyon. (Permit required, available from Glen Helen.)

The East MacDonnell Ranges
At this point the East Macs are still something of an insider tip. This little visited area has at least as much to offer as the West MacDonnells: good access, great scenery, walking tracks of any length or difficulty level, seasonal swimming holes, wildlife, wildflowers, great camping, four wheel driving if you want to...

What else could you possibly ask for?

Attractions and Things To Do
The road is sealed for the first 74 km/46 miles. Most cars can easily drive as far as Trephina Gorge.
The Emily and Jessie Gaps Nature Park - 14 km and 21 km from Alice Springs, respectively (8.7 and 13 miles), protects two small gaps in the ranges. Emily Gap has some Aboriginal rock paintings and is a registered sacred site, Jessie Gap has good picnic facilities.

Corroboree Rock Conservation Reserve - 46 km/29 miles from Alice Springs, important Aboriginal site, unusual rock formation, circular walking track.

Trephina Gorge Nature Park - t/o 69 km/43 miles from Alice Springs, last 5 km to main campground are unsealed but suitable for all vehicles, two gorges (Trephina Gorge and the John Hayes Rockhole), three bush campgrounds, several waterholes, seasonal swimming, great walking trails.

N'Dhala Gorge Nature Park - t/o 81 km/50 miles from Alice Springs, access by 4WD only, very narrow and steep gorge, ancient petroglyphs (rock carvings), nature walk, quiet bush campground.

(There is also a small commercial campground, the Ross River campground, right after the initial turn off.)

Arltunga Historical Reserve - 110 km/68 miles from Alice Springs, ruins of what used to be central Australia's first town, old gold mine shafts can be accessed, small museum and many informational displays. Impressively desolate.

Ruby Gap Nature Park - very remote, very (!) rough access track, very much worth it. My favourite place in the East Macs and rated as the most beautiful gorge in central Australia. Challenging four wheel driving, spectacular and extended wilderness walks, gemstone fossicking (garnets, not rubies), water holes, fantastic bush camping... Paradise.

Watarrka National Park - Kings Canyon

- 474 km/295 miles from Alice Springs
- 310 km/193 miles from Uluru

Watarrka National Park protects of the rugged and scenic George Gill Range. Kings Canyon is the biggest attraction inside the park, so much so that few people know the real name of the park.

It is a massive gorge, with red sandstone walls that rise over 100 metres to a plateau of rocky domes and other sandstone formations. Walks lead along the gorge floor as well as up to the rim and around the full length of the canyon.

The Kings Canyon rim walk is often cited as the highlight of a trip to the red centre.

(I don't quite see it that way. However, any experiences that I would rate above Kings Canyon require a 4WD, some skill driving it, the willingness and equipment to
bushcamp, to go on long wilderness hikes, or simply a lot more time than the average tourist has available.)

If you only have up to a week to spend in the Red Centre, are stuck with a 2WD and don't really want to hike all day, then Kings Canyon may well end up being your number one memory, too. The rim walk is one of the best and most varied walks you can do in central Australia.

**Getting There**

**By 2WD** - along Stuart Highway, Lasseter Highway and Luritja Road
- 474 km/295 miles from Alice Springs
- 275 km/171 miles from Erldunda Roadhouse t/o (on Stuart Highway south of Alice Springs)
- 310 km/193 miles from Uluru

**By 4WD**
- 357 km/222 miles from Alice Springs (via West MacDonnell and Mereenie Loop Road)
- 329 km/204 miles from Alice Springs (via Stuart Highway, Ernest Giles Road and Luritja Road)
- 199 km/124 miles from Ernest Giles Road t/o on Stuart Highway

**Accommodation**

Accommodation and camping is available at Kings Canyon Resort (near Kings Canyon) or at Kings Creek Station (on the national park border, about 40 km from Kings Canyon).

**Attractions and Things To Do**

**Kathleen Springs Walk** - 2.6 km return/1.5 hr
Easy stroll to a permanent, spring fed waterhole, starting about 7 km from national park entrance.

**Kings Creek Walk** - 2.6 km return /1 hr
Easy stroll along the bottom of the canyon to a lookout point.

**Kings Canyon Rim Walk** - 6 km loop/3-4 hr
Fantastic walk, starting with a steep climb up onto the plateau, then following the rim of the canyon all the way around and descending on the opposite side. Also the opportunity to climb down to a permanent waterhole (the "Garden of Eden"). A very varied scenery and spectacular views all the way. Don't travel all the way to central Australia and then skip this one.
**Giles Track** - 22 km/2 days
For experienced bushwalkers only, from Kathleen Springs to Kings Canyon along top of the ranges.

Find more details and many photos on my website:
www.theoutbackguide.com/kings-canyon.html

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**Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park**

- 1964 km/1220 miles from Darwin
- 461 km/286 miles from Alice Springs
- 751 km/467 miles from Coober Pedy
- 1602 km/995 miles from Adelaide

Standing in front of Uluru (Ayers Rock)... For many outback travellers this is the most anticipated moment of their Australia holiday.
Ok, for some standing on top of Uluru is the ultimate dream, a "must do before I die" thing.

Either way, nearly every tourist wants to visit Uluru while in Australia.

I discuss Uluru in great detail on the website. It is an important destination, an important topic and a controversial one as well. Books have been written about it.

I am not going to write another one here. I will just stick to the practical considerations of your visit. For more details and opinions, please see the website.

www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-australia.html

Uluru and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) are both located in *Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park*.

**Getting There**

While outback travellers usually have done some research and have a good idea about what a trip to Uluru involves, it's shocking how many tourists arrive totally clueless.

First of all, Uluru is not in or anywhere near Alice Springs! It is 460 km/285 miles south west by road.

No, you most certainly do not need a 4WD. There is no opportunity to leave the bitumen anywhere. This is mega tourism and there are big coaches everywhere.

Uluru is not a wilderness destination. It is not a challenging adventure to get there. It's a normal drive along the highway. The road from Alice Springs to Uluru is a busy highway, wide, well maintained, and with service stations about every 100 km/60 miles.
The biggest hazard of the drive comes from other cars. People speed like crazy on that highway in their mad rush to fit the rock into their hectic schedule. Accidents are common.

**Self Driving**

Follow the Stuart Highway. At Erldundu Roadhouse, 199 km or 123 miles south of Alice Springs, turn west onto the Lasseter Highway.

- Distance from Alice Springs to Uluru - 461 km/286 miles
- Distance from Erldunda t/o to Uluru - 262 km/163 miles
- Distance between Uluru and Kata Tjuta - 53 km/33 miles
- Distance between Uluru and Kings Canyon - 310 km/193 miles (fully sealed road)

(You can find maps here: [www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-map.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-map.html))

**Flying**


Alternatively you can fly to Alice Springs and join a tour from there.

**National Park Entry**

The national park gate is 10 km from the rock.

Entry fee: A$25 per person. You buy your pass at the park gate. The pass is valid for three days. There are no one day or two day passes. Children under 16 are free.

**Accommodation at Uluru**

There is only one option for accommodation near Uluru and that is the nearby Ayers Rock Resort, Yulara.

Yulara is located 6 km from the airport, 8 km from the national park entrance and 18 km from Uluru itself. The resort offers accommodation at all price levels, from camping to ultra luxurious. There are also shops, restaurants, a supermarket and a service station. It's a huge development. In fact, the resort is bigger than many outback towns.

You can read more about it here: [www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-accommodation.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-accommodation.html)

You can read reviews, search for prices and special deals using the links below.
(I find that Tripadvisor usually has more reviews, HotelsCombined on average returns the best prices, but it's always worth checking the special deals at Tripadvisor.)

**Uluru special deals at Tripadvisor**
**Uluru accommodation at HotelsCombined**

If you are travelling on a shoestring budget and camping, check this page:
www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-budget-tips.html

### Attractions and Things To Do

**Cultural Centre** - Educational display about culture of the *Anangu* people and Aboriginal law (*Tjukurpa*), great information materials, and brochures about Uluru's history, geology and environment.

**Climbing Uluru** - it is allowed, but discouraged. The Aboriginal custodians ask you to respect their culture and not climb. If you choose to climb start early to avoid the heat of the day. For safety reasons the climb may be closed on very hot or windy days.

Read more about climbing Uluru, about the controversy surrounding the climb, and see photos and videos here:
www.theoutbackguide.com/climbing-ayers-rock-uluru.html

**Sunset and Sunrise Viewing** - only possible from designated parking and viewing areas.
www.theoutbackguide.com/uluru-ayers-rock-sunset.html

**Uluru Walks**

**Dune Walk** - 500 metres return/20 min
This short walk offers good views of Uluru. It starts from the bus sunset viewing area and gets closed for all other visitors (those not on a bus tour) one hour before sunset.

**Liru Walk** - 4km return/1 hour
Walk from the Cultural Centre to the base of Uluru.

**Kuniya Walk** - 1km return/30 min
Short track to a permanent waterhole at the base of Uluru.

**Mala Walk** - 2km return/1 hour
In my opinion the best walk at Uluru. Can be done as a self guided walk, following the booklet "An Insight Into Uluru". (Available at the Cultural Centre.) Rangers conduct daily free guided walks here, starting 8am (Oct-Apr) or 10am (May-Sep). Meet the ranger at the Mala Walk sign.

**Uluru Base Walk** - 9.4 km/3-4 hours
Circles the whole base of the rock. (The Kuniya and the Mala walks are part of the Uluru Base Walk.) Start early and take water!
Kata Tjuta - The Olgas

Also located within Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is Kata Tjuta, formerly called The Olgas.

Kata Tjuta consists of 36 steep sided monoliths, which, just like Uluru, look most impressive at sunrise and sunset. Again you have to stick to the official sunset viewing area to see the spectacle.

Of the twelve walks that used to wind through the valleys here, only two remain. The rest are closed to enable the Anangu to hold their traditional ceremonies. (As you can imagine, there are no more ceremonies amidst the carnival at Uluru.)

**Walpa Gorge Walk** - 2.6 km return/1 hour
Leads up a rocky slope and then into a shady, moist gully, ends on a viewing platform.

**Valley of the Winds Walk** - 7.4km circuit/3 hours
To me this is by far the best walk in all of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. It retains a sense of wilderness and the scenery is just spectacular. Kata Tjuta is nowhere near as busy as Uluru, and if you pick a good time (like very early or late in the day) you may be alone for much of the walk.

Read more about Kata Tjuta and see photos of the walks: [www.theoutbackguide.com/olgas-kata-tjuta.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/olgas-kata-tjuta.html)


For more information on all things Uluru also see the Uluru section on my website: [www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-australia.html](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-australia.html)

Read about how other readers experienced Uluru: [www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-australia.html#VisitorPages](http://www.theoutbackguide.com/ayers-rock-australia.html#VisitorPages)

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**Final Words**

Well, and that’s it. I do hope that you found this little introductory guide useful. It was only a quick trip across the Northern Territory but I sure hope it convinced you that you should have a closer look!

If it did, then you will find more information and help on my website:

[www.TheOutbackGuide.com](http://www.TheOutbackGuide.com)
Should you entertain the idea to venture north west (in my totally biased opinion the most beautiful corner of Australia) then make sure you have a good look at my Kimberley website (www.kimberleyaustralia.com) and the free Kimberley Pocket Guide: www.kimberleyaustralia.com/kimberley-travel-guide.html

And if you are the adventurous and independent sort and like your camping, then check out my detailed guide e-books for the Top End and for the Kimberley.

**Destination Top End**

**Destination Kimberley**

I wrote them when I realised that a website and free booklet will just never cut it.

If you want to venture out there and make the most of it, you do need a comprehensive and detailed book to take with you!

I would be delighted to hear from you again, either during or after your trip. And I would be even more delighted if you could share some of your photos or experiences on the website, because I know that other readers would love to read your stories:

www.theoutbackguide.com/outback-travel-tips.html

If you do know of someone else who might benefit from this quick guide, please send them to the website so they can get the latest copy for themselves.

Also, if you find this guide and the website useful, then please help others to find out about it.

**If you have a blog or website, consider adding a link in a post, the blogroll or favourites.** Every link helps.

**Thank You!**

Thanks for reading all the way to the bottom, and I hope to see you here soon.

(Birgit “B” Bradtke)