



6 Storked in Darwin
Discovering the wildlife — including a very large jabiru — and the wartime history of Australia's Northern Territory.

Top guns, red suns and other star attractions

Russell Baillie visits Darwin, a city revelling in its 15 minutes of fame

IT'S less than an hour into my Darwin mission and already I'm being stalked. Well, storked.

It's been a four-hour flight from Sydney across that big red centre. I'm sitting under the eaves of my digs for the first night, adjusting the pores for a weekend of steamy 30-plus temperatures.

A jabiru has wandered over and made meaningful eye contact from a metre away. It just stands there, one mad, staring, yellow peeper from a head showing definite signs of pterodactyl in its ancestry. How neatly Darwinian.

Consulting the NZ-Oz phrasebook, a greeting is offered: "Crikey. You're a big ugly fella aren't ya?"

With its unflinching gaze and slightly disdainful expression, the jabiru — also known as the Asian black-necked stork or *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* — looks to be thinking much the same thing.

While unsettling, it's impressive that my first close encounter of the Northern Territory wildlife kind is happening even before I've had time to unpack, string corks

from my hat or find something to put into my complimentary stubbie holder.

The next few days will bring others with spiders, bats, lizards and kangaroos — mostly down in Lichfield National Park, but that's another story — though despite the many warning signs, no crocodiles.

Eventually the jabiru loses interest and returns to her exotic mates squawking around the waterhole at the centre of the Feathers Sanctuary, an idyllic bed and breakfast with a real thing for local ornithology — as well as an aviary, each villa has an adjoining cage with its own resident fauna.

Ours is a sugar glider — possibly also known as *Ohsoverycute marsupialarus* — which doesn't spend much time awake or venturing outside its hollow log. Must be the heat.

But those weird birds and the troppo air are a reminder of Darwin's place in the world.

This is where Australia pokes its sparsely populated head up into Asia and gets a permanently fevered brow.



Travel Page 6
Region: National
Frequency: Daily AM
Circulation: 196,182
Height: 22.41 cms
Width: 21.56 cms
Size: 284.91 sq.cms.

Yes, that weather. There is a lot of it about. Later that night it turns spectacular, with a ground-shaking electrical storm. Darwin has two main seasons.

“The Dry” is the relatively mild winter months where the locals break out the woollies if it dips below 20C.

Then there’s “The Wet”, which brings the cooling monsoon rains, along with frequent electrical storms and the occasional cyclone — the most famous of which, Tracy, levelled the place in Christmas 1974 in what was, until this year’s bush fires, Australia’s biggest natural disaster.

The excellent Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory has a wing dedicated to Tracy, complete with howling sound chamber and a photo exhibition which is all the more compelling if you remember the headlines of the time.

Weather-wise, we’re here for in-between. It’s the post-Dry pre-Wet November build-up, the hottest month of the year. It might be better named “The Steam”. There’s a free sauna with every step.

But Darwin is So Hot Right Now for another reason. It’s gone from tropical to topical in the wake of *Australia*, the movie.

Darwin is where the movie starts — and nearly three hours later, in scenes depicting the first Japanese bombing of the city during World War II, ends.

Truth be told, not a lot of Baz Luhrmann’s film was shot here, though when Nicole Kidman’s character arrives in Darwin, that’s Darwin. And the boat on which Hugh Jackman sets out to the fictitious Mission Island to rescue the boys is the Anniki.

The 1950s pearl lugger is now used to take us tourists out on motor-powered sunset cruises — via the lock on the Cullen Bay marina area — on Port Darwin’s

wide and largely featureless harbour. Nice sunset though. Another drink? Cheers.

For *Australia*, much of 1930s Darwin was reconstructed in the Queensland town of Bowen because the combination of Japanese bombs, Tracy and modern development has changed the city over the years.

The Stokes Hill wharves of the film still stand, but the precinct is undergoing major development, with a cruise ship terminal and resort hotels being built alongside an already-completed conference centre.

But the hope is that *Australia* might remind Australians — and maybe those who put the other syllable in Anzac — about Darwin’s war history and get them interested in the place.

Local guide Steve Noble says it’s ironic that his countrymen treat overseas spots like Gallipoli and the Kokoda Trail as war shrines while Darwin is largely ignored.

He says this as he points out yet

more evidence of how and where the city was pounded by the Japanese in 64 raids.

During the first in February 19, 1942 — which provides *Australia*’s finale — more bomb tonnage was dropped than had hit Pearl Harbour two months before.

That first raid had an official death toll of 243 — some still think it was in the thousands — many of whom were buried at the Adelaide River War Cemetery, 110km south.

Visiting those well-tended graves under yet another gathering thunderstorm is enough to temper any boy’s-own excitement generated by all this war talk.

But Darwin’s military past and present still defines the place. The airport shares its runways with a major RAAF base. The Anniki cruise passes moored Royal Australian Navy patrol boats.

Drive south down the Stuart Highway and you’ll see signs denoting the many wartime airfields now largely overtaken by scrub.

But for the aviation nut, there are far more tangible thrills at the Australian Aviation Heritage Centre on the highway just south

» CHECKLIST



DARWIN

■ GETTING THERE:

Qantas offers daily services to Darwin via Sydney.

■ WHERE TO STAY:

Check out Moonshadow Villas (www.moonshadowvillas.com) and Feathers Sanctuary (www.featherssanctuary.com).

■ WHAT TO DO:

Explore Darwin at a leisurely pace with local guide Steve Noble (www.darwinwalkingtours.com) and enjoy the city views from the harbour aboard the Anniki Pearl Lugger (www.australianharbourcruises.com.au). Visit Char Restaurant @ Admiralty located on the corner of Knuckey St and The Esplanade in Darwin (www.charrestaurant.com.au). For vehicle hire contact Budget Car Rental (www.budget.com.au). Contact Territory Discoveries for bookings in Northern Territory (www.territorydiscoveries.com).

■ FURTHER INFORMATION:

Tourism Northern Territory:
www.australiasoutback.com.
Tourism Australia:
www.australia.com.



of Darwin. Its centrepiece is a USAF B-52 bomber, its cavernous open bomb bays acting as a screening room (but no *Dr Strangelove*, pity).

But the museum's own narrative traces the Top End's aviation history from the days Darwin was the landing place for pioneering flights from the Old Country, the early days of the Flying Doctors and Qantas, through World War II to the modern era.

On display are the remains of a Japanese Zero, which crashed on Melville Island after being damaged during the first Darwin raid. Pilot Sergeant Hajime Tojoshima was captured by aborigines, making him Australia's first Japanese prisoner of war.

He was one of 231 prisoners who died in 1944 during the Cowra breakout, having sounded the bugle to start the suicidal mass escape bid.

That's another movie, or at least the great 1984 mini-series co-directed by Phillip Noyce.

Back in the city, you can visit the oil storage tunnels under the city which weren't completed in time to be used, among other historic sites.

The wartime development hastened Darwin's rise from northern outpost to city and if its proximity to Asia then put it at risk, today it has helped make it like no other capital in Australia.

True, it's a fraction of the size — it has 120,000 people with only 80,000 or so more in the rest of the

vast Northern Territory.

It's a tourist town and gateway to the territory's national parks. But even with its own casino, the place hasn't succumbed to the tack of the Queensland coastal strips, and its history is far more engaging than your typical tropical getaway.

One drawback, though, is that despite its beaches you can't go swimming in the sea from October to May because of box jellyfish. Not to mention the saltwater crocs, who do like to hit the open water now and again.

A few days after that jabiru encounter, we find a waterhole to call our own.

It's the terraced swimming pool of the Moonshadow Villas, an architectural wonder of a place usually catering to a far better class of tourist.

It may not be far from the centre of Darwin, but it feels like it's taken its design cues from Asia — outdoor style from Bali, antique Chinese furniture, mammoth plasma TVs from South Korea.

Combined with the humidity imported from the Timor Sea, it's hard not to lie back in that pool and declare the Darwin mission of discovery over early.

Or in the words of another great Australian film, to ask: "How's the serenity?"

Pretty bloody good, actually.

Russell Baillie travelled to Darwin courtesy of Tourism Northern Territory and Tourism Australia



PAST MASTER: The Australian Aviation Centre offers tangible thrills to flying nuts.





NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS: (clockwise from left) The ex-pearl boat Anniki now takes tourists for sunset cruises on Darwin's harbour; a jabiru stares down dinner; Darwin is the gateway to spectacular national parks like Litchfield.

On the warpath: Darwin's military attractions

The East Point Military Museum: The bunker command post for a 9-inch gun emplacement was converted to a military museum which now is now largely devoted to the 64 raids on Darwin during World War II. With its bunkers and range of vehicles and weaponry, it's a place for army and artillery buffs. But the big gun here now is a replica of the original — that was sold in 1959 to a Japanese scrap company.

Australian Aviation Heritage Centre, Winnellie: This is a hangar full of the Northern Territory's aviation history with a century's worth of aircraft on display. The exhibits range from a World War II USAF B-25 Mitchell bomber to the Cold War- and Vietnam-era B-52 Stratofortress and



GRIM REMINDER: A WWII-era bomb crater in the Northern Territory.

vintage RAAF jet fighters. Helicopters, civilian aircraft and static displays are also on show. (See main story.)

Stuart Highway airfields: Take the Stuart Highway south and every few

kilometres you'll spot signs marking World War II airfields. There's not much to see now, but the extent of the old dirt runways gives you an idea of how near the aerial frontline the area was.

Oil tunnels: Beneath Darwin are extensive oil tunnels which are open to the public. Built to protect fuel supplies from the Japanese raids, they were never used — the tide of the war turned before they were finished.

Adelaide River War Cemetery: An hour's drive south of Darwin, the town of Adelaide River was a staging post for the Australian war effort. The tranquil spot has the graves of 434 people killed during the war, including many of the victims of the raids on Darwin.