



Darwin & the Top End

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Why Go?

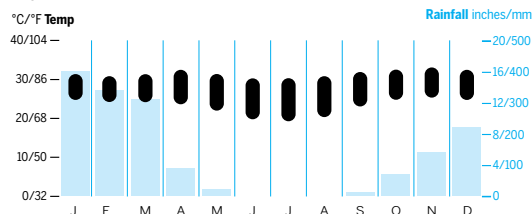
The Top End is frontier country. It feels wild out here; time spent exploring the region's outer reaches will feel like exploring the Australia of childhood imaginings. This is the nation's most rewarding Indigenous homeland, a land of art centres, isolated communities and ancient rock art. It is also a world of iconic Aussie wildlife, from the jumping crocs of Mary River to the wildlife-rich flood plains and wetlands of Kakadu.

The wildness comes in many forms out here, from remote Arnhem Land to backpackers letting loose on Darwin's Mitchell St, from the mournful cries of Kakadu whistling kites and black cockatoos to the wild turtles laying their eggs within earshot of Darwin.

And Darwin itself is an intriguing place with a steamy, end-of-Australia feel, excellent markets, restaurants and galleries of Indigenous art, and a fine waterfront with terrific museums.

When to Go

Darwin



Apr–Sep Dry-season markets, fine weather and good festivals.

Oct & Nov The 'build-up' brings a chance of heavy rain and very humid conditions.

Dec–Mar The Wet brings monsoon rains and fewer visitors.

DARWIN

POP 135,000

Australia's only tropical capital city, Darwin gazes out confidently across the Timor Sea. It's closer to Bali than Bondi and can certainly feel removed from the rest of the country, which is just the way the locals like it.

Darwin has plenty to offer travellers. Chairs and tables spill out of streetside restaurants and bars, innovative museums celebrate the city's past, and galleries showcase the region's rich Indigenous art. Darwin's cosmopolitan mix – more than 50 nationalities are represented here – is typified by the wonderful markets held throughout the dry season.

Sights

Central Darwin

★ **Crococaurus Cove** ZOO
(☎ 08 8981 7522; www.crococauruscove.com; 58 Mitchell St; adult/child \$32/20; ☀ 9am–6pm, last admission 5pm) If the tourists won't go out to see the crocs, then bring the crocs to the tourists. Right in the middle of Mitchell St, Crococaurus Cove is as close as you'll ever want to get to these amazing creatures. Six of the largest crocs in captivity can be seen in state-of-the-art aquariums and pools, while an eco boat cruise (adult/child \$14/7) takes you out on the water with them.

You can be lowered right into a pool with the crocs in the transparent **Cage of Death** (1/2 people \$165/250). If that's too scary, there's another pool where you can swim with a clear tank wall separating you from some mildly less menacing baby crocs. Other aquariums feature barramundi, turtles and stingrays, plus there's an enormous reptile house (allegedly displaying the greatest variety of reptiles in the country).

Aquascene AQUARIUM
(☎ 08 8981 7837; www.aquascene.com.au; 28 Doctors Gully Rd; adult/child/family \$15/10/43; ☀ high tide, check website) At Doctors Gully, an easy walk from the north end of the Esplanade, Aquascene runs a remarkable fish-feeding frenzy at high tide. Visitors, young and old, can hand-feed hordes of mullet, catfish, batfish and huge milkfish. Check the website and tourism publications for feeding times.

Bicentennial Park PARK
(☀ 24hr) Bicentennial Park (the Esplanade) runs the length of Darwin's waterfront and **Lameroo Beach**: a sheltered cove popular

in the '20s when it housed the saltwater baths, and traditionally a Larrakia camp area. Shaded by tropical trees, the park is an excellent place to stroll.

Mason Gallery GALLERY
(☎ 08 8981 9622; www.masongallery.com.au; Shop 7, 21 Cavenagh St; ☀ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat & Sun) **FREE** Features bold dot paintings from the Western and Central Desert regions, as well as works from Arnhem Land and Utopia.

George Brown Botanic Gardens GARDENS
(www.nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/george-brown-darwin-botanic-gardens; Geranium St; ☀ 7am–7pm, information centre 8am–4pm) **FREE** These 42-hectare gardens showcase plants from the Top End and around the world – monsoon vine forest, the mangroves and coastal plants habitat, baobabs, and a magnificent collection of native and exotic palms and cycads.

Myilly Point Heritage Precinct HISTORIC SITE
At the far northern end of Smith St is this small but important precinct of four houses built between 1930 and 1939 (which means they survived both the WWII bombings and Cyclone Tracy!) They're now managed by the National Trust. One of them, **Burnett House** (☎ 08 8981 0165; www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/burnett-house; \$5; ☀ 10am–1pm Mon–Sat, 3–5pm Sun), operates as a museum.

Darwin Waterfront Precinct

The bold redevelopment of the old Darwin Waterfront Precinct (www.waterfront.nt.gov.au) has transformed the city. The multi-million-dollar redevelopment features a cruise-ship terminal, luxury hotels, boutique restaurants and shopping, the Sky Bridge, an elevated walkway and elevator at the south end of Smith St, and a **Wave Lagoon** (☎ 08 8985 6588; www.waterfront.nt.gov.au; Wave Lagoon adult/child \$9/6; ☀ Wave Lagoon 10am–6pm).

★ **Royal Flying Doctor Service** MUSEUM
(☎ 08 8983 5700; www.flyingdoctor.org.au; Stokes Hill Wharf; adult/child/family \$26/16/70; ☀ 9.30am–6pm, last entry 5pm) This outstanding new museum on Stokes Hill Wharf is the way all museums should be. There's a 55-seat hologram cinema, virtual-reality glasses that enable you to relive in vivid detail the 1942 Japanese bombing raid on Darwin Harbour, a decommissioned Pilatus PC-12 aircraft from the Royal Flying Doctor