

## Introducing Northern Territory (NT)

The Northern Territory (NT) is a place of such natural and cultural distinction that nothing can really prepare you for it. Sometimes you'll be taken over by visual splendour, such as when you stare into Kings Canyon or watch dozens of flying foxes take flight from the canopy of a monsoon forest. But much of the NT's beauty sneaks up on you only after days of exposure to its mesmerising, deceptive emptiness: the silhouette of desert oak trees against a dusky sky, a goanna ambling down a dry creek bed or ancient scratchings of Aboriginal art under a sandstone overhang.

Visitors quickly learn to savour the landscape, from the contours of Uluru (Ayers Rock) and the sheer escarpment of Arnhem Land to the tropical Top End's mangrove swamps. They cruise Yellow Water looking for the eyeballs of a saltie (saltwater crocodile), walk the rugged gorges that indent the McDonnell Ranges, and paddle across rock pools and under waterfalls in Litchfield National Park. They appreciate the fascinating complexities of Aboriginal culture by standing among burial poles on the Tiwi Islands and viewing fine exhibitions in museums and cultural centres. And they relax in pubs in the Outback, beer gardens in Alice Springs and foreshore cafes in the capital, Darwin.

## Territory-Wide Must Sees & Dos

**Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park** – Climb the sheer, 100m-high walls of awesome Kings Canyon, one of the most spectacular sights in central Australia.

**Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (The Olgas)** – Be transfixed by the changing colours of spectacular Uluru and the striking collection of Kata Tjuta's rounded monoliths.

**Litchfield National Park** – Float across beautiful water holes surrounded by waterfalls and patches of rainforest in this magnificent park.

**Kakadu National Park** – Study Ubirr's spectacular Aboriginal rock art then explore other parts of extraordinary Kakadu, World Heritage listed for both its natural and cultural importance.

**Rainbow Valley** – Get a taste of the outback on a 4WD trip to Rainbow Valley, a series of extraordinary sandstone bluffs and cliffs. The silence will stun you.

**Tiwi Islands** – Visit Aboriginal communities on Bathurst and Melville Islands with a company such as highly recommended **Tiwi Tours**.

**Tiwi Tours:** Phone: 1300 721 365 Website: [www.aussieadventure.com.au](http://www.aussieadventure.com.au)

## Introducing Darwin

Darwin is a thoroughly likeable modern place with a relaxed, tropical spirit. It's closer to Jakarta than it is to Sydney, and closer to Singapore than to Melbourne, so it should come as no surprise that it looks outward to Asia as much as it looks inland to the rest of Australia. Like most far-flung Territorians, residents of Darwin are accustomed to making their own fun: the nightlife along Mitchell St is evidence of this. And even though you can't swim at the beach for two-thirds of the year due to jellyfish, the city's oceanfront position provides breezy walking trails with great harbour views, plus some popular bayside cafes.

The volatile wet season creates some fantastic electrical storms – locals know a storm is about to begin when the wind picks up. At other times, the climate is conducive to sitting out in a sunny beer garden and planning trips to nearby Top End attractions. One of the things Darwin is most well-known for by Australians from other states is Cyclone Tracy. This devastating cyclone occurred over Christmas Eve/Day 1974, reaching wind speeds of up to 280km/h, killing 66 people and destroying nearly 60% of Darwin's houses. Since then, the new and rebuilt houses have been cyclone-proofed.

Darwin's centre is a compact, orderly grid at the end of a peninsula. The main shopping area is around the pedestrian-only Smith St Mall.

## Darwin's Weather

Although roughly 80% of the NT is in the tropics – the Tropic of Capricorn lies just north of Alice Springs – only the northern 25%, known as the Top End (where Darwin is), has anything that resembles the popular idea of a tropical climate. Like the rest of the Top End, Darwin's climate is described in terms of the Dry and the Wet, with year-round maximum temperatures of 30°C to 34°C and minimums between 19°C and 26°C.

Roughly, the Dry lasts from April to September and the Wet from October to March, with the heaviest rain falling from January onwards. The most comfortable time to visit is June and July, though Darwin has its good points during the Wet – everything is green, and there are spectacular electrical storms and relatively few tourists. However, the combination of heat and high humidity can be unbearable, dirt roads are often impassable and some national parks are either partially or totally closed.

## Cultural Overview

Darwin has a vibrant artistic community, good live music venues and some great museums, such as the **Australian Pearling Exhibition**, showcasing the area's local heritage. It's also a good base for exploring some of the Top End's ancient Aboriginal cultures and customs at places such as the Tiwi Islands and Arnhem Land. Tours to Aboriginal lands, some operated by the communities themselves, are gradually becoming more common, as communities feel more inclined to share their culture. Benefits are twofold: financial gain, not only from the tours but from selling arts and crafts direct to the public; and educating non-Aboriginal people about traditional culture.

**Australian Pearling Exhibition:** Wharf Precinct. **Phone:** 08 8999 6573.

## Don't Miss...

Following is a small selection of Darwin's highlights:

Join the fish at high tide when they come in for a feed at **Aquascene**, as they have done for the past 40+ years. You can feed the hordes of mullet, catfish, batfish and the occasional manta ray yourself.

**Aquascene:** Phone: 08 8981 7837 Website: [www.aquascene.com.au](http://www.aquascene.com.au)

As the sun sets, make your way to the **Mindil Beach Sunset Market** and try to decide what to eat from the selection of 200-plus tantalising (and cheap) food stalls. You'll also find great craft stalls, masseurs and wares from Southeast Asia.

**Mindil Beach Sunset Market:** Website: [www.mindilbeachsunsetmarkets.com.au](http://www.mindilbeachsunsetmarkets.com.au)

Head north of town to Fannie Bay for the superb **Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory** (tel 8999 8201; Conacher St); allow plenty of time for the excellent NT Aboriginal art collection and the Cyclone Tracy exhibition.

**Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory:** Conacher St. Phone: 08 8999 8201

Pack a picnic and head to East Point Reserve, a spit of land north of Fannie Bay. Time your visit for the late afternoon so you can see the sun set across the bay and watch the wallabies when they come out to feed.

Lie back in an old-fashioned deckchair and watch a movie under the stars at **Deckchair Cinema**, Darwin's fabulous open-air, waterfront cinema.

**Deckchair Cinema:** Kitchener Dr, Wharf Precinct. Phone: 08 8981 0700 Website: [www.deckchaircinema.com](http://www.deckchaircinema.com)

## Eat & Be Merry At...

There are plenty of eating options around Mitchell St and the city centre, or head down to the Wharf Precinct or Cullen Bay for water views. Most of the bars popular with visitors (and many locals) are on Mitchell St, all within a short walk of each other. See what you think of these favourites:

Research local arts happenings and entertainment options on the noticeboard at **Roma Bar**, a small, casual café serving good coffee and providing magazines and newspapers for diners.

**Roma Bar:** 30 Cavenagh St, City Centre. Phone: 08 8981 6729

Take your time at **Buzz Café**, a multilevel waterfront place in amongst the yachts of Cullen Bay marina, with great food, a long wine list and distinctive interior design.

**Buzz Café:** The Slipway. Phone: 08 8941 1141

Enjoy fresh NT ingredients with distinct Asian touches at **Twilight on Lindsay**, an atmospheric restaurant tucked away under the raised floor of a pre-Cyclone Tracy house.

**Twilight on Lindsay:** 2 Lindsay St, City Centre. Phone: 08 8981 8631

Catch some live music and a refreshing drink in the great beer garden at **Lizards Bar & Grill**, which attracts people of all ages.

**Lizards Bar & Grill:** Top End Hotel, cnr Mitchell & Daly Sts, City Centre. Phone: 08 8981 6511

Dance the night away at **Retro**, a large dance club also in the Top End Hotel enclave. Head there on Tuesday when cheap drinks are on offer.

**Retro:** Phone: 08 8981 6511

## Darwin (and NT) Events

Like the rest of Australia, Darwin has its fair share of festivals and special events. In particular, there are many annual Aboriginal festivals worth attending; although the festivals are usually held on restricted Aboriginal land, permit requirements are generally waived for them. Here are various ones to look out for:

**Tiwi Grand Final** – Held at the end of March on Bathurst Island, this sporting event is the culmination of a season of Australian Rules football between Aboriginal communities from around the Top End. The final is a major spectacle, with planeloads of people flying in from Darwin for the day.

**Beer Can Regatta** – This is a cheerfully strange festival, held in mid-July off Darwin's Mindil Beach, featuring races for boats made entirely of beer cans!

**Garma Festival** – This four-day festival is held in August in northeastern Arnhem Land. It's an important, large-scale celebration of Yolgnu culture and includes ceremonial performances, bushcraft lessons, a yidaki (didgeridoo) master class and an academic forum.

**Garma Festival: Website:** [www.garma.telstra.com](http://www.garma.telstra.com)

**Darwin Rodeo** – Hear whips cracking in August as international teams compete in numerous events.

**Festival of Darwin** – This two-week, mainly outdoor, festival in August highlights and celebrates Darwin's unique cultural mix.

**Festival of Darwin: Website:** [www.darwinfestival.org.au](http://www.darwinfestival.org.au)