

Jatbula New Year Special: December 27, 2012 - January 2, 2013

It's been seven years since I (Russell Willis) last did the Jatbula Trail; seven years since anyone from Willis's Walkabouts did it. Not only do I enjoy it, but if I don't use my Nitmiluk permit, I could lose it. Willis's Walkabouts is, as far as I know, the only tour operator allowed to do the trail during the wet season when it is closed to the general public. (The photos in these notes were all taken during our 2005-06 trip.)

This walk represents the beginning of Willis's Walkabouts. In February 1984, two years before my first trip as Willis's Walkabouts, I took my first paying customer on this walk. It was a great walk then, it remains a great walk today. When I didn't have the bookings to run the normal New Year in Kakadu trip, I decided to offer it to friends and to members of the Darwin Bushwalking Club as well as past and potential clients.

Nitmiluk National Park is much more than just the area immediately around Katherine Gorge itself. The park extends far to the north and includes a number of creeks and waterfalls. It is the only park in the N.T. which has a well established set of walking trails. The longest of these is the trail to Edith Falls, a route which normally takes five days. We always take longer so that we can show you some of the lovely spots which lie hidden from those who restrict themselves to the marked trail.

In terms of the variety of terrain and number of waterfalls, this walk is at least equal to any walk of similar length in Kakadu. During the dry season any reasonably experienced bushwalker should have no trouble following the trail. At this time of year, lush growth and fallen trail markers can make parts of it hard to follow.

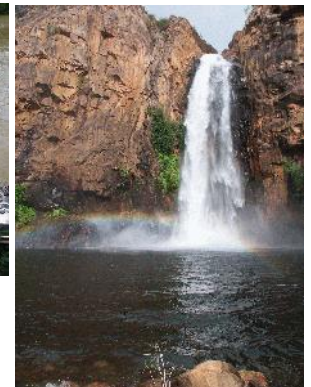
We begin with a boat across the Katherine River and start walking to the Northern Rockhole Waterfall. Unlike those who come later in the year, you should see it flowing well. Unfortunately, swimming is no longer permitted at the Rockhole in the wet season as there is a potential for large crocs to sneak in



Boat drop off.



On the Jatbula Trail, December 2005.



Northern Rockhole Falls.



Biddlecombe Cascades.

unobserved. Fortunately, this is the last place where we have that worry.

We will try and get to Biddlecombe Cascades for our first camp. This is a lovely spot and one of the main camping areas in the dry season. On our last trip, the official camping area was flooded so we moved on a short distance to a flat spot with better access to the creek. We may spend two nights here.

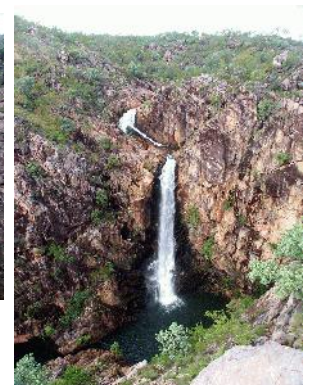


If we kept strictly to the marked track, you would see little of interest between Biddlecombe Cascades and Crystal Falls. These are wonderful places, but there are other beautiful waterfalls and gorges waiting for those who know where to look. We know



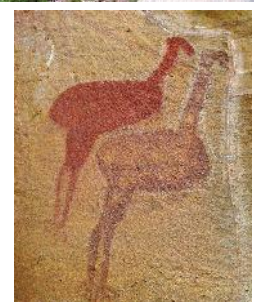
Crossing Crystal Creek.

and will show you the best that the area has to offer. The two photos at right show two of the unnamed waterfalls we visit.



Crystal Falls is yet another spectacular spot. Crossing Crystal Creek, however, is likely to be a bit of a challenge. If water levels are moderately high, we wade as below. If they are too high, we may have to go upstream and swim.

Our next stop after Crystal is the Amphitheatre where we drop our packs and climb down into a small gorge full of Aboriginal art. The photo at right is one small sample – in keeping with the wishes of the traditional owners, we do not publish photos of most of the paintings.



Amphitheatre art



17 Mile Falls

Our next stop is at 17 Mile Falls where, once again we have a potentially tricky crossing. But, in all but the worst floods, there is a long, deep pool where the current flows slowly enough for us to swim across if it is too deep to wade safely. The photo at right shows some of the group enjoying a swim above the falls. By staying out of the main flow, they can relax and enjoy the water safely.



17 Mile Creek swim.



On the trail between 17 Mile Creek and the Edith River.

From 17 Mile Creek, we follow the track to the Edith River. If any part of the trail is going to be somewhat overgrown this will be it. The terrain is, however, relatively flat so the walking is relatively easy. Once at the main river, we stop for yet another swim. As the track is closed, we have the luxury of stopping wherever we can find a decent spot.

We continue downstream to Edith Falls where we collect our vehicles for the trip back to Darwin.



Relaxing at camp.

Notes

You must be able to swim at least 100 m unaided. If you can't do that, don't even think about coming. We may or may not have to do so but you need to be prepared to swim your pack across one or more flooded creeks.

If we have to float packs, putting your pack on an airbed or thermarest helps keep it dry and gives the weaker swimmers something to assist them in getting across. If you have a completely waterproof pack cover, you can use it to float your pack as shown.

It is very important that you pack well enough so that you can keep most things in your pack dry, even if you have to pack a wet tent or other wet items. A pack liner can be considered essential at this time of year. Garbages are a useful supplement. They are not satisfactory on their own.

The exact date of the monsoonal rains which cool the land and fill the creeks cannot be predicted far in advance. The monsoon normally begins around mid December. However, in some years, it begins in late November. In others, it may not arrive until mid January. Both unusually wet and unusually dry conditions could force us to change to another walk.

Weather can range from extremely hot and humid to cooler and cloudy to very wet. This will affect how difficult you find the trip and the walks will be adjusted accordingly.

Exceptionally severe flooding during the walk can mean that we simply have to sit it out for a day or more. This has happened to us only three times in the past 25 years, but it has happened.

This is an A to B walk which will require a vehicle shuffle at the start or finish. While we hope to be able to organise someone to do this for us, we may have to do it ourselves. This would take several extra hours on both ends of the walk.

A day pack is likely to be useful on this trip.

Make sure you keep some money and a water bottle with you during the drives. It may not be possible to get at your pack until the vehicle is unloaded at the end.

Special price – \$650. As this trip began as a trip offered to some of my local friends, it is not priced as a normal commercial trip. No discounts apply.

The first day's walk is a longish one. If it suits everyone who books, we may leave Darwin on the 26th and spend the night in Katherine so that we can get an early start on the 27th. If so, your accommodation and meal that night are not included in the price of the trip.



Edith River upstream of the falls.



Using a pack cover to float a pack.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall Level 3

Climate Level 5. It will be hot (although not as hot as you might think) and it will be humid.

The average daily maximum is 34-35°C (93-95°F). If we get a spell of relatively dry weather, the temperature could reach 40°C (104°F). If we get a spell of cool, overcast weather, we might have days where the maximum temperature is only 28-29°C (82-84°F). The average minimum is 24-25°C (75-77°F). Sleeping bags are not needed. Rain is almost certain.

On average it will rain two days out of three, mostly in short, sharp bursts. Averages can, however, be misleading. Occasionally, it might rain for days at a time. (This makes it somewhat harder to walk but it also makes the waterfalls more spectacular and keeps it relatively cool.) Occasionally, it may rain very little. This makes it substantially hotter than normal. There will be many opportunities to swim and cool off, but you must be prepared for hot, humid conditions.

Terrain Level 3.

Whichever walk we choose, there will be a good mix. Some sections will be flat and relatively easy, others will include short, steep climbs. There will inevitably be some sections of rock hopping. The creeks are likely to be low enough so that swimming across with packs will not be necessary. Exceptional rain could cause this to change so you need to be prepared to float your pack across a flooded creek.



Crossing the upper Edith. If the water had been a little deeper, we would have had to float the packs.

Even in the boggiest of seasons, Nitmiluk and the Top End have nothing that can compare with the mud of Tasmania. However, if you have a particularly wet year, you may find yourself sinking up to mid calf regularly on some sections.

While most of the walking is on a marked trail, that trail can be difficult to follow at this time of year. In addition, we will be doing some side trips which are not on the trail. If you have never done any off-track walking through moderately rough terrain, nothing we can say can adequately describe the experience. The photos on our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, can give you a partial picture, but they cannot substitute for the real thing. Most of those who have not had any off-track walking experience find it more difficult than those who have done it before.

Anyone who does not regularly (average twice a month) go bushwalking carrying a full pack would benefit from doing some pre-trip training. Do this and you will almost certainly enjoy the trip. If you are not an experienced off-track bushwalker and you don't do any training or any other form of strenuous physical exercise, you might feel that the trip is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience.

Vegetation Level 2-3. Much of the walking is likely to be through relatively flat, open woodland with a grassy understorey. Some short sections of grass may hide a broken rocky surface where you will have to be particularly careful. There may be some slow sections where you will have to pass through thick scrub. The vegetation can vary dramatically from year to year. What was easy walking one year may be quite scrubby the next. On the other hand, sections of scrub can disappear in a bushfire.

The spear grass normally reaches its peak in March, often three or four metres tall in some areas (much shorter in others). This early in the season, it is unlikely that it will present much of a problem.

This is an exceptionally good time for wildflowers.

Hours Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer. Unless it is raining, you can expect a lunch and swim break of two hours or more most days.



Wattles are incredibly abundant at this time of year. Grevillea goodii only blooms during the Wet.

Groups where a majority enjoy a leisurely start in the mornings will not be able to cover the same distance as groups which manage to get away quickly. This is a holiday — a fast or leisurely start is your choice.

- Packs** **Pack weight** - level 3. You need to carry a ten days' food. This will include about 3-4 kg of the evening meals. You do not need a sleeping bag but you do need a tent and fly.
- Art** While there are not many sites, there is some very well preserved art in at least one spot as well as several other more faded sites.
- Campsites** Mix of grass, sand and rock ledges. Most sites are good, some are excellent but we have to avoid some of the dry season campsites which could get flooded. You are unlikely to see anyone else anywhere along our routes. We always carry a group fly where we can sit for shade or for shelter at mealtimes if it is raining.
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- [Relaxing under the group fly.](#) [Campsite near the Edith River.](#)
- Swims** You can expect multiple swim stops every day. This is the best time to see the waterfalls in the Top End. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot. Floating packs across a flooded creek is a real possibility. **If you can't swim at least 100 m unaided, do not do this trip.**
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- [Biddlecombe spa.](#) [Swim stop, off trail on an unnamed creek.](#)
- Lowlights** Heat and humidity. Possible lack of rain can make it more uncomfortable than normal. Exceptional rain can slow us down. Carrying ten days' food.
- Highlights** Wet season waterfalls. Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites.
The lush green landscape that dry season visitors can only imagine.
- Wildlife** Birds are always present but spread out at this time of year. You are unlikely to see many large animals.
- Fishing** Not permitted on this walk.
- Maps.** 1:50 000 Katherine, Seventeen Mile & Edith River or 1:100 000 Katherine. The 1:50 000 Nitmiluk National Park map shows all the walking tracks in the park but does not give the detail necessary for off-track navigation.

Itinerary: Jatbula New Year Special

- Note 1** Day 0 is the day before departure.
- Note 2** This itinerary is subject to change.
- Day 0** If we leave Darwin on Day 1, there will be a pre-trip meeting, 6.30 p.m., Tracy's Bar, Holiday Inn, 122 The Esplanade. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

If we leave Darwin on Day 0, we will have our meeting where we have dinner in Katherine.
- Day 1** 7 to 8 a.m. pick up. Pick up is from your accommodation if you have notified us where you are staying at least a week before departure or have made alternate arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. Otherwise, pick up is from Darwin Transit Centre at 69 Mitchell Street.
Drive to Kakadu. There will be a stop along the way to buy cool drinks, etc.
Begin the walk. Bush camp, carrying full packs.
- Day 2-6** Bush camping, carrying full packs most days.
- Day 7** Return to vehicles and drive back to Darwin.