

Russell's Kakadu Special: August 30 - September 8, 2018

Update 2 August

When we had no takers for the easier Kakadu trips in our program, Walkabouts owner Russell Willis decided that he'd make up a special trip consisting of things he particularly wanted to do at a never-to-be-repeated price.

This ten day trip will consist of an air boat ride, an Aboriginal cultural festival, a bit of four wheel driving and two walks during which you will need to carry a full pack a total of less than 15 km. On the walks, you will, however, need to carry a day pack for much more if you wish to do the full walk. On both of these walks, you camp next to a nice pool and have time for swimming during the day. It will finish with a night on a houseboat on the Mary River so that you have the opportunity to experience the Top End wetlands in a way you could never do on a bushwalk.

The Start

We begin with a drive from Darwin to Mary River Wilderness Retreat. On the way, we may stop at Fogg Dam with its wonderful birdlife, Leaning Tree Lagoon, the Mary River National Park Bird Billabong walk and/or the Mary River National Park Hardies Lagoon 4WD track.

Links Mary River Wilderness Retreat, <http://www.maryriverretreat.com.au/>

Mary River National Park,

<http://nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit/mary-river-national-park>

Mary River 4WD tracks,

<http://nt.gov.au/leisure/parks-reserves/find-a-park-to-visit/mary-river-national-park>

This links to 2-page PDFs describing the two main 4WD tracks.

Leaning Tree Lagoon, <http://www.australiaforeveryone.com.au/nt/leaning-tree-lagoon.htm>

Note. Russell last visited Leaning Tree Lagoon in the 1970s and has never done either of the 4WD tracks mentioned above.

After a night at the Mary River Wilderness Retreat, we continue to Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge, stopping to do a bit more in Mary River Park. The next morning, water levels permitting, we do an air boat tour at Carmor Plains. Russell did the air boat tour in February and May this year and was fascinated by the difference. He definitely would like to see the wetlands when they are approaching their low point. Carmor Plains is currently up for sale so we may or may not ever be able to offer this again.

Links Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge, <http://www.pointstuart.com.au/>

Carmor Plains air boat, <http://www.australiawidesafaris.com.au/special-safaris-tours/air-boat-tours-northern-territory/>

I've taken lots of photos but theirs are better. Make sure to click the link to their photo gallery, <http://www.australiawidesafaris.com.au/photo-galleries/air-boat-tours/>

After the air boat tour, we continue to Jabiru for the Mahbilil Festival. Overnight at the Anbinik Kakadu Resort.

Links Mahbilil Festival,

<http://northernterritory.com/kakadu-and-surrounds/events/jabiru-mahbilil-festival>

<http://mahbililfestival.com> At the time these notes were written, the website at left still had the 2017 information and dates.

Anbinik, <http://www.anbinik.com.au/>

Walk 1: Gunlom and Waterfall Creek

In 2015, Kakadu did a survey in which they asked people their favourite place in Kakadu. Gunlom was number one. It may not be as well known as places like Jim Jim and Twin Falls but those who have actually been to the park thought it was better. We will see far more than they do and you will understand what makes this such a special place.

The drive from Jabiru to the Gunlom car park is about 150 km and will take about two hours, slightly more if we stop along the way. Once there, we follow the marked trail to the top of the falls, turning off before the final drop and walking upstream.

There are a number of potential campsites. Our choice will be determined by water levels (it wouldn't be a Willis's Kakadu camp without a good pool) and the conditions we find at the time. The next day, we don our day packs and walk a few kilometres upstream to the end of a rocky area. There is a beautiful high point for a view and a few art sites.

We return the way we came. Depending on time, you should be able to visit the plunge pool at the bottom of the falls on the way in or way out.

Walk 2: Graveside Gorge

To do this walk we need to travel about 150 km from Gunlom, the last 44 km of which is a very slow 4WD track. From the parking area, we carry our packs about 5 km to a shady spot next to a nice pool. We spend the following day exploring the two branches of Graveside. In some places on our day walk, the water is wall to wall so we have to wade – or if you prefer, swim. You can make this day as easy or as hard as you'd like. To get to the middle falls shown in the photo at left, you need to swim across a pool and climb up next the falls. It's not easy but we did have a very fit 77 year old woman from New Zealand do it.



Below the middle falls in the main gorge

The second day is seriously energetic – and spectacular.

A short, steep climb the next morning gets us onto the plateau where we have a look at the upper reaches of the two

creeks we explored the day before. At this time of year, the flow is down to a trickle but there are still plenty of pools where we can cool off and relax in the midday heat.

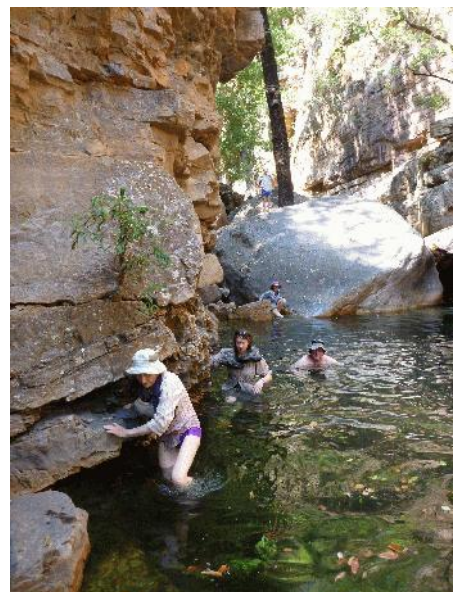
We continue with a loop along the top and descend via a small gully near our campsite. Anyone who thinks that this might be too much is welcome to relax in camp for the day.



Shady campsite under the trees, our private pool is just 20 metres away



This amazing rock formation marks the end of the rocky area and the furthest we are likely to go



Wading through the side gorge

We may reverse the order of the two day walks as we will need to move back out to the main valley on the final night so that we can get back to our vehicles early enough to finish the drive to the houseboats at a reasonable hour.

For more information, see our Graveside Gorge page, but note, Cascades Creek is too far for a trip of this nature. <http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/graveside.shtml>

Mary River Houseboat



Mary River Houseboat

This is so different – and enjoyable – that Russell felt he had to include it. It is the most comfortable wetland experience we can offer – a day and night aboard a houseboat on the Mary River.

We cruise slowly along the Mary, watching the hundreds of birds that line the river banks and enjoying the changing scenery around us. Those who wish to try their hand at catching a barramundi have a chance to do so. We pull in to shore for the night and enjoy a relaxing final meal in the bush as we listen to the night sounds around us. The following morning, we cruise back to where we began and get into the vehicles for the drive

back to Darwin. The trip is over, but the memories will linger on.

To get a better idea what it is like, please have a look at our Mary river Houseboat Gallery page, <http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/galleries/oldsite/houseboat07gal.shtml>

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall Level 2+

Climate Level 4. By September it is always starting to heat up again. The humidity is beginning to build up, but both the temperatures and humidity will increase in the weeks to follow. The maximum temperature on most days will be 35-38°C. The average nightly minimum is about 23-24°C, but it once dropped all the way down to 11°C in Katherine, about 100 km to the south. You may not need a sleeping bag but you should be prepared and bring a light one. Rain is unlikely but possible so you should have something to use as shelter if we do get rain.

Terrain Both of the walks have a steep climb, neither of which is over 100 m. As short as they are, these climbs are strenuous. They may require using your hands to hold on as you climb up or down. None are technically difficult. None require ropes or other special equipment. There will be some places where you have to step from stone to stone as you walk along the edge of a creek.

The creeks are low enough so that swimming across with packs will not be necessary. It may, however, be necessary to wade across slippery rocks through waist deep water. Your guide can help if you need assistance.

Little of the walking is on a marked trail. On some of the walks, **none** of the walking is on a marked 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 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 from year to year depending on when last burnt. If there has been an early rain, you may see the beginning of the greening of the land.
- Hours** Generally 4-6 hours, no more than three hours carrying a pack on one day.
- Packs** **Pack weight** - level 2. You need to carry no more than 3 days food. This will include about 1 kg of the evening meals. At this time of year, whether you bring a sleeping bag and/or tent is a matter of personal choice. But, if you don't bring a sleeping bag, you should bring something like a set of thermals in case we do get a cool night. Similarly if you don't bring a tent, you should bring something you can put over yourself to keep yourself dry in case we get a storm.
- Art** We visit a variety of art sites on the Koolpin walk. We may see some minor sites on the Waterfall Creek walk. We don't see much, if any, at Graveside.
- Campsites** Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites.
- Swims** Plenty of them. We should have good pools at every campsite and lunch spot.
- Lowlights** Possible tourist crowds at the beginning and end of the first two walks. Hot, possibly sticky weather.
- Highlights** Good weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites.
- Wildlife** Birds are always present and are beginning to concentrate near the waterholes as the land dries out. This would be an excellent walk for keen birdwatchers. You are unlikely to see many large animals.
- Fishing** Not permitted on this walk.
- Maps** The 1:50,000 Koolpin map shows Graveside and Koolpin; the 1:50,000 Goodparla map shows Waterfall Creek. The 1:250 000 Kakadu park map shows all areas but is not suitable for navigation.

Fitness Note

While this trip is easier than any of our other pack-carrying trips, we must emphasise some of the points made on our How Hard page, <http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/howhard.shtml>

The absolute minimum level of fitness required for our easiest trips is to be able to comfortably walk 10 km in 2½ hours on level ground while carrying a small pack.

You will not have to walk this fast on any of our trips but your ability to do so is a good indicator of whether or not you are fit enough to cope with the conditions you will encounter.

This test is not enough. If you have done little or no off-track walking in rough conditions or you have not done extended walks in hot conditions, you need to study our information on rock hopping and climate before deciding to try one of our trips. Links to this information are on our How Hard page, <http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/howhard.shtml>

General Notes

We will try and organise someone to come out from Darwin with fresh food and cold drinks for the houseboat trip. He or she will get a free cruise in exchange for bringing out the food & drink. The cost of the boat meal and drinks is not included in the price of the tour. You put in an order and pay for the drinks individually. We all split the cost of the dinner and some fresh fruit for breakfast.

We can't book the boat until we have the bookings we need to run the trip. If it is unavailable the trip will finish a day early but the price will remain the same.

You can leave food and clothing for the second walk and for the houseboat in the vehicle during the first one.

Make sure you keep some money and a water bottle with you during the drives. It is unlikely that you will be able to easily get things out of your pack during the day.

A daypack will be useful on both walks. If you don't have a day pack, you will need to use your big pack.

The Cost – the price is only \$500 (no discounts)

There are two reasons that it's so cheap. (1) Russell Wants to do it and (2) many of the things we normally include in the price are now extras where you can choose your preference.

The cost includes the services of the guide, park entry and the five meals on the walks. The rest is all extra.

- Evening meals for the four nights in accommodation or campgrounds and on the houseboat. Estimated cost (without drinks) \$100 to \$130.
- Accommodation and camping fees for the first three nights. Estimated cost anywhere from \$60 to \$300. **You choose.**
- Air boat tour. \$100 per person.
- Houseboat. Depending on numbers and what boat we get, this could be anywhere between \$90 and \$200 per person. Best guess \$100 to \$120.
- Vehicle. Depending on numbers, we will use one or two vehicles. These will cost \$.20 per km (approx fuel cost), to be split among the members of the group excluding the guide (probably Russell). Estimated cost between \$50 and \$100 per person.
- Total extra cost estimated to be between \$400 and \$800. That means the total cost will be between \$900 and \$1300. When we know what accommodation you'd prefer and what is available, we can give a more accurate estimate.

Itinerary: Russell's Light Special

- Note 1** Day 0 is the day before departure.
- Note 2** This itinerary is subject to change. The description below assumes that everything is open as scheduled and we can book.
- 29 Aug** **Pre-trip meeting, 6.30 p.m., Pool Side Bar & Restaurant, Double Tree Hilton, 122 The Esplanade.** There are two Double Tree Hiltons next door to each other. The correct one is closer to Daly Street, the taller of the two. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.
- 30 Aug** 7-8 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. Otherwise, pick up is from the Mitchell Street Tourist Precinct at 69 Mitchell Street.
Drive to Mary River Wilderness Retreat. Short walks along the way to allow a bit of off the beaten track exploration.
Overnight camping or accommodation, your choice.
- 31 Aug** Drive to Drive to Mary River National Park and do the Hardies Lagoon and/or the Wildman 4WD track. Overnight at Point Stuart Lodge.
- 1 Sep** Water levels permitting, Carmor Plains air boat tour. Drive to Jabiru.
Mahbilil Cultural Festival.
Overnight camping or accommodation, your choice.
- 2 Sep** Drive to Gunlom. Begin walk carrying full packs. Bush camp.
- 3 Sep** Day walk visiting Aboriginal art sites and swimming holes. Bush camp.
- 4 Sep** Return to vehicle, drive to Graveside, walk to campsite.
- 5-6 Sep** Day walks & shift last campsite.
- 7 Sep** Return to vehicle. Drive to Mary River Houseboats and board the boat mid afternoon.
Overnight on the houseboat.
- 8 Sep** Return to vehicles. Return to Darwin, arriving mid to late afternoon.