

# into the wild with Willis

Territory

Most people who come to Kakadu National Park never glimpse the majesty of the park's signature Jim Jim or Twin Falls cascading from the Arnhem Land escarpment. Visitors come en masse in the dry season between June and September when the falls are but a trickle. The only ones fortunate enough to see the falls in all their thunderous glory are those who visit during the wet season and take an hour's tourist flight. Alternatively, there are those few who brave the heat and the storms that characterise the Territory's wet season and walk to the falls, seeing them up close in a way those who fly past never can.

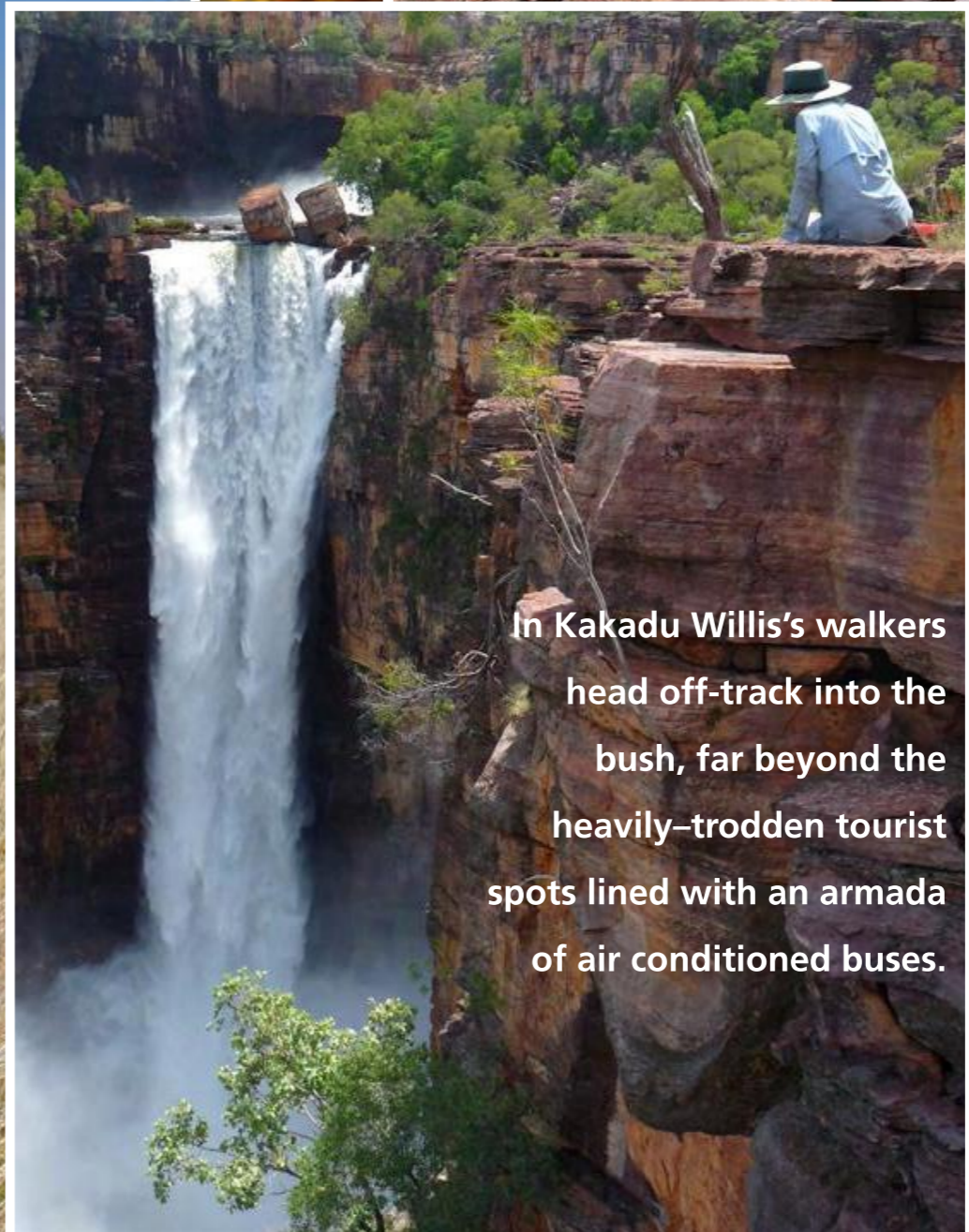
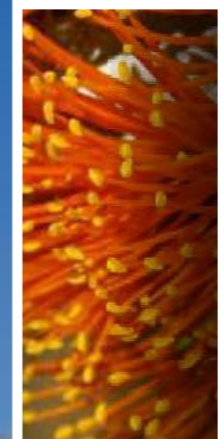
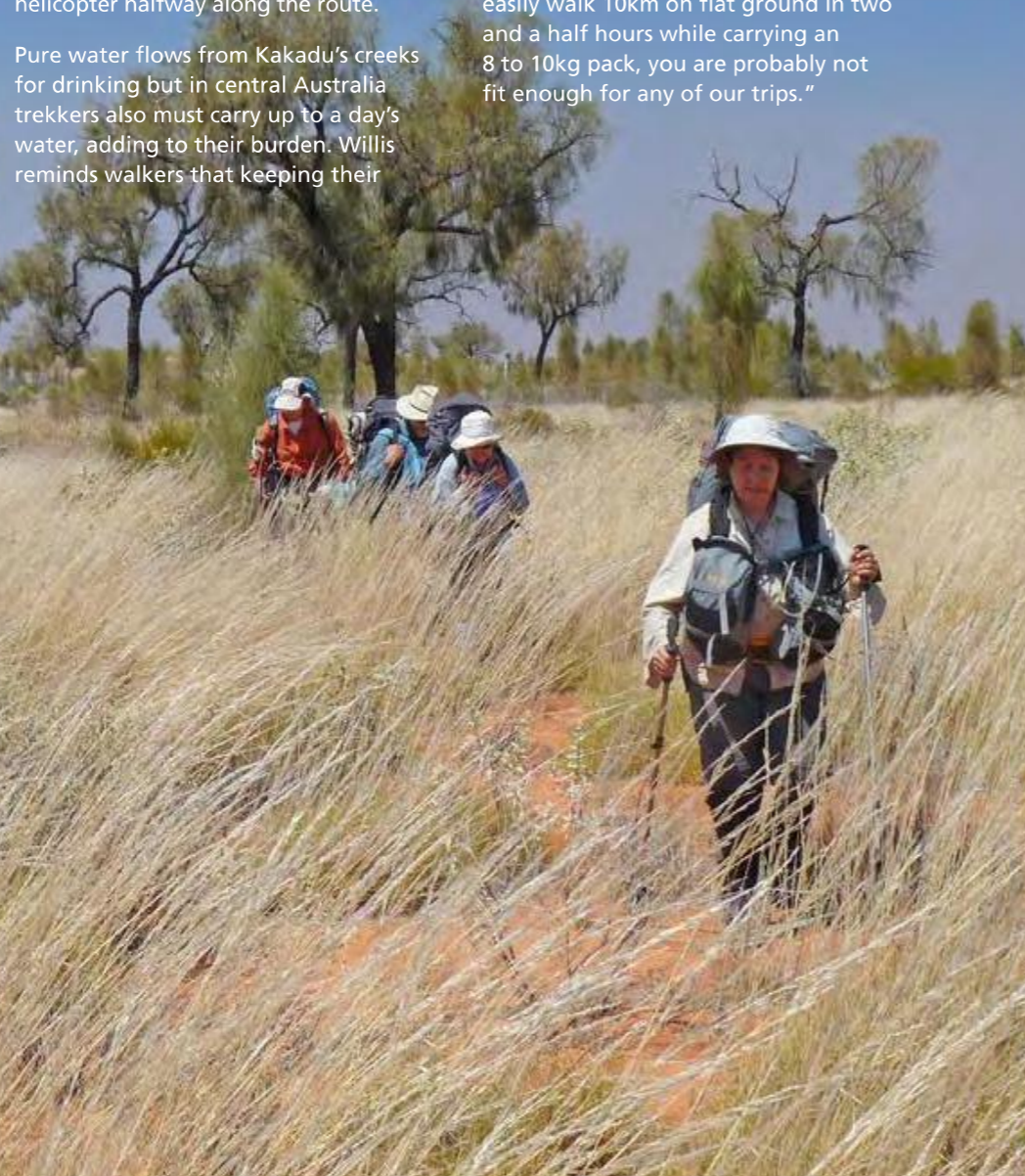
They are members of a Willis' Walkabouts tour, now in its 26th year of providing exclusive wilderness bushwalking tours for those healthy enough in body and mind. "You have to be reasonably fit but perhaps more than reasonably mentally fit," explains tour operator Russell Willis in his distinctive New York American accent. "The mental bit is actually much more important than the physical state."

The treks are definitely challenging. Some of the Willis's walks are three weeks long and hikers must carry all their needs on their backs, often in saturating tropical heat. That means their food, utensils, camping gear and spare clothes. For the longest trips, food is often dropped by helicopter halfway along the route.

Pure water flows from Kakadu's creeks for drinking but in central Australia trekkers also must carry up to a day's water, adding to their burden. Willis reminds walkers that keeping their

pack's weight low by bringing only absolute necessities makes for a much more enjoyable experience. The walkers leave no trace of where they've been, so everything that's carried in must be consumed, burnt or carried out.

So, how do prospective trekkers know if a Willis' walk is the tour for them? "On average, you can expect to walk between five and seven hours per day. This can mean covering anywhere from 2km to 20km," explains Willis in his handbook, a finely detailed 40 page guide that he demands be read before embarking on a walk. "All trips require reasonable fitness and a few require above average fitness. If you cannot easily walk 10km on flat ground in two and a half hours while carrying an 8 to 10kg pack, you are probably not fit enough for any of our trips."



In Kakadu Willis's walkers head off-track into the bush, far beyond the heavily-trodden tourist spots lined with an armada of air conditioned buses.

Far left> Trekking across the central Australian grassland.  
Left> Crossing a rock ledge at Koolpin Gorge in Kakadu.  
Below centre> On top of Jim Jim Falls.  
Below right> A gum flower.

For those who are up to it, the rewards are inspiring. In Kakadu Willis' walkers head off-track into the bush, far beyond the heavily-trodden tourist spots lined with an armada of air conditioned buses. They walk through rocky gorges, stopping for swims in wilderness creeks and rock pools. They discover ancient rock art galleries painted by Aboriginal artists who have occupied the area for a thousand generations. In the wet season they cross swollen creeks, floating their packs before them, experiencing the park at its peak seasonal growth.

However, Willis' Walkabouts tours are not restricted to Kakadu or to Willis as their guide. They walk off-trail into the wilderness in the Kimberley, the Pilbara, central Australia, and later this year will retrace the footsteps of 19th century explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt through Arnhem Land, finishing in Kakadu. Willis also has been taking walkers overseas since 1990, trekking the trails of Chile and Argentina, southern Africa, the Canadian Arctic, and later this year he will take his first European trip to Norway and Sweden.

Russell Willis came to the Territory via Sydney in 1974, a young American teacher looking for adventure. He was a founding member of the Darwin Bushwalking Club, and many of the longer walks offered commercially today originated back in the 70s and 80s. He began thinking of starting a business doing what he liked best after a national newspaper ad he took out attracted his first customers. Willis's Walkabouts was born in 1986.



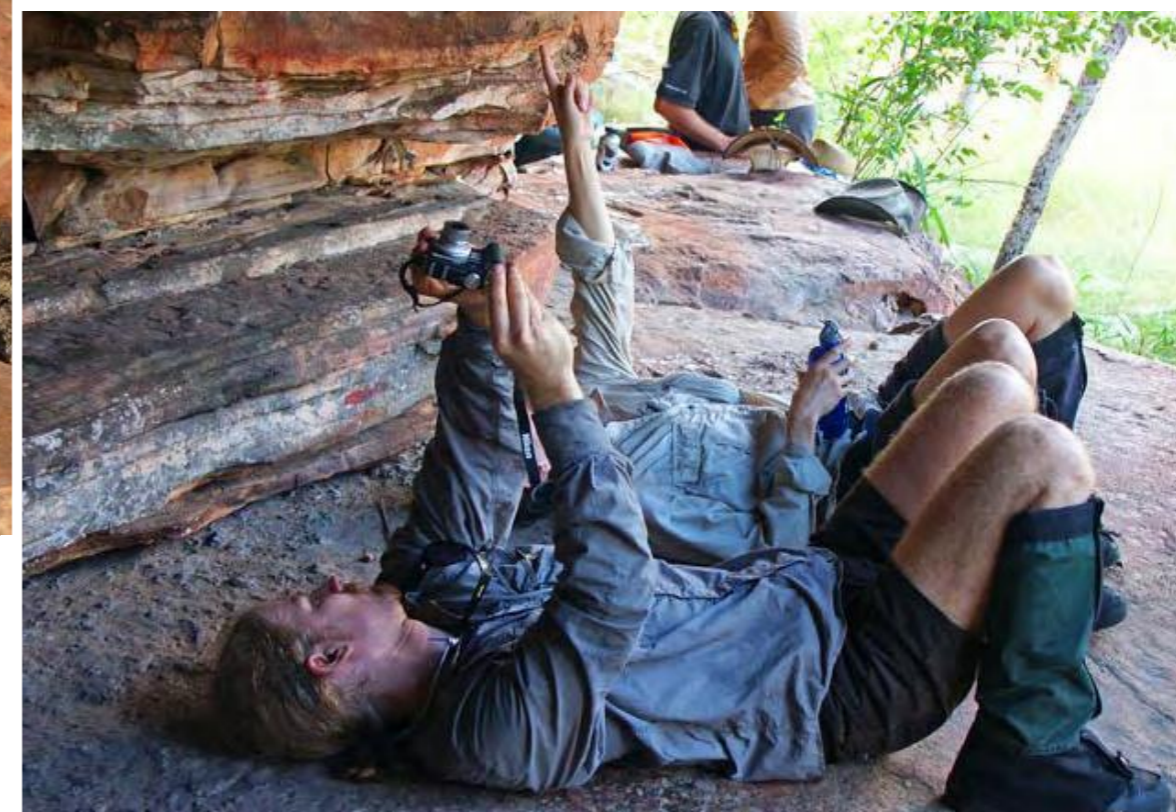
**"You have to be reasonably fit but perhaps more than reasonably mentally fit."**

Every year Willis presents ideas for 50 different walking trips of varying lengths and costs on his website and his regular email newsletters. Those tours that get enough early bookings are finalised and guides recruited. While Willis does advertise his tours in a number of periodicals, he is considering ending those efforts. His clients come overwhelmingly from personal recommendation and return business. Many clients return four and five times, with one couple in their 80s having returned many times over the past 20 years. "Right from the beginning they have been incredibly good at packing light," observes Willis. "What they carry between them as a couple is less than others carry for one person—and that includes food."



But Willis has seen a decline in the number of young people joining his tours, reflecting their lack of membership in national bushwalking clubs. His is an absurdly tiny niche business that used to be considerably bigger. In the mid 90s he was guiding 500 people a year. That figure is now down to just over 100, mirroring youthful disinterest. "It's because when you go places like I go, your mobile phone doesn't work anymore, and some people need to be wired all the time. Young people also want a big time adrenaline rush followed by a party," he says.

**"Somebody said that growing old is like being increasingly penalised for a crime you didn't commit."**



Russell Willis turned 66 last year, still remarkably fit and looking forward to his next walk. He is philosophical about the future of a business that places great demands on the body. "I suspect I'll get too absent minded before the body gives out," he says.

"But I'm still carrying the heaviest pack on any trip and in the local runners' club I'm still ahead of half the field. Do a bit of yoga. Somebody said that growing old is like being increasingly penalised for a crime you didn't commit."



Far left- A grevillea in bloom.  
 Top centre- Russell Willis leads a group across a Kakadu creek.  
 Below centre- A perenti watches a walking group.  
 Top right- Koolpin Gorge.  
 Left- Discovering a rock art shelter in Kakadu National Park.  
 Above- Floating a pack across a swollen creek.

walkabout@bushwalkingholidays.com.au