



RUSSELL WILLIS

Russell Willis – the man behind the iconic Top End guiding business, Willis’s Walkabouts – in his own words on a busy life chock full of experiences

I was born just before the end of World War II and I grew up in New York, on the edge of the city suburbs. It was quite a contrast to Darwin, but amazingly I lived within short walking distance of one of the largest parks in that part of New York, Nature Studies Woods. I went there all the time. The house I grew up in also backed on to a bit of parkland, so I had this lovely little bit of bush just behind the house, I even managed to build a treehouse in one of the trees in the wood and spent at least one night up there.

After school I went to college and became a teacher (maths and science) in 1967. In 1971, I was feeling less than happy with the job I had. Australia was

experiencing a teacher shortage and New South Wales was recruiting in America. The ad in the *New York Times* said, ‘Come and teach in the sun.’ A friend of mine had just come back from seven months of travelling and partying up and down Australia’s east coast. He raved about it. The Australian government offered me a two-year tax holiday, so off I went.

It took two years to get there as I did a bit of wandering along the way. In retrospect, the most influential part of the trip was four and half months in New Zealand where I spent a term teaching. It was there that I was introduced to ‘tramping’. I was immediately hooked and did several long walks before moving on at the end of the year.

I finally got to Australia in January 1973. I spent most of my first year in Sydney. I did a couple of bushwalks, but my other love was running and competitions were on the weekends so the overnight walks were few and far between. I still run with three clubs, including the Hash House Harriers, who are best described as a bunch of drinkers with a running problem. My claim to fame is that I can actually get a tune out of a bugle when I am running.

I enjoyed Sydney, but I thought I should see somewhere else before moving on and going back to New York. I applied for jobs in every state and was offered one in Darwin. I arrived in January 1974. Before the year was out I knew that I had a new

Left, Russell Willis in the Carr Boyd Range, the Ord River in the background.
Glenys Roper

home. Part of the reason was Darwin's laidback lifestyle, part was the best teaching conditions I'd ever experienced and part of it was the north Australian bush. I still remember my first trip to what is now Kakadu. I hopped into the water for a quick swim and, for the first time in my life, I discovered that water didn't have to hurt when you got into it. Growing up in New York the water was never anything but awfully cold. It is part of the reason why I failed beginner's swimming lessons for seven years in a row; I couldn't stand the water. I've now been here so long that I don't really enjoy swimming unless the water temperature is at least 28°C.

That June there was a small notice in the local paper asking for people interested in forming a bushwalking club. That meeting led to the formation of the Darwin Bushwalking Club. Two of us who attended that first meeting are still members. Most of the club members were fairly young in those days. We thought nothing of driving 300 plus kilometres late Friday, camping by the car, doing an overnight walk and coming home again late Sunday. The roads weren't as good as they are now, but there was less traffic and we could go exploring almost anywhere. Most of the longer walks the club does today and most of the Top End walks that I do commercially are based on routes that we discovered back in the 1970s and 80s.

Walking here is a totally different world to bushwalking down south. One of the things I think is really attractive is that in most places you can still have campfires. And not only can you have campfires but they probably make a lot more sense than carrying around a bunch of fossil fuels that are going to leave all the rubbish of these gas canisters or whatever else behind afterwards. Particularly because the bush grows so fast and there are so few people using it.

As the years went by I found that I was spending more and more time on paperwork and less and less actually teaching. A number of local political decisions made classroom conditions worse so I began thinking about alternatives. In 1984 I was granted another year's leave without pay to go travelling. Prior to heading off I thought I'd see if I could find people who were interested in paying to be taken on a long bushwalk. I put an ad in the travel section of *The*

Weekend Australian and got a couple of replies. I had my first customers.

Back in the classroom I thought some more and registered the business name, Willis's Walkabouts. In 1986, I chose to take a bit of my long-service leave at half pay and try and get the bushwalking business going. I bought a second-hand four-wheel drive, put a small ad in *Wild* no 19 (I missed one or two early issues after that but I've been in every issue since 1987) and got enough customers for me to try it again the following year. At the end of 1988, I left teaching and went into the business full time.

From the first, I offered trips in the top half of the Northern Territory and in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. In 1987, I employed my first extra guide. In 1989, I added Central Australia. In 1993, I added the Pilbara. In 1990, I added South America. In 2001, I added southern Africa. I've even run three trips to the Canadian Arctic. With a bit of luck, I'll be running one to Sweden and Norway in 2012, using the local knowledge of two of my Swedish customers to work out a great walking trip.

I've always expected more of my clients than any other tour company I'm aware of. They have a lot of pre-trip reading (like my 44-page *Bushwalking Guide*). They have to provide their own breakfasts and lunches. They need to bring their own gear – or decide exactly what they might want to hire from our limited selection. That's undoubtedly cost me some business, but it has meant that we seldom get anyone who physically can't cope with the trip, and has led to a wonderful group spirit and many great friendships over the years.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my work is seeing people suddenly becoming aware of, 'Oh, I'm out here, there is no phone ringing, you can't get me... Oh, there's a pool, let's go for a swim. Oh, there's another pool, let's go for another swim...' Mostly I find that it takes me a couple of days to unwind from the office, it's about day two or three that I'll relax and really get into it. It is one of the reasons why I like the longer trips. Only every once in a while do we get a difficult group, but it's very rare, if it wasn't I wouldn't be doing it – I certainly don't make enough money to be putting up with pains in the neck.

My all-time record for time out in the bush was seven months in a calendar year,

on the lower side it could get down to three months or a bit less. Seven months was too much – it was too long to be away.

I wouldn't say I am an expert on Aboriginal culture, but I know a bit. I'll take people to a lot of art sites that are on walking routes, but you have to stick to particular routes when you are in the park. Those routes are seen as corridors, you've got a little bit of leeway, but you're specifically told that you are not allowed to roam as you might stumble upon a sensitive site. There is one site, for example, that we stumbled across years ago and when Parks realised it was there they hastily closed the area. It was a burial site. It would be very easy for people to find, so I just don't talk about it. There was a case, quite a few years ago now, that resulted in a whole section of the park being closed; somebody went back to a site for a ceremony and his father's bones had been stolen. You can understand very much why they would get upset if people are going to do things like that.

Most of the Aboriginal people in Kakadu are based in the lower lands now, and many of them don't get up into the escarpment country very much. But, for example, one of the elders, a lady, has got her own tour business, I manage to sneak in a little two-hour cultural walk with her on a number of trips. She grew up walking and riding horses through Kakadu when she was a kid, long before Kakadu was thought of as a park. She has got all sorts of interesting stories to tell.

I think the mining proposals for the Kimberley are going a bit far. For instance, you've got an area like the Mitchell Plateau where they've declared the Mitchell Plateau National Park, but it's this tiny little park and basically if it is ever economically viable they will just scrape off the top few metres of bauxite off most of the surrounding area and send it overseas. And in terms of tropical coastline, I don't think there is anywhere else in the world like it.

This year marked 25 years since my first customer under the name Willis's Walkabouts. I'm exceptionally fit and active for my age (66), but my age is something that cannot be denied. I hope to keep Willis's Walkabouts running to 30 years, maybe even beyond, but I'm taking it one year at a time. As long as the body and mind hold out, as long as I enjoy bushwalking, I'll still be there. **W**