

Why walk in the wet?

by Tony R.

Photos by the author.

Extracts from my journal, as written on the Kakadu Super Circle No.1, January 2004.

R [*one of my fellow walkers*] refers to the memories that cannot be taken away from us – very true.



A reason for being here is the intensity of feeling – hot, sweaty, wet, even cold when it's raining hard (the rain does not seem to have time to warm up during its descent), feeling and relishing any hint of a breeze when it is hot and humid. Noticing the radiation from the sun, the change and improvement when a cloud obscures it, and the varying degrees of shade – light shade from Eucalypt, hardly worth having, denser shade from the wonderful 'Allosyn' tree [*Allosyncarpia, a large, spreading, shady tree restricted to the Kakadu and Arnhem Land region*], and in the rainforest, and the full, deep, longed-for shade under a rock overhang. The instant transformation of slipping into water when hot and sticky, and the discovery that when it is cold [*in the rain*] the usually cooling water becomes a warming bath. The pleasure of a dry shirt, all too brief because either rain or sweat or often both quickly drenches it. The very rare ecstatic delight of dry socks – so far, I have not experienced the almost unimaginable pleasure of dry boots since we left the Toyota on day one, and I didn't, in retrospect, sufficiently appreciate it then because of the all-too-present awareness of the weight of the pack.



More 'body awareness' – the delicate feel of flies crawling over back, legs, feet and face – everywhere, in fact, and gathering to probe joyfully around any kind of wound or sore. The itching of past insect bites. On the night of day nine I lay awake scratching. The scratching is a pleasure, a relief, at once stimulating and soothing to the skin, but it only seems to lead to more intense itching. T reported the same – a night of scratching.

The damp smells of the rainforest, the sweet or minty or fruity scents of various plants, the evocative smells of cooking food, the smell of burning wood as the smoke (often much smoke from too-wet wood drying before it burns) gets in one's eyes, at least (perhaps) keeping the mozzies away for a while. And then there is the characteristic boggy odour of wet socks and familiar sweaty smells of bodies and shirts.



There are feelings too – awareness of damp clothes, already mentioned, spiky grasses and prickly leaves brushing against the skin (along with the sun/sunburn the reason for wearing the damp clothes while walking). Those flies' feet, mozzies biting – they like feet, too – in the evening (yes, I do use repellent when I notice them) and while walking the sudden nips of green ants. These climb aboard when we brush against green ant-laden branches and bushes, then seek a soft area of skin – often behind the knees – before biting. The one mitigating characteristic of green ant bites is that the pain does not linger. Once the ant is evicted, the pain goes too. But get an army of them on you, all determined to go for the 'big kill', and you are certainly aware of them. What happens once we brush them off? Do they find their way back to their own nest and ant friends? Join another nest – there are plenty of them? Or live new, independent lives in a slightly different part of the plateau? And another unwelcome feeling – the swallowed or half-swallowed fly that takes advantage of speech or open-mouth-breathing to explore a moist cavern.

Colours – every shade of grey from white to almost black in the clouds of the sky, constantly changing, with patches of blue. Big expanses of blue sky are rare. The water reflects the sky and is lightly dyed by the sediment it carries – sometimes bluish, more often a grey, slightly greenish, occasionally brownish moving mass, turning white with froth and splashes at rapids and falls. The sandstone is grey and fawn, speckled with light greens and dark greys and patches of lichen, with long broken lines of deep shadows between layers of rock. Starting as horizontal beds, these are now at all angles where erosion has caused sections to tumble, now heaped against each other with no apparent rationale. Over them the vegetation, greys and browns of tree trunks, white and sometimes fawn or pink or red on the Eucalypt trunks and branches, every shade of green from bright and lush in the wet areas to pale and yellowing in drying leaves. On the ground is rotting, insect-laden wood and the yellow-browns and grey-browns of leaf litter.

(I am writing this as much as an incentive to make me look closely, analytically, as to make a record of what should anyway be seen in my photographs)

Interestingly our clothes and tents use this same palette of colours – greens and fawns and blacks and greys, with a little blue. The most intense colours are on some of the wild flowers and insects, small jewels in the economical palette that is the landscape as a whole.



Having made word pictures of feeling, smell and vision, let's cover taste and sound as well.

Taste. Noticeable is the absence of taste in the pure water that we drink in huge quantities, to be quickly sent back out of our bodies as sweat. In contrast, T's cooking is anything but bland – spicy and intense and varied, a minor miracle with the dried ingredients and testament to his care in the selection and make-up of meals and ingredients.

What we hear is often dominated by the white-noise background of rushing, tumbling, splashing, falling water – I hear Twin Falls as I write this. But there is also birdsong and insect sounds, from the announcing chorus at dawn, scattered calls through the day, and insects in the evening. Last night in the rain was a recurring high pitch note that sounded like a bird but must surely have been an insect or frog, much more likely to feel the need to tell of its pleasure in the wetness and darkness. The only human voices are from the five of us, and the only mechanical noises are the drones and whines of the sightseeing light aircraft and the throb of a chopper. Once we get away from Twin and Jim Jim we shall lose them.



[at another place in the journal]

High above us on the underside of a rock overhang is an Aboriginal art work of a man, stunning in its design and context.

We climb up towards it, and find other art under overhangs in this area. People, realistic kangaroos, crocodiles, a few hand stencils, some more abstract and difficult to read figures. Most are light or dark ochre, some black. We scramble around here for a couple of hours. At one place there seems to be a ground flat stone and grooves from spear sharpening on the rock face. We end together on an outcrop on a rock shelf under a big overhand – art underneath, spectacular views over the landscape. Stay here a while. Cool – a magic place. We talk about Aboriginal life, quality of life v. standard of living, the impact of Europeans on this country.



[at another place in the journal]

The experience is a totality – the views, the feel of heat and the cold rain, the ancient rock art, the more ancient geology, the occasional brightly coloured flower or insect, the sensuous pleasure of naked swimming in warm water, the sweat and thirst, the weight of the pack, being tired and crawling into the tent, listening to the rain outside and the creek flowing, feeling replenished in the morning and listening to the bird chorus. The attraction is all of this – the discomfort is a necessary edge to the comfort. Also overcoming the scariness of crossing the girder bridge, and tackling a pack float uncertain of how the rushing creek would feel.

[and another place]

At lunch by the creek, T [*our guide*] asks why someone like me who is a competent navigator would go with Willis's rather than make up a group of friends.

- The food drop.
- The local knowledge – good camping places, rock art, routes.
- The company – it's more fun with others, and with strangers if we don't get on it doesn't matter. Going with friends could create a strain that would affect our friendship later. [*The company was great – thanks T, B, R and S*]
- The organization – permits, getting meals together, etc. (T took a week in preparations).
- The cooking – much more interesting and varied than I would do for myself.

[Kakadu in the wet was a memorable experience. Most of the time I live a life where many experiences are dulled by the comforts of civilization. Although here, too, we relied on technology – lightweight camping gear, dehydrated food and a satellite telephone if we got into major trouble – it still felt remote and primordial, and I liked that. Other walks have been memorable, too, but this one has its special place. A memory that cannot be taken away.]