

## Swimming with crocodiles

By Mark R. Johnson  
For The Bulletin

**"T**here's a croc in the water!" shrieked a panicky voice. This is normally not a problematic thing to hear in Kakadu National Park, a place where crocodile sightings are ubiquitous. From a roadside or boat perch, you simply ready your camera to capture the surreptitious reptile as it slinks in the shallows. Problem this time was, I was swimming in those shallows.

The body of water in question was a lime-green pool formed at the base of Twin Falls, where I was ducking under the streaming rivulets that flowed down a massive sandstone wall. It was a remote place our small tour group had driven to in a Land Cruiser via windy, sandy tracks and then paddled up to on inflatable rafts. I was feeling utterly complacent, swallowed up by Australian bush and its paperback groves, towering rock escarpments and chunky clouds.

Swimming with a croc was not on my list of things to experience in Australia. You hear about people — ranks of tourists among them — who get taken by "salties" every year. So I was right to momentarily panic. But actually, I didn't do much of anything. Remembering that movement compels crocs, I held still.

Thankfully, my swimming companion was a "freshie," a harmless reptile that bears no aggressive likeness to its saltwater relative. He was small, about five feet long, and floated up to the surface. Like me, he was going for a dip to offset the heat of the day. Regardless, I opted to get out of the water.

Kakadu — derived from "Gagadju," a local aboriginal language — offers, in many ways, the essence of Australian wilderness. Located in the country's tropical north, some 90 miles east of the cosmopolitan port of Darwin, it's a remote and rugged piece of land that spans 120 miles north to south and 60 miles east to west.

Passage into the park is characterized by broad flood plains, lush wetlands, and termite nests that dot the clearings like giant sand sentinels. Kakadu's natural boundaries include the mangrove-lined tidal flats of Van Diemen Gulf in the north, and the Arnhem Land (Aboriginal land) escarpment in the east and southeast. This sandstone cliff rises like a lithic spine 600 feet above the bush in some places, and winds more than 300 miles in length. Three major rivers course through Kakadu, draining to the mighty South Alligator River.

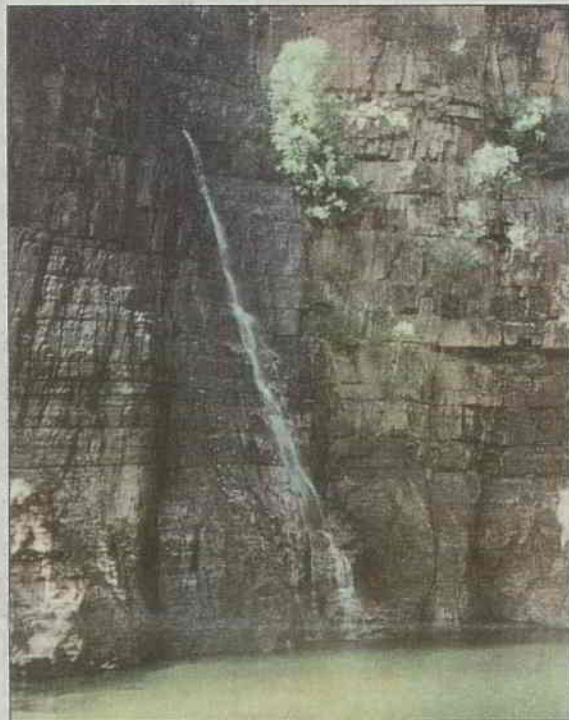
**T**eeming with wildlife, Kakadu is a place where you'll come face to face with everything from common kangaroos and crocs to the spectacular frilled lizard and the impressive red-tailed black cockatoo.

Wallabies, scaled-down kangaroos if you will, frequently grazed close to my tent site, and I observed their furtive movements while eating breakfast. I had a few run-ins with the frilled lizard, a comical reptile that runs wildly on its hind legs to avoid confrontation. If pestered, it fans out an impressive hood and opens its mouth to create a ferocious appearance.



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A frilled neck lizard is just one of many exotic animals that can be found in Kakadu National Park, Australia.



Twin Falls offers visitors a true Australian feeling.

Hiking alone one day, I got a jolt after I almost stepped on a four-foot goanna and he delivered a threatening hiss. I decided to detour around him. One evening, a bony dingo, burnt-orange in color, without so much as a sidelong glance, trotted across the road on which I was walking. Unlike dogs, dingoes don't bark, but instead voice an incredible howl, and at night I'd stargaze to their cryptic songs.

More than 1000 plant species flourish in Kakadu, covering the diverse landscape in the form of dry lowlands, mangrove swamps and monsoon rainforests. Some of these plants still are used by Aborigines for

food and medicine. There are about 280 bird species in the park, one-third of all those native to Australia, and birders are in seventh-heaven counting pelicans, Jabiru stork, wedge-tailed eagles, rainbow bee-eaters, and Burdekin duck in their sightings.

A visit to Kakadu imparts a sense of Aboriginal history, current and past. Perhaps one of the best places in Australia to view Aboriginal rock art is here. Found in about 5000 sites, some art is dated at more than 20,000 years old. This artwork contains the earliest known narrative art ever recorded. It is also a place where evidence for the oldest known edge-ground stone ax technology was discovered.

At the Anbangbang shelter — part rock art gallery, part protective overhang — I saw an example of the images which, to the Aborigines who rely on an oral culture, speak of many stories. The ochre artwork, routinely touched up by individuals familiar with the stories, features kangaroos, hand stencils and even a musket, showing early European influence.

**M**uch of the park is leased by the Australian government from Aboriginal land and there are several settlements in the park itself. Today, Aboriginal people team up with the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service to establish park policy. Many young Aborigines are trained as rangers and guides. Their knowledge of the landscape, legends and sacred sites offer visitors a special appreciation of Kakadu.

The Parks and Wildlife Service offers free talks, walks, and slide shows. Information on the park is also available from several points of interest. The Kakadu National Park Headquarters & Bowali Information Centre, which houses a number of informative displays, is a good place to orient yourself.

For hikers, there are numerous tracks that offer backcountry flavor. If you're inclined to traipse off on your own, you'll pass through some amazing country, but it's not a place for the uninitiated. The terrain is vast and challenging, not to mention the dangers of poisonous snakes and crocs.

See **Kakadu** / A10



# Kakadu

The Dry season is a good time to visit the national park

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Activities such as fishing, scenic flights, boat tours, and 4WD tours afford a unique guided experience.

Although Kakadu National Park received World Heritage status in 1991, it bears a controversial burden. Since the early 1980s, the Australian government has allowed the operation of uranium mines inside the park boundaries, raising hackles of many environmentalists worldwide.

Currently, the Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) and the Australian government are under criticism for the Jubiluka mining site, an operation based on land that once belonged to the people of Mirrar.

Many protesters, outraged by the presence of this mine, have been arrested. For now, things are at a standstill as the World Heritage Committee has found that the Jubiluka uranium mine poses harm to the park and has required the Australian government to report by April 2000 with an explanation of how the mine can proceed without damaging Mirrar cultural values.

In the north of Australia there are

*In Kakadu, there are restaurants, cafes and, in Jabiru, even a condensed shopping center.*

two rather self-explanatory seasons: the Wet and the Dry. The Wet, or Gudjuek as the Aborigines call it, takes place from January to March and saturates the landscape with violent thunderstorms. Storms flood the countryside with some 50 inches of rain. This can be a difficult time to visit because many side roads become impassable. If you're camping, it can be downright dangerous.

The Dry, or Warrgeng, is in July and August when the weather is at a prime. It is also the time that animals converge on receding watering holes, and is therefore prime tourist season. I visited during the season referred to as Yekke, which is from May to mid-June. This is when the Wet has abated and things are just starting to dry.

There are a variety of accommodations spread out within the park. They include everything from a four-star hotel — built in the shape of, what else, a giant crocodile — to mo-

tels, a youth hostel (Dry season only), and camping sites.

There are restaurants, cafes, and in Jabiru, even a condensed shopping center. Although charter flights and buses operate in the park, renting a vehicle in Darwin is recommended. The scenic trip to the park is entirely on paved roads.

It's when you venture off the main roads inside the park that things start to really get interesting. Just be sure you can tell the difference between a "freshie" and a "saltie" before you do. And watch where you swim.

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