

KAKADU CALLING

Offering an outlandish experience of Australia is Kakadu National Park in the oft-eluded Northern Territory, an untamed expanse of waterfalls, lagoons, forests and wildlife.

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dinodia photos; ©NSP-RF / Alamy / India Picture; Rishad Saam Mehta



Obscured by towering rock faces at a height of 215m, the sight of the glinting green swimming hole—the kind you see in movies about lost tropical paradises—made the arduous trek worthwhile. We had persevered for a kilometre, most of it over huge boulders made slippery by a layer of loose sand. The going had been slow and stressful, but we were rewarded at the end of the walk by the idyllic grotto-like swimming bowl into which the Jim Jim Falls emptied themselves.

It was the first day of spring here in the Northern Territory (NT), affectionately called ‘The Top End’ of Australia, and the temperature was already peaking at around 34 degrees, despite being the very beginning of the dry season. We had arrived hot and dehydrated to the pool, all our water supply depleted, and in stunning synchronicity, the eight of us had stripped down to our bathing

Clockwise from above: A White-bellied Sea Eagle perched atop a tree; The pristine pool at the base of the Jim Jim Falls is ideal for swimming—if there are no crocs around; A salt water crocodile glides through the Yellow Water River; Magpie Geese flock in a wetland habitat in the park, where one-third of Australia’s avifauna reside.



Every now and then, a croc would glide up to the boat, maybe to try his luck at a flailing limb dangling from aboard.

Above: The stream alongside the walk to the Jim Jim Falls. When water levels fall, these isolated pockets are called billabongs.

Below: Getting to the Twin Falls includes a short boat ride, a distance that can be swum but for the crocodiles.

togs and succumbed to the cool green water. That swim in the sun-warmed water hole, deep within the Kakadu National Park (KNP), easily became the highlight of my 10 days in Australia.

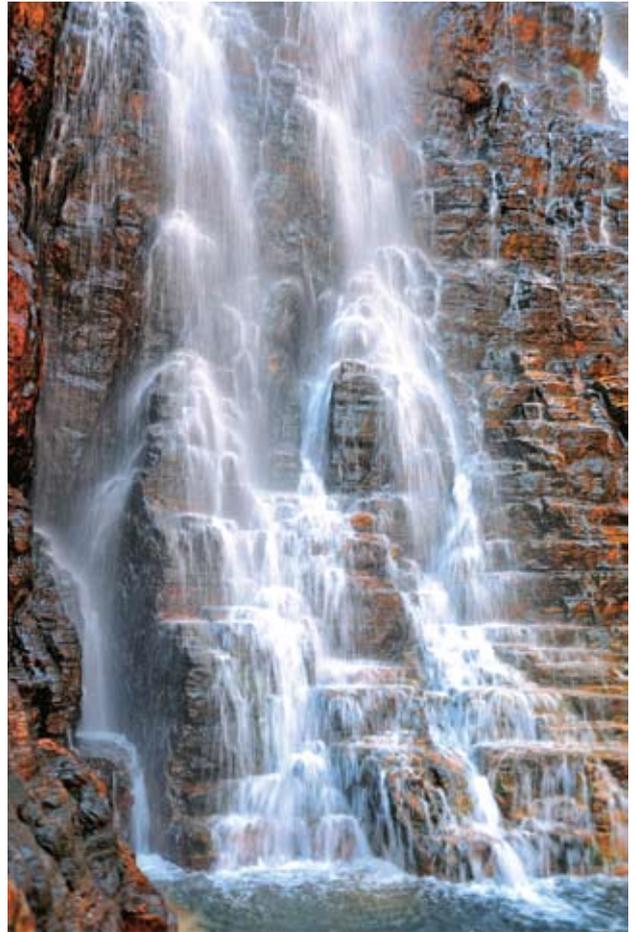
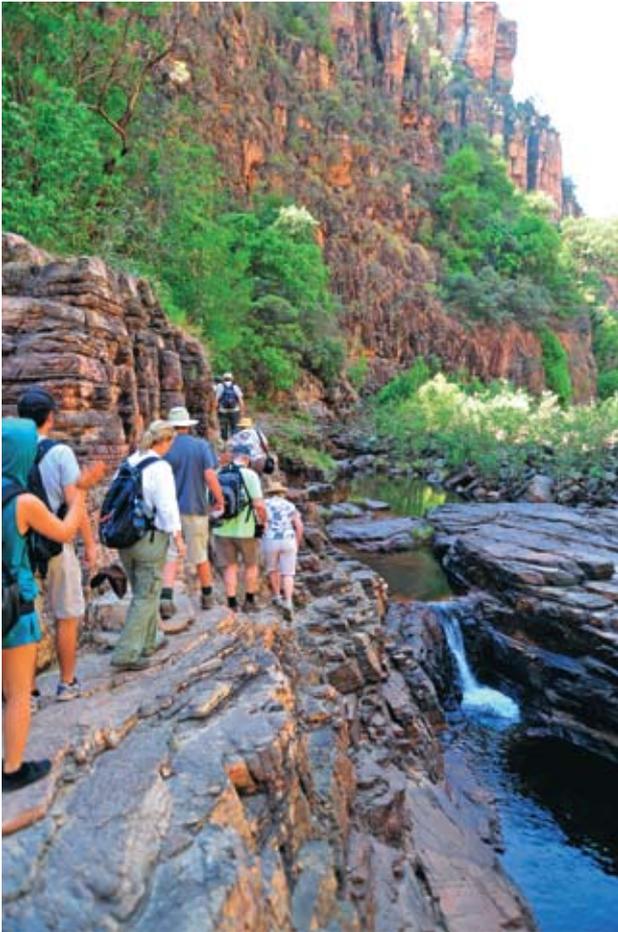
REPTILES AND ANCIENT RELICS

The KNP, covering nearly a whopping 20,000 sq km, lies about 175 km southeast of Darwin. It is full of diverse landscapes, wildlife, and home to some of Australia's best Aboriginal rock art. All of this natural and cultural importance has earned it the rare distinction of being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is located in the region of the Alligator Rivers containing the East, West and South Alligator Rivers, named so by Lieutenant Phillip

Parker King in 1820 when he mistook the crocodiles he saw for alligators. By the time the error was realised a decade later, too many maps had been printed, and so the name stuck. The area is still infested with crocodiles. In fact, one of the most common sights to be seen are the signs warning visitors not to enter the water. One will spot a sign even at the smallest of ponds, creeks and billabongs because the carnivorous reptiles are always lurking about. Lucky for us, our little water hole was isolated, and park rangers had determined there were no crocs around, so we had our fill despite signs warning that estuarine crocodiles could slink into the pool unnoticed, and swimming is entirely at your risk.



Richard Saam Mehta



CHASING WATERFALLS

We'd decided to explore Kakadu on a 4-wheel drive day-tour to the Twin and Jim Jim Falls. We started off early in the day, and the only hiccup was a flat tyre, sorted out in a jiffy by our energetic and resourceful guide, Kerry. Our drive from Cooinda (the accommodation and base) to the Twin Falls parking lot took about two hours over 50 km of wide, unsealed roads, followed by 45 minutes on a narrow, bumpy dirt track through the forest. We then footed our way to the makeshift jetty for a short boat ride, and a short walk along narrow cliff ledges along a gorge brought us reprieve in the form of the cascading Twin Falls.

There was a time when you could swim all the way from the jetty to the falls, but recently, four crocs were spotted there, of which three were caught and relocated, but the last, a stealthy 14-ft chap continues to elude the rangers. The story goes that during a nighttime search for the croc in a narrow motor boat, the Aboriginal trackers could smell the croc, but just couldn't see him—only to later realise that the sneaky fellow was hiding out right under their boat. I saw the traps that had been set for him, complete with a fleshy hock of ham as bait, but the crafty creature wasn't falling for that old trick. It was a real travesty, because the pool at the base of the Twin Falls, with its soft, sandy bank and pristine water, is so very inviting.

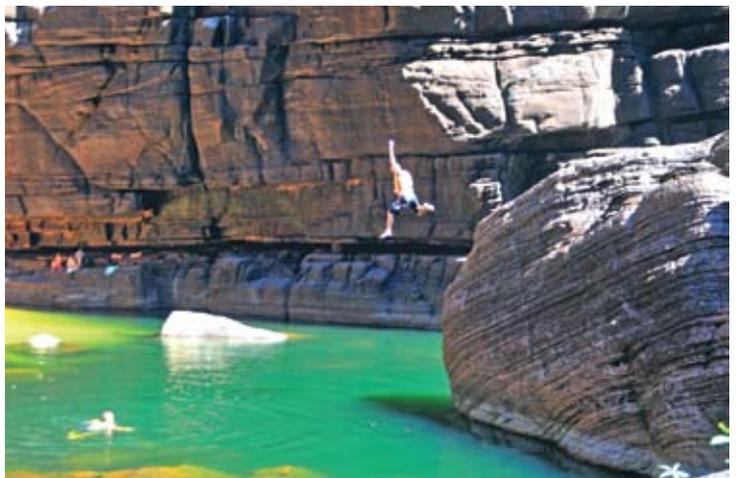
We quickly posed for pictures by the water's edge at the base of the falls before retreating a respectable distance up the beach, in case the croc came waddling ashore, looking for some fast food.

A JUMANJI-IAN ODYSSEY

For all the crocodile warning signs rampant around the park, I hadn't yet seen a single one, and when we finally drove back to Gagudju Lodge in Cooinda that evening, I started to wonder if the creatures were part of some mythical folklore. But the next morning, on the cruise of the Yellow Water River,

Above: The picturesque but daunting hike to the Twin Falls is not for the faint-hearted.

Below: The natural swimming pool at the base of the Jim Jim Falls is ideal to cool off in after the hot, hard walk to it.



Below: Sunset at the Yellow Water billabong.

Bottom right: The Jesus bird walks over water and lotus leaves looking for breakfast, as the sun rises over the Yellow Water River.

the sun rose, bathing the wetlands with soft golden rays, and I finally realised that the crocodiles are a hard reality. These cold-blooded creatures crave the sun, and they rise with it from the depths of the water in order to bask on the banks. On that two-hour cruise, I saw more crocodiles (some, a bit too close for comfort) than I had in my entire life.

The light was perfect at dawn as we slowly glided on water as still and reflective as a looking glass, vividly mirroring the rampant green vegetation of the swamp. An early morning flush of avifauna, preening at the first rays of the sun had camera shutters tripping in frenzy on the boat. As mist rose over the paperbark (melaleuca) swamp, I saw a pair of Jabiru birds, who mate and stay together for life, the Jesus bird that can walk on water, two species of kingfisher ready to dart for a fish, a gaggle of ducks arguing at the water's edge, a pretty Purple

Heron foraging through lotuses, and a White-bellied Sea Eagle swooping down to pluck a fish out of the water. The keen eyes of our guide also spotted three perfectly-camouflaged Golden Tree Snakes wrapped around a paperbark branch. And this was a mere fraction of the 290 bird species that call Kakadu home. Besides birds, KNP is home to nearly 120 reptiles, a host of tidal and freshwater fish species and over 10,000 species of insects. Wild horses and herds of wild buffalo also roam its forests.

Every now and then a croc would glide up to the boat, maybe to try his luck at a flailing limb dangling from aboard. The killer creatures have been known to jump a few feet above the water to grab at tasty tidbits—and when you are 13 ft long, a five-and-a-half-ft human is really only a morsel. This is probably why every visitor at KNP is conscientious about the crocodile warnings, and when the boat docked at the jetty, the embarkation and disembarkation numbers are tallied, and everyone leaves with their extremities intact.

Most visitors to Australia don't even consider the Northern Territory as a destination—which is understandable because they'd want to tick off places like Cairns, Sydney, Melbourne and the Great Ocean Road, which are all fabulous in their own right. But NT is so unique and refreshingly different that it warrants a visit. You wouldn't tick Europe off your list if you've only been to Switzerland, so if you haven't been to the Northern Territory, don't tick Australia off your list just yet.



QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights to Singapore from Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. From Singapore, you can fly with our codeshare partner Qantas to Darwin. You can hire a car at Darwin Airport and drive to Kakadu National Park, however you cannot take a hired car on unsealed roads.

SPECIAL OFFER

Jet Airways offers new attractive fares to Australia. Log on to www.jetairways.com for more details.

GETTING AROUND

A 14-day pass for Kakadu National Park costs AUD 25. For children under 16, it's free. For more information on KNP, go to www.kakadu.com.au

ACCOMMODATION

Three accommodation options are available within KNP: Gagudju Crocodile Holiday Inn, Gagudju Lodge Cooida and Gagudju Camping Cooidia. For more information, go to www.gagudju-dreaming.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.tourismnt.com.au



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