

Pooled resources

The Top End offers safe swimming spots, from waterholes to hot springs

THERESE SPRUHAN

DARWIN

With Darwin's beaches off limits for swimming, the city's three public pools are cool alternatives. At Parap, Nightcliff and Casuarina, all three centres have Olympic-sized and children's wading pools, kiosks, picnic tables, free barbecue facilities and tropical garden settings. Parap Pool, just five minutes' drive from the city, also has a diving board and small slide in the children's pool. On a hot Sunday afternoon I join the kids leaping off the springboard and swim a few laps in the well-maintained circa 1960 pool. At Nightcliff Pool, on a headland by the Timor Sea, we follow the locals' tip and swim at sunset. As I lap up and down, the sky turns pink and casts a glow over the six-lane, 50m pool. More: darwin.nt.gov.au.

On Darwin's waterfront precinct, we grab a boogie board and try to ride the swell in the chlorinated salt-water Wave Pool. After a few attempts I retire to a deckchair under a shady umbrella and watch the lifeguard expertly surf the man-made waves. It's a pleasant place to relax between 10am and 6pm and there's also a shallow wading area with fountains that's suitable for young children. At the next-door Recreation Lagoon, filled with saltwater pumped in from the harbour, a sea wall and mesh screens keep out marine stingers. We head out to the deeper area where the lifeguard says the water quality is better, swim around the 400m circuit and then relax on the grass among the tall palms and frangipani trees. More: waterfront.nt.gov.au.

LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK

Just over an hour's drive south from Darwin, Litchfield is a swimmer's paradise full of cascading creeks and waterfalls tumbling into freshwater rockpools. The most popular spots in the 1500sq km national park are Wangi Falls, Florence Falls and Buley Rockhole. After having exclusive use of pools at Walker Creek and Tjaetaba Falls, we are taken aback by a busload of tourists wading into the waterhole beneath Wangi Falls. But Wangi is so big there's plenty of space for everyone and we soon discover there's a surprise in this double-waterfall pool.

After swimming across to the smaller of the two falls we clamber about 15m up the rock face and slip into a very deep spa-like pool and look back over the huge expanse of water in lovely Wangi Lagoon. The next day when I gaze through my goggles in the pool beneath Florence Falls a school of black bream darts around the smooth rocks and rainbow fish swim by.

We stand under the falls and feel the force of the water tumble over our heads and then rest on a raised rock in the middle of the pool and watch young backpackers climb up to a ledge and jump off. After a waterside lunch, we follow butterflies along the easy Shady Creek trail through rainforest and open woodland until we reach Buley Rockhole, where it's busy with young people leaping (even though signs say "No jumping or diving") into a series of small, deep cascading pools.

We walk back along the path towards the Florence Falls carpark and follow a sign to an unnamed pool that we have to ourselves and where a little waterfall gives me



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TOURISM NT

a firm shoulder massage. Before we leave Litchfield we drop into Batchelor, the main centre near the national park, and swim laps in the 25m public pool, the Northern Territory's oldest. More: parksandwildlife.nt.gov.au; coomalie.nt.gov.au.

KATHERINE

With Katherine Gorge not yet open for swimming when we visit in early June, we take a cruise with Nitmiluk Tours that includes a dip at the base of the Lily Ponds Waterfall, a short walk uphill from gorge three. On the way we pass a shallow pool with purple flowering waterlilies and then continue ascending for another 200m to reach an idyllic spot where the Jawoyn women would bring their babies to feed and give them skin names. We stand under the waterfall cascading from 30m and then float on our backs and look up at the honey-coloured sandstone rocks surrounding the blue-green pool. More: nitmiluktours.com.au.

The next afternoon we drive for an hour to the north end of Nitmiluk National Park to plunge into the expansive area of water beneath Edith Falls (or Leliyn in the local Jawoyn people's language). We swim out to the sandy island in the middle and chat to grey nomads floating on noodles around the pandanus and paperbark-lined lagoon. We wish we had time to walk up to the top of the falls and do the 8.6km return trip to the Sweetwater Pool. Then we check out the picnic area and camping ground and stop by Edith Kiosk where barramundi burgers are on the menu. More: travel.nt.com.

Next morning we immerse ourselves in the warmth of Katherine Hot Springs, 2km west of town. The water is crystal clear and when I dive under, rays of sunlight illuminate the spearmint-coloured springs full of tiny

Clockwise from top, Wangi Falls in Litchfield National Park; Mataranka Thermal Pool in Elsey National Park; and nature's own infinity pool at Gunlom Falls, Kakadu National Park

striped fish. It's so relaxing I drift down to a small waterfall and slide over the edge into a larger, deeper pool. Locals reckon morning is the best time to plunge in; for a soak in hotter water, head an hour's drive south to Mataranka and Bitter Springs. More: travel.nt.com.

For excellent lap swimming there's also the Katherine Aquatic Centre, open seven days from 11am in the dry season. More: krc.nt.gov.au.

KAKADU

With most of Kakadu's waterways home to saltwater crocodiles, we are delighted to find an Olympic-sized pool in Jabiru, our base in the national park. After a morning walking in the heat at Ubirr and viewing ancient Aboriginal rock art, we cool off in the 30-year-old pool as cockatoos fly overhead. In 2013 the complex was renamed after Alberto Luglietti, who back in 1985 tiled the pool and ran the Kakadu Bakery, which is still going strong. The complex includes a children's wading pool, play equipment, picnic tables, a barbecue and small gym and is the venue for the swim leg of the annual Kakadu Triathlon. More: westarhnt.nt.gov.au.

A swimming highlight at the southern end of Kakadu is Gunlom Falls, which we reach after a steep climb from the camping ground. At the top of the escarpment we find cascading waterholes spilling into each other and over pink-red rocks until they reach the lowest, known as nature's own "infinity pool". We swim to the edge where there are spectacular views over Kakadu's stone and woodland country and the South Alligator River Valley.

Other swimming options in Kakadu during the dry season include plunge pools at Jim Jim Falls and Maguk Gorge — but before entering check for crocodile-warning signs. More: travelnt.com.

GREAT CRUISE ESCAPES

FRANCE CALLING: APT has launched its 2016 France River Cruising brochure with an offer of free international flights for advance bookings on nominated Seine, Rhine and Rhone voyages; there are also five new itineraries on the Bordeaux River, shorter cruises and special event sailings such as wine-themed voyages. Early payment discounts apply of \$800 a couple on cruises booked and paid for 10 months before departure. More: 1300 196 420; aptouring.com.au.

INCLUSIONS GALORE: Asia cruises aboard Silversea's Silver Shadow in 2016 will include a pre-voyage stay for two nights at a five-star hotel, embarkation transfer, and complimentary Silver Select shore excursions; a seven-day round-trip from Singapore on February 6 to ports in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia starts at \$3950 a person twin-share. The Italian-owned line has also introduced free Wi-Fi on all its ocean and expeditionary ships from 2016, covering one hour a day for passengers in most

suite categories or unlimited periods in top-tier accommodation. More: silversea.com.

TAHITI LOOKS NICE: The 332-passenger Tahiti-based luxury cruiser Paul Gauguin has a range of packages that include a Polynesian blessing ceremony and romantic extras; the ship sails on seven and 13-night itineraries from Papeete and fares include all meals and beverages, watersports from a retractable marina and stops at private beaches and islets. Sailings on

September 12, 19 or 26 start at \$US4254 (\$5548) a person twin-share and fly/cruise options are available. More: 1800 251 174; wiltrans.com.au.

HOME BASE: Holland America Line's Vista-class ship Noordam arrives in Sydney on October 25 and will operate nine Australian, New Zealand and South Pacific round-trip and one-way cruises through to April. More: 1300 987 322; hollandamerica.com.au.

SUSAN KUROSAWA