

Feeling territorial?

Legends and spirits are hiding in the rocks and rivers of ancient Arnhem Land, writes **Ewen Bell**

A TRIP through Arnhem Land in the Top End is one of Australia's great adventures. There's not much of a tourist trail, just a dusty red road that throws up stones and punctures tyres. But the land has many stories to tell, if you know where to look.

Rocks and rivers define the Arnhem landscape. Floods drench the plains from December to March. Above the floodplains are sandstone and granite hills, sacred sites that have been repositories for indigenous art for tens of thousands of years.

The first stop when crossing into Arnhem Land, travelling from Darwin via Kakadu National Park, is the town of Oenpelli. I drop into the artists' co-operative and ask for a guide to walk me through the rock art at Injaluk Hill.

Wilfred, a traditional land owner and talented painter, is my host.

Injaluk translates into "fish dreaming", and depictions of barramundi and saratoga dominate the ochre paintings. Even the simplest images tell a story — for instance, the barramundi whose severed head is being carried in a dilly bag.

"It tells us we can travel with the fish for several days. Good food on hunting trips," Wilfred says.

To visitors the site appears to be a maze of open galleries, but to the locals this is their history writ large. Ghost-like figures of ancestors appear throughout the rock art at Injaluk. They have been watching on for more than 10,000 years.

Spirits are painted in ochre, often in bizarre forms that symbolise their powers.

"Only the wisest of elders can see the spirits," Wilfred says. "When they see a spirit they have to warn everyone, so they paint him."

North of Oenpelli a dirt track leads to Mt Borradaile, home to a unique collection of significant art sites. Here a 6m-long painting of the vengeful rainbow serpent has survived for more than 8000 years.



Dream world: local children love to ham it up for the cameras.

Mt Borradaile's head man, Max Davidson, is passionate about the indigenous people and the beauty of their culture.

With Max's help you can spend a couple of days exploring Mt Borradaile, unearthing the stories behind each painting.

Galleries hidden in rocky catacombs feature emus, kangaroos, thylacine and geese. Not all the wildlife is on the wall, however. Much of it roams freely in the nearby lagoons of Cooper Creek.

Sunset cruises successfully combine migrating birds, curious crocodiles and dry sparkling wine.

Continuing east across Arnhem Land the scenery changes every hour, from termite mounds to cycad forests and savanna. Where pandanus trees grow there's usually water nearby, and little is more pleasing to the eye than arriving at a river crossing.

Sandy banks and shady trees make river crossings the perfect spot for a swim.

Crocodiles don't like shallow water because they cannot conceal themselves, so travellers and locals make the most of the clear, flowing water on a hot day.

Indigenous kids like to make a splash, but when you bring the camera out they really ham it up. Even the elders get excited when you ask to take their photograph.

BACK on the road, it's a long drive between towns, so any excuse will do for a stop: a drift of purple flowers, a frill-necked lizard warming itself in the sun, a flock of red-tailed cockatoos.

When we reach the Gove Peninsula, on the eastern edge of Arnhem Land, there are 1000km between us and Darwin.

All the modern conveniences can be found at Nhulunbuy, and one last cultural treasure in the nearby coastal sand dunes.

The traditional owners at Bawaka enjoy a connection with land and sea, and they're happy to share it with visitors.

Timmy, the head man of the village, collects guests from Nhulunbuy and drives them to Bawaka in a beaten-up four-wheel-drive. He makes several stops to collect bush tucker, talk about seasonal foods and catch mud crabs and fish.

Timmy watches the water carefully as we drive along the beach, then suddenly stops the car and races into the sea with spear in hand. He catches more than half of what he sees. The young lads also have some success.

The rest of the day is spent at the village, cooking seafood over hot coals, joining in traditional dances and taking a hands-on class in bushcraft.



Natural gallery: guides are available for a rock-art tour.



It's tradition: spears are used to catch fish at Bawaka.

THE DEAL



KP/Herald Sun 15/2/08

➔ **Getting there:** Qantas, Jetstar, Virgin and now Tiger fly from Melbourne to Darwin. Travelling through Arnhem Land or entering specific townships requires a permit from the Northern Land Council. It's not a difficult process, you just need to plan a few weeks ahead. www.nlc.org.au

➔ **Getting around:** Arnhem Way, a circular route across the northern end of Arnhem Land, then return along the southern highway through Kakadu National Park and Katherine, is now open for travellers to drive.

➔ **More information:** Visit Tourism NT website for more details and accommodation options. www.travelnt.com

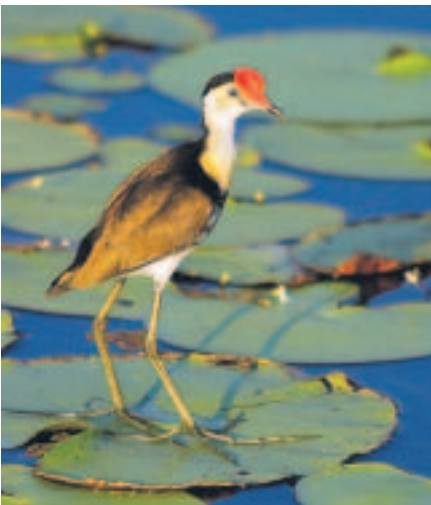
➔ **Exhibition:** Tourism NT is presenting an exhibition, Journey into Kakadu and Arnhem Land, at Federation Square from March 17-31. Photographs from Kakadu, Mt Borradaile, Gove and all points between will be on display in the Atrium.



Road trip: (top) Arnhem Land does not have much of a tourist trail.



Splash out: (above left) river crossings provide a safe swimming spot.



What a beauty: (above right) a jacana.



Bush tucker: locals share their knowledge of bush food.



Sea what I caught: mud crabs and fish on the menu at Bawaka.



Wild: sunset cruises mix birds, crocodiles and sparkling wine.

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