

# Remote Control

Shooting in extreme locations can present some unusual challenges, writes **Lynn Gail**. She outlines some handy tips for shooting in the Top End and on Aboriginal lands.

**A**s a travel photographer I've recently had the chance to visit East Arnhem Land, one of the most remote areas in Outback Australia. Situated at the top of the Northern Territory, East Arnhem Land covers more than 92,000 hectares of privately owned Aboriginal land. The culture of the Yolngu people is deeply rooted in this vast rugged landscape, where photographic possibilities present themselves in many ways. From my experience, here are some tips and techniques for shooting in one of the world's most amazing and isolated landscapes.

## Capturing the landscape

All great, eye-catching landscapes come with great light. As the sun rises and falls in the Northern Territory it creates

a rich glow on the predominantly deep red earth. If you're planning to effectively shoot landscapes during these 'magic hours' check out your angles beforehand to maximise shooting opportunities. In this tropical environment the sun rises and sets quickly, so being in the right position is paramount to achieving strong images which stand out from mediocre ones.

But perfect light alone does not make for a perfect shot – it simply sets you up for a good opportunity. Your composition and point of focus will make or break the image. Aim to have a point which will either lead the eye into the scene or an object that allows the eye to rest upon it, such as a tree, rocks or a person in the distance to lend scale.

In using a wide-angle lens and focusing on your foreground you'll extend the depth of sharpness throughout the image

by increasing your depth of field. To achieve this it's useful to use a small aperture – say f/14 or f/18. A tripod is vital to keep everything rock steady and sharp. Landscapes are usually associated with a wide-angle lens of around 16-35mm focal lengths, but it's worth experimenting with a zoom lens of around 70-200mm to pick out elements which record interesting story telling details. People in the distance, or silhouetted against a dramatic orange sunset will add interest to your photos. Fresh perspectives recorded in the moment will add varied visual interest to your collection. The Northern Territory is known for its wildlife, so be vigilant and look out for salt and freshwater crocodiles. When you're in and around a bush area, always keep an eye out for wild buffalo (though they have been substantially culled, a few still exist), dingoes and snakes.

## In the communities

Before you can enter Aboriginal lands you need to obtain a permit. If you are travelling in Arnhem Land contact the Nhulunbuy Corporation or the Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation. You can also apply online for permits at [permits@dhimurru.com.au](mailto:permits@dhimurru.com.au). A general permit enables visitors to access recreational areas on Aboriginal land, while making sure the land owners' conditions are met. If you want to spend time visiting and photographing the Yolngu people in their homelands you can find several immersive cultural tours through [www.lirrwi.com.au](http://www.lirrwi.com.au).

If you are fortunate enough to experience a 'Welcome to Country' ceremony you quickly get a sense of the Yolngu people's deep spirituality and connection to the land.

## ABOVE

The Point, also known as The Needle, is a ten-minute walk from Nyinyikay Homeland. As the sun rises and lights up the rock face it is engulfed in a stunning rich red glow. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/60s @ f/18, ISO 640, handheld.

# HOW TO Shoot In Isolated Locations

## RIGHT

Shooting from above creates a different view of an artist painting a story-pole at Yirkalla Art Centre, Nhulunbuy. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/60s @ f/4.5, ISO 1000. Photoshop for levels, sharpness, curves and contrast.

## BELOW

These Yolngu children were hamming it up for the camera before boarding a chartered flight back to their homeland from Nyinyikay's airstrip. Including the light aircraft as a backdrop helps to tell the story. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/200s @ f/7.1, ISO 400. Photoshop for curves, levels, contrast, brightness and burning in of bright areas.



**“Making connections...is important so take the time to talk and listen before you get your camera out.”**

No photographs are allowed during the welcome ceremony and no one is permitted to talk – it’s a very significant moment. The Yolngu history and family ties are complex and if you spend time sitting under a tree and sharing stories, you’ll begin to learn about their connection to nature and how they live in and respect the land. Apart from the welcoming ceremony, photographs are allowed after permission is sought. Although the Yolngu speak and understand English very well, the older generation are more comfortable speaking their native language, Mathu Yolnu. Any effort on your part to learn a few words is likely to be well received. While bright-eyed children love to be photographed, the adults can be more reserved. Making

connections with your subjects is important so take the time to talk and listen before you get your camera out. If you can establish a connection by chatting about your life and theirs, your photos are likely to be more engaging.

## Portrait options

Once you find a willing subject, there are a couple of different portrait options to consider. A close-up portrait – just the head and shoulders – with your subject staring directly into the lens can create a soulful image with immediate impact. The key is the eyes – make sure they are pin-sharp. Eyes are the window to the soul, and are the first thing most of us register when we see a portrait. Focusing on the eyes with an open aperture of around f/3.5-f/5.6, depending on your lens’ capability, will make the background blurred and bring attention to your subject. But watch for bright areas which can take the viewer’s eye straight out of the frame and away from where you want them to look. In a hot, glaring climate bright spots are a common hazard. No matter how interesting the subject is, if there is a large white blob on the edge of the image the viewer’s eye will be drawn away.

When visiting the homelands you’ll see women gathering

under a tree in the mornings preparing materials to make story poles, bush beads or shell jewellery. They collect berries from the bush, which are boiled on an open fire to make necklaces and bracelets. Pandanus leaves are also collected and boiled to make mats and baskets. The leaves are later dyed using fresh roots which have been ground in a mortar and pestle. Men will also gather branches to make fishing spears. They sand them down, fashioning the ends into multi-pronged sharp tips for a quick kill. All these items can add detail to your environmental story – things like the steam rising from a cooking pot, roots being ground or a man’s rough, cracked hands making a spear. These moments may seem insignificant, but when they are added to your collection of images from your journey they will develop a theme around interesting aspects of daily life and give a sense of cultural rhythm on the homelands.

When photographing environmental portraits think about where you’re placing the main point of focus. Remember the rule of thirds, where a composition is effectively divided by a ‘noughts and crosses’ grid and the key subject is located on one of the intersections of the lines. Also, in placing

## Camera basics

With this kind of trip you want to maximise your shooting opportunities. A good all-round travel lens from 28-300mm will allow you to shoot a range of subjects from landscapes through to portraits. If you want to take individual lenses, I’d suggest a wide-angle zoom (around 16-35mm) for landscapes, a general zoom (28-70mm) for everyday shooting, and a longer zoom (70-200mm) for portrait and detail shots. A macro lens is handy if you enjoy close-up photography. A strong, steady travel tripod is a must, along with a ball head for good manoeuvrability, and a cable release, which will ensure there’s no camera shake when you press the shutter. A head-torch helps you to keep both hands free when searching for things in the dark. In the more isolated regions you should also “buddy up” with someone. Always carry an emergency first aid kit and plenty of water. If you have access to one, take a satellite phone, as there are no other means of communication once you leave Nhulunbuy. If you’re visiting the homelands, satellite phones are available for emergency use only.





Beginnings of a basket being made from boiled and dyed pandanus leaves at Nyinyikay Homeland. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/200s @ f/5, ISO 250. Photoshop for levels, contrast, burning in edges, sharpness and cropping.



# HOW TO Shoot in Isolated Locations



## Getting away

### 1. Gaining access

Before you go you'll need to arrange the proper permits to enter restricted areas. The Aboriginal Land Act NT 1979 requires all individuals to have a current permit. Permits are available through the Nhulunbuy Corporation on the Gove Peninsula. The Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation offers general and special 'do-it-yourself' permits. You can also apply online at [permits@dhimurru.com.au](mailto:permits@dhimurru.com.au). A general permit covers a wide range of areas and costs \$160 for an annual family permit and \$85 for an individual. There is also a \$45 two-month permit and a \$35 seven-day permit. A special permit grants access to particular recreational areas where vehicle numbers are capped to protect the land and cultural sensitivities. If you want to spend time visiting and photographing the Yolngu people in their homelands you can find several immersive cultural tours through [www.lirrwithtourism.com.au](http://www.lirrwithtourism.com.au). For more advice relating to privately owned Aboriginal land in the Top End contact The Northern Land Council in Nhulunbuy – [www.nlc.org.au](http://www.nlc.org.au).

### 2. When to visit

The best time to visit the Top End is the Dry Season, from June to October. Humidity starts to build in November in the lead up to the Wet Season which runs from December to March. March to May is when everything starts to dry out.

### 3. In the suitcase

Take breathable, lightweight cotton clothes, hiking shoes, and a pair of thongs for moving around campsites. When visiting homelands, be aware of cultural sensitivities. Locals prefer women to wear longish shorts and no singlets or visible cleavage. Driving to the Outback communities can take several hours from the town centre of Nhulunbuy. There are no shops and no internet access in the homelands. Take all the supplies you need, including insect repellent and medications. It can get cold at night, so pack some warm clothing too.

### 4. Reading material

*Welcome to Country* by LakLak Bburarrwanga covers the history, landscape and cultural aspects of Outback in East Arnhem Land. It's published by Allen & Unwin. *Weaving Lives Together at Bawaka – North East Arnhem Land* talks about how lives are woven together through the making of story-telling baskets using pandanus leaves. It's published by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies.

strong elements on the left-hand side of a horizontal scene (landscape format) it will lead the eye through the image, enhancing the story you're attempting to tell.

## Capturing personalities

The Yolngu people like a good laugh and that can make for some great candid images. Against a bright background containing sand or sky be aware of exposure issues as the camera tries to meter for the lighter background. Meter for your subject, with a view to darkening the background in post-production if it is over-exposed. Shooting in Raw will give you more options to pull and push the exposure later on. Also, consider recomposing by moving your subject to a more evenly shaded area. Another option is to place a reflector near your subject to bounce light onto the face and get a more even exposure. A small white, silver or gold reflector is ideal but you could also use a piece of white foamcore, cardboard or even white cloth to reduce shadows and even out the exposure. Always look for a catchlight, a small bright speck in the subject's eye, to give a portrait some life.

## A way of life

The Yolngu are expert fishermen and their accuracy when spear fishing is remarkable. This lifelong tradition can present plenty of shooting opportunities, from close-up portraits as the hunters wade through shallow water, to wide-angle landscapes taking in more people and more of the action. Around the mangrove swamps which punctuate the northern Australian coastline, the men watch for the slightest flickers as they step through still water. In an instant the spear leaves the hunter's hand, flies through the air and connects with the target. If you are want to capture this, watch carefully and anticipate the action before it happens. Make sure you keep one area in sharp focus or the picture will lose impact. If possible, focus on the eye and keep the shutter speed fast. At the very least, if you are shooting hand held, the shutter speed should not drop below the inverse of the (equivalent) focal length of your lens – otherwise you're likely to get a blurred image. For example, if you're using a 200mm equivalent lens, your shutter speed should be faster than 1/200s if the camera is hand held. And that's just to counter the shake of your hand, not the movement of the subject. If you increase the ISO it will allow you to shoot at faster shutter speeds but be aware of your camera's limitations. You need to stay within an ISO range that doesn't produce excessively noisy images. Having said that, it's better to have a grainy shot than a blurry one!

## Recording details

By including a range of subjects in your images you'll record a wider sense of Outback life. Landscapes and portraits are obvious subjects, but it is also important to capture details close up to tell a bigger story. Aged hands weaving a basket or painting a shell in rich earthy tones, an elder making a spearhead – there are many items which will add depth to your portfolio and capture something of the unique and fascinating culture.

Wide-open apertures from f/2.8 to f/4.5 work well in these scenarios, as long as one area is sharp for the eye to focus on. As you walk around you might come across bright clothes on washing lines, a kettle on an open fire, a freshly caught crab or maybe even some damper bread which has just been baked in the sand. Alongside the wider scenery these details add depth to your photographic story, so keep an eye out for them as you go.

## Experience of a lifetime

Photographing in the Top End is a unique experience. It can be challenging but also deeply rewarding. In many ways, the Top End is a photographer's paradise: crisp light, heavenly landscapes, deeply saturated colours, an age-old culture and warm, friendly people. What more could any photographer ask for? With the right preparation it's the experience of a lifetime. Give it a go – you won't be disappointed! ☺




### LEFT

By focusing on the eyes and cutting out the background there is nowhere for the eye to wander. The eyes allow the viewer to share a connection and get a sense of the person being photographed. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/60s @ f/5, ISO 320. Photoshop for cropping, sharpening, levels and burning in bright edges.

### OPPOSITE PAGE

The beautiful azure waters of Arnhem Bay are accessible only by 4WD and a three-hour drive. You'll likely be the only visitors in this stunning remote location in East Arnhem Land. Canon EOS 5D Mk II, 24-70mm lens, 1/200s @ f/16, ISO 200. Photoshop for levels, curves, shadow/highlights and cropping.

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