



Early morning view over Arnhem Bay from a swag at Yinyikay. OPPOSITE PAGE: Milika Marika emerging from Arnhem Bay with the catch of the day: a clam.



ARNHEM LAND DIARY

Words and images by Lynn Gail

Photographer Lynn Gail is a native Brit. Now living in Australia, she felt somewhat ignorant of her adopted country's Indigenous heritage, so she headed to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, one of the most undeveloped environments in Australia, covering 100,000 square kilometres and with a population of just over 16,000. Indigenous locals live a traditional lifestyle, and the Lirriwi Yolngu Aboriginal Tourism Corporation welcomes tourists to north-east Arnhem Land to share their heritage. It's a place that has produced some of Australia's most successful performing artists – Yothu Yindi, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and the Bangarra Dance Theatre – as well as beautiful paintings and weaving. Here, Lynn shares her Arnhem Land trip notes.

DAY ONE:

I hop aboard the aluminium fishing boat MV *Nomad* and head out over turquoise waters to Banubanu Wilderness Retreat, located on Bremer Island in Melville Bay. Over lunch, Banubanu host Trevor Hosie explains how the retreat was built almost entirely from recycled materials and items washed up from passing

fishing boats. We arrive on a deserted beach of soft white sand then climb sand dunes to take in panoramic views of the rugged coastline.

DAY TWO:

We travel to Nyinikay, on the edge of Arnhem Bay, where we are met by Geraldine and Joe, a young Aboriginal couple. They invite me down to the beach, where a freshly cooked turtle is being carved up to share. Excited by a new face, beaming children immediately surround me, wanting to be photographed. As we have dinner around the campfire, elder Marcus Lacey strums an acoustic guitar, and talks and sings about his community's spirituality – from the earth to the stars and beyond. Songs are extremely important to the local oral storytelling history and are passed down through generations. My swag lies close to the water's edge and I drift off to sleep to the sound of lapping waves.

DAY THREE:

Up at the crack of dawn, we drive out to Rocky Point to witness the sunrise paint the wild coastline in reddish brown hues. I feel I am beginning to absorb the land's calmness and

complexity and feel overwhelmed by its natural beauty. It's only day three and I have taken more photographs than I could possibly use. Back in the community, Nancy, affectionately known as "Old Lady" (a term of respect), has gathered the women to show me basket weaving and jewellery making techniques using bush materials. The sense of community is evident in the people's laughter and easy banter.

In the afternoon, we are taken to Bawaka, on the beachfront at Port Bradshaw. We're met by a group of friendly men who are eager to show me the art of fishing with spears and nets. As we jump into 4WD vehicles and head along the beach, we're joined by Djarli, a respected elder. He explains how in Yolngu tradition there are two moieties – you are either Dhuwa or Yirritja. Marriage within a moiety is prohibited. Everything in the Yolngu universe – plants, animals, clan groups, land, even the ocean – is either Dhuwa or Yirritja.

We spend the afternoon following the men in the water, watching them fish, then head back to camp to prepare dinner. A couple of young lads, Jason and Anthony, put on a song and dance for us, accompanied by Theo on yidaki (didgeridoo) and Djarli on clap sticks.



FROM TOP: Bawaka. Early morning walk to the viewpoint on Bremer Island. Weaving baskets is *miyalka djama* – women's work. OPPOSITE PAGE: an impromptu dance at Bawaka (top left). Nancy with grandchild and bush jewellery materials (top centre). Table laid at Banubanu – the lanterns are made of dried turtle skins found on the beach (bottom).



DAY FOUR:

Rangers from Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation (established to manage Arnhem Land) take us to Cape Arnhem, a permit-only area where a maximum of ten cars are allowed at any time. My friendly driver, Banula, sings like Elvis Presley and chats about the land and habitat as we travel along some of the country's most sensational beaches. He is happy to stop for photographs as he proudly shows off his land, and is prouder still when his son emerges from the crystal-clear waters with a large clam. It is illegal for non-Indigenous people to take clams (with a fine up to \$10,000) so seeing the clam prepared and tasting its salty flesh is a real treat.

Gapuru Memorial Park is our final location. Again, access is by 4WD and only by permit. The sky is black as it is the beginning of the wet season, and clouds are gathering as thunderstorms threaten. Luckily, the skies clear and sunlight glimmers across freshwater rock pools. The rangers smile and wave before diving into a watering hole.

I sit by the waterfall and reflect on a week that has stimulated my mind. To witness the culture, to hear how spirits are born of the land and return to the land, is to begin to understand the Indigenous people. I only touched the surface, and what lies beneath is a spirituality I can only imagine. ■



The Details

How to see north-east Arnhem Land

- Lirrwi Yolngu Tourism Aboriginal Corporation offers a range of corporate, group and individual package tours to north-east Arnhem Land. To find out more, contact Craig Hodges on 0487 333 660 or Matt Grooby on 0402 338 793; lirrwitourism.com.au.
- If you would like to arrange a self-drive visit, contact Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation to ask about permits, restrictions and campsites. (08) 8939 2700; www.dhimurru.com.au
- For tourism information, visit East Arnhem Land Tourism Association, ealta.org

How to get there

- Air North flies from Darwin to Gove (Nhulubuy) daily; flight time is 1hr 40min. 1800 627 474; airnorth.com.au
- All tours depart from Gove/Nhulunbuy, East Arnhem Land, NT.

When to go

The best time to visit is in the dry season, May to October, when temperatures range from 20°C to 30°C.

Where to stay

- Banubanu Wilderness Retreat, Bremer Island. Contact Trevor Hoise on 0411 690508; www.banubanu.com
- * Walkabout Lodge, 12 Westal St, Nhulunbuy. (08) 8939 2000; walkaboutlodge.com.au

Must visit

- Buku Larrnggay Mulka Centre in Yirrkala: a fantastic indigenous art gallery. (08) 8987 1701; mulka.org