



boarding pass



getting there: Qantas and Virgin fly direct to Darwin
stay: Paradise Lodge: Mark Hanlon 08 8975 9705
tours: www.pungalinasafaris.com.au or Owen Davies 08 8975 8951
flying to Pungalina: akirk@ozmail.com.au, www.kirkhopeaviation.com.au or 0418 379 263
more: Tourism NT 136 110, 8951 8471 or 08 8999 3900; email.tourismnt@nt.gov.au



Top End temptations (clockwise from left): The main bar at the Daly Waters Hotel is decorated with travellers' underwear and nick-nacks; the author with a Gulf of Carpentaria barramundi; playing bowls on the road outside the Daly Waters Hotel; all aboard for the flight to Pungalina; and below Owen Davies launching a fishing boat on the Calvert River.

Hooked on adventure

An Outback adventure on land and water thrills inspire **Ric Acott**

IT HAS been 43 years since a drive from Adelaide to Darwin put me in awe of the vastness, harshness and raw beauty of the Outback — and made me an admirer of the resilient characters who inhabit it.

Those feelings flood back as I gaze at the sparsely occupied, sunburnt terrain from the light aircraft taking four of us from Darwin to Borroloola and the start of an adventure the likes of which don't come around very often.

Ahead, among other things, are fresh and saltwater barramundi fishing, crocodile sightings, menacing water buffalo, brilliant bird life, a five-star bush camp, sunset drinks and nibbles atop a remote gorge, tucker fit for pharaohs and a liver-punishing pub crawl covering hundreds of kilometres.

Yes, what an adventure.

The no-pretence way things are in many places at the Top End is demonstrated at the airstrip at Borroloola, a frontier town rich in history — and tales of skulduggery — on the McArthur River in Gulf of Carpentaria country.

The terminal is a two-sided tin shed with a wooden bench or two, a toilet of sorts and a fenced-off area that holds drums of aviation fuel.

Two almost new Mitsubishi Pajero four-wheel-drives await our party.

Mindful of what's ahead, we glance at a map and head straight to King Ash Bay, about 40km downriver, where Mark Hanlon, of Paradise Fishing Tours is waiting.

Mark secures the cars and one of his boats whisks us down the mangrove-lined and crocodile-inhabited river to the sea and then on to the north island of the Sir Pellew Group, where members of his family have established dwellings. It's about a 100km trip.

Mark, who was born in Geelong and about 10 years ago had a stint



running the Bellarine Peninsula's Portarlington Hotel, knows the area backwards and soon has us pulling up a variety of fish, including barramundi and golden snapper.

It's magic — as is what's going on back on the island. Being prepared for us is a five-course spread of oysters, prawns, mud crabs one of Mark's boys has just netted, fish and much more. Beer and wine flow.

For much of the year, Mark, family members and friends live on the island and welcome guests. Amenities are basic and Outback style, but they are adequate. The hospitality is generous, the adventures to be had could entertain for months and the atmosphere puts us in a relaxed mood immediately. The all-inclusive cost is about \$440 a night per person.

We fish next morning — again successfully — before tackling the 1¼-hour trip back to the cars.

Being a fishing enthusiast, I am

wishing our schedule would allow more time to benefit from Mark's ability to pinpoint where the thrills are to be had.

We farewell Mark and negotiate dirt roads and riverbeds to remote Pungalina Station, which is still in Gulf Country and close to the Queensland border.

PUNGALINA is a 200,000ha oasis full of surprises — stark escarpments, millions of years old limestone caves, billabongs, gorges, plants and wildlife, springs, barramundi fishing and canoeing on the Calvert River, swimming, fossils and Aboriginal art.

The terrain is rugged, so much so that it made earning a living from mustering cattle difficult.

That's the reason Owen Davies, a knowledgeable and affable bushman of diverse talents, and Tony and Sandy Kirkhope have turned the station into an eco-wilderness desti-

nation with a safari camp that can accommodate up to 12. The camp operates from April to October, depending on the wet season.

Owen is camp/station manager, while the Kirkhopes concentrate on air tours throughout Australia.

The sooner word spreads about Pungalina the better, because it is a treasure. In some places your footprint will be the first by a white person.

I would be surprised if the camp's "driveway" is not the longest in Australia. It is safe, but demands close driver attention.

The easiest and most popular way to the camp is by air. The Kirkhopes arrange the trips.

The shaded tropical camp's accommodation and kitchen are tents — the first-class variety.

Dining is in the open next to running spring water that I splash in when not using the shower (hot water is available). The tucker does

justice to the magical setting. Keeping us company much of the time are Owen's pet dingoes.

Activities are tailored to people's capabilities and interests.

I experience a variety but, for me, the highlights are landing more barramundi (catch and release), having sunset drinks and nibbles on a cliff overlooking the snake-like Calvert River and swimming in a warm spring with bubbling sands.

Next is the drive — er, pub crawl — back to Darwin via the Savannah Way and Carpentaria and Stuart highways.

The Savannah Way is called Australia's greatest adventure drive because of its world heritage areas, national parks and historic sites.

Like the Outback's inhabitants, the pubs enroute are packed with character and have history to burn.

First stop is Cape Crawford with its Heartbreak Hotel and helicopter flights over the Lost City.

THE famous Daly Waters Hotel is a favourite with the grey nomads who are found all over the NT. We find its tucker and overnight accommodation to our liking. The entertainment accompanying the evening meal is, well, different.

So, too, are a number of other hotels we try — none more so than those at Larrimah and Grove Hill, which is halfway between Katherine and Darwin and 16km off the highway.

The publican at Larrimah keeps crocodiles and a python, among other animals, to interest drinkers, while Grove Hill's heritage pub was built in 1935 from recycled metal and other materials.

Thick cobwebs that must have been there for decades hang from the interior of the main roof and the walls of the Grove Hill. Memorabilia and nick-nacks abound; furnishings are olde-worlde.

Downing a cold beer — even my favourite beverage, Cooper's stout, is available — in such surroundings and enjoying banter with hosts Bill and Margaret Lucy is something to remember.

Such is life, Outback style.