

comes with the territory

Luxurious new digs in Nitmiluk National Park are opening Katherine Gorge and the culture of its traditional owners, the Jawoyn people, to a new brand of traveller. *Rob Ingram* explores the escarpment around Cicada Lodge.

PHOTOGRAPHY GEORGE FETTING

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We're sitting on the pool deck of the Northern Territory's sleek new Cicada Lodge with marketing manager Clive Pollack, who is struggling to express the frustrations involved in building a luxury lodge in a national park on land owned by an indigenous group. It has taken nearly seven years from original concept to opening day. Jane Runyu, chair of the indigenous-owned Nitmiluk Tours, the owners and operators of the lodge, looks sympathetic – but then reminds him that seven years isn't so bad for a building when you've owned the land for 45,000 years.

Cicada Lodge sits on an escarpment in the Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park high above the Katherine River. High is a good idea because in the wet season the water level has been known to rise up to 20 metres as it cascades through the deep gorges it has carved through ancient sandstone rock.

"Ancient" takes on a new meaning here. The concept of time travel has long fascinated us via everyone from HG Wells to Harry Potter, but the time travel that Cicada Lodge opens up to a whole new market is on a scale that is difficult to comprehend. Allowing the traditional owners – the Jawoyn people – to help only makes the history of the place even more unfathomable.

"There's a bit of difference between what you call history and what we call history," says Runyu, just to remind us that we're surrounded by the oldest living culture in the world. "We were here 40,000 years before the Great Pyramid was built."

And tour guide Jamie Brookes explains why there are no fossils in some of the rocks lining the gorge. "They were formed 1650 million years ago," he says. "Hard-bodied, boned or shelled creatures hadn't even evolved back then."

But for all the pride and respect they attach to their long history, the Jawoyn people are anything but locked in the past. They number about 800 individuals, a figure that has been steady during the past few decades. Their traditional land stretches across 50,000 square kilometres – bigger than Switzerland – and includes parts of Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park. They don't consider that they own the land but rather that the land owns them, and that it is their obligation to care for it.

What they do own is Nitmiluk Tours, a major tourist operator in the area with a fleet of 20 gorge cruise boats, and Jawoyn Aviation, which operates scenic helicopter



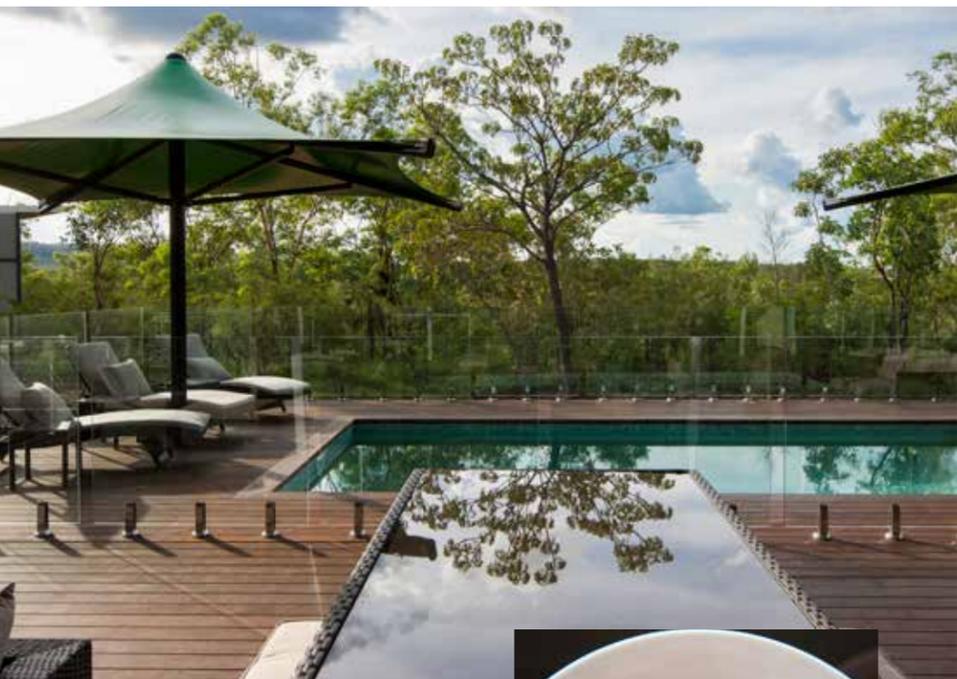
flights. Nitmiluk Tours offers gorge tours, canoe adventures, guided walks, indigenous experiences, and accommodation in chalets, a campground, permanent tents or the impressive new lodge.

Their motto is "Jawoyn – Sharing Our Country", and it is their tolerance of other beliefs that has shaped their cohesion and their resilience.

They spell it out in a mission statement in the visitor centre: "Nitmiluk is not a wilderness. It is not pristine or untamed. It is a human artefact. It is a land constructed over tens of thousands of years. Since the coming of white man, our country has been used for cattle and buffalo, for horticulture and mining. Our lands and our people have seen changes beyond the imagining of our ancestors – yet our country >

CULTURE BUNKER

Opposite: Cicada Lodge, high above the Katherine River, brings a little luxe to an ancient land. Above: the built environment serves as a framework for cultural and natural highlights, including fibre art and birdlife.



still lives in our hearts and daily lives. Our country is part of a living heritage that forms a basis for economic and social independence for our people.”

It’s a philosophy that softens the collision between austerity and hedonism, between selflessness and indulgence, between the rainbow serpent on the river and the gin and tonic on the balcony. Cicada Lodge will bring a sophisticated new market to enjoy and, more importantly, to understand this ancient land.

The lodge is 100 per cent indigenous-owned in a joint agreement between the Jawoyn people (represented by the Jawoyn Association), Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA), and Indigenous Business Australia (IBA). The national park is jointly managed by

Jawoyn people and the Northern Territory government. Eight of the 13 people on the management board are Jawoyn, representing the traditional owners who have leased the land back to the Northern Territory. Central to the management plan is the intention to preserve, manage and maintain the flora, fauna, cultural heritage and natural environment of the park.

Clive Pollack, who as CEO of Nitmiluk Tours also oversees the operation and marketing of the lodge, says the owners have been painstaking in establishing the lodge’s level of luxury.

“Our field is experiential tourism,” he says. “The lodge has exceeded all our expectations and has brought a new level of accommodation, service and experience to the Top End. We’re very proud of it, but we don’t want guests going away raving about the lodge. We want them to go away raving about the experience.

“Cicada is not one of those hotels where you pay hundreds of dollars and get a bed. It is a total experience from the dining and touring options to the cultural education and the excellent service and attention to detail.”

The lodge itself was designed and built by Darwin construction company Sitzler, and displays strong, simple forms and organic integrity that allow it to blend into the drama of the landscape. The reception area, dining room, bar and kitchen share a main building which looks out over a pool deck, a landscaped garden of native plants and the natural bush.

The sense of arrival is enhanced by a breezeway that links the familiar new world from which you’ve come to the magical ancient world you’re about to experience. One wall features strataed rock with waterfalls running into a long, narrow, gorge-shaped pond – the designer’s nod of acknowledgement to the inspiration the environment has brought to the project.

Large green umbrellas shading the pool deck add an architectural element to the eucalypt savannah that surrounds the site. There is also the cool dense shade of lancewood and the papery bark and silver leaves of

the various melaleucas. The main lodge building defers to the visual impact of the environment by employing the secondary tones of the landscape – the charcoal and stone shades that give relief to the oranges, browns and yellows of the gorge walls.

Striking interior features that remind the guest of the cultural richness of Jawoyn life include a beautiful piece of colourful fibre craft (weaving is a traditional way of sharing culture), distinctive local ceramic art, and an emblematic painting of two cicadas depicted in West Arnhem Land X-ray style by resident artist John “Long Johnny” Dewar.

The cicada has great significance to the Jawoyn people. In the Jawoyn language, Nitmiluk – the name given to Katherine Gorge – means “cicada country”. Many places here were named by Nabilil, a dragon-like figure in Jawoyn legend who came from the west.

At the entrance to Katherine Gorge, he heard the song of the cicada and called the place Nitmiluk after the “nit, nit, nit” sound the cicada creates.

“To my people, the song of the cicada is soothing and comforting,” says Jane Runyu – and somehow Cicada Lodge radiates that same mood.

Accommodation is in 18 outlying suites scattered between landscaped garden and native bushland. Each has a private balcony, generous bedroom and sitting area, and luxurious bathroom with huge monsoon shower. The suites are all air-conditioned but also offer the option of controlling the climate with overhead

fans and secure screens. Natural earth and timber colours, textures and finishes are totally contemporary and appropriate, and the bathroom features polished stone in cinnamon and cream. Bulgari toiletries and a single orchid in a vase confirm the style, taste and quality of the lodge.

This is reinforced by the lodge kitchen, where head chef Adam Woods displays the happy knack of producing dishes that capture the seasons, moods and produce of the region. A sublime barramundi fillet with shallots and a coriander and lemongrass sauce exudes the aroma of traditional paperbark cooking. Native bush spices and plant food such as lemon myrtle, pepper berries, river mint, wattle seed, quandong, bush passionfruit and Kakadu plum add vibrance and relevance to menu favourites such as a tender Scotch fillet on skordalia mash, and a roll of smoked salmon with lemon chive dressing, avocado salsa, crème fraiche and salmon roe. His food is not uncomplicated but not pretentious either, and there isn’t a whiff of “creative native” clichés.

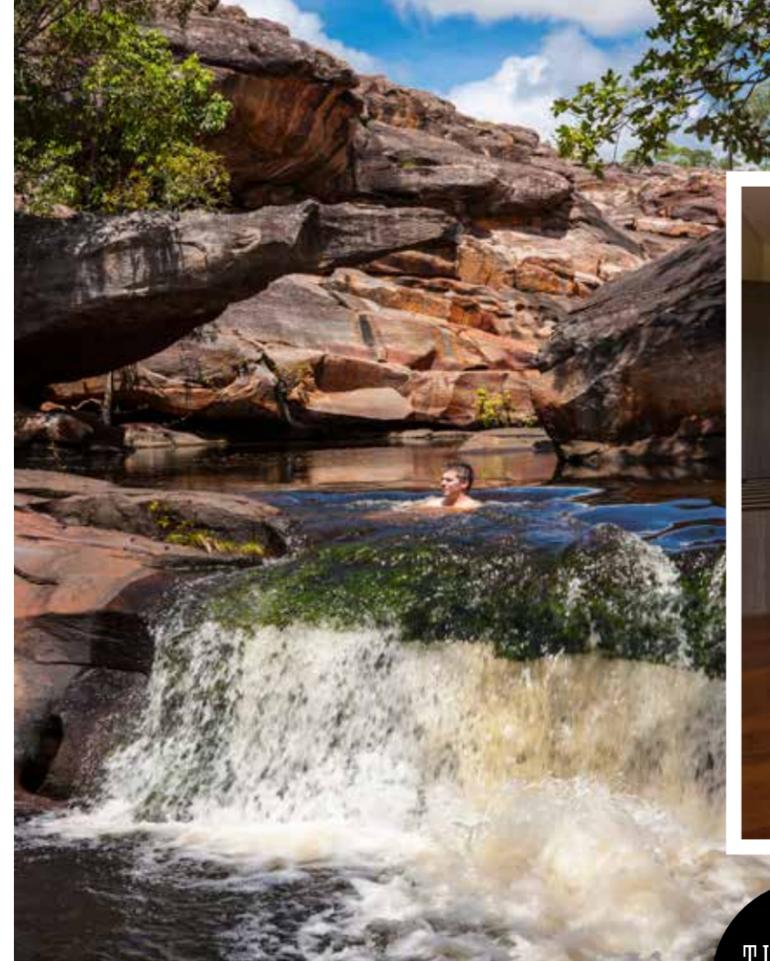
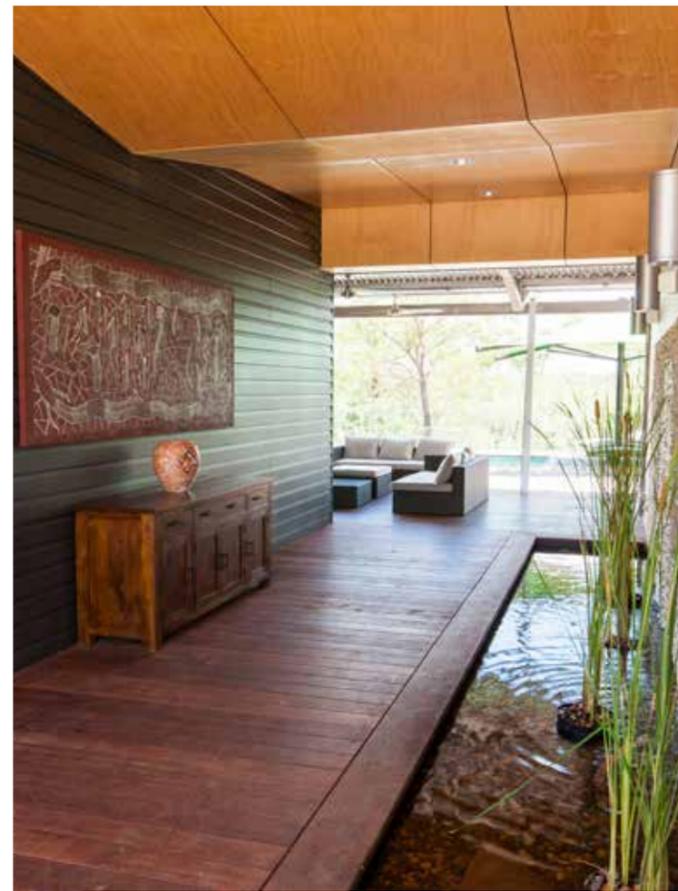
With indigenous experiences so prominent in Cicada Lodge’s allure, this assured young chef can also turn his hand to wrapping a crocodile tail in paperbark with dry saltbush and cooking it in a fire-pit. It’s as succulent as pork belly, and what more exclusive finger food to serve with cocktails on the balcony at sunset? Croc tails and cocktails – surely a natural affinity.>

What more exclusive finger food to serve on the balcony at sunset? **Croc tails** and cocktails – surely a natural affinity.

MAKE IT SNAPPY

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Cicada Lodge’s pool deck; chef Adam Woods’s bush tucker-driven cuisine; a wallaby visitor; sleek service in the lodge’s bar and dining area; the breezeway, inspired by the local environment. Below: the dramatic escarpment carved by the Katherine River; and croc canapés in the making.





THE FINE PRINT

“Guests can fly by helicopter to remote **rock art** sites with an indigenous guide to view paintings thousands of years old.”

As excellent as the lodge may be, in the breathtaking surroundings of Nitmiluk, it will only ever be a totally impressive base from which to enjoy the many natural and cultural attractions on offer.

In turn, the excellence of these is a reflection of the vision and diligence of Nitmiluk Tours – the public face of the Jawoyn people’s tourism interests. Its role is to enhance the experience available to visitors while retaining the traditional integrity of the place, and it does

so with conspicuous success. This is a company so savvy to the sensitivities of its role that each employee completes a cultural awareness course that includes indigenous employees being educated in many of the mysteries of European customs and attitudes.

Much of this work is undertaken by Tessa Pollack, wife of CEO Clive, herself a researcher and tutor in anthropology. The training shows out on the river where tour guide Jamie Brookes not only demonstrates an extensive knowledge of history, geology, biology and botany but – like some indigenous thought tracker – also anticipates the next question from an audience in awe. In two hours, passengers on his introductory gorge cruise come away with a knowledge of the

lives and beliefs of the traditional owners, of the fish species, bird species, animal species and plant species in the gorge environment, of how the Jawoyn seasons depend on a flexible climate cycle, of crocodile and river behaviour, of food sources, plant uses, rock art and the legend of Bolung the rainbow serpent who resides in the second of the 13 gorges.

Clive Pollack outlines the variety of ways in which Cicada Lodge guests can experience the drama and fascination of the Nitmiluk region, and we agree that this is at least a three-day destination.

“There are walks and cruises,” he says, “or guests can fly by helicopter to a remote location to swim in private in a wilderness waterhole. They can be dropped off anywhere along the gorge system to canoe back down. They can fly to remote rock art sites with an indigenous guide to view paintings thousands of years old. Or they can fly low over this ancient country and experience the power of the gorge and Kakadu from the air.”

Further attractions already planned include a wellness centre and a four-wheel-drive outback safari tour.

We take a rock art tour, heading out from the helipad and over the lodge to catch an idea of the magnitude of the huge gorge system. Off each of the gorges are side

chasms sculpted from the sandstone over millennia so that the country, from the air, is like looking down on a vast block of chocolate.

At the end of the wet season, the land is also laced with streams, billabongs, waterholes and swamps, and patches of open grassland give no inkling of the bare brown desolation of the dry season. After 30 minutes in the air we put down near a picturesque spring-fed waterhole in an artistic installation of orange rocks. And then, there on the walls, protected by a verandah of overhanging rock, the stunning images – maybe 30,000 years old – of wallaby, fish, goanna and human forms etched in the rock to tell others who came this way what food was available and to provide a record of events that had happened at this site. The mind goes into scramble mode looking for answers to what were never questions. Then the sense of awe and privilege that these are authentic and original, and not pictures in a book. A swim in the waterhole, a picnic on the rocks, and then it’s the long trip back from spirituality to reality.

The wonderment will return, however. In 2006, a survey team working in Arnhem Land came across a rock shelter containing a spectacular ancient sandstone art gallery. The hundreds of paintings depict subjects as varied as kangaroos, snakes, and spirits from stories central to the beliefs of the Jawoyn people. When it is declared a commercial site – and that may be only months away – Nitmiluk Tours, through its Jawoyn ownership, will have exclusive access... and the world will beat a path to Cicada Lodge. **CT**

GETTING THERE

Qantas operates 57 direct flights a week to Darwin from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Alice Springs. By road, Katherine is 310km south-east of Darwin on the Stuart Highway, and Nitmiluk Gorge is a further 29km from Katherine.

There are regular coach services between Darwin and Katherine, and chartered fixed-wing and helicopter transfers from Darwin are also available. qantas.com.au

The Ghan passes through Katherine on Wednesdays and Saturdays on its rail journey from Darwin to Adelaide. Travelling in the opposite direction, it passes through Katherine on Tuesdays and Fridays. Passengers travelling from Adelaide can opt to complete their train

trip at Katherine and transfer to Cicada Lodge, with transfers to Darwin organised by the lodge. greatsouthernrail.com.au

STAY

Cicada Lodge suites cost \$645 per room per night (based on twin share), including breakfast and “Welcome to Nitmiluk” sunset drinks and canapés. Various packages that include transfers from Darwin and activities are also available. cicalodge.com.au

SEE & DO

For more information on all the following tours and activities, visit nitmiluktours.com.au. **Nitnit Dreaming cruises** offer an insight into the cultural significance of the first two gorges. Hear how the stories and beliefs of the traditional owners are woven into the dramatic landscape. **Nabilil Dreaming dinner cruises** reveal the beauty of the gorge at sunset and

the excitement of the bush coming alive with nocturnal creatures. A candlelit three-course buffet meal is served on the boat.

Canoeing gives visitors access to one of the most picturesque canoeing spots in Australia. Half-day, full-day and overnight rentals are available.

Helicopter flights take in one, eight or all 13 gorges with the option of a remote high ridge landing for photo opportunities.

Adventure Swim **helicopter tours** fly over all 13 gorges then deep into the national park to a remote waterfall with a pristine waterhole for swimming.

Jawoyn rock art **helicopter tours** fly to a remote site a guided viewing of rock art dating back 30,000 years.

Bush tucker educational **tours** offer insights into the Jawoyn people’s use of native plants for food and medicine.

WONDER WALL

Above: the colours used in the design and construction of Cicada Lodge echo those of the natural features around it. Opposite: the lodge itself, with its 18 king and twin suites, is the perfect base from which to explore the area and swim in natural waterholes.