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12 | **best weekend**



# GORGING ON ADVENTURE

**Crocs, wallabies and indigenous culture make an unforgettable holiday, writes *Angela Saurine***

**T**he crocodile on the river bank watches us warily with one eye as we paddle our canoe along the tranquil waters of Nitmiluk Gorge. It's a slightly unsettling experience in our rather flimsy craft, but fortunately our new companion is a freshwater croc, not a saltie.

While attacks on humans by saltwater crocodiles are well documented, freshies

have a different jaw structure and are unable to eat anything they can't swallow whole. Therefore, as long as you don't antagonise them, they pose little danger to humans.

Freshwater crocodiles can be found in the gorge all year

round, but the area is cleared of salties at the start of the dry season, when tourists flock to the Northern Territory's Nitmiluk National Park, around 300km south of Darwin.

Previously known as Katherine Gorge, Nitmiluk Gorge is actually made up of 13 gorges stretching over 16km and separated by natural rock

barriers and rapids during the dry season.

Explorer John McDouall Stuart named the gorge in 1862 after Katherine, the second-eldest daughter of James Chambers, the politician who helped fund Stuart's expeditions.

The name was changed back to

the original Nitmiluk — which means "cicada place" — when the Jawoyn people were recognised as traditional owners in 1989.

After our paddling adventure, we return to our accommodation, the 18-room architect-designed



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Cicada Lodge, a joint venture between the Jawoyn people and Indigenous Business Australia that opened in 2013.

But our nature spotting is not quite over — from our balcony, we spy a left-hand wallaby, so called because of the species' habit of waving a front paw in a circular motion.

Her joey lies a few metres away, while another wallaby forages in grass nearby.

We have yet another wallaby encounter the next day, during a trip to Top Didj Cultural Experience And Art Gallery, a short drive away on the way back to Katherine.

There we meet Manuel Pamkal, from the Dalabon tribe, who plays the didgeridoo for us and tells us about his life. As he speaks, a cute joey hops up and starts sniffing people's feet and handbags, even licking my toes before bouncing away.

Pamkal tells us he was born under a paperbark tree beside Nitmiluk's second gorge in 1963. His parents were from Arnhem Land, and had walked with around a dozen relatives for months to reach the area.

"My mother and father would walk around every day looking for food – emu, wallaby, crocodile," the softly spoken Pamkal says.

"I used to watch people having corroborees and ceremonies every day."

When he was a teenager, his father told him Dreamtime stories about the ancient days when animals human, and taught him to do bark painting in the traditional way, showing him how to harvest and burn the stringy bark, straighten it with cross sticks and make it ready for painting.

Pamkal now passes that

knowledge on to us.

In our hands-on, family-friendly experience, we are handed paintbrushes made from reeds from a nearby billabong and taught to paint a small picture, pointing the brush away from us.

Next we take turns learning how to light fire by rubbing two sticks together. Children go first, then the women, then the men. "More!" Pamkal urges one dad, and finally the wood starts to smoke and an ember appears. He encourages him to blow the ember in the grass until it starts to flame.

To finish, Pamkal takes us hunting, with the excited kids following him in a line as if he is the Pied Piper. We take turns learning how to throw a spear at a big, red (fake) kangaroo. My first two attempts are embarrassing, but it's a case of third time lucky as I get close to my target.

Lucky, too, to have had this taste of Northern Territory nature and culture.

angela.saurine@news.com.au

The writer was a guest of NT Tourism, Nitmiluk Tours and Cicada Lodge



Padding on Nitmiluk Gorge (main); and fire lighting (above) and spear throwing (below left) with Manuel Pamkal.

short break

**NITMILUK  
NATIONAL  
PARK, NT**



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# essentials

## GETTING THERE

- Qantas ([Qantas.com.au](http://Qantas.com.au)) and Virgin Australia ([virginaustralia.com.au](http://virginaustralia.com.au)) fly to Darwin.
- Nitmiluk National Park is around 300km south of Darwin. Thrifty Car Rental offers car hire from

Darwin, 08 8924 0000 or [thrifty.com.au](http://thrifty.com.au)

## STAYING THERE

- Bed and breakfast packages at Cicada Lodge start at \$450 per room per night in the wet season and \$550 per night in shoulder season. For \$701 per room per night, the Indulgent

Escape package includes accommodation in a King Lodge room, breakfast, wifi, sunset canapes, a three-course Chef's Table dinner with wine, 08 8974 3100, [cicalodge.com.au](http://cicalodge.com.au)

## DOING THERE

- Nitmiluk Tours offer

cruises, canoe hire, helicopter flights and accommodation at Nitmiluk Campground and Chalets, 1300 146 743, [nitmiluktours.com.au](http://nitmiluktours.com.au)

## MORE

- **When to go:** Peak season is May to October.
- **Details:** [travelnt.com](http://travelnt.com)

