

AUSTRALIA NORTHERN TERRITORY 2019

In the summer of 2019, five members of our hiking group traveled to Australia for a two week vacation. Part of the impetus to go was to climb Ayers Rock, before doing so was permanently banned (October 2019). We also wanted to experience the Outback and Bush country of the Northern Territory, do day hikes in national parks, and to see the unusual animals that live there...especially birds.



Australia is almost the same size as the contiguous United States. How could you possibly see much of the country in two weeks? You can't. So we narrowed our time to a few days in Sydney (our entry point) then spent the rest of the trip in just one area...the Northern Territory (NT). It occupies the central and central northern region of the country.

The Northern Territory is vast (521,000 square miles) but sparsely populated (less than 300,000). Most of the lower two thirds of the territory is called the "Outback" ... the vast, remote, desert-like interior of the country. In the northern most part of the NT, "Bush" refers to any location outside of urban areas.

The largest city in the NT is Darwin, population 200,000. Known as the tropical capital, it is situated in the northern most aspect of the NT, on the Timor Sea. The largest settlement at the southern end of the territory is Alice Springs (30,000), the famous Outback town. The two are connected by Stuart Hwy, which is the main overland road in the NT. There are many National Parks in the NT, but the two most well known are Uluru-Kata Ujuta (home to Ayers Rock), a half days' drive from Alice Springs and Kakadu NP, a four hour drive from Darwin. They were our primary destinations.



I traveled on Air New Zealand, nonstop, from Chicago to Auckland, NZ. It was a 16 hour flight....too long! Then three hours to Sydney where we spent the night, then another three hour flight to Alice Springs. We rented a car and stayed in the area for the next six days. Then one last flight on to Darwin, where we rented another car and spent six more days there, exploring the region. At the end of the trip we did all these same flights again, in rapid succession! That's the biggest problem with traveling to the other side of the world.

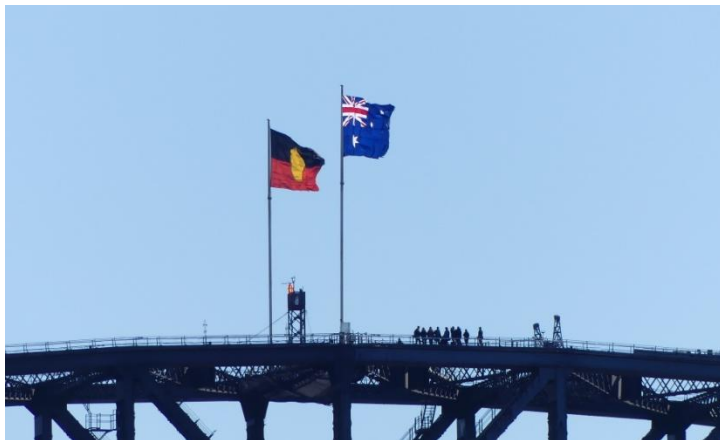


The indigenous people of Australia are known as Aboriginals. They comprise many ethnic groups that are the earliest known inhabitants of the continent, dating back at least 50,000 years. The term 'black' is used to refer to indigenous Australians...not only skin color, but also to the Aboriginal heritage and culture. We saw many of these people as we traveled throughout the NT.

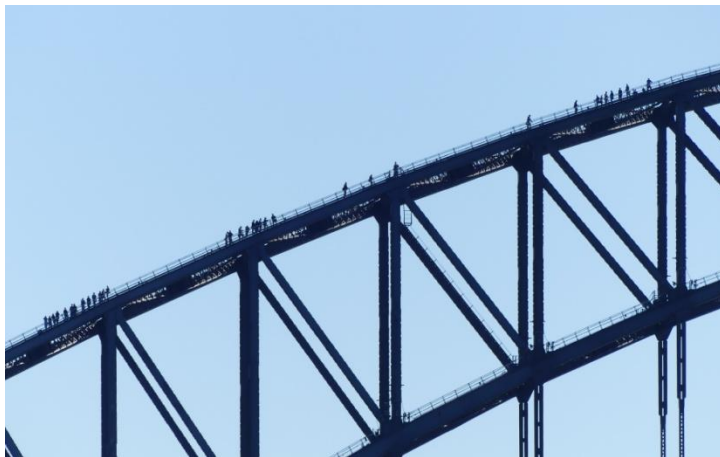
Aboriginal Hand Print. The main function of the stencils was to record a people's presence and association with a site.



We took a sunrise ferry ride from Sydney (Circular Quay) to the coastal town of Manly. You get to see all the famous sites in Sydney Harbour, including the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge.



The iconic Harbour Bridge is where fireworks are launched on New Year's Eve and where Paul Hogan (Crocodile Dundee) used to work. See the people on the top of the bridge by the flags? They paid \$100 to



climb to the top. Tourists walk up a steel stairway with guardrails. A safety belt worn around the waist is attached by chains to the guardrails to ensure safety. There is a guide, and patrons wear special outdoor gear as well.



It was a three hour flight from Sydney to Alice Springs. Nothing down there except the reddish, pink colored Outback. We spent two nights at a Backpacker's Hostel and one in a motel. No outdoor camping on this trip!

One of the bars in town was just like being on a set from the movie "Crocodile Dundee". Here we are getting our daily hydration fluid...Australian beer!





Every morning we set out for a National Park to day hike. In July, it's winter Down Under. Temps were in the 60's during the day and 40's at night. It was also the dry season, so no rain. We were there a few months before the terrible Bush fires began.



In the West MacDonnell National Park we visited the Standley Chasm, a unique geographical formation. The gap in the mountain is 80 meters high. The reason for the striking color is due to iron found in the rocks....as these minerals rust over the years, they can appear almost red in color. Sunlight at different angles can also cause the color of the rocks to change from red to pink, to orange, even purple.



Only five minutes from the chasm we came to a section of the Larapinta Trail. We hiked up through a gully and emerged on top of a high pass. From here we were able to look back and see a panoramic view of the Outback. The Larapinta trail is a 223 kilometer, long-distance walking tract, within the West MacDonnell Ranges. This tract has been listed as one of the top ten walks in the world.



One of my objectives was to see Budgerigars (parakeets) in the wild. We visited Trepina Gorge Nature Park, which is a site in the Outback where they come to breed. Unfortunately we saw none. The picture above is from a bulletin board in the park. They roost in the trees alongside the creek. However, being the dry season, the creek was empty and the birds had gone elsewhere. We should have come six months later when the creek would be flowing and the plant life more lush. Being from America, we don't seem to think of budgies as coming from such an arid, harsh environment, but they do. This is true of cockatiels as well.



Ayers Rock...also known as Uluru, is a large, monolithic sandstone rock formation located about 200 miles from Alice Springs. It was a five hour drive to get there. The Rock is a sacred place of the local Aboriginal people, as well as a UNESCO world heritage site.



Ayers Rock and several other rock formations lie within Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. There is a small park village ten miles from Ayers Rock which has lodging, camping, restaurants, a gas station, and shopping for food and gifts. We stayed there. There is really only a few things for tourists to do here....walk or ride bicycles on designated trails, take lots of pictures, learn about the local Aboriginal culture, and climb Ayers Rock. Photographing Ayers Rock at sunset is amazing...the mountain literally changes color to a deep orange color!



The Anangu (local indigenous people) are the traditional "owners" of the Rock and this site is holy to them. But also because of superstition and political correctness, the agency that manages Uluru, (Parks Australia) has banned climbing Ayers Rock beginning in late October, 2019. Because of this, tourist numbers were way up this summer, many of whom wanted to climb the Rock before it was banned. Ourselves included.



Uluru is 1141 feet high. There's only one place where it can be safely climbed. After an initial, unaided ascent of several hundred feet, one reaches a chain handhold which continues to the top of the steep slope.



It's definitely a bit scary, especially as you get higher and higher. An accidental slip and you could fall all the way to the bottom. More than 35 climbers have died on the Rock. The climb is closed if there are high winds or rain.



That's me, climbing near the top, finally reaching the last metal post. Beautiful views from up there!



Once on top, you still have to continue walking on the undulating surface for more than half an hour to finally reach the highest point.



At the summit!

Picture time.

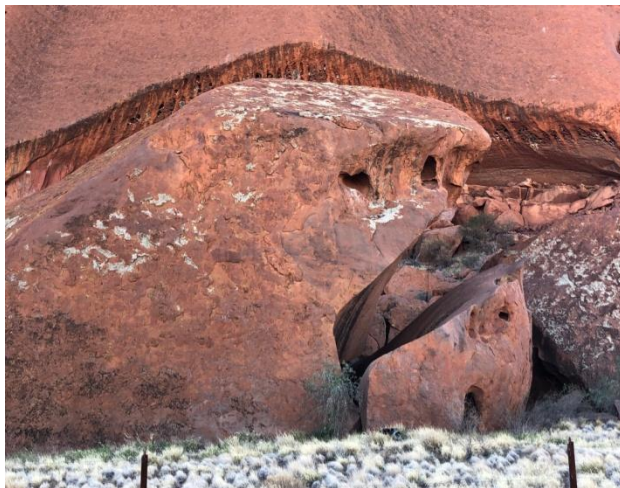


You have to get down the same way you got up.

It's more than a little daunting when you have to look down as you proceed. But we all made it safely.

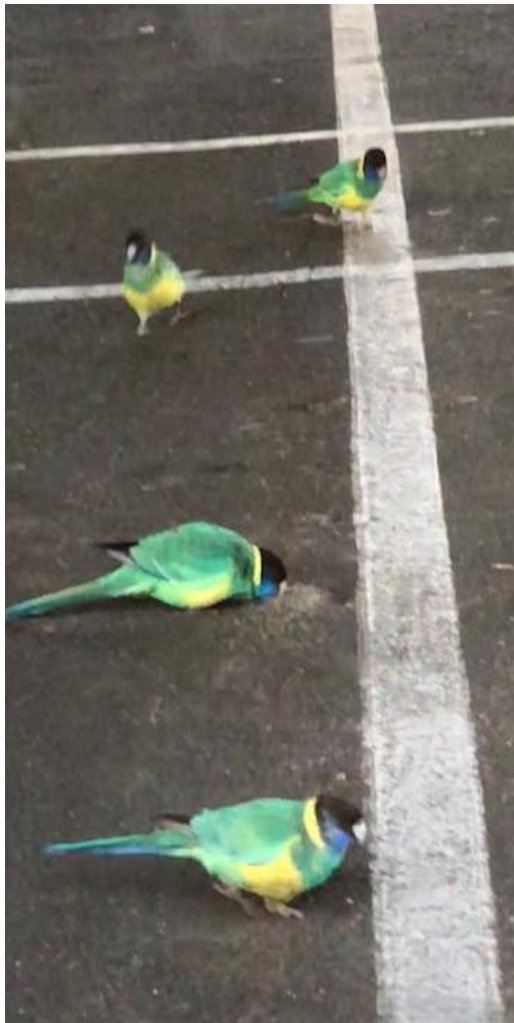


The following morning we rode bicycles on a nine mile path around the base of Uluru. It gave us a different geographical perspective of the Rock.



This rock formation looks like the head of a tortoise. Lots of flies...if you stop too long, they surround your face looking for moisture.

We didn't see as many psittacine birds as I thought we would. In Alice Springs we did see two types. On the left are Port Lincoln's, a type of parakeet, slightly larger than a cockatiel. They were early morning scavengers in parking lots and on city streets. More ubiquitous were Rose-breasted Cockatoos. They literally were as common as pigeons. Locals must have known we were tourists because we kept taking so many pictures of them.





On to Darwin, where our first night was spent at a park festival. We celebrated with everyone as the sun set over the ocean.



A half days' drive from Darwin is Kakadu National Park. It covers an area of 7600 square miles. The exact origin of the name is unknown but the anglicized version of the word is "Cockatoo". Aboriginal people have occupied this region continuously for centuries. There are many Aboriginal cultural sites still present with various depictions of rock artwork. These traditional land owners jointly manage the park with the federal agency known as Parks Australia.

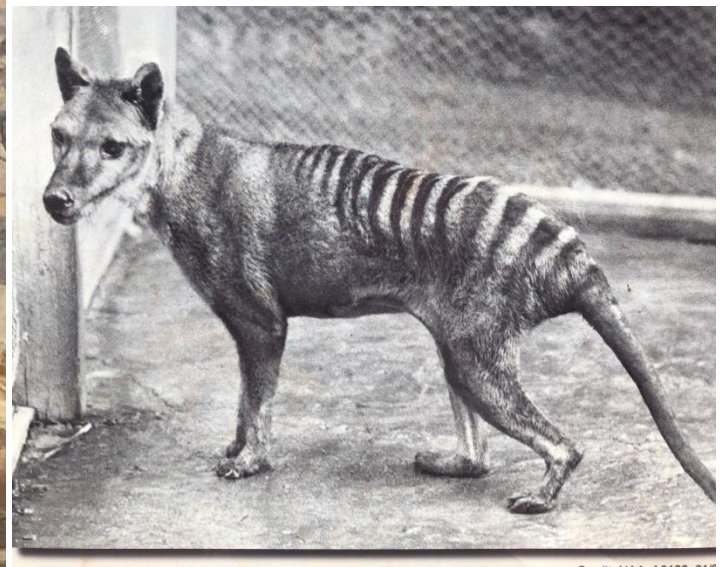
Geographically, within Kakadu NP, is the Arnhem Escarpment, a huge plateau with rough terrain, spectacular waterfalls, and high cliffs. Much of the park consists of forested lowlands and floodplains (including four major river systems, tidal flats, and estuaries). During the wet season there is much flooding and when the water eventually recedes back into the rivers, it also drains into isolated waterholes known as billabongs.



The park is so big that you end up driving to various locations where you disembark, and then walk on pathways or trails to get to points of interest, as seen above. From atop a rocky ledge, we had a great view of a floodplain with the ocean in the distance.



A rocky outcropping affords shelter for an ancient Aboriginal encampment. Artwork depicts a Side-necked turtle. The animal below is a Tasmanian Tiger (Thylacine), thought to have gone extinct in the 1930's. These were carnivorous marsupials. The rock painting on the left, from hundreds of years earlier, shows the same animal.





Fires are part of the landscape in Kakadu NP. However they are less threatening in northern Australia than in southern Australia because many of the trees here are fire-resistant and smaller plants simply regenerate more quickly.

Controlled burns have been utilized for thousands of years as a management tool. Aside from clearing out excess undergrowth, fire was used by the Aboriginals to flush out prey. The tender new shoots in burned out areas also attracted Wallabies, which were then easier to hunt.

As we were driving through the park one day, an unattended controlled burn came within 20 feet of the road. Notice all those black birds...they are Whistling Kites, a type of raptor. We got out of the car to see what they were after...grasshoppers. The poor insects were either burned alive or faced certain death by being devoured, when they tried to cross the road.



Cathedral termite mound. This one is about 14 feet high. Made from mud, plant debris, and termite saliva, the hardened mound functions as a ventilation shaft which regulates temperature and humidity for the nest...which is actually underground. Mound construction is an ongoing process that can take decades. Pretty amazing for an insect that is also blind!

Notice the barren ground from a recent burn. The trees are partially blackened, but not dead.

We saw no kangaroos and only a few wallabies, usually grazing near roadsides at dusk. We did see two Rock Wallabies up close. They were small, only 20 pounds.





Nourlangie Rock with a billabong in the foreground. A scene from Crocodile Dundee was shot on this exact site.



Billabongs are a great place to see lots of waterfowl and other interesting birds.



We were warned not to walk along the edge of any river or billabong. Crocodiles can lay hidden just off shore. Any movement can trigger them to lunge out of the water.

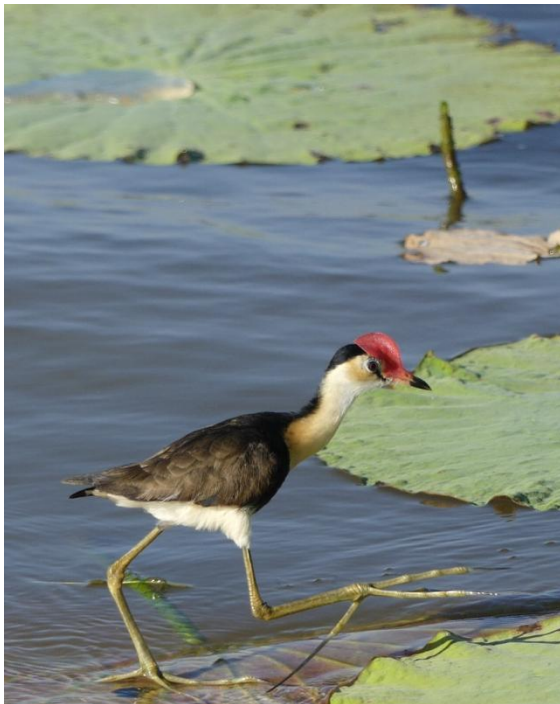


Cruising on a Billabong

Blue-winged Kookaburra

Comb-crested Jacana

Saltwater Crocodile





Cockatoos in Kakadu. The birds in the top two pictures are called Bare-eyed Cockatoos. In Australia they call them Corellas. They are grazing on grass. The bird in the bottom picture is a Greater Sulfur-crested Cockatoo.

For me, the one bird I wanted to see more than any other was the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. It wasn't until the afternoon of the last day that we finally saw some. Thanks, Dave Crooks, for spotting them.



Beautiful ventral red tail feathers



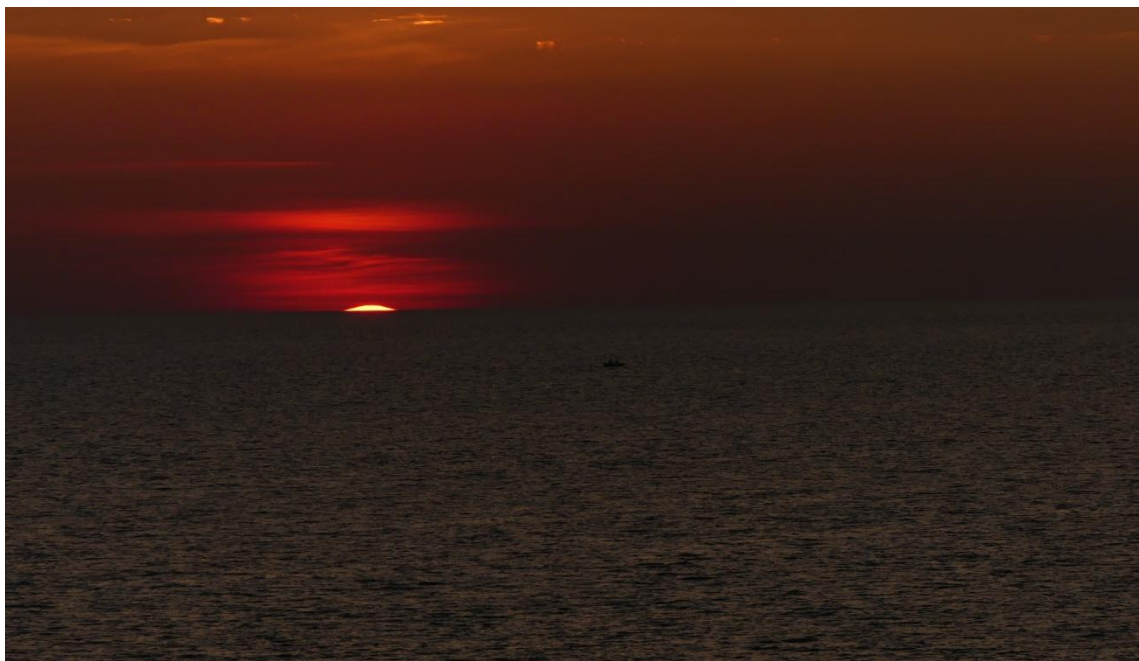
Eating eucalypti seed pods



Our group

**Jim Head
Larry Ring
Scott McD
Dave Kloster
Dave Crooks**

**Sunset over
the Timor Sea**



My parents traveled extensively in their retirement years. My brother, Glenn, reminded me that with the conclusion of this trip, I had completed the trifecta of what my dad considered his three most memorable adventures...going to Machu Picchu, a whitewater river trip in the Grand Canyon, and climbing Ayers Rock. My father died two years ago. I wasn't quite able to do all three before he passed.

