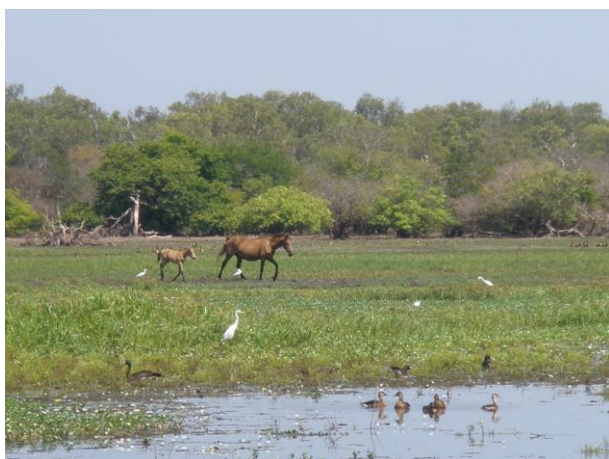


Hello Dear Reader,

The last episode saw us at *Jabiru in Kakadu*, in the far northern part of Australia, in the Northern Territory. We pick it up now moving on, heading off to visit the yellow waters as they are known and to stay at *Gagudju Lodge at Coinda*.

Yellow Waters Cruise. The *Gagudju Lodge* is the only place where one can stay overnight when taking the Yellow Waters Cruise. We decided to go at 9am, rather than at the crack of dawn which is a popular time, because of the opportunity to see more wildlife. We took on a two-hour trip and saw an abundance of birds, crocodiles and quite a few brumbies.



A brumby is an Australian wild horse and they have been used by the aborigines when tracking and working on the land. The cruise boat went very close to many crocodiles; one was fascinating to watch, it had a huge dead Tandanus catfish and was tossing it around in the water to break it up and make it easier to eat.



Fisherman with Barramundi just caught



Our next stop was at the *Mary River Roadhouse* where my husband received a free cup of coffee, an incentive by the Northern Territory government to aid weary travellers. At their information centre were many Aboriginal paintings and other products for the tourist.



Nice clouds and scenery on the way to Pine Creek

Pine Creek. It was hot and I was looking forward to a swim at Pine Creek, where we planned to stay the night. However, though the Lazy Lizard Hotel was a most unique building, with hand carved posts holding up the ceiling, there was algae in the pool and the accommodation was barely adequate. The bathroom had two of the three toilets out of order and a very cracked, hand carved wooden hand basin in the shape of a tortoise. Although we were weary and hot, we kept going on to Katherine.



Jabiru Bird



Hand carved wooden basin in shape of tortoise.

Katherine. Katherine was a treat - a real city! Even a shopping mall! It is second only in size to the capital city, Darwin in the Northern Territory. We stayed three nights at the *Low Level Caravan Park*, which had a 25 metre salt water swimming pool, fabulous bistro and free entertainment each night. I can recommend this caravan park, it has great accessories, including cooking facilities and two utility blocks. In one utility block, there were nine showers and toilets, seven hand basins and a baby bath. The laundry has four clothes dryers, eight washing machines, iron and ironing board. Wow, imagine that!



River scene near Katherine

Cutta Cutta Caves. These awesome caves are 30 km south of Katherine. *Cutta Cutta Caves Nature Park* covers 1,499 hectares of limestone (Karst) landscape, which is limited to only a few locations in Northern Australia. Spectacular features such as Karst formations and complex cave networks are a feature of the Park. Tower-like masses of Tindal limestone with some supporting large boulders and various surface depressions are other features of this landscape. It was a ten minute walk through and around the limestone to the entrance of the caves.



We arrived there and were met by Russell, an Aboriginal guide, who took us on a 45 minute tour down into the caves. Climbing gingerly down the steps we walked in for 200 metres. The cave environment is home to a variety of wildlife. The harmless brown tree snake, *Boiga irregularis*, is often seen coiled upon cave ledges. We saw a red and white rock python. Five species of cave-dwelling bat occur in the deeper areas of the main cave, although most are rarely seen. Two of the species

recorded, the ghost bat, *Macroderma gigas*, and the orange horse-shoe bat, *Rhinonicteris aurantius*, are rare and highly specialised species.

Two species of blind shrimp, *Parisia ungius* and *Parisia gracilis*, which have no body pigment and are completely blind, inhabit the cave. The only other closely related species of shrimp is found in Madagascar, off the coast of Africa. One shrimp is only 3-4 ml in size; so minuscule and live off the droppings from the many bats inhabiting the caves. The most striking feature of this habitat is the native fig, *Ficus virens* var. *dasycarpa*. The caves provide an easy passageway for the figs long roots to reach the water table.



Red & White Rock Python



Fig tree at entrance to caves

It is an interesting story how the caves were discovered, as a farmer lost cattle that had fallen down into it. Unfortunately too we heard of the intentional damage to the stalagmites and stalactites: During the 2nd world war soldiers went underground and, to amuse themselves, would shoot them for sport and they would break off.

Katherine Gorge. Our choice was to take a four hour, three-gorge tour, which entailed climbing out of consecutive boats, walking over land into the next boat and gorge. We travelled for half an hour to the first gorge, then climbed out to walk across to the next gorge. On the way, our guide showed us Aboriginal wall or cave paintings.

This trip is most highly recommended. It was one of the most incredible experiences for us, as the scenery was magnificent almost beyond my belief. It was also fun watching the yellow canoes being lifted out of the water and carried across land on the stones in between gorges. It was still very hot and we were so thankful for the ice cold water on board and snacks; we finished up with an hour's swimming at the swimming hole at the first gorge.



Let me share a little more about the day. The trees and plants are utterly amazing, as so many, grown against the rock walls, often thrive in minimal soil. Although we did not see any crocodiles, the freshwater crocs are rather shy and we were assured there would have been many underneath the surface. The swimming hole was chock a block with native fish. This was of particular interest to us as we used to own an aquarium shop, specialising in Australian native fish.



On the edge of the water under the trees, we saw a white floating ball which gave information about the type of crocodile according to teeth marks left on it after a bite. Salt water crocodiles are vicious and travel upstream to this area with the floods. Hence the need for crocodile traps on the edge of the water. When the Salties, as they are known, are caught, they are then transported back to a more suitable place and released.



Here we left the Kakadu region and travelled in the direction of the *Lichtfield National Park*, where there are walking tracks and many picturesque waterfalls

Edith Falls. Travelling down the Stuart Highway, we arrived at Edith Falls and decided



to walk along the tremendously difficult track up to the Upper Edith Falls. It took us 40 minutes and it was well worth it, as swimming beneath these gorgeous waterfalls was an unforgettable experience. The walk was steep and, once again, we saw what looked like a dead tree, yet holding a few pieces of fruit on it - so extraordinary the abundance and opportunities for Aboriginals to survive on this harsh, hot land.

Upper Edith Falls

Lower Edith Falls. Making it back safely to the park alongside the Lower Edith Falls, we were impressed to see a Striker Bower Bird, which had red feathers on its head, which it puffs up to display to his female.

Wangi Tourist Park. A little off the beaten track, and the only dirt road that we had to travel on to drive into it, my fond memory here was the huge number of wallabies crazing around our van in the night. There were quite a few cane toads also, a huge menace in Australia. The cane toads were originally introduced to eat the cane sugar beetle, they did not and are quickly spreading across the states. The bad thing about them is that they are poisonous and if any animal would consume water contaminated by the toad, they can die.

Wangi Falls. The Wangi Falls are the most readily accessible one, with a short walk from the car park to arrive at the lake beneath the falls. To the right is a boardwalk to a viewing platform where one has an overall view of the whole lake and the falls. Plunging after that into the cool waters for a swim, the water being fairly still as it was getting towards the end of the dry season. There were a few hot spots of water and some areas of the pool had a sandy bottom. It was a lot of fun swimming with the Australian native fish. We fancied seeing a sooty grunter and some purple spot gudgeons as well as some rainbow fish on the water's edge.

Greenant Creek. The other great highlight of the trip for me. We walked again to the falls, which are a 2.7 kilometres round trip from the car park. It was a tough walk, not paved in any way, with large stones and roots to walk on, yet so worth it. It is a solitary place, and we walked alongside a monsoon rainforest up to a couple of pools at the top of perhaps a 200 foot drop to the base of the mountain. The base of the falls is an Aboriginal sacred site, where it is not permitted to swim in the creek. Along the walk we saw some black wild pigs rushing out onto the path, as well as birds, butterflies and

fabulous monsoon forest trees, vines and shrubs. This rainforest could have equally been on the Queensland coast, as there were many philodendrons growing up in large numbers. The swim was a relief in the heat of the day and lo and behold, another creature joined us in the form of a 2' goanna. He slowly and purposefully walked along the rocks and over the side of the waterfall. We saw him again, as apparently he had stepped off to the side, rather than what had appeared straight down the side of the waterfall.



Falls above Greenant Creek



Goanna at falls

Leaving Litchfield we stopped under shady trees alongside the *Butterfly Farm* at *Batchelor*, on the outskirts of the park. Very hot and humid here, the butterflies were of course very beautiful and we saw many of the 'wild' type of guppy fishes in the little stream flowing through the butterfly house. Interesting too, some boxes had arrived with varying sizes of cocoons, which had come up from Melbourne to stock up the butterfly numbers.

Berry Springs. Our last night on the road was at *Tumbling Waters Caravan Park*, which had many birds inhabiting the grounds. We saw finches, guinea fowl, pea hens and a glorious male peacock. A lovely caravan park, with much free entertainment during tourist season and wireless interconnect throughout the park. Yeah!



The Territory's Wildest Wildlife Experience. Driving back to Darwin we stopped here which is like a mighty big zoo. It is large, providing a shuttle bus from one feature to another. This place is a 45 minute drive from Darwin's CBD. Some of it includes a Billabong, Nocturnal House, Sandbar and Nocturnal House. Two favourite memories are hand feeding

the fresh water stingrays at the Sandbar. With my feet planted firmly into the sand, I held pieces of fish and the stingrays swam up to me, sucking the fish into their mouths. They felt very soft underneath, the top being a little rough.



Lynette feeding fish to large freshwater stingray



The other good memory was the Flight Deck, watching the show of birds flying to their handlers. Afterwards, we were able to take close ups of some of the birds.

By this time on the trip I realised that living in the moment each day eradicated the need to be thinking too much or planning ahead more than necessary. It was very cool, we had bonded more by being so close to nature and there is such a special energy being in the Northern Territory. There were the caves, the difficult walks to places of great beauty in Kakdu and Litchfield National Park. We felt quiet and heart connected, more tolerant of each other. Flying over Arnhem Land was a moving experience and my understanding of the Aboriginal culture has been enhanced by this trip.

Until we meet again...



Love, light & laughter,
Lynette Mitchell x o