

TRAVEL / NORTHERN TERRITORY

CALL OF THE WILD

Nothing quite prepares you for the stunning sight of such a magical landscape and, no matter what the season, Nitmiluk Gorge is sure to leave a lasting impression, writes **SUE WALLACE.**

MOONLIGHT is shining on the calm waters of Katherine River in Nitmiluk Gorge as our candle flickers in the breeze and we dine on barramundi and freshwater prawns.

In the dark, my thoughts turn to stories told earlier by the Jawoyn people, who are custodians of Nitmiluk National Park.

Under shady trees we learnt the meaning of Nitmiluk, the Jawoyn name for Katherine Gorge, which was given by Nabilil, an important figure of the Jawoyn Creation Time.

"As he travels through the country he comes to the gorge where he hears the cicada crying 'nit nit nit' and so the name was given," says one of the Jawoyn people.

All is quiet on the river now except for the sound of cicadas and the story becomes all the more poignant.

Nitmiluk Gorge is one of those majestic places where the landscape takes centre stage.

Nothing prepares you for the grandeur of the red sandstone cliffs, which date back 23 million years, and the diverse and spectacular landscape.

Even those who have been here before still marvel at nature's brilliance.

The landscape is an extraordinary mix of ancient escarpments, deep gorges and waterways, limestone caves, thermal springs and nature reserves.

Located in Nitmiluk National Park, it is one of Australia's most stunning attractions with 13 deep gorges stretching over 16 kilometres and a it's sight enjoyed by thousands of visitors every year.

It's the colours, shapes and that sense of "age" that captures your imagination and leaves you staring in awe at the pleated rock formations, blue water and green bushland.

Carved by years of weathering and water erosion, the cycle continues each season as the monsoons dump up to two metres of rain on the Arnhem Land plateau.

Just a 30-minute drive from Katherine, the Nitmiluk Visitor's Centre provides all the information you need about the history, flora and fauna of the gorge.

There are 18 separate plant communities with woodland and monsoon forests covering much of the region and the park is home to more than 192 species of birds.

On a walk we spot red-collared lorikeets, red-winged parrots, northern rosellas, red-tailed black cockatoos and a blue-winged kookaburra.

A great way to immerse yourself in the area is a stay at the new aptly named Cicada Lodge, which is nestled in the natural bush high above the ancient waterways.

It is the latest venture of the Jawoyn people and makes an ideal luxury eco-friendly base from which to explore the area.

Guests are welcomed with a glass of bubbles and shown around the lodge, which features the colourful indigenous artwork of John Dewar and others.

It doesn't take long to feel at home at Cicada Lodge. It features 18 airconditioned, elevated rooms with private balconies.

Each spacious room has views across the sandstone country above the gorge including lush gullies and broad valleys.

From the balcony I watch six young left-hand wallabies, known as Jotet in the Jawoyn language, look at me before heading bush.

I later discover they are called left-land wallabies due to their habit of waving their front paws in circular motions.



Jawoyn people are custodians of the park.

Breakfast is served in the glass-fronted restaurant, which overlooks a pool that's perfect for a quick dip after a busy day.

Sunset drinks and canapes are served in the evening giving guests a chance to mingle and chat about the day's events.

Dining is a treat at Cicada Lodge where the

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chef, Kenneth Clapham, incorporates native Australian foods into a contemporary menu.

"We mix and match traditional herbs and fruits with local produce from the region and the tastes are sensational," he says.

The menu features treats such as saffron-poached Northern Territory banana prawns with avocado and preserved lemon salad, barramundi with fresh spinach and prawns in paperbark and a finale of rosewater-scented milk pudding with stewed rhubarb and chantilly cream.

General manager Nikki Allison says it doesn't take guests long to unwind here.

"As soon as they push the buzzer on the front gate they are immersed in a different world," she says. "It's all about doing as much as you want to or sitting back and watching what unfolds around you."

There are many ways to enjoy the park — by foot following walking trails, canoeing along the scenic waterways, taking a cruise, or you can enjoy a bird's-eye view by helicopter. In 25 minutes you can see the whole gorge complex.

Cicada Lodge also offers helicopter flights to remote locations where you can swim in crystal-clear waters, be dropped near the top of a gorge system and canoe down or fly to remote rock art sites with an indigenous guide to interpret images.

Many of the rock art sites in the region have not been accessible before to the public. Some have been carbon dated to 40,000 years old. The two-hour cruise visits the first two gorges, the four-hour cruise visits the first three and the eight-hour gorge safari explores up to the fifth gorge.

Our sunset cruise visits the first two gorges and involves an easy walk over the rocks before returning to the boat for a gourmet dinner of crocodile bisque, local barramundi with lemon myrtle, salads and ginger and coconut creme brulee.

Throughout the cruise our eyes are peeled for freshwater crocodiles, known as freshies, which are very timid and rarely bite unless provoked, unlike their saltwater cousins.

Our guide spots a small "freshie" that doesn't hang around for long. We also spot turtles and water monitors. As spectacular as it is in the dry season, the wet season is even a more memorable sight, according to our guide.

The onset of the big wet resurrects the gorge's waterfalls flushing out the waterholes, leaving crystal-clear water in its path and injecting a splash of vibrant green into the countryside.

But no matter what season it is, the Nitmiluk Gorge is stunning. As for those cicadas, after the cruise they are in full song and like the story of Nabilil, it is something that leaves a lasting impression.



ABOVE: Canoeing along the scenic waterways is one way to experience the majestic landscape. BELOW: The Cicada Lodge is open all year 'round.



Travel notes

WET SEASON SPECIAL
Cicada Lodge is the only luxury property in the Top End to open all year 'round.

The two-night Luxury Escape is priced at \$715.50 per person twin share and includes two night's accommodation in a luxury king room; a personal welcome to the property with French champagne on arrival; complimentary drinks and tapas each evening at sunset on the pool deck; cooked breakfast each morning; and a three-course dinner and wine each evening.

A stay at Cicada Lodge also includes Bvlgari guest amenities; free in-house movies; free WiFi and broadband and personal tour desk service for tour arrangements.

For bookings and inquiries contact Cicada Lodge on 1800 242 232 or email reservations@cicadalodge.com.au.

For Northern Territory tourism details visit travelnt.com.



SHORT STAYS

MELBOURNE



Vibe Hotel Carlton offers a 'Strictly Business' package.

Business sense

TRAVELLING to Melbourne on business? Vibe Hotel Carlton's "Strictly Business" package is available from \$142 a night.

The package includes one night's accommodation, a one-course dinner and drink, buffet breakfast for one person and complimentary WiFi and parking.

Vibe Hotel Carlton is just 10 minutes away from Melbourne's city centre, take the Number 19 tram.

It is also walking distance to Lygon Street, the birthplace of Melbourne's cafe culture.

And at the end of an active day, relax in the courtyard by the pool, wander through Carlton and experience the unique Melbourne lifestyle or linger in the spirited atmosphere of Curve Restaurant + Bar.

Book (best online rates guaranteed) visit www.vibehotels.com.au.

SOUTH COAST



Explore Victoria's south-west coast on a guided walk.

Making tracks

VICTORIA-based walking tour operator Bothfeet has announced extra dates for the 2013/14 summer season for their selection of guided walks.

Unprecedented demand for the four-day/three-night Twelve Apostles Guided Walk has seen 20 extra departures added for the season between October and May next year.

The Twelve Apostles Walk is a lodge-based walking journey that takes in 56 kilometres of Victoria's south-west coast with the final day's walk culminating at the Twelve Apostles.

Separate from but parallel to the Great Ocean Road, the walk traverses east to west and guests stay all three nights at Bothfeet's purpose-built hiking lodge at Johanna Beach where gourmet meals and creature comforts greet walkers at the end of each day.

The Bothfeet Lodge offers foot spas, a gear drying room, massage on demand, onsite chef and en suite bathrooms.

Single travellers are catered for in single rooms with no supplement required. Accessed from Melbourne, Bothfeet includes transfers and a scenic helicopter flight over the Twelve Apostles before returning to Melbourne CBD or Melbourne Airport.

Prices start from \$1995 per person for the four-day guided Twelve Apostles Walk including all accommodation, meals, guide and helicopter tour. For further details of Bothfeet walks, visit bothfeet.com.au, email info@bothfeet.com.au or phone 1300 767 416.