

# The West Australian

News Travel

## Darwin's new vibe

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As I wander through the beachside market during a Darwin day's last light, trying to decide whether to go for Asian, grilled barra or a croc roll for dinner, a deafening whipcrack punctuated by childrens' laughter pierces the steamy air.

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Through the meandering crowds and hippy clothing stalls, I see a stockman teaching a boy of around 10 how to crack a crocodile stock whip in front of a buoyant crowd and a stall sign that reads Mick's Whips.

The crack is made when part of the whip moves faster than the speed of sound, and the activity is not just about cattle mustering in the Top End, it's also a competitive sport. An eager queue of boys, most in their early teens, is waiting for a turn.

Personally, I'm more tempted by the sunset so I grab a lime and mango smoothie and a southeast Asian curry and slip through the stalls and onto Mindil Beach.

And as the fiery ball melts into the tranquil expanse of the Timor Sea, I think what a special place this is.

Darwin is a tiny outpost - just 100,000 people - on the edge of the desert and the edge of the sea. Many Australians never make it here - and they should feel disappointed.

## THE CHANGES WE'VE SEEN

My last trip here was 10 years ago, but as I was told by my taxi driver earlier that day, Darwin has changed. "You won't recognise the place," he told me proudly.

The Northern Territory capital certainly seems to be enjoying a heyday. It is carving a reputation as a centre for world-class art galleries, fine restaurants and a throbbing night scene. And the population is burgeoning - made up largely, it seems, of curious folk from the southern states keen to try life in the tropics.

The first major change I notice is the new Darwin Waterfront precinct, a short walk from the centre of town. This is a new complex of bars, eateries and art galleries, all enjoying views of a delicious tropical sea - but most enticingly, there are two stinger-and crocodile-free swimming oases where you can take a cooling plunge.

## ACCOMMODATION

Thankfully I'm staying at the Vibe Waterfront, which overlooks the precinct, so am able to start my days with a dip in the netted lagoon (it's a stunning day and I'm the only one swimming at 7am, sigh ...) and finish my afternoons in the wave lagoon, a large chlorinated pool that creates waves of up to 1.7 metres (who said you cant boogie-board in Darwin?).

If you do want to swim with saltwater crocs though, you can - at least behind transparent acrylic panels - at Crocosaurus Cove. The city centre wildlife park has an easy-going feel, with crocs lying nonchalantly on rocks and awkward, goggle-eyed hatchlings learning to swim in the water. In fact, the beasts appear so at ease that they don't even seem to notice us gliding tantalisingly on the other side of the panel.

After farewelling my scaly swimming companions, I'm back on Mitchell St, the city's main drag, and I see the taxi man was right - this place has changed.

Darwin is still pleasantly low-rise, but there has been plenty of development and there are a few shiny new buildings about.

## DINING

One of these is the Hanuman Restaurant a few doors down. It's a sophisticated and airy Asian dining room that in Sydney or Melbourne would likely intimidate thong-wearers like me. Not in Darwin. There isn't a sniff of superiority as I'm shown to my table. And the curries and tropical cocktails are pretty good, too.

## ABORIGINAL ART

One of the draws of a trip to Darwin, of course, is the quality and comparatively low cost of the Aboriginal art available here (by the time works reach Sydney or Melbourne, there's usually been plenty of middlemen to hike up prices).

There are countless galleries and shops around town that sell paintings, fibre sculptures and weavings made from local communities (I am particularly drawn to the huge, circular, woven floor rugs).

Most places sell the style of art typical to the Top End and Arnhem Land, which uses cross-hatching and "X-ray" drawings made up mostly of lines in white, black and red. (Bold colours and dots hail from Central Australian communities.)

## MORE TO DO

After an afternoon of art and history, another tropical sunset draws near and in my few days in Darwin, I discover two more great places to experience it. The first is the Deckchair Cinema, a short walk from the Waterfront, where I enjoy an appropriately outback Aussie flick - Red Dog - next to the ocean, under the stars and surrounded by bats.

The second is the Darwin Ski Club (home of the NT Water Ski Association) at Fannie Bay, a locals' secret. The bar is little more than an open-sided hut with a corrugated metal roof set among billowing palm trees by the beach.

Locals stroll about barefoot with stubbies in their hands as young kids play contentedly on the sand, way back from the water where their parents have warned them crocodiles may roam.

The Ski Club also serves up decent pub grub and as the sun sets, a pleasant covers band bursts into song.

As I sit back, nursing my clammy body with a cold beer, I think that no matter how much this city has changed, at its heart it still has the wonderful vibe of a laid-back town in the wilderness.

## FACT FILE

**GETTING THERE:** Darwin is regularly serviced by air from all major Australian cities by Qantas ( [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au) ), Virgin Australia ( [www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com) ) and Jetstar ( [www.jetstar.com](http://www.jetstar.com) ).

**STAYING THERE:** Vibe Waterfront Darwin is a comfortable and easy-going hotel overlooking Darwin's new Waterfront complex and a short walk from the city's CBD. Visit

[www.vibehotels.com.au](http://www.vibehotels.com.au)

**EATING THERE:** Hanuman Restaurant, 28 Mitchell St, Darwin. Visit [www.hanuman.com.au](http://www.hanuman.com.au)

Darwin Ski Club, 20 Conacher St, Fannie Bay. Visit [www.darwinskiclub.com.au](http://www.darwinskiclub.com.au)

**PLAYING THERE:** Mindil Beach market runs on Thursday and Sunday evenings from the beginning of April to the end of October, featuring food stalls, local art and craft, and live music. Visit [www.mindil.com.au](http://www.mindil.com.au)

For a Saturday morning market experience, check out Parap Village Markets in the inner suburb of Parap - a low-key, smoky melange of southeast Asian cooking carts, fresh-cut jungle flowers, fragrant fruits and local crafts.

Crococaurus Cove, centrally located on Mitchell St, has the largest display of Australian reptiles in the world (including lots of crocodiles). Visit [www.crococauruscove.com](http://www.crococauruscove.com)

The Deckchair cinema specialises in independent, art house, cult classics and Australian films. For information and screenings, visit [www.deckchaircinema.com.au](http://www.deckchaircinema.com.au)

The writer was a guest of Northern Territory Tourism.

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