

Aboriginal adventure in Kakadu National Park

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Nov 1, 2005



Kakadu National Park's Yellowwater Billabong

Photo: courtesy, Tourism Australia

Local Hangouts

Melbourne native Cate Blanchett escapes the city's hot, dry climate at Elwood Beach, a family-friendly spot four miles south of the city on Port Phillip Bay; the actress learned to bodysurf at Portsea Back Beach, 60 miles south of Melbourne on the tip of the Mornington Peninsula.

SAB LORD is demonstrating a traditional bush remedy for sore throats. Grabbing a nest of green ants from a paperbark tree, the 45-year-old safari guide explains that these nests work nicely for a quick vitamin-C fix. Grinning impishly, he flattens the fist-size morsel, rolls it into a ball, pops it into his mouth, and begins sucking the lemony enzymes from the ants' posteriors. Within seconds, he spits out the remnants of his snack and offers a fresh nest to a rapt audience of novice bush foragers.

The small group has gathered in Kakadu National Park—a 4.9-million-acre expanse of red cliffs etched with ancient rock carvings, and verdant wetlands rich in birdlife and croc-infested billabongs, 186 miles east of Darwin in the Northern Territory—to learn about Yolngu (East Arnhem Land Aboriginals) beliefs and practices. Lord, an ex-pro rugby player, a white guy, and owner of Lords Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris, would be an unlikely guide to indigenous culture except for one key fact: Thanks to a childhood spent on a water-buffalo station in Kakadu, he was ceremonially adopted by an Aboriginal family in the Mamakala community.

He learned the ant-nest trick—and plenty more about indigenous foods, or "bush tucker"—from his adoptive grandmother, Rosie Lunduy. Four feet nine inches tall and utterly engaging ("Leeches are some tasty tucker!" she cries), Lunduy is one of several Aborigines leading food-foraging tours through Kakadu and adjoining Arnhem Land, a 24-million-acre Aboriginal-owned wilderness.

The entertaining duo of Lord and Lunduy will help you carve a digging stick to root up bush yams and demonstrate how to strip pandanus leaves—also used for weaving bags—to get to the artichoke-flavored hearts. You can sleep out in the bush, relaxing at night in a fully equipped safari camp, or opt for day trips and the comfort of one of the park's six hotels. But whatever you do, leave your taste for Taco Bell at home.

Lords Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris' custom Maningrida Arnhem Cultural Tour includes a bush-tucker course and a sunset barbecue; 011-61-8-8948-2200, www.lords-safaris.com.

From [Outside Magazine, Nov 2005 Get the Latest Issue](#)