

Hidden Outback Transcript

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● Simon Calder interviews Sab Lord

Welcome to the Outback!

Simon Calder, Senior Travel Editor of the Independent newspaper interviewed Sab Lord live from Darwin:

<http://www.lords-safaris.com/>

Simon: Good morning to you all. Good evening Darwin – it's now 14 minutes past 7 in the evening. Sab Lord, you are very welcome to the Royal Geographical Society, and we are honoured to talk to you. This event is all about inspiration and insights and I hope that we will get plenty of those opportunities from you. Starting with the concept of the Northern Territory, which is a faraway land of which we know very little. Tell me what makes you so passionate about it Sab?

Sab: I suppose for me the most passionate thing is that I was actually born and bred in the Territory but also born and bred in Kakadu National Park before it was a park. And just being with my Dad I was one of those awfully fortunate blokes with my brother that we didn't have much schooling until Dad decided we were getting a bit feral so he sent us away to school at about 14. The next step was basically tourism and this is my ninth year now, and I suppose I still do it because I just love being out in the bush.

Simon: You are the proprietor of Lord's Kakadu & Arnhem Land Safaris - give us a clue about what you do?

Sab: We're a very small company and there's basically two sections to our company; there's a one day trip to Arnhem Land, which this year began from Darwin as well as from Jabiru, quite early in the morning. There's only a few operators who are allowed into Arnhem Land with the permits. The other side of the business is exclusive charters for clients and there's many things from camping to five star accommodation.

Simon: We'll focus in a little more detail on Kakadu and Arnhem Land itself a little bit later but first of all, the Northern Territory of course encompasses everything from the hot, humid, TopEnd to the Red Centre. Can you give us a prescription for anybody who is lucky enough to have a month in the Territory or maybe just as little as a week - what are the absolute essentials?

Sab: The essential is if you're going to come to the Northern Territory, especially Europeans and people who aren't used to the heat, the best time to come is from mid-April through to September and because at night, the temperatures are cool and also you have access to most areas at that time of year. The Red Centre has more access because they don't get the rainfall that we do, so we're just starting into our wet season now and it's quite hot here, and it's slowly building up with more afternoon storms and eventually the rain all comes in, so access up here is a bit limited really from December onwards until mid-April, for people like myself as well.

Simon: Thanks - I've been lucky enough to go to the Northern Territory, but some of our guests here perhaps haven't had that opportunity; what would be a good itinerary to make the most of the Northern Territory?

Sab: If people have got around five days go out to places like Bamurru Plains, which is a five-star resort. They have the opportunity to use airboats, to get out on the floodplains and experience the massive wetlands of the Territory, and then into Kakadu, to experience some of the magnificent waterfalls, for example, Gunlom, Maguk and Jim Jim Falls at the beginning of the season. Also Yellow Waters is magnificent, especially at the moment with the amount of crocodiles there and then my favourite is Arnhem Land because of the restrictions on permits for operators allowed to go in there, I think it's quite a unique place because you can get away and you'll find no tourists at all and some areas that I go to are like that.

Simon: Let's talk a little bit more about that because a number of people will be surprised to learn that there are actually large swathes of the Northern Territory (and indeed other parts of Australia) where you actually need permission in advance to visit. That is quite a tricky process I guess if you want to do it independently but you have already got that sorted out?

Sab: Yes. I've got the permits to enter the restricted areas in Arnhem Land right from the day tours to whatever people require or request from me. We actually employ aboriginal guides on most of our tours, so we'll lead them for a couple of days or even for just a few hours. The general person who does come to Kakadu, for him to access these areas it's basically impossible for them to do it on their own. For us, it is an experience that if you get up there and go with someone that knows what they're doing, they get a different perspective of the country and the culture.

Simon: And I believe you were ceremonially adopted into an Aboriginal family. Tell me about that.

Sab: That happened a long time ago. What gives me the opportunity to get where we are today is that when I was growing up, all my playmates and the workers that worked for Dad were all Aboriginal people and over time a relationship built up and I got accepted and other things happened.

Simon: Now let's focus in on the specific locations that you know so well. Very close, relatively speaking to Darwin, you have a Litchfield National Park. That is a pretty good introduction to the natural wonders and wildlife that people will find elsewhere in the Northern Territory.

Sab: Litchfield is a park which people could go to by themselves: the self-drive market is a big one to Litchfield because it is well sign-posted and easily accessible areas to get into so the waterfalls can be seen there: Florence Falls, and Wangi, and actually it's very easy to get to so you get a lot of older people that really enjoy it and the young ones do it because you get the opportunity to swim because it's crocodiles free in that area.

Simon: Moving on from there to Kakadu, the unit of area which we traditionally use here is miraculously *exactly* the same size as Wales – that is an enormous area to comprehend. What would you recommend to make the most of Kakadu?

Sab: I believe you need at least need 4-5 days, minimum 4 days to enjoy it, especially if you want to get away from the crowds. We have some special permits, for Kakadu to go to a place called Koolpin, which is in the southern area of the park and the walking areas are just extraordinary – you could swim all the time because it's safe and it only depends on the fitness of the person, as to

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how far you could walk, but it's just magnificent and sometimes you could do that and not run into one person the whole day because of the permit system which is in place by Kakadu National Park, only allowing a small number of operators there. I also enjoy Gunlom because you can swim at the bottom of Gunlom and at the top where there's a magnificent view. An extraordinary view over the Savannah woodlands and it's a very good camping area because there's not many mosquitoes. Other great locations are Maguk or Barramundi Gorge, it's about 1km walk in there but it's a very nice swimming place, safe from crocodiles. Twin Falls early in the season; when it is flowering is magnificent and probably an icon - a little bit of Kakadu. Then of course you've got Yellow Waters and your Nourlangie Rock.. For bush walkers there are great day treks as well – I'm not involved in that but there are some great walks there.

Simon: Could you just talk a little about ensuring personal safety. You mentioned a little about crocodiles. First of all, let's tackle them, figuratively speaking, you've got salties and freshies – tell us about the differences.

Sab: There are big differences between the two of them. The fresh water crocodile is a Johnson crocodile, and it'll basically get away from you unless you try to disturb it like some people do. The salt water crocodile is very aggressive and because they have been protected since the early 70s, the numbers have got to the stage where there's between 80,000-100,000 in the Northern Territory now and even the other day, a gentleman decided to go for a swim and of course there were all the signs, and he was very lucky man not to get grabbed as people helped him! On all our trips, we are very conscious about this danger, especially in Arnhem Land, because there are no signs or barriers to explain anything to people that crocodiles are there so I've been myself, nearly taken three times – there's a huge respect for them. I just worry about kids, because they have no fear of water so you've got to be careful with them.

Simon: So you've been taken by a salt water crocodile (nearly) on 3 occasions. My goodness. It's interesting to learn that they are now approaching the numbers of citizens in the Northern Territory and that's why you need a good guide. While on the subject of exploration in Kakadu, where will I stay and what would I eat?

Sab: If you need to be accommodated, there is the Crocodile Hotel which is in the shape of a crocodile, owned by the Aboriginal association and it also owns Cooindar which is more of a lodge setup, and you'll be able to access any food. English campers camp with me because they want to get the experience of hearing sounds in the middle of the night. We do all the cooking from whatever they like – the roast dinners, barramundi, anything like that. I just believe that camping is a varied experience in many ways, better than staying in a hotel because you get a feel that you're out there and you're not going to be eaten by a lion or a tiger or something like that.

Simon: In terms of food, you specialize in introducing people to something known as bush-tucker?

Sab: We've got to try a bit, like the other day, a gentleman had a bit of a cold so I gave him the remedy of green ants and made sure he ate a lot of them. You put them in your mouth and roll them around and spit them out afterwards – he was a bit hesitant at first but the next day he felt as good as gold but other bush-tuckers we try are witchetty grubs, we get them in Arnhem Land because the Aboriginals get them for us. At this time of the year, they'll get me Magpie Geese so people will actually want that and also, we do cook-ups. We get a couple of cook-ups for the English clients where the Aboriginals actually do it all for us. They look at it a bit strange because it looks a bit rough but they really enjoy it.

Simon: In preparation for this, looking at the Lonely Planet Guide of the Northern Territory, where they say you could order any drink you want as long as it's beer? It's not quite right is it?

Sab: No it's not right. Almost all of the clients like a nice red or white wine but most blokes would have a beer because it's damn hot up here so they want to have a beer!

Simon: Talk about the impact of tourism in the Northern Territory. We're aware of the taboo of not climbing Uluru, Ayers Rock. Is there anything else us tourists should know so that we don't inflict a damaging impact on the Territory?

Sab: The important thing is to respect the culture, which some people don't. Some think they can photograph every aboriginal seen or ask for artefacts and they [the aboriginals] get a bit tired of that. Even when I go into Arnhem Land, I speak to the people about taking photos of Aboriginals because the women get a little bit embarrassed. Tourism has grown into a stage where the tourists need to have sensitivity to culture. In respect to Litchfield and Kakadu National Parks, the great thing here is that numbers of tourists drop off so the country recovers, you will hear it from aboriginal people, they like tourism to have a break.

Simon: Let's explore Arnhem Land. If the Litchfield National Park is a kind of 'taster' of the Northern Territory, and Kakadu gives you ideas about the scale and the diversity of aboriginal art, what will I find if I go with you to Arnhem Land – Kakadu is the size of Wales and Arnhem Land is the size of the State of Victoria or the whole of Britain – this is a vast area, what could you show us there?

Sab: The scenery is extraordinary. You have weathered escarpment rocks and the scenery is different from Kakadu in a lot of places. The greatest thing about Arnhem Land is it is *original culture* - in other words, those people haven't had the influence from Europeans as the rest of Australia had so when you do go there, you are actually going there with aboriginal people where their cultures are still intact and the people I work with over there from Gunlom to Maningrida, they're absolutely tremendous and they want to show their culture and explain things. Probably when you get in a bit further, people do misunderstand a little because it's still quite raw in that respect, as it isn't a traditional tourist destination and aboriginal people just want to do whatever they want to do.

Simon: If you are the traveller who likes everything nicely scheduled, it's probably not for you, but if you've got an open mind and a sense of adventure, it possibly would be.

Sab: Yes, a sense of adventure... those are the people I really enjoy being with because they have travelled a lot in the world, and they have had different experiences and when they come here, they are looking for something different.

Simon: Thanks to the extraordinary technology, we could talk to you 8000 miles away in Darwin. We could also take questions from our excellent audience here at Royal Geographical Society in London.

Questions:

Alan Goddard: What's the opportunity there for birding in the Northern Territory?

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Sab: The amount of bird life is just prolific at the moment. I've been just been on one tour actually this week and the amount of birds is just staggering at the present time and because we're coming into the end of our dry season, and because all the water's drying up, the birds are just in huge numbers at the moment. The birding side over here is just getting off the ground for people. I've been to Africa eighteen times and I believe that the birds here are on par with birds over there.

Simon: What would be the highlights of bird watching in the Territory for people who are not wild-life experts?

Sab: Places like Bamurru Plains because you're able to get out on an airboat and get amongst the birds where you don't have the opportunity in Kakadu because of the restrictions there, but to get out on the floodplains to see the birds up close is just unbelievable in that aspect whereas Yellow Waters, you have the opportunities but you are limited due to the number of regulations.

Simon: What types of species would surprise and amaze me?

Sab: The number of Magpie geese around the shrinking water holes – there'll be up to 15,000 - 20,000. Whistling ducks are in huge numbers – both species of Whistling ducks, but you've got all the water birds that are congregating in the middle of those water holes so the numbers are quite staggering at the present time. For photographers, this is the time to come if you want to get the number of birds.

Charlotte: Where is the place that is not in the guide books to see some aboriginal art? Seeing and buying.

Sab: In Arnhem Land where we employ an aboriginal guide for about 4 hours a day who takes you around to see some of the best art in Arnhem Land, and also Maningrida, where there's an art centre there and it's all traditional, in other words, there's no paper or canvas and all their art is still on totemic poles or bark.

Si: What is the best opportunity for me to hear some aboriginal music?

Sab: It is a bit hard. Sometimes people expect it to happen. There is a guy in one Kakadu camp who will play but if people want to see that they'd have to organize their time.

Christine: How are the invasions of frogs getting on as I've already heard they are on the fringes of Kakadu?

Sab: A very good question. It's one of the things that upsets me dramatically living in Kakadu for 40 years and seeing what's happening to our reptiles and mammals. Massive decline: the government's not doing enough about it – the cane toads are in huge proportions and they've just reached Western Australia at the beginning of this year – where we could go out on tour and see a number of snakes everyday, these days if we can see one every week, we're doing well. I just don't believe there's enough effort from the government to protect our wildlife and I've spoken heavily about that.

Simon: What concerns there are in the Territory about climate change?

Sab: Our Company is climate-friendly from the 25th of last month. Amongst the big operators here, the issue is becoming the focus point but on the ground, you actually could see it happening here

and a lot of people are concerned about the rising levels of the sea due to the low floodplains. Already the channels are cutting across our floodplains and are killing off huge swamp lands. We are trying to stop it with levee banks but it's a tough situation. It is a talking point up here.

Simon: Could you tell us about other parts of the Territory, in particular Katherine , the biggest settlement between Darwin and Alice Springs?

Sab: Katherine Gorge is renowned for Gorge cruises, accompanied by aboriginal guides who are very involved in the tours there. It's owned by the Jawoyn Association, who are also opening a resort there. It's very well run and people of all ages can enjoy it. For those who are younger and fitter though, I would always recommend doing a canoeing trip there, either a half day or a full day, or if you've got more time do overnight trips up the gorge.

Simon: What about the islands off the north coast?

Sab: The Tiwi Islands are renowned for their prints and also their carvings.. It's one of those places that it depends on what people are looking for. It's a bit more tourism orientated than places I go to in Arnhem Land.

Simon: And how to you get there?

Sab: They fly over by plane, but there's a ferry that started last year to take people over there from Darwin, but the majority of people will go over by plane.

Simon: And that is an area you need to get permission in advance or travel with a tour operator?

Sab: Yeah you can't just turn up over there to do whatever you want to.

Alex: What opportunities are there for freshwater fishing in the areas you cover? What sort of species?

Sab: Plenty of opportunities. During the colder months, mid-June, July and August, it is hard to catch the barramundi. The time before, April and May, is tremendous, that's our run-off period so you're into the barramundi which most people are after. The barramundi are just starting to come on now and also the pelagic, the sea fish, are coming on at the moment. There's some very good operators up here, and some remote operators too so you can get well out into the bush, away from Darwin and Kakadu. There are some good operators in Arnhem Land and also on Bathurst and Melville Island (the Tiwi Islands).

Mary: What is the camping like?

Sab: My camping can go from lodges down to four man tents with two people. All my trailers are custom made, they have fridges, and all the swags are brand new. The great thing is, there's only myself and my other guide that do the camping, and he's been with me for four years. We give people the option of what they would like to do. We do semi-bush camp, which is big tents with stretchers in, right through to basically five-star lodge camping which we have in Maningrida. I had some English clients this year and it was quite a funny trip. He was scared of a Christmas beetle so I chased him around with a Christmas beetle and he threw his daughter in front of me a few times! They'd never been camping in their lives before, except Africa of course, and when they left they said it was one of the best experiences they'd ever had.



Simon: Did I hear you right when you said each tent has a fridge?

Sab: My trailers all have fridges so we can have ice-cream and all that sort of stuff!

Simon: That's a relief to all of us!

Charlotte: What would be a one week itinerary that would really interest children?

Sab: We would leave Darwin, do a jumping crocodile cruise, then go down to Gunlom, where we've got a semi-permanent camp, and have a swim. Then we would go to Koolpin which is a restricted area, so that's day three, walk up to Gunlom, then Maguk, and camp near Cooinda, and from there you'd do Yellow Waters and Arnhem Land. What I try to do with kids (probably sixty percent of my clients are families) is try to put the emphasis on not too much culture and not too much swimming, a bit of both, so the families come a way with an experience.

Simon: What kind of protection is required for both children and adults against insects?

Sab: Make sure you put on mosquito repellent; the mosquitoes are worse at the beginning of the year. When you leave your tent or accommodation always walk with a torch, don't go wondering around at night without a torch because that's the opportunity for someone to get bitten. It's common sense a lot of the time. People who go to Africa have got a lot more to worry about.

Simon: Just to make clear, there is no chance on Malaria being spread in the Top End?

Sab: It's Malaria free. The worst one we have here is only during the wet season normally, it's a disease called Ross River but very very few people get it.

Simon: I wonder how many people here have seen the great film 'Australia'? A great film, which did a tremendous amount to show the Northern Territory in all its glory. How much impact have Europeans had on the Northern Territory? Are there these great stations that take up more land than the average English county and how accessible are they for people?

Sab: The stations are actually opening up more to tourism because they've realised that people from overseas don't get the experience of seeing these big stations. You'll see a few of them starting to open up now up here. The movie itself I really enjoyed. I think some people thought it'd be another 'Crocodile Dundee' but to me it was a great story. I believe it has helped the tourist industry in such a difficult time with the recession. The Northern Territory has probably fared very very well with what's happened in the world with our tourism. More and more people are looking for an experience instead of doing the normal tour. A lot of people are looking for smaller, boutique companies that will give them that experience instead of doing the mass tourism side of things.

Simon: I think movies like 'Australia' and, to be fair, 'Crocodile Dundee' have opened a window on aboriginal culture. I think a lot of people still look upon aboriginal people as a single group, but there's an awful lot more to it than that. Could you outline the different tribal groups?

Sab: Just in Kakadu you have a lot of different tribal groups. In Arnhem Land you only have to go fifty kilometres and you run into a completely different language group. Aboriginals are still a bit standoffish with tourism as they don't fully understand what it's all about. One aboriginal fellow said to me, 'why do white people want to come and see our art?' And I tried to explain to him that it's

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quite unique, and he says 'but that's painted by someone else and I could paint over the top of it.' So it's still that situation where you have to explain to the aboriginal people that it's important to keep it because when people, including me, find new art we get excited about it and that's the crucial thing.

Jackie: What about visiting the city of Darwin itself?

Sab: I don't particularly like living in Darwin. I don't like cities. I had to make a compromise with my wife! I'd rather be running around in the bush. Darwin is a modern city. We have everything. We even have cappuccino machines here these days, if anyone wants a cappuccino! Accommodation is excellent here; there are new hotels that are just opening up. There's plenty to do around Darwin, just short excursions. I've got to emphasise that it is a modern city.

Simon: I just want to add that, yes it is a modern all-amenities city, but there is a sense of the exotic, of being in the tropics with influences from South East Asia. In fact, I believe that Singapore is closer than Sydney. I must just see if you agree that the open-air cinema in Darwin is one of the great treasures of the Northern Territory. Have you been there at all?

Sab: Yes I agree with you. In the middle of the year it gets a bit cold so you've got to take a jumper along or a jacket. The big thing in the Northern Territory now that's growing from strength to strength is the Mindil Markets on a Thursday and Sunday. They attract a huge crowd because of the diversity of food from every nationality you can imagine. The tourists love going down there, and also seeing the sunset from there. One thing Darwin does have is a magnificent sunset over the sea.

Simon: And of course ferries that can take you an hour away to places where you find yourself utterly isolated.

Sab: Yes, Mandorah is a prime example. Great pub there. You don't have to drink and drive, you can have a few beers, a beautiful meal, and watch the sun set. Or even in the middle of the day, which a lot of the tourists do, go over for lunch and then catch the ferry back.

Alex: Is there the chance to learn how to catch bush-tucker in the traditional aboriginal way on your tours?

Sab: Yes there is. The Maningrida tour is a bit expensive because we work with the aboriginals, but that's what you can do. You can go hunting, anything in the sea they [the aboriginals] will go hunting for. There's also the witchetty grubs, there's a lot of other exotic stuff there that you'll eat. There are opportunities for that. We actually had some people this year who wanted that, so we got some pig, and I won't describe what happened, but we did that for them.

Simon: What does the Northern Territory mean to you?

Sab: My childhood, on the station, in the park working with my Dad. He was a pioneer. I grew up with aboriginal people, basically no whites. I had the opportunity to understand and listen. One old blackfella said to me, 'why do you wear shoes, Sab? If you wear shoes you don't feel the earth.' I have to wear shoes these days because my wife makes me. For me the Territory is one of the last areas around the world where we don't have mass tourism. People ask me, 'what's the difference between the Northern Territory and Africa.' The difference is that we have to work here a lot harder to get the tourists here because we don't have the big game. But one thing we do have here that



Africa doesn't have is culture and a heritage that is unique to the Northern Territory. You can't find it anywhere else in the world.

Simon: Sab Lord thank you so much for the inspiration and insight you've provided to us.