

Hidden Outback Transcript

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● Action and Adventure – Top 20 Recommendations

Whether you want to canoe the Katherine River, follow the Jatbula Trail or plan to trek, this session is for you. Sarah Marquis, solo traveller through the Outback, walking expert Christopher Somerville and adventure traveller Amar Grover lead the way with their personal recommendations and advice.

Amar Grover: Afternoon everyone, I am going to give you a little talk about the Jatbula Trail in Australia and Arnhem Land, as well. Arnhem Land lies next to Kakadu National Park. Now Sarah earlier on in her talk was talking about flowers in the outback. I think on this talk I am going to be a bit of a pansy here, 'cause I am only talking about 66 kilometres in five days of the Jatbula Trail but it's the sort of path that I think anyone, almost anyone here can do, there are no hard climbs, there is no scrambling around on the undergrowth, there are no major rivers to cross, and essentially you are walking 14-15 kilometres a day.

Now, let me read you something from the Parks and Wildlife Commission leaflet on the Jatbula Trail: 'The Jatbula Trail is a long and potentially difficult walk, however adequate preparation would insure a safe and pleasant journey.' This sounds that they are trying to have their cake and eat it, doesn't it? 'it's long and potentially difficult', 'have a safe and pleasant journey', but in a way, it sums up Australia, the most urbanised country in the world, where the distinction between sort of comfy urbanised environments and the Bush is often a just few minutes walk away. Now the Jatbula Trail starts at the mouth of the Katherine Gorge which some of you may know, is the one of the Northern Territory's, most important tourist sites, a couple of hundred thousand people visit the Katherine Gorge every year, a fraction of those people would have heard of the Jatbula Trail and even fewer will take it. But at the mouth of the Katherine Gorge, instead of taking that boat trip up the river, you cross the river and you start walking. There are some rules and regulations about Jatbula Trail. You pay £50 deposit, you pay camping fees in advance, which I believe is \$4 dollars a day, and you have to register your intension to walk and you start walking in a set direction which is basically from east to west. The walking season for the trail would be approximately May or June until the start of the wet season in November, although the trail can close at any time and apart from that the Trail is a fantastic example of the Australian wilderness. I spent five days walking this trail, you can do it in two or three if you want. I gathered that there are people that do 66 kilometres in two days although quite what they see is an other matter, I think, I imagine that sort of pace is sort of heads down and keep walking. But four or five days you have a taste of the wonderful wilderness environments of the Northern Territory. The sort of place where the skies are unreachable, the horizons unlimited, and the solitude embracing and that's what I really liked about this trail, for five days I saw absolutely no one. I was taken by a guide from a small local company that leads guided tours, and among this particular trip there were just the two of us. So, within minutes of crossing the Katherine River, you were in this lovely beautiful wild environment, and the picture here I've got on the screen is of the first significant landmark on the site, which is approximately 6 kilometres into the Trail, a place called Northern Rockhole and we paused here for a bit of a breather, rest our packs or our backs, I should say, 'cause I must emphasise that this is a camping trip, you need to carry your food, your fuel, your tent, if you want a tent, you need to carry everything. So it is quite a temptation to even consider camping in this place, my guide Jen advised that this is one place that we were not allowed to camp. There are specific camp sites on this Trail, which are well spaced, they are clearly designated spots and they have chemical-free waterless toilets. So we carried on to the first camping spot, the place called the Biddlecombe Cascades and I think Christopher mentioned earlier on his talk about the sheer joy of a swimming

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in waterholes in Australia, and that's one the lovely things about the Jatbula Trail, there are plenty of swimming spots here in the Biddlecombe cascades, you have a confluence of two streams come together, flowing to a series of cataracts and as you can see in that image, on the sort of right hand side just dips down into a sort of ravine or canyon that flows down to the plains. I was walking in May, June time, so the days are still pretty hot and what better thing to do, than to cool off in the afternoon by swimming in a rockhole. The days tended to proceed along the same sort of basis, you get up early in the morning, 6 or 7 o'clock, have breakfast, pack everything up, walk until lunch time, stop for a breather, hopefully have a swim and maybe walk a little bit more to the next camping site and I think this picture gives you a nice idea of the sort of terrain involved. You've got this sort of sandstone escarpments, with a thin covering the vegetation mostly eucalyptus and plenty of opportunities for swimming in the river.

Now, one of the other attractions of the Jatbula Trail is that there are a few examples of aboriginal art. The whole scene, aboriginal art scene in Australia, where tourists are visiting aboriginal art sites is very interesting, because as I found out on this trip and subsequently trips to Arnhem Land, tourists only see a fraction of the art sights because even the authorities only know of a fraction of the art sights and I was told that there are other sights in and around the Jatbula Trail, but there are only one or two which visitors are really encouraged to visit. And this is one of them at a place called the Amphitheatre on day two. Essentially you walk up to a low ridge, you come to a horse shoe shaped amphitheatre of rock and a little side trail dips down beneath the cliff face and it's another little world down there, with a selection of paintings and tannin fed streams and lots of little caves and overhangs most of which look pretty inaccessible and I am fairly convinced there would've been some more aboriginal art sites there.

One of the other aspects of the Jatbula Trail, is you are not very far away from what I call civilisation but you are far enough away, that if you get into trouble people need to know where you are and there is a system in place where hikers are encouraged to register their progress along the trail, so assuming that you have signed in at the beginning of the trail at the mouth of the Katherine Gorge, the idea is that you keep signing your progress along the trail, so that if you ever get into any difficulty, the rangers will know your last halting point. The halfway mark is a particularly spectacular place called 17 Mile Falls and this is the upper part of the river. Just below it falls 70-80 metres into a pandanus fringed pool. This was my favourite camping place on the trail, we camped just to the right of this picture and within a few minutes walk of the waterfall, and you can see there, you can actually walk out right on to the lip of the falls and in the centre of the image there is a picture, is a view of the pool into which the water falls. I've spent many hours just lingering on the rocks here, it is an absolutely beautiful spot, and a little painting on a rock face caught my eye, it showed a sort of a stick figure tumbling head first, so I looked at this picture, I'll never know but the obvious thought crossed my mind, 'is this a warning to people who go to sit or stand on this particular area or does it commemorate some major accident?', we'll never know. The Trail itself, I said earlier there is no scrambling, there is no climbing, there are no major rivers to cross, but you do need to watch out where you are going. There are blue triangular markers, hanging from trees or pinned to trees, every 20 to 50 metres and you do need to make sure that you follow those trails. My guide Jen was absolutely emphatic on this point and a couple of times towards the end of the trek we did have to backtrack to the previous marker and have a good look around and find out where the next marker was, because there are plenty of animal trails, especially wild pig and buffalo and it's very easy to follow those trails assuming that that's the main walking path and before you know it you can be quite seriously lost. And this was a lesson that was really brought home to me a week later in Kakadu National Park. I did one of the well known walks in Kakadu. It's a day walk, you park your car in a car park, you do a circular walk. And as often happen with these things, I started a bit late, I got a bit cavalier with time, before I knew it I was trying to find back my way at dusk. And starting to feel very uncomfortable and I could not find the trail and I always remember what Jen, my guide, had said a week earlier on the Jatbula Trail: 'If you can't find the

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next marker for the Trail, you go back to where the previous one is and you have a good look around and you'll find it.' That was good advice and I did just that in Kakadu and I made it back to the car safely, but it was the beginning of a slightly sticky situation. I mentioned rock pools; this was one of the loveliest rock pools on the way. It was a place called Sandy Camp Pool, this was a place where you could literally sit on the water flowing into a small lake, it was like a jacuzzi, and my guide Jen, took a good opportunity there to cool off. People might be wondering about wild animals or beasties on this trail, and I have to say that the only thing I saw was a pair of wallabies at the very first campsite. They just fled as soon as they saw us. You might come across wild pig; if you are really unlucky you might come across buffalo. Wild buffalo were put there a 150 years ago all across the Northern Territory for hunters to farm and hunt and a lot of those are completely feral now. So you might come across a wild buffalo. I was told that this is really the most dangerous thing you can come across on the Jatbula Trail is a wild female buffalo with a young calf. Snakes, no sign, really, in some senses you can say disappointing from a wildlife point of view. It's not really a wildlife experience from what I can make out. Edith Falls or Leliyn Falls is the end point of the track and one of the strange things about seeing no one for four or five days is that when you finally do see people again it seems really odd, it's very peculiar when you walk for five days here on the Jatbula Trail you don't want to see people, but you see people swimming in this lake and it's really quite bizarre, even in this short period to come across this. Now, I mentioned aboriginal art and Kakadu a little bit earlier on, and Kakadu of course has become famous through the Crocodile Dundee films, it's an important tourist site in Northern Territory, but Arnhem Land is absolutely fascinating. The name Arnhem Land, where does that come from? Well it comes from the name of a Dutch ship, shipwrecked in the area in the 1700s and Arnhem Land's significance in Australia today is that it is probably the one place in Australia where aboriginal culture has been preserved and is the least damaged. Arnhem Land was declared an aboriginal reserve in 1931 and that's not quite as magnanimous as it seems. I think the colonizers has spent decades trying to get some use out of Arnhem Land, but the terrain was so difficult, the climate was so hot most of the time that they couldn't do anything with it. So in the '30s it was declared an aboriginal reserve and it's pretty much been left to its own devices ever since. Arnhem Land starts on the eastern boundary of Kakadu. You need permits to visit Arnhem Land from the Northern Land Council. They're readily available, you should probably give yourself about ten days to get a permit. There are lots of different permits for different areas of Arnhem Land. It depends exactly what you want to do and where you want to go. And you need to stick very strictly to the terms of your permit, and one of the permanent requirements is that when you go to Arnhem Land, you don't take any alcohol for the obvious reasons that some of the aboriginal communities are trying to stay dry and whitefellas like myself coming in with crates of booze is just not on.

So the picture here shows the road which crosses from the eastern boundary of Kakadu in to Arnhem Land. You cross at a place called East Alligator River, alligator being a bit of a misnomer, they are actually crocodiles in that river but the name alligator has stuck. You cross at a place called Cahill's Crossing and the rivers at this area are tidal, so there are tide tables available locally that tell you where and when you can cross because there is no bridge. You drive across in a four-wheel drive when the waters are low enough and then you start coming into this country that you see here. The hills that you see in the background are what many Northern Territorians call the Stone Country and by the Stone Country they are talking about the Arnhem Land escarpment which is basically sandstone. And one of the places tourists visit is a place called Gunbalanya also known as Oenpelli. It's about an hour's drive east of Kakadu and you come to a place called Injalak Hill at the foot of which is the Injalak Arts and Crafts Centre. Now, Injalak Arts and Crafts Centre has developed a growing reputation as a sort of front piece for local aboriginal artists who can display their crafts, particularly their paintings. It's a fascinating place to visit. When I went there there was a young chap there called Anthony Murphy who'd been in the town for years and he knew quite a bit about the aboriginal scene and what was happening with the Northern

Land Council and various aspects of Arnhem Land. But my main reason for coming to Gunbalanya or Oenpelli was to climb Injalak Hill with an aboriginal guide and start looking at some of the aboriginal art. One of the things I realised about visiting aboriginal communities and going around with an aboriginal guide are the different layers of knowledge. My guide Wilfred had taken me up through the boulder strewn hill and he started showing me various art galleries, painted works of possums and strange beasts, some animals and spirit figures on some rocky overhangs, and I asked him: 'Wilfred, are there any other sites that you know here but you don't take foreigners to see, whitefellas like myself?', and I wasn't trying to get a special tour I was just curious to know if there were other sites, and he kind of looked at me in a very strange way, and I realised that questions like that you just don't ask, because in aboriginal culture there are layers of knowledge. There are aboriginal people who don't know about sacred sites, so what chance does a whitefella have? And this is all part of the complexity of aboriginal culture that has been really misunderstood by white Australia for a long, long time, but things have come a long way, aboriginal tourism is a growing area and there is a growing interest in this sort of thing, which is why guides like Wilfred now have an opportunity to show people like myself some of these places. So we continued on Injalak Hill, looking at various art galleries, and there was an image he showed me of the Thylacine otherwise known as the Tasmanian Tiger and this picture is believed to be several thousand years old because it's extinct now in Tasmania. The Thylacine probably never lived in the Northern Territory for thousands of years but someone there and then had seen the Thylacine and draw an image of it on the rocks of Injalak Hill. And I think that's quite interesting because it shows the spread of this animal must have been much, much wider than recently believed. There is another view there of Injalak Hill, as you can see lovely, lovely sort of wild, pretty rugged scenery with this sandstone outcrop right at the edge of the escarpment. But there was just one last treat in store for me in Arnhem Land, that was to visit a place called Mount Borradaile. I don't know where the name Borradaile comes from, I believe it's probably from an old buffalo hunter who was hunting in that area, but Mount Borradaile, which is only about 40 kilometres north of Injalak Hill is an absolutely sensational place, it's an absolute treasure trove of aboriginal art and it's long being recognised as a sacred site. Now when I was visiting, the road from Injalak Hill was still underwater, the transport was difficult, so we went back to Kakadu to hop on a plane and this gives you some idea of the terrain. That river that you see there is called Cooper Creek and Cooper Creek joins West Alligator river, where it flows into the sea. A rather pioneering chap called Max Davidson has set up a camp here and I think he started this camp 20 years ago. Max was an ex-buffalo hunter who'd been knocking about the Northern Territory for years and as he said to me in a telephone interview, unfortunately I never met the man face to face, he said to me in the telephone interview: the buffalo rule shut down by the mid 80's and he started going around with an aboriginal custodian of the land called Charlie Mangoulda, Left Hand Charlie they call him. And they go out to aboriginal art sites and they keep finding more, and this picture here just shows the airstrip that Max has cut in the forest to access his camp, it's a thirty minute flight from Kakadu and anyway back to the aboriginal art. He and Charlie would go out for days at a time looking for various aboriginal art sites and one day, as Max tells it, he looked up, just up at the poles for no reason, had a sip of water or whatever, looked up into a rocky overhang and saw the most enormous rainbow serpent painting on the ceiling of a cave and he says that from that day on he decided to set up a camp and start showing people around with the permission of the traditional owners. And one of the interesting things about the art in the Mount Borradaile area is that it shows contact period art, if you look at this picture here is very clearly a European boat. It's like a rigger, in fact you can almost see possibly the letters of its name written in the side there and you can all these layers of art and history in the Mount Borradaile region. I mean you can still see the Paperbark beds of old buffalo hunters that were in caves, their Martini Henry rifles are still lying around, with rusty matchboxes but the main draw of course is the Aboriginal art and I mention Max Davidson's sensational rainbow serpent and this is it, apparently one of the best examples of a

rainbow serpent image ever found in the Northern Territory. Mount Borradaile itself is a peculiar place, apparently a horse shoe shaped amphitheatre of rock, riddled with burial chambers and sacred spots and aboriginal artwork. And the way Max is running his safaris at the moment is that there are no set itineraries, whether you get in to the bottom of Mount Borradaile seems to depend on what day you turn up, but at the moment he will only take people to the foot of the mountain, he is not allowing or not leading any tours into heart of Mount Borradaile, for I think, out of reasons of respect to the aboriginal culture. One of the well known galleries that he takes people to is called the Major Art Gallery and it's awash with images, handprints, spirit figures, all sort of things. And the other thing that was emphasised to me, was I should not photograph burials in this cave, you can still see Paperbark wrapped bodies cantilevered on wooden platforms, they are still there, it's absolutely extraordinary but they really do insist that you don't take pictures in case that causes offence to the aboriginal community. That's another view there of the Major Art Gallery as they call it with one of my guides in the background. A typical day of Max Davidson's is you go out in morning and the afternoon with a guide. You set off by Jeep safari vehicle and you drive for half an hour and then you will start walking and you can spend hours, walking from site to site to site and you come back for lunch and you do the same thing in the afternoon, you can also take cruises on the billabong to spot birds and crocs. And there are at least thirty to forty sites that they regularly take people to, so if you are interested in this sort of thing, you can easily spend days with Max and his team. The other slightly odd thing about some of the sites near Mount Borradaile, is that you get these catacomb like caves which also have artwork in, you actually have these little network of tunnels which are not manmade, apparently it's natural water erosion and here and there you've got these quite spooky eerie images painted on the walls and ceilings. And just the final shot there that gives you an idea of the sort of caves and catacombs in Arnhem Land. That was my experience of Arnhem Land, just a small fraction of the place. I don't know if anyone saw a film that came out a couple of years ago called Ten Canoes. It was shown in London and it received all sorts of awards. Ten Canoes was shot in Arnhem Land. It is inspired by a series of 1930s pictures that were probably the last images of a fading way of life in this aboriginal community and I believe Ten Canoes at the time inspire quite a bit of interest in Arnhem Land and I hope this talk may encourage some of you to visit it yourself.

Applause

Not sure we need to include this?

Question: Sorry this is a question for Sarah. A girl from Switzerland, you must expect this question in London. What happened to Joe your dog?

Sarah Marquis: Okay, somebody has got sense in here. Good question though. Joe... it is been a really hell of a journey, when I get in to the end of my trip to realise that I actually finished my trip, to get back to civilisation, because my sensitivity was so high, my hearing system was so different, my smelling system too, it was a hell of a journey for myself, but my biggest worry was about Joe, because I was running out of money, and take my Joe back to Switzerland. As much as I love my country they've got rules and rules and rules, so it was kind of hard to take him back, so the rules say you have to put him in quarantine time in Australia, so I have to pay for the dog to stay at a kennel, government kennel for one month, 30 days then I have to organise his shifting back to Switzerland, so all that is being possible because of everybody in Switzerland hearing about my amazing journey because my mum actually done an article on newspaper saying Sarah is going to come back but she can't take Joe because she doesn't have the money. It was costing me five grand to take him back, I didn't have that money so everybody put like ten bucks in my bank account, even kids and they were collecting money, and five bucks at the time, that's for Joe, that's

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for Joe. He became a star in like three days time, that was amazing, so they were all collecting the money and basically I get that amount of money. Then I organised everything to ship him back home, so it's a hell of a journey with a Jet Pet company so it is really well organised, so one day I received a call and he was in Zurich. So here is my car, just drove to Zurich with my brother to collect him but the paper work, there was something wrong with the paper work so there was no way I can claim back Joe officially on my name, they didn't want to give it to me. I said why? So we went from one office to the other for like three hours and go back to the main office and the lady said in really broken French, 'I don't know, I don't have any recommendation about that kind of dog, so I cant' say what is this type of dog.' My brother said we are sick of it, so the main concern about it was how much did it cost me that dog, It costs five bucks like a sheep, sheep alright sheep, so he's registered as a sheep, so I take my sheep back home and I live in the Alps, so it was like December it had like two or three meters of snow so he saw the snow for the first time, he found it quite cold. It was quite a journey for him to get back and get used to the snow. But now he is fourteen years old, he is going pretty well and he is coming with me everywhere to conferences, just moving around. But he is not coming with me to the next journey he is a bit old fella by now so...

Alasdair: You didn't bring him with you today.

Sarah Marquis: No I can't take my sheep out of the country that's the thing

Alasdair: Maybe one last question before we break for tea. This gentleman here.

Question: Did you find it easier when you had the dog to catch food? Did you work finding you were working together?

Sarah Marquis: The thing is that with Joe, I never want to let him go hunting by himself, because he is kind of a funny boy that guy, because I can't see him running after a kangaroo and eating one leg and leaving the rest, it wasn't really my plan so... But the thing is I have to hunt for both of us, but I always share my food with him, always. So when we didn't catch anything he was eating dead wood, soft dead wood to put in his tummy, to fill up his tummy and he never asked, he was always understanding what was going on. And he knew if I had some food I would share with him, which is I still do those days, yeah...

Alasdair: Thank you very much. Thanking Amar, Sarah and Christopher for a fantastic session.