

VENTURE NORTH

IT'S JUST AFTER DAWN AND THE OCEAN IS SO CALM it's like a mirror; it's difficult to see where the water ends and the sky begins. The air is heavy in the build-up to the wet season and, although the clouds hold the promise of storms, there is no breeze. Standing on the beach, the only disturbance in the water is the occasional fish busting up a school of mullet. "The water looks beautiful, but this is no place to swim," Travis Bird says. "There was a croc here last night."

The setting is the beach at the base of the cliffs on the remote Cobourg Peninsula, in the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park on the western tip of Arnhem Land. It's a special place where tour company Venture North has been granted permission by Traditional Owners to establish a coastal camp for their five-day tour. The tour departs Darwin twice a week and takes in the best of Kakadu, a morning in Arnhem Land and an extensive exploration of the Cobourg Peninsula.

When you drive into Cobourg Coastal Camp the bushland feels otherworldly. This is the tip of the Northern Territory's Top End and the environment has a Jurassic feel to it, with enormous palms and plenty of unusual wildlife, including herds of Banteng cattle, wild Timor ponies and water buffalo.

Venture North's camp is near the Cobourg Ranger Station, where ranger, Alan Withers, happily calls his beat "paradise". "This is my patrol area," he says, indicating the sparkling seas. He escorts Venture North guests on a short boat ride across the bay to Victoria Settlement, a British military outpost established in 1838. It was abandoned within 11 years, and its stone ruins are being retaken by the forest. The inscriptions on the gravestones testify to the hardships experienced by the early colonists.

Fishing for dinner off the beach below camp in the build up to the wet season.





Each of the three evenings spent at Cobourg Coastal Camp finishes the same way; guests gather at the cliff top overlooking the ocean as the sun sets. Chilled champagne is served with the freshest spoils of the ocean. The only thing to disturb the postcard scene is a marauding sea eagle or a dancing broilga. In the distance, a huge saltwater crocodile cruises up to the beach, interrupting a pair of eagle rays breaking the surface with the flapping of their wings. The croc sidles up the sand to camp at the base of the cliff; night time beach strolls are not recommended.

The return trip to Darwin packs in a finale of scenic stopovers in Kakadu; Ubirr art site and a magnificent hill top view over the wetlands. Lunch is served on the verdant banks of the Adelaide River awaiting the neep tide for a safe river crossing. When a couple of kids haul in a metre-long barramundi, a massive croc surfaces close by to eye it off, before silently submerging. With this, Travis looks over with a smile and says: "Welcome to the Territory".

The Venture North Camp blends naturally into its bush and coastal setting. From most vantages, the views take in the bush or ocean surrounds rather than other tents or structures. This gives it a sense of seclusion and calm. Sand tracks lead guests from the open lounge retreat to their canvas accommodation, bathroom facilities and the cliff-top lounge. Guests stay in eco-tents strung along the cliff top and shrouded by trees. The eco-tents are more like canvas lodges than camp sites; set on timber platforms with ocean-facing balconies, they are perfectly suited to the climate and environment. Even after the

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A whistling kite picks up nesting material from the Mamukala wetlands; Cobourg Camp's open-air kitchen; ruins at the failed Victoria settlement; the verdant flood plains of Kakadu.



hottest day, the tents are cool and comfortable at night, with solar-powered fans and the gentle evening breeze ensuring a good night's sleep. Solar-heated showers and eco-toilets are set off in the bush.

Guests soon acclimatise to the wildlife in and around the camp. Walking anywhere almost guarantees an interesting sighting, such as hunting raptors, sugar gliders, Stimpson's pythons and giant monitors.

Integral to the Venture North experience is the cuisine. Guides are expert cooks and every meal served on the tour showcases the best local produce, much of it caught or foraged by guests. Watching the sun set while sipping a chilled champagne and sampling sweet pipis, fresh shucked oysters and chilli mud crabs is delightful. The menu varies depending upon what the day has brought, but there's guaranteed to be a freshly caught seafood dish on the camp oven coals. After dinner, guests wind down in the open lounge and dining area with a book or a chat over a coffee, while the rhythmic sounds of the bush play out in the background.

The journey to and from the Cobourg Coastal Camp is peppered with experiences that entertain and educate. The first stop out of Darwin is a guided cruise on the Corroboree Billabong. Cameras need to be poised to capture close encounters with wildlife in all directions and like all activities in around water in the Top End, crocodile safety is paramount with some very large resident 'salties' occasionally showing themselves.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tent with a view; an eroded cliff face near the Victoria Settlement; a local saltwater crocodile close not far from Cobourg Camp.





LOCATION

Cobourg Coastal Camp is in Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, 570km by road north-east of Darwin.

GETTING THERE

Venture North's five-day tours of Kakadu, Arnhem Land and the Cobourg Peninsula depart from Darwin. This city is accessible from all other capital cities as well as some Asian ports.

WHAT'S INCLUDED

Transport by four-wheel-drive, meals, camping and accommodation fees, park entry and cruise fees.

WHAT TO BRING

Comfortable enclosed footwear for bush and rock walking, water shoes or sandals for wading in the shallows, binoculars, a camera and a hat.

WHEN TO COME

The five-day tour is run from May to October, with the most popular time from June-August because of cool, dry conditions. Shoulder periods, including the build-up to the wet season, can be spectacular.

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Crossing the East Alligator River and entering Arnhem Land, the landscape is beautiful, as vast wetlands meet rocky outcrops. The road takes the tour to the Injalak Arts and Craft Centre in Gunbalanya where Aboriginal artists produce extraordinary paintings with precision strokes using brushes made from local vegetation. The tour is joined by a local Aboriginal guide for the short drive to the Injalak Hill to view some of Australia's best ancient rock art sites as well as sacred burial sites before lunch with breathtaking views back over the wetlands where local women brave croc country to gather traditional food and hunt for file snakes.

Once at Cobourg Coastal Camp, there is a balance of exploratory day trips throughout Garig Gunak Barlu National Park and quiet time to just relax in the unique location. There's always a rod and lure available to chase a few fish for the evening meal. Exploring the coastal reaches of the national park includes a stop-off to forage for oysters and pipis and to chase after mud crabs at low tide.

The waters here are teeming with life: turtles, manta rays, crocodiles, sharks and whales are often sighted. The camp is a short drive from the northern-most point in the Northern Territory. A monument originally built in 1845 by the Royal Marines out of Victoria Settlement marks the location atop the rust-red laterite cliffs made ever more intense by the azure water of the Arafura Sea.

Every day with Venture North reveals unique encounters and experiences. By the time the five-day tour draws to a close, guests have become adapted to spotting all manner of wildlife on the coast and in the bush. This 'unplugged' interaction with an untouched part of the Top End is at the heart of a Venture North experience.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Cruising the glassy waters surrounding the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park; Injalak Hill boasts some of Australia's best Aboriginal rock art sites; fresh mud crabs caught off the camp are wok-cooked for dinner.