

## UP AND OVER DOWN UNDER

By JACK AGNEW

Okay. Time for your geography quiz. Where exactly is Bali and Timor?

(If you know the answer, you qualify to enter the next local geography bee fundraiser, but if you can't remember -- keep reading.)

*Emu, crocodile, kangaroo, Asian buffalo, snake...*

Part of the exotic fauna that can be found at the famed World Heritage Kakadu National Park outside of Darwin, Australia? Not exactly. These are some of the culinary offerings at the internationally acclaimed Mindril Beach Sunset Market on the outskirts of Darwin -- the Northern Territory's best known city.

After a four and a half hour Qantas Airlines flight up and over "Down Under" from Sydney that usually includes one good meal and one bad movie, you will arrive in Darwin, the gateway to Asia. On the top end of Australia, Darwin is a tropical port on the Timor Sea (first clue) and the Territorial capital. The best time to visit is during the "dry" season that runs from April through October when the temperature hovers around 80 degrees during the day (definitely bring a hat and sun block), but you often need a blanket at night.

Darwin lies much closer to Indonesia (including Timor and Bali) than does Sydney, which may account for the surprising Asian and Malaysian influence both downtown and in the suburbs. The two most recent mayors have been of Chinese descent, and more than half of the near 80,000 population is Indonesian, Vietnamese, Laotian and Chinese.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the Mindril Market that opens every Thursday night from May to October as the yellow and red sun dips slowly into the Timor Sea while the locals and visitors gather on expansive Mindril Beach to watch a sunset that rivals anything you've seen at the Grand Canyon or Key West. Then it's time to wander around the market and let your olfactory senses be stimulated by the aromas from 60 food stalls with cuisine from over 20 countries. Yes, you can get kebobs of Emu, crocodile, snake, buffalo and kangaroo, but your palate will be further tempted by spicy Asian dishes from Sri Lanka, Korea and Japan -- not to mention Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Indonesia. But this is an equal opportunity food market with representative booths from Greece, Turkey, Italy, South America and Northern Africa as well. No McDonald's here!

And Mandril Market is far more than a food emporium: It's also the favorite meeting place for locals; you could meander for hours through the 200-plus varied arts and crafts stalls. There are jewelers, leather workers, artists and tailors plying their old world craft in this modern day setting. Although you may not have time to visit Bali or East Timor, you can buy some exquisite carvings or mobiles from these countries, as well as some fine Australian Aboriginal artwork. And the prices will be far less than those at downtown souvenir shops.

If hours of walking tire you out, there is a solution at the Mandril Market...a massage! All throughout the Market, there are masseurs and masseuses ready to sooth tense muscles in your shoulders, back, neck or feet. The cost? About \$15 AUS for fifteen minutes. It is well worth it.

So, now that you are rejuvenated, you may want to continue your exploration to enjoy live street theatre, magic acts, and music -- all quite different from what you would see and hear at the Faneuil Hall Marketplace. Your favorite might be a demonstration of whip cracking where they ask for volunteers from the audience. All this free entertainment continues until the 10 PM closing time.

What else is there to do in Darwin? Lots. Start with scuba diving to the iron shipwrecks that are reminders of Darwin's leveling from Japanese bombing attacks in WW II. If damage is your fascination, then go to the local art museum that offers photographs and audio recordings that echo the devastation from Cyclone Tracy in 1974 which leveled Darwin as badly as the World War II bombings.

On a more tranquil note, there is a superb botanical garden and the daily fish feeding ritual at high tide at Doctor's Gully where -- as if on cue -- thousands of mullet, bream, catfish and milkfish come crowding in to be hand-fed bread from visitors like you.

So, if you are going Down Under to Australia, think about including Darwin on your itinerary. There is the famed Kakadu National Park with the potential to become one of the world's great Parks with its combination of waterfalls, rock formations, dense tropical vegetation and the greatest abundance of crocodiles, rare birds and animals you will ever see.

#### Odds and Ends about Darwin:

1) Money exchange. The best rates whether for travelers' checks or US dollars are at American Express or WestPac Bank. Neither charges a commission which can be as much as 5% at other banks.

2) Taxis are not cheap, but if there are two or more of you travelling, the per person charge of the airport shuttle bus will cost you as much or more. The average cab fare to downtown Darwin is \$12 US. Baggage trolleys at the airport are free. Same in Sydney. You pay \$1AUS in Cairnes and Brisbane.

3) Tipping. Joy of joys! There is none: Australia seems to pride itself on not having fallen into that trap.

4) Clothing. Unlike the rest of Australia, this is the tropics. Bring those loose fitting, lightweight clothing. At night, "Darwin Rig" means casual dress for women and long trousers and a collared shirt for men. Ties are hardly ever worn.

5) Accommodations run the gamut from the elegant Plaza Hotel Darwin at \$200US per night to *Ivan's Backpackers*, a hostel in the heart of town that boasts individual air conditioned rooms with private bath, coffee making machine at \$40US.

6) Swimming is fine between October and May. During the rest of the year Darwin is plagued by the box jelly-fish (sea wasp) that can deliver a sting that can actually kill a human being unless he or she is treated immediately. Stay away from remote beaches where help may not be readily available. The anecdote is a liberal

pouring of vinegar on the wound and you will find supplies of vinegar at most major beaches. The other warning you must heed is crocodile warning signs at estuaries, rivers and creeks. They are not idly posted.

But do not let these cautions dissuade you from visiting Darwin. It is a simulating city and a wonderful cross of the Australian and Asian cultures. You will consider it one of the highlights of traveling Down Under.

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