



Molly looking for hermit crabs, at Mindil Beach, Darwin



Daddy's little girls



THE ROBERTSON FAMILY GOES TO THE ...

Northern Territory

for a four-day family adventure.

By Jo Robertson

*The Robertson
Family*



Jo

A writer, copy editor and proofreader. She loves travelling and cooking with her girls.



Josh

Manages landscaping projects for the NT Government and is a keen barramundi fisherman.



Molly, 4

Loves ponies and mermaids and is looking forward to going to pre-school in 2014.



Lexie, 3

The boldest member of the family, she will give anything a try and is known for jogging almost everywhere she goes.



Day One: Darwin

If you've been within cooee of Darwin you'll know one thing it's not: a spot for a nice paddle at the beach. The beaches are gorgeous, but the resident crocs and box jellyfish have unknowingly created a saltwater haven all for themselves.

But Darwin and the Top End are world renowned for its water – lily-padded billabongs thick with birds, tidal rivers from which gigantic crocodiles leap, boutique safari lodges set in wetlands teeming with life and seaside markets at sunset.

We started with the markets. **The Mindil Beach Sunset Markets** are one of Darwin's biggest drawcards – half of Darwin and visitors from all over the planet flock there with chairs, kids and wine on ice to taste the incredible food from every corner of the earth, from Thai and Indian to Brazilian and Portuguese.

Even with all that choice, the four of us couldn't resist our faves: fragrant paella jewelled with mussels for Josh, Japanese omelette with sticky sauce for me and fresh mango smoothies for the girls.

When a purplish hue tickled the horizon,

it was time to catch the sunset from the beach. Molly was quickly waylaid by a scurrying hermit crab and ditched her smoothie to scramble after it. "His home is on his back, see!" she delightedly squealed. After a good half hour with her new mate and just two hours into our trip, she'd already declared it "the best holiday ever!"

Stay: Adina Apartment Hotel Darwin Waterfront. Studio apartments are priced from A\$180 per night and one-bedroom apartments from A\$280 per night for two adults. Extra adults and children can be accommodated for A\$50 per person per night and interconnecting apartments are available for larger groups. adinahotels.com.au

Day Two: Darwin

High tide was at 10.03am on day two, important to note for our first adventure: hand-feeding some very friendly fish at **Doctors Gully**.

Snaffing a fistful of bread, Molly and Lexie couldn't get their shoes off quick enough to hop into the boiling mass of mullet, slithering over bare feet to slurp soggy bread from outstretched fingers. "They're tickling my toes!" giggled Lexie, who wasted little time clinging to dad before getting a wet bottom trying



Doctors Gully Fish feeding

Tucked away a couple of minutes from Darwin's CBD, the site was a flourishing market garden prior to World War II. In 1958 its owner began feeding the few fish that came to shore at high tide – the start of a tourist attraction that thrives today. aquascene.com.au



Mindil Beach Sunset Markets

Every Thursday night during the dry season (April to October) stalls are assembled beneath a coconut grove and monsoon forest with more than 200 local and international artisans, musicians, performers and more. mindil.com.au



Feeding the fish at Doctors Gully

"The best holiday ever!"
Molly

Enjoying a swim with Dad at Darwin Waterfront Precinct's wave lagoon



Feeding the Crocs on the Adelaide River



Lexie

"I held him all by myself"

Mum and the girls relaxing in the pool at Wildman Wilderness Lodge (above), and cuddling a baby croc at Crocosaurus Cove.



CROCOSAURUS COVE

A sprawling park in the middle of the city where you can get up close and personal with saltwater crocodiles as well as the world's largest display of Australian reptiles, with 70 different species. crocosauaruscove.com

to give a fish a nurse. Two gigantic stingrays, some lackadaisical barramundi and swarms of plate-shaped moonfish put on a great show floating in and out of the shadows.

Next stop was **Crocosaurus Cove**. Through ultra-thick glass, Molly came nose-to-nose with Burt, the 5.1-metre star of Crocodile Dundee. Upstairs, we got a great aerial view of the big boys: Chopper (at 5.5 metres – gawd) and William, flanked by his demure mate Kate.

Cuddling a baby croc was a highlight for Lexie. "I held him all by myself!" she said proudly. "His tummy was smooth but his back was pretty bumpy." Lots of "ooohs" and "aaahs" as we wandered through the cool, dark reptile enclosure. Molly loved tip-toeing back and forth past a tank while an inquisitive baby turtle swam alongside her.



Darwin Waterfront Wave Lagoon

A plethora of stinging or biting animals means the water around Darwin is off limits, so this huge lagoon is the next best thing. The waves can get up to 1.7 metres high and there's also a shallow, still area for little ones. waterfront.nt.gov.au

We watched, transfixed, as a rat was scooped by a coastal carpet python that'd had its last meal three weeks prior. "There's just the tail sticking out," Molly commentated, eyes wide. "Gosh, he must have been hungry."

An ice cream and a swim at the **Darwin Waterfront Precinct's Wave Lagoon** capped off a fun and adventure-filled day. Both girls expended any remaining energy paddling out to the big waves on daddy's back.

Stay: Adina Apartment Hotel Darwin Waterfront.

Day Three:

Darwin to Mary River Wetlands

After a hearty breakfast in the Adina's colourful restaurant, we set off for a **Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise** on the Adelaide River, 45 minutes from Darwin.

It was mating season and we were quickly treated to a formidable sight – a female guarding her nest in the tall grass. The boat inched a little too close and mumma croc exploded; lashing out, jaws snapping in warning. "She's a bit cross," Lexie observed sagely.

The river's wildlife put on a fabulous show. The crocs all defied gravity, propelling most of their bodies vertically out of the water after a hunk of chook, and a couple of white-bellied sea eagles had a lively barney in a tree directly above us. And in the tour's finale, keen-eyed kites (hawks) swooped down to snatch tiny morsels of meat flung from the bow of the boat. Molly, our reptile-wrangler, scooped up a tiny brown frog and showed him around to the other guests.

An hour's drive on towards Kakadu National Park and we arrived at our final road trip destination, Wildman Wilderness Lodge in the heart of the Mary River wetlands.



Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise

The Adelaide River is famous for its crocodile cruises where the huge reptiles will leap out of the water, just centimetres from the boat, after a piece of meat dangled from a rod. jumpingcrocodile.com.au

Our host, Daniel, showed us to our digs – one of five family safari tents that promised glamping on a grand scale with timber floorboards, gorgeous linen and an ensuite. Daniel later told us he's a former mayor of Geneva.

Lexie spotted the pool and took off, with Molly in hot pursuit. We all jumped in and spent a joyful hour splashing about in the blissfully cool water. When another couple joined us, Lexie wasted no time in striking up a lively chat.

Board games, colouring in with daddy and a few glasses of wine in the lodge's cool common room were the perfect antidote to a hot day, before a late afternoon swim with wallabies grazing nearby.

We were the first dinner guests, so the chef, Matt, gave the kids a special tour of the kitchen and let them choose their dessert. As he peeled the lid off a container full of choc bits, Lexie, quick as a flash, dove her hand in and came out with a fistful before anyone knew what was going on. She graciously shared her haul with Molly.

With the girls tucked up, Josh and I relaxed on our verandah with a glass of wine and a deck of Uno (I smashed him 10-3). It was utterly peaceful – just the murmur of the bush and the animals going about their nighttime routine. We fell asleep to thunder rumbling in the distance and the glorious smell of rain.

Stay: Wildman Wilderness Lodge.

Safari tents are priced from A\$359 per night for two people and can accommodate up to four for an additional fee. The property is open from 1 March – 30 November each year. wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au

Day Four:

Mary River Wetlands to Darwin

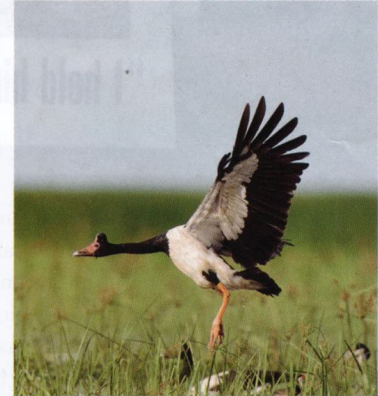
Chipper as chipmunks, we rose at dawn for a cruise on Home Billabong, a short drive from the lodge. Drifting peacefully through the lily pads with the morning mist rising and birds calling to each other was a world away from our typical morning hustle and bustle.

Scott, our guide, pointed out a few members of the billabong's waterbird menagerie – egrets, jabiru, night herons, darters, jacanas, kingfishers and whistling ducks. The girls were fascinated by a cormorant drying its outstretched wings after a busy morning's fishing. Josh was more interested in comparing fishing stories with Scott.

After fresh fruit and buttermilk pancakes, it was time to head for home. It was only 10am, but both girls were fast asleep inside 10 minutes. It'd been a very special few days of real, connected family time; not a computer or TV in sight.



Wildman Wilderness Lodge



Kakadu Geese



quiet time after an adventurous day

