



True north

Between 1997 and 2004, regular *Highlife* contributor HUW KINGSTON embarked on his City2City project, a series of seven journeys under human power linking each of the state and territory capital cities. Travelling 25,000 kilometres by bike, foot, kayak and ski, the adventure was an incredible 543 days in total. And with countless adventures since, Huw still vividly recalls his first visit to the Northern Territory.

TRY THESE," says Richard, holding out a handful of green ants. "Good for stopping flu." I take the ants, rubbing my hands together to squash them into a lime green pulp which I pop into my mouth. They taste of a sour fruit and not too bad. It is also an opportunity to get my own back on these creatures. So often I've brushed past a bush and found myself screaming as hundreds of waiting claws dig deep into my neck, onto my arms and legs and head down my shirt. I stamp crazily, pulling off my pack, my shirt, my shorts, desperately brushing the biting buggers off.

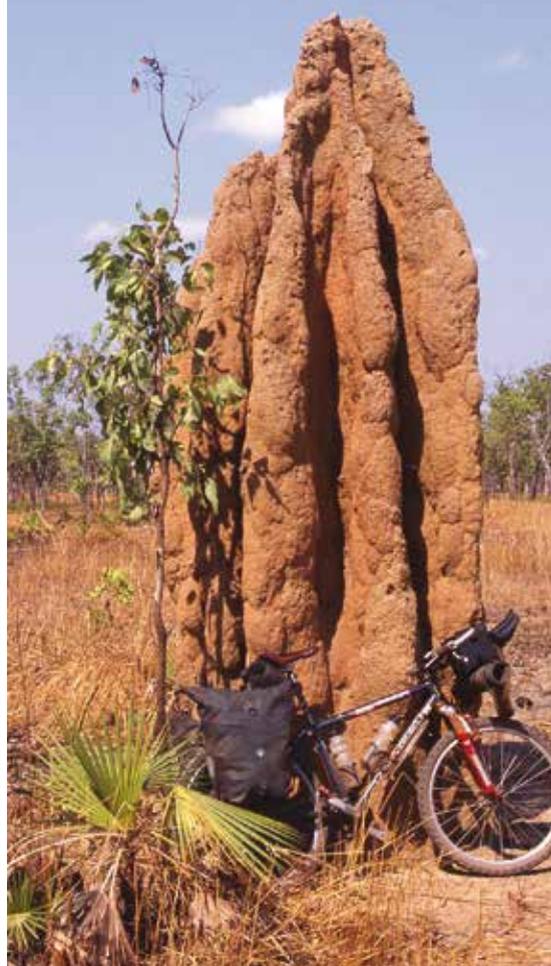
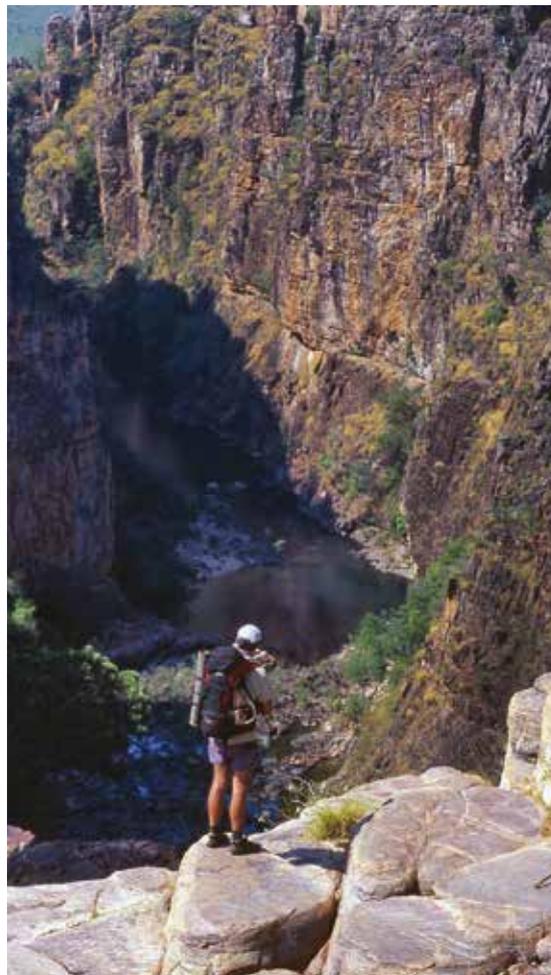
I am walking with two Indigenous guides from Manyallaluk, a community east of Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge). The pace is relaxed for the three days across to the gorge, the scenery excellent. It's a great opportunity to talk; even more so to learn. We head off the escarpment into the upper reaches of the Katherine River. The land away from the river is bone dry and the grass cracks underfoot.

Richard and Long Johnny take me to hidden rock art sites, great camping spots and deep swimming holes. Richard makes

an elegant cup from a large leaf and presents it to me to scoop up water and drink. As he does, a brilliantly coloured rainbow bee-eater alights on a nearby tree hanging over the river. "He's looking for his enemy, the crocodile," says Long Johnny and tells me a story from the Dreamtime. The crocodile and the bee-eater had been fighting over a firestick, which the bird won. The long, black feather extending from the tail of the bee-eater now represents the hard-won firestick.

On the last day, we leave the river to cut across to Nitmiluk. Richard leads the way up dry creek beds and across open country through chest-high grass. Occasionally he stops, looks around then heads off in a new direction. I begin to wonder if he knows where he is heading and surreptitiously check my compass. We stop again. "Yeah, this looks familiar," says Richard, staring at a nondescript rock. Long Johnny nods in agreement. We stop again. His nose is in the air, sniffing out the correct bearing. We turn 90 degrees and walk on.

Some hours later we come out of the grass and onto the edge of the Nitmiluk cliffs. Bang on where we hit the gorge, Richard points out a small fire scar: some black ash mixed with sand



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT MANYALLALUK GUIDE RICHARD ARRIVES ON THE EDGE OF THE UPPER KATHERINE GORGE; ARRIVING AT THE TOP OF TWIN FALLS, KAKADU; A STURDY BIKESTAND IN NT (PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON); ROCK ART, KAKADU (PHOTOGRAPH TOURISM NT – GRAHAM FREEMAN).
OPPOSITE PAGE TWIN FALLS, KAKADU (PHOTOGRAPH TOURISM NT – JARRAD SENG).



JIM JIM FALLS IN THE DRY, KAKADU (PHOTOGRAPH TOURISM NT – SHAANA MCNAUGHT)

perhaps half a metre across. “We made a fire here five years ago, the last time we came this way,” he says. This exact spot above the gorge is the only point where it’s possible for us to scramble down to the water. Anywhere else is sheer cliffs 50 metres or more high. Incredible navigation.

I lie back in the shade of the impressive cliffs and drift off...

“Dr Kingston, I presume?”, a smiling face calls from a canoe. Snowy, a Top End guide, had agreed to paddle up river to meet me. Months before this trip had begun I’d been in touch with him, pumping him for information on suitable river trips that might lead me closer to Darwin. He was enthusiastic about my long journey from Brisbane and offered to help. We paddle back down through the deep gorges; an impressive place despite the tour boats and numerous hire canoes.

We continue down the river beyond Katherine – and the tourists – and paddle along beautiful waterholes, through narrow channels arched by overhanging pandanus, to camps on glorious sandy beaches.

On the third day from Katherine, a three metre saltwater crocodile slips into the water as we paddle through a narrow channel, swimming close to the canoes before diving under. Minutes earlier we’d been swimming in the river, no more than 100 metres upstream.

If the crocodile isn’t hungry then the flying foxes certainly are. Each night thousands head high into the flowering paperbark trees to gorge themselves, not caring as they defecate all over our tents below. At night too, hundreds of frogs fall from the same trees to feed at ground level. Truly raining bats and frogs.

On the river we are joined by my old friend Warren and another guy, Angus. On his third trip down the Katherine with Snowy, Angus has one goal in life: to catch a legal-size barramundi, over 70 centimetres, with a fly-fishing rod. He pulls in a couple of 65 centimetre barra and one at 68 centimetres, but the big one eludes him for another year.

On day eight we paddle up to Claravale Crossing where a

dirt road crosses the Daly River. Here we meet a vehicle that has brought in our bikes. Warren and I pack for the ride to Koolpin Gorge in Kakadu and farewell the others. True to form, three days later Snowy is at Koolpin to meet us with ice cream and bushwalking gear.

Kakadu National Park covers some 20,000 square kilometres, protecting escarpment country, and dropping, via impressive cliffs and waterfalls, into extensive wetland areas. Our walk from Koolpin Gorge to Jim Jim Falls is food for the soul and leaves a deep impression on me. We wander up creek lines which, to our pleasant surprise, contain plenty of water and we spend as much time swimming as walking. Perfectly proportioned little gorges, crystal clear pools and white sandy beaches, all fringed by paperbarks and pandanus. Beyond these lush arteries cliff lines rise to dry plateaus where the grass snaps and cracks, waiting for wet season rains that will turn drought into flood.

The signs are here with cloud building, distant electrical storms and a few short showers in the early hours. We are unprepared. Using only tent inners, the rain forces a dark scramble to gather gear and stumble towards the shelter of nearby rock overhangs.

We see no sign of anyone else. We try to capture the stunning light of dawn and dusk even though we know the spirit of this time can never truly be recorded. That’s it, the spirit. There is something so much more than the landscape through which we are travelling. Something we feel but can’t touch or see.

Solitude ends at the top of Twin Falls where we join the tourist route through Kakadu. Justifiably spectacular, we descend from the Arnhem escarpment and swim up the 500 metre gorge to the base of the falls before walking out along the track to Jim Jim.

In the evening light we scramble to the base of Jim Jim Falls, an almost perfect arc of cliffs dropping 100 metres into a huge plunge pool, the depth of which we can only imagine. The falls themselves are dry but the silent amphitheatre is no less spectacular for that. I dive in, a fitting place for the final swim of my first journey into the Territory. **HL**