

MONSOON MADNESS

AFTER A TOO -CHILLY WINTER, THE LEGENDARY LANDSCAPE OF AUSTRALIA'S TROPICAL TOP END WORKS A TREAT.

BY MELISSA RIMAC

Is it possible not to be hopelessly, instantly, bewitched by a place where the air rings with the sound of geckos and is heavy with the sweet scent of tropical flowers?

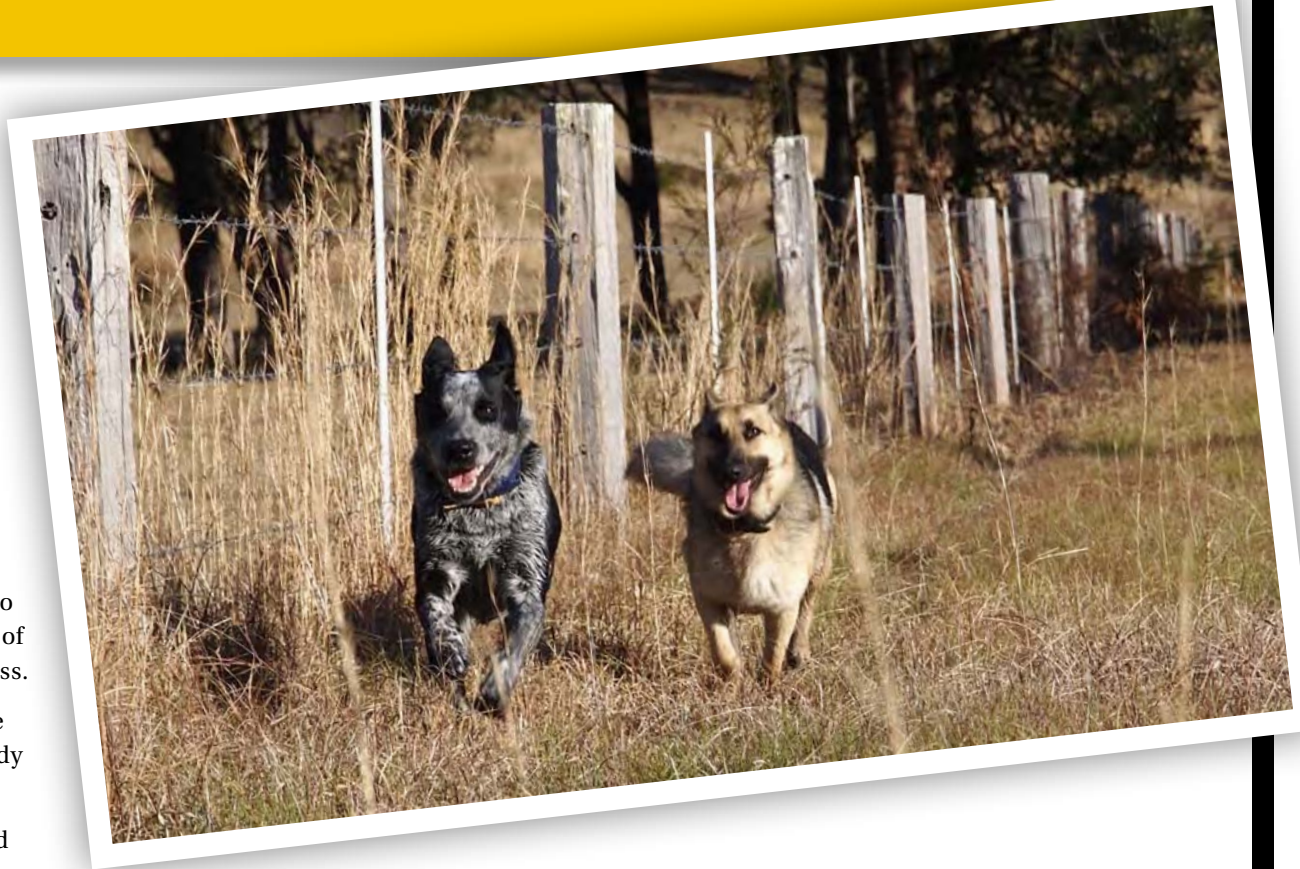
We've only just arrived in Darwin, but it feels uncannily – and quite delightfully – as if we're journeyed to another country.

It's not just the fact that wet and dry seasons divide the year, or the way we can overhear people chatting in many languages and catch the alluring whiff of spices on our walk to fetch groceries for dinner.

The Top End sees itself as a place apart. Locals proudly refer to themselves as 'Territorians', and bask in the obvious absence of big-city haste. We're immediately struck by the outdooriness.

Maybe we're getting soft, but this year's winter seemed to bite especially hard. Our souls yearned for sunshine and that heady feeling of far-flung adventure.

The primal landscape of the Northern Territory has long lured us, so when we heard that the Top End had cranked up its dog-



friendliness, we made haste for a part of Australia blessed with a cinematic scenscape.

Thanks to our atmospheric home here, a tropical haven called Moonshadow Villas, we're able to savour boutique hotel style and mindful comforts along with the buzz of a cosmopolitan and eclectic city as well as unique wilderness, all while holidaying with our dogs.

As soon as we open the door to our luxury villa, we kick off our shoes and pad about barefoot on the coconut-wood floorboards. There's something about the soft whirr of overhead fans, the handcrafted teak furniture, the colourful, Old Orient-inspired artworks and the stately antique Chinese banquet table with its huge marble top which conjure up recollections of our early travels in Asia.

I flop into the overstuffed antique recliner and have to keep reminding myself that we're not in Bali.

Our dogs Onyx and Pierre, however, see no point in reverie; with ears and nostrils piqued, they excitedly lap up every intrigue in the lush, loud, jungle-like garden.

The downstairs bathroom opens up to evocative surrounds. It's a special pleasure to be able to shower (in rainwater – for Moonshadow is about as eco-friendly as you can get) while gazing out upon moonlit fronds of giant fishtail palms and clumps of golden bamboo.

The upstairs bedroom is tucked into the treetops and delights further with polished cotton sheets and tactile antiques. But it's the heavenly outdoor room where we spend most of our time – a space that invites languor, long conversations and a slow relishing of exotic bird calls.

Darwin is a soothingly uncrowded, walkable city, which makes it perfect for exploring with dogs. About 10 minutes walk from Moonshadow is the Botanical Gardens – a treasure trove of tropical plants that's at its best in the dewy freshness of the morning. There's over 400 species of palms alone, and so many delightful nooks like the ginger gardens, that we pass several blissed-out hours here. Unlike Botanical Gardens in other states, dogs are welcome.

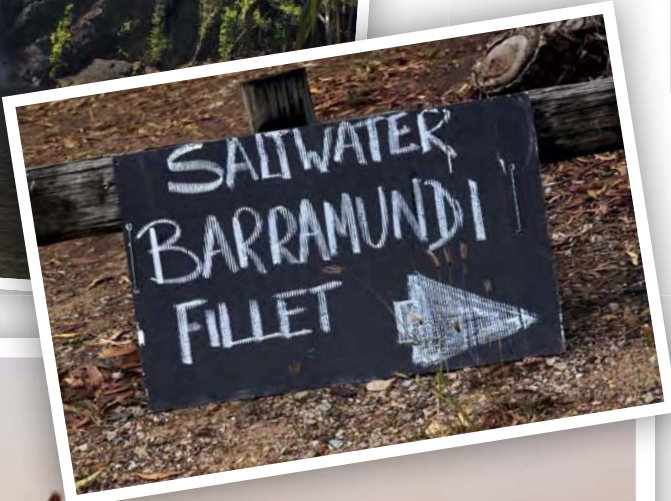
The sprawling green of Bicentennial Park fringes Darwin's CBD, and it too

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ONYX'S TROPPO TRAVELLING TIPS:

ROOM WITH A MOOD

Moonshadow Villas is a sensual treat for humans as well as dogs. The charms of a heady tropical atmosphere and edgy eco-style come with bonuses like free Wi-Fi and a veritable library of current magazines. www.moonshadowvillas.com

Centrally Located, dog friendly apartments are available from: www.escapeforabreak.com.

CHOWING DOWN

For hearty, virtuous lunches, Simply's Healthy and Vegetarian at Star Village Plaza, The Mall

For an alfresco breezy dinner, choose from several Asian eateries at Stokes Hill Wharf Kim's has a large range.

The quintessential Darwin dining experience, however, is to feast among the spicy scents and flavours of the . Local favourites include Mindil Beach Sunset Markets and Parap Village Saturday Markets (also a great place to stock up on local produce).

EXCITING WALKIES

George Brown Botanical Gardens, especially in the mornings
 The extensive waterfront paths skirting The Esplanade
 Casuarina Coastal Reserve
 Cullen Bay Marina

DOG MINDING

Several of NT's iconic landscapes are within National Parks, but they really shouldn't be missed. Happily, Darwin offers some great day-care options:

www.furrygodmother.com.au
www.goodgolly.com.au

URBANE PURSUITS

Watch art-house movies under the stars, next to the harbour:
www.deckchaircinema.com ph; 08 89810700

WILDERNESS ENCOUNTERS

www.wetlandcruises.com.au
www.NTindigenoustours.com
 Further Inspirations:
www.tourismtopend.com.au

is fabulously set up for taking dogs out, with long paths that weave their way through huge raintrees, and plenty of scenic spots to stop, chill out and feed the fish that come close to the edge of the mangroves.

Also a short walk from Moonshadow is Cullen Bay Marina, crammed with eateries and cafés with tempting outdoor eating areas.

I sorely tested the patience of my partner Mark and the fur-kids by dropping into galleries each time we went into town, but happily, Darwin moves to a twangy, big country town beat which soon lulled my impatient crew into a suitably mellow rhythm.

We pass two elderly Chinese men sitting behind a handmade sign extolling the wonders of pressure -point massages, and many 'best Laksa in town' signs which declare themselves with the same insistency that I've seen in Asia.

Everywhere we look, people are dining outdoors.

From town, an excellent leg-stretch is the walk to Darwin's resort-like waterfront area and then on to the Stokes Hill Wharf, where tug-boats and lovely old timber pearling luggers rub up against the wharf and the resident batfish look as big as coffee tables.

At Moonshadow, dogs are welcome to stay in the shady, very roomy courtyards if their humans want to experience some of the knock-out natural attractions in National Parks within day-tripping distance of Darwin. Alternatively, there are several new doggie day care centres nearby.

Having decided our boys are mature enough to hang out in a luxurious resort while their parents go and play in huge, crystal-clear pools fed by waterfalls, we spend a day touring Litchfield National Park with our very informative and entertaining indigenous guide, Tess, who grew up in the area.

At Corrobooree Billabong, we wrap up our trip with a cruise that gets us upclose to crocodiles, wild buffalo and a cacophony of waterbirds. As I watch curtains of birds slowly lower themselves upon the vast Mary River wetlands, I feel privileged to have experienced such an iconic landscape. 🐾

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