



A day paddling in Katherine Gorge

by Wade Rowston



I have been wanting to paddle at Katherine Gorge for many years and the opportunity finally arose late in September this year, as part of a campervan holiday, starting at Darwin and doing a loop that takes in Kakadu NP, Nitmiluk NP and Litchfield NP.

The forecast for the day is for 37C and clear skies as we left Katherine at around 8am. It's late in the dry season and starting to heat up. We head for Nitmiluk NP which is a meagre 28km east of Katherine and includes the famous Katherine Gorge. Nitmiluk National Park is 292,800 hectares and is owned by the Jawoyn Aboriginal people and jointly managed with the Parks and Wildlife Service of the Northern Territory.

It soon becomes obvious that this is a major tourist attraction and not some quiet backwater. We first go to the Visitors Centre, then discover we need to head to the boatshed kiosk to hire kayaks for the day. We reach the kiosk just before about 100 people line up for the scenic cruise.

As with many tourist destinations in NT we are attended to by a European backpacker who is working in the kiosk. I am a little shocked when she initially advises that she thinks all the kayaks were already booked for the full-day hire, but there are some for half-day hire. It never occurred to me that that would be a possibility, but fortunately we get the last double and single kayak available for full-day hire. We were lucky. It costs about \$145 for the 2 kayaks for the day.

The kayaks are heavy duty plastics, possibly the heaviest and slowest craft I have ever paddled. They are almost as wide as they are long and difficult to keep straight until you get used to them. You have to wear a PFD and the paddles are plastic with an aluminium shaft. You also get a little barrel to keep your kit dry.

So off we go into the 1st Gorge. I'm in the front of the double, with my better half Carly in the second seat, and our



First section of the 2nd Gorge



Overhangs in the 2nd Gorge



Towering cliffs in the 2nd Gorge



Rockbar and rapids at end of 2nd Gorge

third son Cal, who is 16, is in the single. Katherine Gorge consists of 13 gorges, each gorge being separated by small rapids and/or rockbars. The 1st Gorge is 3.2km and we spend the first half just trying to keep the kayaks going straight. That's OK as the scenery is not all that impressive at this point.

The last third of the 1st Gorge starts to get interesting. Small faded orange, yellow and pink sandstone cliffs start to rise sheer out of the water giving us a sense of what is to come. We get to the end of the gorge and land on a sandy beach. There are already another 20 odd kayaks there and a bloke operating a leaf blower! (ahhhh ... the 'serenity'). Turns out he is clearing the pathway of sand to the next gorge. Fortunately for the 'full-day' hirers you leave your kayaks on the beach and walk about 300 metres where there is another set of kayaks at the start of the 2nd Gorge, thus avoiding carrying the kayaks.

As we start along the 2nd Gorge the scenery becomes simply stunning. We are entering an area of sheer rugged sandstone cliffs on both sides. The colour and the height of them are imposing. The first half of the gorge the cliffs are broken only by an occasional sandy beach which has signs warning you to stay off it as there are freshwater crocodiles nesting there. That's OK, as we had already discovered earlier in our trip that you only have to worry about the saltwater crocs, the 'freshies' are very timid and quite small, about the size of a large goanna. Best not to get into an argument with them though.

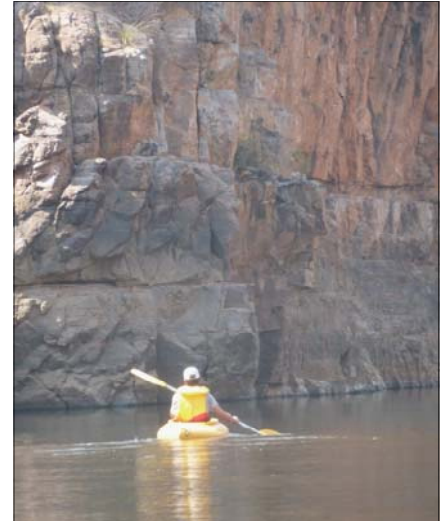
The second half of the 2nd Gorge is even better than anything I expected. The cliffs are very high, and we feel dwarfed by their size. We head for the shadier side of the gorge as it's starting to get very hot. There are little shallow caves to enter and overhangs to paddle under. It's simply brilliant. This is the dry season but you get a sense of the power of nature that must be at work during the wet season when masses of water tear through these gorges. This gorge is 2.4km long and is easily the most breathtaking landscape I have ever paddled through. At the end of the gorge we encounter a small island. Water flows by one side over about 30 metres of placid shallow rapids that can be walked through with kayak in tow. We have to be careful as it's very slippery.

The 3rd Gorge is even shorter at just 1km long. It is still beautiful, but now the cliffs are not quite as high. We soon reach the end where we encounter a huge barrier of rock. There is a little stream flowing down one side and some more rapids which cannot be paddled through. We backtrack a little and find a little landing spot in a gap between the rocks. The end of the 3rd Gorge is the turning point for the full-day paddlers as the next portage is a whopper, about 40 mins carrying the kayaks. Given I reckon the plastic fantastics each weigh about 25 kilos we make the obvious decision to turn back (no choice really, anyway). But first we explore the rock shelf and investigate some huge vortex holes and check the view beyond further into the 4th Gorge.

Back in the kayaks we make a beeline for the nearest little sandy beach without a croc sign and spend about an



Section of the 3rd Gorge



Cliff face in 2nd Gorge

hour swimming and having some lunch. Not many paddlers make it this far, so only occasionally we see someone else. The occasional tourist cruise boat comes as far as the end of the 3rd Gorge but we only see them once in this gorge (they keep a couple of cruise boats permanently in each of the first 3 gorges during the dry season). By now it's midday and the sun is high and hot as we start to head back.

We are starting to tire on the way back due to the heat, the burning sun and the slow bath tubs we are paddling. There is really nowhere to hide and no breeze to offer some relief. Even the water is a bit warm so it offers only moderate relief. The 2nd Gorge is still spectacular, but a little less impressive with the bright sun high above offering less definition on the cliff faces.

The last couple of kms are a bit of a struggle for Cal and it seems like a long way back. He's done well for a non-paddler wrestling with the big plastic beast. It becomes apparent that all the action happens in the morning at the boatshed, as the place is almost deserted when we finally arrive back at about 3pm. Sadly the paddle is over!

Anyone sensible is currently sipping a nice cold drink and relaxing comfortably in some air con and that's exactly what we do next. We quickly change and go back to the Visitors Centre and have an iced coffee. Iced coffee is the non alcoholic drink of choice in NT. There is a great selection in the fridge of every cafe and service station (standard, light, double shot, mocca, iced coffee stubbies).

Why drink hot coffee in that climate! The Visitors Centre has a great display of the whole gorge, indigenous history of the area, and flora and fauna. There are some stunning photographs of the floods a year or so ago.

It's a great paddle and I enjoyed every minute and thoroughly recommend it to everyone. I have resolved to go back one day and camp overnight further up the gorge.

Tips:

1. Book kayaks in advance and for a full-day hire if you want to go past the 1st Gorge. Half-day hire you are only allowed up to the end of the 1st Gorge.

2. Refer to this canoeing guide http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/pdf/Nitmilukcanoeinfo09_000.pdf for detailed maps.

3. Start as early as possible to see the gorges in the lower light and to try to minimise time in the sun and heat.

4. As mentioned above, freshwater crocodiles are timid and pose no threat. However, be aware the saltwater crocodiles do venture up to 300km inland from the coast and are perfectly happy in fresh water! Fortunately no snapping handbags around in Katherine when we were there.

5. The Jatbula Trail walk starts at Katherine Gorge and takes 5 days to reach Edith Falls, another great place to visit. It on my list of walks to do. See http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/pdf/Jatbula%20Trail_11.pdf for details.



Landing point at end of the 3rd Gorge



Sandy beach for lunch in 3rd Gorge