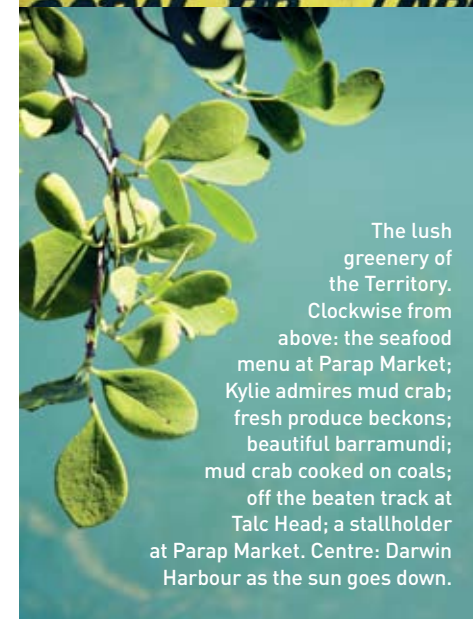




Northern exposure

delicious. editor Kylie Walker heads to the Northern Territory and marvels over the kaleidoscopic colour, the diverse cuisine, the sense of adventure and the rich history of the land.



The lush greenery of the Territory. Clockwise from above: the seafood menu at Parap Market; Kylie admires mud crab; fresh produce beckons; beautiful barramundi; mud crab cooked on coals; off the beaten track at Talc Head; a stallholder at Parap Market. Centre: Darwin Harbour as the sun goes down.

“When I think of Darwin, I think of cloudless skies and clear blue waters. I can smell it and taste it, too.”

NIGHT LIFE

Fishermen come from across Australia to chase big fish in the Territory. They fish from beaches and boats, chasing all sorts of finned trophies. Few of them, though, have done what I'm about to do: go fishing by night with just a spotlight and a spear.

Joe Romelo runs **Barra Dundee** (0404 582 639), a popular business that caters to visiting fishermen, where much of the action takes place in Arnhem Land, and at Dundee Beach, about an hour's drive from Darwin. His newest program is rather different. No reels nor rods, no lines, baits or lures. And not much light, either.

Barra by Night, which Joe runs on Darwin Harbour, offers a chance to try your hand at spear fishing, similar to the kind the land's traditional inhabitants have done for thousands of years. To catch barramundi this way, we need to be in the shallow waters surrounding the harbour's mangrove swamps.

In the late afternoon, I catch a lift across the harbour with Brendan Bainbridge, owner of **Venture North** ((08) 8927 5500, northernaustralia.com). It's clear from the start that Brendan – like everyone I meet on this expedition – loves the Territory. Venture North organises 4WD expeditions, fishing trips and photographic safaris to some of the Territory's most scenic spots, and Brendan tells me tales of Arnhem Land,

the Kimberley and the Coburg Peninsula. He talks of ancient rock art, of walking the land with members of the indigenous communities, and of camping in Kakadu.

I'm here during “the dry” – a six-month spell of warm, rain-free days, which is when most visitors come to the Territory. But Brendan urges me to come back in the wet season.

“It's a different country then. It's quieter, and everything is green. And in ‘the wet’, it's spectacular watching the lightning storms,” he says.

As the sun starts to set, the horizon becomes red-gold, and the harbour waters turn to dark glimmering silk.

Tonight, Joe is sending me out with a local called Steven Long. A courier driver in Darwin by day, Stevie has been spear fishing since he was a boy.

I transfer from Brendan's big boat to Stevie's shallow dingy, and we head off towards the shore. Soon, Stevie cuts the motor. Barefoot, he balances at the front of the tinny, spotlight in one hand and a long bamboo spear in the other. He uses the spear as a pole, gently shifting the dinghy through the rippling night waters. In a whisper, he points out a small white shark gliding through the water to one side. We disturb a ray, which shoots off, leaving a cloud of dirt in its wake.

Out here under the stars, it's peaceful and quiet. The lights and noise of Darwin

are way off in the distance. I hear just the swoosh of the pole, birds calling in the mangroves and the occasional plop, plop of small mullets skipping out of the water.

We spot small swimmer crabs paddling furiously just under the surface, bream and mullet and various other fish, but the barramundi are proving elusive. We pole onward and find more rewarding waters. The eyes of the barramundi glow like red coals under the water. Stevie passes on several – too small to be legal – before he spots a big barra in front of the boat.

Stevie's bamboo pole ends in a sharp, two-pronged steel tip. He throws it, one-handed, down into the water. The barra shoots off just as he casts, though.

“You have to be patient when you fish,” says Stevie.

Noise scares the fish off and the wind, weather and tides all also affect where the fish are and how hard they are to catch. His patience eventually pays off. He sends the spear hurtling down again, and this time, it connects. Stevie hauls the barra into the boat. With tomorrow's lunch secure, it's my turn to try.

It's harder than it looks. Water bends rays of light, tricking the eye – Stevie's used to it after years of practice, but hand-eye co-ordination has never been my strongest skill. I make no contribution but I really don't mind; being out on the harbour at night has been magical.



Bobby Wibisono fires up satay at Mindil Beach Sunset Market. Below: Kylie on the harbour. Opposite: the shimmering ocean while fishing.

(08) 8981 3454, mindil.com.au) is a long double row of food stalls. Like Darwin itself, the stalls are a cultural melting pot with tastes ranging from Timor to China, and Italy to India.

At the Inday's Fruity and Juicy stand, I grab a “Cambodian-style shake”, made with lychees, jackfruit and condensed milk, thick and sweet and refreshing, then wander from stall to stall. I'm tempted by garlic roti, test-your-heat-tolerance green papaya salad, rich curries, prawn dumplings, sugary Spanish churros, sticky Greek honey puffs and a hundred other picnic-friendly dishes. But a friend has told me not to miss one essential market offering – the delicious beef and lamb satay served up by a bloke called Bobby.

Bobby Wibisono's bright red trailer isn't hard to find – and there's a hungry horde already lining up for his Jakarta-style *halal* satay. This is a family business – his wife, daughter and niece man the stall while Bobby, a smiling charmer, attends the flaming grill and chats to customers.

Bobby serves his satays with a sweet-savoury, nutty sauce that's good enough to drink. “What's the secret,” I ask.

“Just Australian peanut butter,” he says. “Come on, no secret ingredient?”

“No,” he laughs. “It's just Bobby-style!”

Crowds begin heading over the dune to the beach. I follow and watch as the sun slips down to the horizon, the blue sky slowly transforming into a glowing shade of watermelon-pink.

Back at the market, people gather around jugglers and musicians. The eating continues into the night, bursts of laughter and spicy aromas drifting through the air.

Early the next morning, I head out for a run under a clear blue sky, through palm-lined streets and along the water. I pass Mindil Beach, deserted now, then go along the shore past the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. The museum's **Cornucopia Café** (Bullocky Point, Conacher St, Fannie Bay, (08) 8981 1002, cornucopiadarwin.com.au), where verandah tables enjoy a harbour view, is a fine spot for lunch or a lazy weekend brunch.

ON THE HARBOUR

Don't sleep as you fly into Darwin. Don't read or chat or you'll miss the chance to see the city's enormous harbour unfold beneath the plane's wings. The waters are clear and jewel-bright, a glorious blue-green that seems almost too beautiful to be real.

Darwin Harbour is big – more than twice the size of Sydney Harbour. Teeming with marine life and lined with pristine sandy beaches and tangled mangrove stands, it's a mecca for fishermen, local families and international trade.

And on Thursday and Sunday nights, just a few minutes' drive from the city centre, the rolling dunes of Mindil Beach are the site of a market unlike any other in Australia. From late afternoon, a steady stream of locals and tourists arrive with chairs, tables and picnic blankets. They set up on a long grassy swathe behind the dunes, beside rows of stalls selling everything from doughnuts to didgeridoos.

At the heart of **Mindil Beach Sunset Markets** (Maria Liveris Dr; Thursdays 5-10pm, Sundays 4-9pm, April-October;



I've always thought of the Northern Territory in the colours of the earth: the blazing red of Uluru, the ochres and yellows of indigenous art and the browns of the open deserts. Now, after visiting the Territory's sprawling capital city, I picture it in shades of blue.

When I think of Darwin, I think of cloudless skies and clear blue waters. I can smell and taste it, too – juicy mudcrab straight from a fire, cocktails at sunset in a leafy garden restaurant, big bunches of aromatic herbs, and piles of fresh fruit at the city's many markets.



SHOPPING AND SAND

The next morning, I meet chef Lea Bell at **Parap Village Markets** (Parap Place, Parap, Saturdays 8am-2pm (08) 8942 0805). Executive chef at **Char**, one of Darwin's most popular restaurants, Lea visits the market every Saturday morning.

We wander past stalls selling tropical fruits, Asian greens, tiny hot chillies, bunches of pungent fresh herbs and brightly coloured flowers. There are eskies full of fish and crabs, too.

"It's great to go down to the market and see what they have that's new, then bring it back to the restaurant. Most of the produce comes straight here, farm to market, from out at Humpty Doo, an hour and a half or so away."

"I came here nearly four years ago, and fell in love with the lifestyle," Lea explains. "And the town is really growing now, it's a great time to be here."

I wave hello to Bobby, who sells satays here, too – he's doing a roaring trade even at 8am – and join the queue at Ken's Crepes. I consider the bacon and egg option, but opt for a minor culinary adventure – a crepe filled with Thai lotus nut paste. It's soft, slightly sweet, and really rather good.

Lea, meanwhile, has gathered salad ingredients and an armful of ginger flowers – the vibrant pink tips, she tells me, make a flavour-packed garnish.

We head off to the marina, then across the harbour's blue waters to Talc Head.

Last night's catch, plus mud crabs fresh from the pot this morning, go onto a fire on the beach. Sitting by the fire, I ask Stevie and Joe how they learnt to fish.

"It's part of what my old man taught us about living off the land, going out hunting and fishing," says Stevie.

It turns out that Stevie's father taught Joe, too. "I came up here in 1971 from North Queensland," explains Joe. "I met Stevie's Dad, and he showed me the Territory style of fishing and crabbing. Hopefully I can pass that on to other people who come here."

"This place, it gets you. A lot of people come here for a holiday, and stay!"

Lea, meanwhile, whips up a pawpaw salad with peanut dressing, a pineapple, cucumber and fresh coconut salad, and a tasty laksa sauce for the mud crab.

It's all perfect picnic fare: fresh crab meat, charry barramundi and tropical, seasonal salads, sitting on the warm sands of an otherwise deserted beach. But my eating adventures in Darwin don't stop here.

EAT STREETS

With more than 50 nationalities among the 70,000-strong population, this northern capital is engagingly multicultural. This vibrant mix of indigenous, Asian

and European cultures can be seen everywhere – the faces in the streets, the food, the produce markets, the year-long parade of festivals and celebrations.

When I travel, food is often how I connect with a new place. I'm as keen on markets as I am on museums; I hunt down hidden restaurants, tiny bakeries and shops selling the best local produce.

And so when a Darwin local mentions a great Greek pastry shop, I pounce on them, begging for the address. After English, Greek is the second most common language spoken in the homes of Darwin. Here, a good Greek pastry shop should be good indeed.

The next day, I make my way to the northern suburb of Alawa. The facade of **Dimitrios Specialty Cakes** (2 Eric St, Alawa Village, (08) 8948 4088) gives no hint of the sweet and savoury delights within. Poppy and Dimitrios Dragatis's shop is packed with trays of sticky baklava and buttery shortbread, tubs of chewy nut and sesame squares and stacks of chocolate-coated Turkish delight. There's also my favourite Greek dessert, *galaktoboureko*, oozing with smooth custard and doused in sweet syrup. Dimitrios, who trained as a pastry chef in Greece, also makes a tasty *spanakopita* (cheese and spinach layered between filo pastry). It sells out fast, though, so arrive before lunchtime to be sure of sampling this treat.



Food-lovers visiting Darwin should also make a stop at **Parap Fine Foods** (40 Parap Rd, Parap, (08) 8981 8597, parapfinefoods.com). Here, supermarket staples share shelf space with some of Australia's best boutique food products. The range reflects the cooking happening in Darwin kitchens: organic Fijian coconut oil, tins of snails in brine, Maggie Beer's quince paste. There's also a deli selling cheeses, meats and bread, and a well-stocked wine corner. There isn't much room in my luggage, but I can't resist a jar of rosella jam and, from Alice Springs, packets of roast wattleseed and ground bush tomato.

Parap Village is also home to **Saffron** (cnr Gregory St and Vimy Le, (08) 8981 2383, saffron.com), an elegant Indian restaurant. Chef Selvam Kandasamy serves up authentic Indian fare on biodegradable plates and bowls – not lovely to look at, it must be said, but commendable. Saffron is open for lunch from Thursday to Saturday, but there's a much more extensive menu available at night. Whatever you order, make sure at least one dish comes with Selvam's excellent mint and coriander chutney.

delicious. TOURISM NORTHERN TERRITORY ADVERTISING FEATURE

On my final night in Darwin, I have dinner at **Char** (Admiralty House, 70 The Esplanade, (08) 8981 4544, charrestaurant.com.au). Over a colourful cocktail, I watch the sun set from my seat at a garden table. Char is housed in a graceful heritage-listed building, but in the dry season, dining moves outdoors, under towering trees and tropical palms.

Given the name, it's no surprise that the menu pays particular attention to steak. Diners are told not only the size of their cut, but also where the beast came from, whether it's been grass- or grain-fed, and even the breed. There's also a strong emphasis on seafood, with dishes like oysters in limoncello, and a clever crab and crocodile lasagne. We try hand-rolled beef cheek and kaffir lime spring rolls, and wagyu beef rissoles, but decide the outstanding dish of the night is a special of braised rump cap served with truffle mash, green beans and a mushroom and lentil sauce. The meat is meltingly tender and the sauce is packed with flavour.

DEEP IMPRESSIONS

The flight home leaves in the wee hours of the morning. There's no dazzling blue harbour below me now, but that's the memory of the Territory I take with me. *Kylie Walker travelled as a guest of Tourism Northern Territory.*



Sunset at Darwin Harbour. Opposite from above: the picnic lunch of chargrilled barramundi with salad; Kylie relishes fresh Thai basil with Char executive chef Lea Bell.

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