

Travelling NORTH

Notebook: editor, Caroline Roessler, ventures to Darwin – a city of amazing characters such as dedicated parliamentarian, Marion Scrymgour, and horse whisperer, Janette Wilson – to discover what makes the place tick.

IT SEEMS FITTING that the name of the Indigenous people of Darwin is Larrakia, resembling as it does the word larrikin, a spirit that is pervasive and enduring in our northern-most city; a place that feels Asian with its tropical climate and smells, but is the most Australian place you're likely to visit.

Locals assure me it's no longer a bolt-hole for people of dubious background running away from bad debts, bad relationships and child maintenance. Yet this city retains a unique personality, where stories seem to be told with the wink of an eye – a tradition, I suspect, that helps locals get through the fabled build up, a phenomenon particular to this part of the world. In those months between September and November, the air is charged with a humidity and electricity so intense the tension doesn't abate until the sky finally gives up its heavy load and Darwinians collectively offer a huge sigh of relief when the rain drenches the Territory in the last part of the year.

Darwin is a place of character and characters. The city has been wiped out twice – first during the bombing raids of World War II, and then during Tracy on Christmas Eve, 1974 – the cyclone has a legendary status all its own up here. The stately Government House was completed in the 1870s and is the oldest European building in the Territory. Home of the Northern Territory Administrator, the building sits on the edge of the city, 70 metres above the Timor Sea, and has about it the aura of a colonial outpost, graceful in its pristine whiteness

and fringed by purple bougainvillea on its perimeter. It is here that I meet the first of five Darwin women I have come to interview, amazingly varied and interesting characters each one of them, and the ideal spokespeople on the subject of Darwin and its many charms.

Dr Tanya Davies (pictured overleaf) is a public health medical officer for the Aboriginal Medical Health Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), the organisation that champions improved health services for Indigenous people across the Top End. We meet at her favourite Darwin spot: the banyan tree, flanked by Government House and, to the right, the new Parliament House, opened in 1994 and a grand model on which all Territory architecture should be replicated.

The banyan tree is old, very old, of that there is no doubt, but attempts to find out its age come to nothing. Phone calls to local garden gurus yield, "Ooh, George would have known that," referring to the big-drinking, garden-loving former Lord Mayor, George Brown, but he died a few years ago and with him, apparently, the only clue to the tree's age. That's Darwin.

It's in this spot Tanya feels particularly connected to the land, its harbour, and the remoteness that lies beyond the city. She knows remoteness; over the past nine years she has worked in more than 20 isolated Aboriginal communities, as well as internationally in Ghana and Sudan. This is a woman with an acute sense of social justice, something she also attributes to the majority of people

NT government minister Marion Scrymgour at East Point Reserve, a special place for her and the people of Darwin. The reserve covers almost 200 hectares, of which 30 hectares is natural forest, and features magnificent beaches, Lake Alexander and Dudley Point, an area significant for its military history and uninterrupted views of the sunset.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MONICA NAPPER

a special promotion.

who come up here to work in health. "That's the reason I love Darwin," she says. "There are three types of people: they are either from somewhere different, going somewhere different or they're interested in trying something different. People come here actively – they choose to come. It's not a passive choice and that's what makes Darwin interesting for me... they all have some story as to why they're here."

Tanya was planning to use Darwin as a stepping stone in her medical and humanitarian career, but she has adopted the place... and it has adopted her. So, at age 42, it's the first time she has put all her belongings in one place. "This is where my heart is," she says. "It keeps drawing me back. What's unique about the Top End is a lot of people in the Indigenous communities adopt people quickly into their fold and their families. So when they adopt you they say, 'Okay, this is my sister.'"

Tanya has worked in east Arnhem Land where she only needs to give her Aboriginal name from a few communities away – and we're talking hundreds of kilometres – "and they know, bang, straight away where I fit in," she explains. This knowledge is possible because the communities move so much. "Indigenous people are constantly moving from one community to another and they have extended relationships. They have a very intricate, complicated social dynamic and those dynamics spread a long way; a lot further than you think."



Dr Tanya Davies with Government House in the background. It is the oldest European building in the Territory.

"People are incredibly patient; as a broad generalisation, they see you make mistake after mistake and you learn about yourself as a person, about your own culture and about their culture. And up here, communities are a lot more active in teaching you, so I think that probably draws a lot of people back to the Top End because they've made relationships."

Marion Scrymgeour (pictured previous page) is a Northern Territory government minister. Having held the title of deputy chief minister, she is, in this country's history, the only Aboriginal – let alone Aboriginal woman – to hold such a high government position. With her husband, David Dalrymple, and three children, Marion, 48, wouldn't consider being anywhere else. Darwin is home.

"I could never move anywhere else. I've often said to my husband if he wanted to return to Sydney he'd be moving there himself," she says lightly; yet you suspect she's not joking. "But he's been up here for 30 years and calls himself a Territorian. The Territory is the best place to live and work and raise a family."

"You can come to places like East Point Reserve. Among all the development and suburbia you've got places where families can come, at our front doorstep. If you go around parts of East Point you can see the kangaroos and the wallabies," she says.

Marion refers to Darwin's mix of cultures as one of the city's most intoxicating and distinctive traits.

It's a recurring theme up here. "It's the cultural melting pot," she says, "it's got all the different cultures and people living together, and yet it is very Australian. It's the Territory; it's who we are."

"I hold a bush electorate and the best place from that electorate is the Tiwi Islands [two hours by ferry or a 30-minute flight from Darwin]. The beauty in that area – from the salt water to the sandstone escarpment of west Arnhem – and to see that electorate steeped in its culture... I could never move anywhere else," says Marion.

Marion feels the climate has a defining aspect that shapes the landscape and mentality of the city and its surrounds. "The beauty of the build up, once you get over the stifling heat, the 100 per cent humidity," and here she stops and laughs, "is you get acclimatised, like anywhere else. And the wet season grows on you. The wet brings the bush alive... and to see that come alive during the wet is the most fantastic..." she stops to think about it. "It's the best part."

There are ways and ways of coping with heat. Qualified carpenter, former crocodile handler and now horse whisperer, Janette Wilson, has one that is unique at the very least; scary at best.

Janette's slice of heaven is a 58-acre bushland property outside Darwin. Her main place of residence is a shed – a shed with no walls. It's a dilapidated corrugated iron roof propped up by gnarled wooden posts, which was how it was when she bought the property and, through circumstance more than choice, she has learned to live that way.

"I love the environment," says Janette. "You're in it. I don't mind the spiders so much, but there are a lot of huntsmen here. They're worse than the snakes. They're in your clothes. The snakes don't get in your clothes." Almost on cue, she pulls a snake from a pot at the end of the dining table. As you do.

Janette does bow to the possibility of unwelcome intruders – such as the odd venomous snake – and sleeps in a caravan next to the shed to keep safe. There is a feral pig roaming the property, but she doesn't seem bothered. "It's getting really cheeky. The dogs (one a dingo called Dingo) bark at him and he ignores them and just does his own thing, but they won't hurt you."



Former crocodile handler, qualified carpenter and horse whisperer Janette Wilson with Noble Comrade and Dingo; Janette's open home outside Darwin.



They won't run out of the bush and hurt you for no reason unless you threaten them. But in the city, where there's more people, the pigs are loose cannons."

Janette believes you have to work with the environment, not against it. "By having the open walls it doesn't get so hot. Using the trees for shade and having it so open, the environment keeps it cool instead of trying to run an air con. When I came here I had no choice. I had no mains power. Now I've learned to live with solar power. You learn to get by without all the bits and pieces. You keep it simple. Less stuff, less things to look after, less things to maintain."

And less things to clean. "You don't need to do a lot of housecleaning here," she says deadpan, eyes following the flight of a leaf from one side of the shed to the other. "Well, that's sort of the idea. The wind blows the bougainvillea right through, so you don't have to sweep. I can tame your wild horse, but don't ask me to clean your house or cook for you."

Noble Comrade is Janette's pride and joy. A breed of Waler – the type used by the Light Horsemen in World War I – the stallion was a gift five years ago and wild



as the wind, but with persistence and love, Janette has broken him in with her famous clicker method and they annually lead the Darwin Anzac Day Parade.

For Janette, Darwin remains a big country town – a place you can be yourself or, possibly, lose yourself. Unless, like businesswoman Darlene Chin (pictured overleaf), you're a third-generation Darwin girl whose family moved here from China in the 1800s. Darlene has four brothers and a large extended family of cousins, nieces and nephews, so the odds of bumping into someone she knows are better than good. "We're just everywhere, infiltrating the whole town," she laughs.



"My grandmother was born in China; my grandfather was born here in Darwin and so was my father. But my granny kept all of the old traditions going so we still recognise all the festivals and, even now, there's a festival called Ching Ming during which we visit the graves of our ancestors and perform ceremonies every year. We're still very Chinese... as much as my dad is so Aussie and my mum's Aussie. I guess I don't notice the Asianness here in Darwin, whereas when I travel and see a lot of Chinese people in other cities I think, 'Geez, there are a lot of Asians here,'" she laughs, sensing how odd this sounds.

a special promotion.

Darwin Festival general manager Anne Dunn at the George Brown Botanic Gardens, named after the big-living, garden-loving former lord mayor.



Fourth-generation Darwin local and businesswoman, Darlene Chin.

After living in Perth and Melbourne for most of her twenties, Darlene returned to Darwin in 1993 where she has built a big life, with two menswear businesses and, with her husband, Darryl Thomas, she also runs Chin Fine Wine Merchants. "I love my family, even though they drive me crazy; I love my work, and I love Darwin – it's such a great place to come home to."

For Anne Dunn, general manager of the Darwin Festival, the city is like nowhere else. A Melbourne native, Anne has come to love her adopted city as only a convert can. "I think the cultural mix is a big defining factor. You know, 10 per cent of Darwin's population is Indigenous, and there's a big Asian component. I love walking down the street and seeing such a diversity of cultures. It's genuine multiculturalism at work," Anne says. "It's a very small place, very isolated

and there's a degree of self reliance – of tolerance. Here, anything goes."

Anne agrees Darwin has the sensibility of a frontier town – one with a massive youthful energy – but that's a real positive, especially for someone so embedded in the arts. "It doesn't have a lot of airs and graces, but the charm is 'let's go; let's do it'. If you come up with a wonderful idea, there are few people who would say no. If you can make it work, do it."

It seems appropriate we end our conversation, and this story, on the weather. "The weather sets your life; the weather pattern is unique and defines the tone," she says, more in appreciation than anything else.

"It immediately puts you on a different cycle to the rest of the country. It forces you to slow down; you just have to chill or you go crazy." ■

DARWIN HOT SPOTS

STAY

- Mantra Pandanas Resort, 43 Knuckey Street, Darwin. (08) 8901 2900; www.mantraresorts.com.au.

EAT

- Pee Wee's at the Point, Alec Fong Lim Drive, East Point, Darwin. (08) 8981 6868; www.peeweess.com.au.
- Moorish Café, 37 Knuckey Street, Darwin. (08) 8981 0010.
- Hanuman Thai Restaurant, 93 Mitchell Street, Darwin. (08) 8941 3500.
- Buzz Café, 48 Marina Boulevard, Cullen Bay, Darwin. (08) 8941 1141.

INDULGE

- The Tropical Spa, The Mitchell Centre, Mitchell Street, Darwin. (08) 8941 0150; www.tropicalspa.com.au.

EXPERIENCE

- Discover Darwin heritage walking tour, a two-hour experience with easy-going commentary by well-informed guide, Steve Noble. Walk through the inner-city parks, sites of Aboriginal significance and other natural, historical and cultural attractions at a relaxed, leisurely pace. (08) 8942 1022; www.darwinbicycletours.com.
- Darwin Harbour Cruises on board the 30-metre Alfred Nobel. Enjoy full table service and a menu of gourmet entree platters of fresh seafood, salads, breads and Territory-style condiments as you take in the sights and the magnificent sunsets. (08) 8942 3131; www.darwinharbourcruises.com.au.
- Mindil Beach Sunset Markets. A Darwin institution, the markets run Thursday and Sunday evenings from April to October, drawing thousands of visitors. On offer is a dazzling array of Asian-inspired market food, arts, crafts and performers. Watch the famous sunset from Mindil as it dips fiery red into Darwin Harbour. And don't miss the sensational Greek lemon cake. Magnificent! www.mindil.com.au.
- Darwin Festival. Running for more than 18 nights, the festival features over 70 productions, 112 events and performances and over 1,000 international, national and Territory artists and cultural groups, reflecting the Indigenous, Asian and Pacific cultures of the region. (08) 8943 4200; www.darwinfestival.org.au.

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 - Four nights in Darwin at Mantra Pandanas, a 4.5 star hotel
 - A two-hour morning walking tour of Darwin
 - Sunset dinner cruise
 - Spa treatments
 - Dinner at the unforgettable Pee Wee's at the Point restaurant

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