

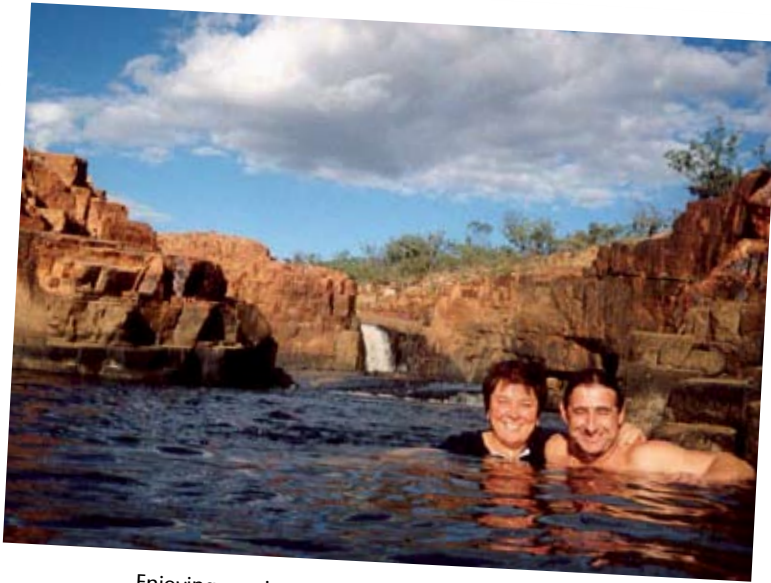
Rare insight

JULIE MCCROSSIN SEES THE WORLD IN A NEW LIGHT AFTER EXPERIENCING A TRULY UNIQUE KAKADU ADVENTURE.

Words **Julie McCrossin**

Above Early morning at Beswick Falls, Wugularr.
Below An Aboriginal rock art demonstration in Eva Valley.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DARREN KERR



Enjoying a swim with Nick Di Candilo at Edith Falls.

A nine-day adventure holiday to the Northern Territory with a mob of people from the Fred Hollows Foundation and World Expeditions gave me so many life-changing experiences it is hard to know where to begin.

I was travelling with a great group of truly adventurous people who had all raised money to support the work of the Foundation in remote Aboriginal communities around the town of Katherine and near the mighty wilderness area of Kakadu National Park. We were travelling rough in the back of a 4WD troop carrier, pitching our own tents and walking miles into the wild bush. Local elders from the Jawoyn people were going to give us special access to their land and stories because of their close working relationship with the Foundation. The scene was set for a magical and intense time.

Swimming at Beswick Falls, through water that was full of fresh water crocodiles, was a turning point for me. The Falls, traditionally known as Mulkgulumbu, are near the Aboriginal community of Wugularr outside Katherine, 107km south-east of Darwin.

The Falls themselves are within a massive, towering amphitheatre of red stone that surrounds a huge plunge pool of clear water. The waterfall crashes down the rocks at the far end of the curve of the rock. None of our photographs captured the sheer scale of the place. Our cameras just weren't up to the job. You had to see it to believe it.

It was a rare privilege to be with a small group of travellers and local Aboriginal people at this place. It is rarely open to the public because it is on Aboriginal land and it is highly protected. You normally need a permit from the Land Council to drive in along the sandy track surrounded by high grass.

Each year the community hosts the "Walking with Spirits" festival (held this year in July) of traditional dance and culture at this naturally theatrical sacred site. It attracts over 700 people to a night time ceremony that people speak of with awe.

While I'd love to see Walking with Spirits one day, it was great to visit with a small group and a couple of elders. We felt the deep peace of the place.

There is literally no development at Beswick Falls. I discovered it is a very emotional experience to see genuinely pristine wilderness. It brings tears to your eyes. The huge scale of the landscape in the Northern Territory makes you go quiet inside. The

One of the eager students at Wugularr School, east of Katherine.



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remnant bush land I am used to in the cities of Australia seems so small by comparison. It is almost pathetic, even though you feel so grateful for these fragments of green life when you're living in the urban world.

All these thoughts were floating through my mind as I was standing alone by the wide expanse of water and staring at the Falls. Suddenly one of my fellow travellers ran past me into the water and called for me to follow.

Her name was Jan, a Fred Hollows volunteer in her sixties. Throughout our holiday we had been the two who would dive into the water and swim to the waterfall at every new place we visited. In Kakadu and Lichfield National Parks there are countless dramatic waterfalls in remote places that are accessible only to 4WDs. We'd bounced along a lot of roads and felt rejuvenated by swimming in such wild places. I felt younger and healthier than I had in years.

But here at Beswick Falls I lost my nerve. We'd been told that the water was full of 'freshies'. These are the freshwater crocodiles that do not eat people, unlike the 'salties' or saltwater crocodiles that do. The Territory is full of signs warning you about 'salties' and telling you not to swim. However, the locals at Beswick Falls assured me it was safe to swim with freshies. The crocs might rub against me, but



Above Katherine Gorge (Nitmiluk).
Above right Crossing a waterfall at Koolpin Gorge.



they wouldn't bite.

Meanwhile Jan was laughing and calling to me to jump in, as we'd done so many times before. But I felt absolutely revolted at the thought of a leathery crocodile tickling my toes or touching my side. In great agitation, I prowled up and down the sandy bank on the edge of the water, as everyone laughed at my cowardice.

I was at a crossroads. I had recently turned 50 and felt if I didn't overcome my fear and swim to the Falls, I would cross a boundary into middle-age losing the essence of my youth forever. Sounds melodramatic, but that's honestly how it felt that day.

Suddenly I grabbed the hand of our Fred Hollows guide Nick Di Candilo and plunged into the water. With Nick's support I made it to the Falls and we climbed all over the red rocks. The photo Jan took of Nick and I in the water at Beswick Falls, as we trod water above the crocodiles, has a cherished place in my heart.

Later that night, we flashed a torch in the darkness across the water I'd swum in so triumphantly earlier that day. As the beam passed across the water, a forest of red eyes shone back at us, reflecting the light of the beam. The pool was indeed full of crocs and the sight nearly made me faint. But I'd done it, I'd entered the water and saved a part of myself from decline.

You might think the rest of our journey through the Top End was anti-climactic after this, but it wasn't.

We paddled canoes up Katherine Gorge or Nitmiluk, 300km south of Darwin. We were told a saltwater crocodile had been recently sighted in the river but with a tough, plastic canoe to sit in while we paddled, we were laughing.

The river twists and turns between towering rock cliffs. It is beyond words. I promised myself to come back and take the opportunity to paddle upstream and camp over night on one of the many beaches by the side of the river. On this trip, we pulled up our canoes at a bend in the river and walked inland to yet another big waterfall to swim and have our lunch. It didn't even have a name but it was a beautiful place.

The Yellow Water Billabong also changed my soul. It is a huge wetland in Kakadu at the end of Jim Jim Creek, a tributary of the Alligator River. It is a sublime place with over 60 species of birds. My sharpest memory is the moment when our young female Aboriginal guide turned off the motor of our tin boat and we simply drifted in silence through a large, flooded forest.

She probably told us about 20 or 30 of the different birds that



A circle of smiles at Wugularr School.



Meeting the locals at Grove Hill pub.

we saw that day at Yellow Water. The richness and abundance of nature in Kakadu changes the way you see the world forever. It has certainly made me sit up and listen when I hear someone talking about whether a place should get World Heritage listing or be protected in the face of development pressures. We need jobs and infrastructure for a strong economy, but we need wild places for our spirits too. This doesn't sound so trite when you're in Kakadu.

Yet my trip to the Territory wasn't only about wild places. I met life-changing people as well. In return for raising money for the

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Foundation as part of the 'See the World Challenge', the team from the Hollows Foundation takes you into Aboriginal communities to meet the Jawoyn people and to learn more about the work they are doing together.

We visited schools, health clinics, community tourism projects, community shops and a women's centre. We saw black and white people working together to improve education, health and nutrition. We heard the 'good news stories' that so many Australians want to know about because they bring hope for a better future.

At Eva Valley or Manyallaluk, 100km east of Katherine, we met local elder Long John who told us strange stories about lost children, as we sat entranced late at night around a campfire. We were camping by the spring of this dreaming place with travellers from all over the world.

Long John's stories didn't seem to have beginnings or endings and he definitely could have gone on all night. It was a unique opportunity to experience an ancient, oral culture by meeting a man who was eager to share his stories with outsiders. Young Aboriginal children from the Eva Valley community sat on the edges of the light from our campfire listening as well.

Manyallaluk has one of Australia's most successful Aboriginal community tourism ventures. Long John and others take walking tours in search of bush tucker. I took the chance to learn how to paint with a reed using natural ochre and also to weave baskets and mats in the traditional way. The community cooks up a great



Clockwise from above left Having survived the canoes, despite the threat of salties; Under a waterfall at Edith Falls; the distances between destinations are huge; The sublime Yellow Water billabong.

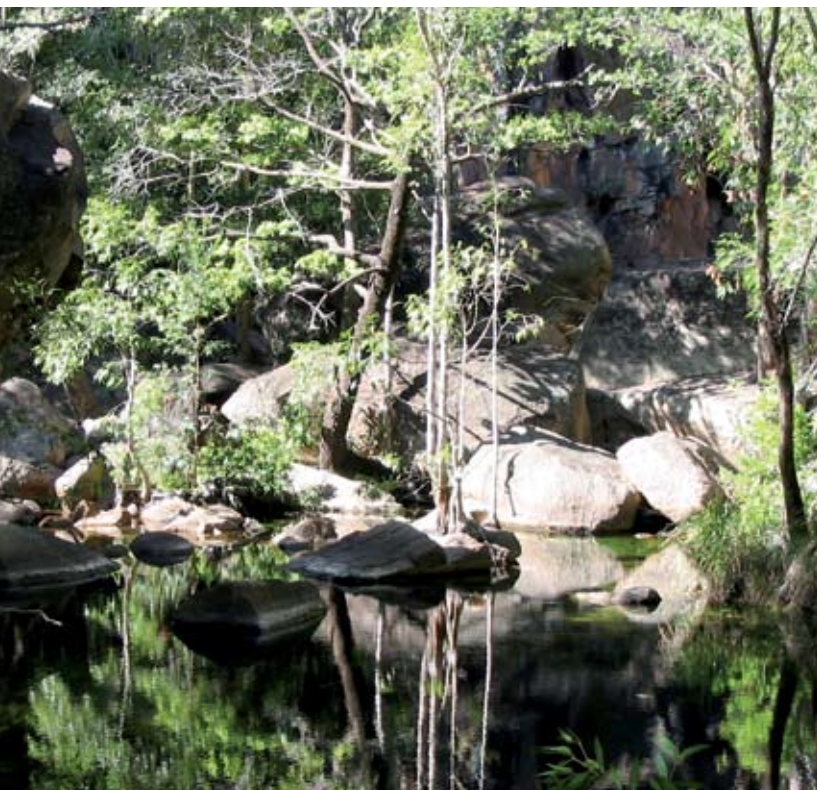




Above Jim Jim Falls, Kakadu National Park. **Above right** One of the Territory's massive termite mounds.
Below Motor Car Falls, Kakadu National Park.



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lunch of steak, kangaroo tails and damper. But the highlight of the visit for me was spending an hour in the local school and meeting packs of the kids. The current principal, Trish Noy is achieving 80% retention in school attendance. The tourism venture offers the hope of jobs when they finish.

Further down the road at Beswick or Wugularr the NT government has just started building a new school and the Hollows Foundation is investing in a community resource centre with computers and a library. We visited the community-controlled shop and the club, which strictly limits the sale of alcohol. Every day the Women's Centre provides a hot, healthy meal for all the children and elderly people in Wugularr. We helped pack the boxes as the women went out to distribute the meals.

It was especially thrilling to meet Aboriginal actor Tom E. Lewis, who lives in Wugularr. He's best-known for his starring role in the iconic Australian film, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Lewis is a key man in the Walking with Spirits event each year and he's recording local stories in a series of animated films called *Dust Echoes*. On 21 May 2007 Lewis opened a new gallery in Wugularr with the help of the Olympian Ian Thorpe, whose foundation is providing funds, and Jeff McMullen from ABC TV. The Ghunmara Cultural Centre will house the art of local elders for future generations, as well as tourists.

As we travelled between communities, another joy of this journey was sharing a car with a remarkable woman.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAYNE QUILLIAM AND JULIE MCCROSSIN AND TOURISM NT



Tyronna Manyita, Trepina Bush and Julie outside the Wugularr Women's Resource Centre.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN FAWCETT

Bino Toby, 50, is an Aborigine from central Queensland who has worked as a social worker for the Fred Hollows Foundation in the Northern Territory for three years. The average life expectancy for Aboriginal men in the area is 46 and Aboriginal babies die at a rate three times higher than other babies. Toby's goal, she says, is to empower the women and help them to get their own voice by working with them one-on-one. She does it primarily by building relationships. As Bino told me, "You can't do anything unless you've got relationships".

Last year, Toby organised fishing trips for the women with babies, squishing 26 women and their children into two 'troopies' (Troop Carriers). "The women appreciate the time and the effort, and they share their stories", Toby says. She believes her voluntary work with local sporting organisations, such as the Wanderers netball team in Katherine, is central to her work. It is how you become absorbed into the community, she believes. She has plans afoot for Australian football community competitions for under-17 boys, involving the girls as well.

Toby is also thrilled that she's started computer classes for women this year, a joint initiative with Charles Darwin University. It is this kind of painstaking, grassroots community development that offers flashes of hope amidst the darkness of Aboriginal health statistics.

Meeting these people and seeing these places was one of the best experiences of my life. As I flew back south I promised myself I would come back and I would tell the story of my adventures so others may be inspired to hit the road and see these places and this work first hand.

To find out how you can be part of the See the World Challenge

P 1800 352 352 E seetheworld@hollows.org

Visit www.hollows.org.au ■

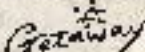
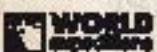
Take the Challenge & See the World



See the World is a fundraising program for The Fred Hollows Foundation. The challenge is to raise money to help those in need in developing countries and at home in Australia. There are thousands of people suffering from cataract blindness in places like Nepal, China, Vietnam and Cambodia, and there are many health issues to address within our own Indigenous Australian communities. Meet the challenge and you will be rewarded with an adventure holiday of a lifetime to one of these fascinating destinations: Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia, China and the Northern Territory.

To find out more call 1800 352 352 or visit www.hollows.org.au

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