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OUTBACK ROAD TRIP · 8 DAYS ONE WAY

# 8 days from Cairns to Darwin

Travel across Northern Australia and take in some of Australia's most iconic and rugged country in this Tropical Rain Forest to Top End adventure.

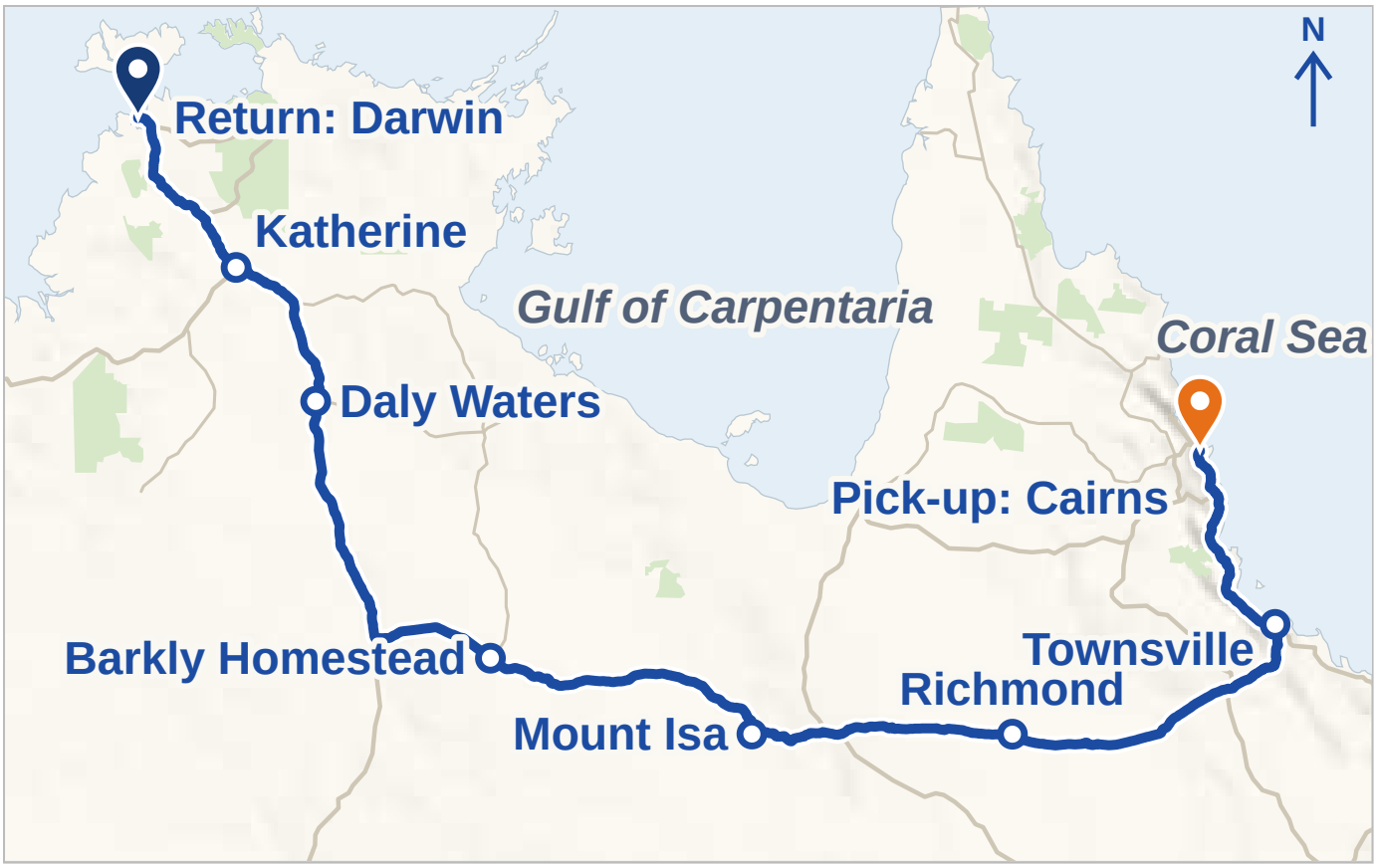
| DISTANCE | DAYS | ROUTE | DRIVING TIME |
|---|---|---|---|
| About 2,860 km | 8 days, 7 drives | One way, Cairns to Darwin | About 39 h by campervan |

| LONGEST DRIVE | VEHICLE | BEST TIME |
|---|---|---|
| 570 km, Barkly Homestead to Daly Waters | Campervan | April to November (dry season) |

This trip crosses the Country of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji, Yirrganydji, Wulgurukaba, Bindal, Kalkadoon, Jawoyn, Larrakia and other First Nations peoples. Traditional Custodians



Katherine Gorge, Nitmiluk National Park, day 7 · Illustrative image




Planning overview, not navigation. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors · coastline Natural Earth · relief Terrain Tiles (Geoscience Australia, SRTM).

> Special caution and planning should be taken when travelling in remote areas to ensure sufficient provisions, fuel and prescribed medicines are carried. Weather conditions can make sealed roads impassable particularly during the northern Wet season.

BEFORE YOU BOOK

## Hiring a campervan for this trip

**Minimum hire**

Apollo, Britz, Maui and Mighty need at least 14 days for a one-way from Cairns to Darwin, from April to November. You can still hire for the 8 days this trip takes, but you'll be charged for 14 (minimum hires). If you're paying for 14 days anyway, the extra days give you time to slow down: two or three days in Kakadu, a detour east from Pine Creek on Day 8, fit well.

**When the branches are open**

Apollo, Britz, Maui, Maui Elite and Mighty close their Darwin branch from 1 December to 31 March. With these brands, plan to pick up in Cairns from 1 April and return the van in Darwin by 30 November.

**One way to Darwin**

Apollo, Britz, Maui and Mighty charge a $300 one-way fee from Cairns to Darwin, or $310 for pick-ups from 1 April 2027. The fee is in the total we quote: compare totals, not daily rates. More on one-way fees.

**Your route**

All rental vendors in Australia have restrictions on where their vehicles can be taken, so discuss your planned route with the rental company when you pick up. Get the rental company's permission before taking the vehicle somewhere it restricts. If you take it there

without permission, you may lose your excess reduction and be fully responsible for any damage. You may also have to pay for towing and recovery, and for damage to other people's property. See road restrictions and when you are fully responsible.

## Picking up in Cairns

**Most Cairns branches hand over vans until 3pm, and on Saturdays most close earlier (pick-up times and late flights). Apollo, Britz, Maui, Maui Elite, Mighty and Mighty Lite close their Cairns branch on Sundays from 1 October to 31 March, so starting in October or November, pick up from Monday to Saturday (Sundays and the wet season). If you're hiring a campervan, allow plenty of time at the branch so the rental company can show you how it works before you leave.**

**Branches are usually open from about 9am to 3pm and busiest from 9am to 10am, so pick up in the morning to reach your first stop in daylight (choosing a pick-up time). Do the online check-in beforehand, bring the documents you need, and if you're flying in, see picking up after a flight. More on picking up your campervan. Branch addresses and hours: Cairns branches.**

DAYS 1–4

# Days 1–4: Cairns to the Gulf country

**PICK-UP DAY IN CAIRNS**

DAY 1

## Cairns

PICK-UP

Pick up your campervan or car in Cairns today.

Cairns is home to many of the natural wonders found in Australia, including the Great Barrier Reef. Try snorkelling amongst the vibrant reef and colourful fish, or stay on the boat and learn about the ecosystem of the reef.

An hour or 2 north of Cairns you'll find the Daintree Cape Tribulation Rainforest, a world heritage site. Explore the untouched jungles and rainforests of North Queensland.

**Stay** Cairns Holiday Park.

***DRIVE***

**345 km** from Cairns | **about 5 h 45 min** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 2

## Cairns to Townsville

**Directions** Depart this morning and take the National Highway A1 to the Bruce Highway/ State Route 14 in Burdell. Continue along State Route 14 and drive to Denham Street/ State Route 16 in Townsville City.

### Afternoon

Visit the Anderson Park Botanic Gardens and explore the 25 acres of natural flora and fauna. Stroll down the Grand Avenues and Tropical Orchards, or wander through the World Cycad Garden. Take a picnic and make a full day of it!

For the history fans amongst us, visit the Army Museum of North Queensland. The museum is actually located in the Jezzine Barracks, where Australian military units have called home for the past 120 years. The three collections focus on distinct periods of time in Australian war history, beginning with the Australian Army in Queensland during the 1800s, up to more contemporary conflicts since World War 2. It opens on a few mornings a week, so check its days before you go.

**Stay** Townsville Lakes Holiday Park (formerly The Lakes Holiday Park).

***DRIVE***

**500 km** from Townsville | **about 7 h 15 min** by campervan | Via **Flinders Highway**

DAY 3

## Townsville to Richmond

**Directions** Depart this morning and take the Southern Port Road to National Highway A6 in Stuart. Follow the National Highway A6 to Goldring Street in Richmond.

### Morning

It's over 7 hours by campervan today, so start early and share the driving.

### Afternoon

Check out the Kronosaurus Korner, Australia's premier marine fossil museum. Some 120 million years ago, much of Queensland was under water. Here, marine animals thrived. As the sea slowly moved out, we were left with the fossils of marine animals from the past. Richmond, in particular, is home to many of

these discoveries, and is finding more each year. Join the palaeontologists on one of their many digs and try and find a fossil yourself, or explore the centre for a fun afternoon.

**Fossil hunting** The public fossil hunting sites are 12 km north of town on a sealed road, and you need a permit from Kronosaurus Korner.

**Stay** Richmond Lakeview Caravan Park.

***DRIVE***

**405 km** from Richmond | **about 6 h** by campervan | Via **Flinders Highway**

DAY 4

## *Richmond to Mount Isa*

**Directions** Depart this morning and head southeast on Goldring Road towards Harris Street. Turn right onto National Highway A6 and follow to Julia Creek. Follow the National Highway A2, and then turn right onto Corbould Street.

### *Morning*

It's about 6 hours by campervan today, so start early and share the driving.

### *Afternoon*

Mount Isa is a mining town, so a visit to the mines is a must-see when you're there! The award-winning Hard Times Mine tour gives you the experience of being an actual miner. You'll be taken down into the mines by an actual miner, and learn about how they form the mines themselves. Have a go at the air-leg drill, and feel the earth move under your touch.

> **Book ahead:**
> Hard Times Mine tours run at set times that change with the season, for ages 7 and over.

To continue the underground theme, see Mount Isa's underground hospital. A slightly ominous atmosphere, the hospital was built during World War 2, to protect it against the threat of bombs.

**Stay** Mount Isa Caravan Park.

DAYS 5–8

# Days 5–8: Across the Top End

**DRIVE**

**450 km** from Mount Isa | **about 5 h 45 min** by campervan

Via **Barkly Highway**

DAY 5

## Mount Isa to Barkly Homestead

QLD → NT

**Directions** Return to the National Highway A2 and across into the Northern Territory. Continue along the National Highway 66, and turn left at the Barkly Homestead.

### All day

Take in the Northern Territory and the outback at the Barkly Homestead. Enjoy seeing native animals run in the wild, or watch a world-famous sunset. Recharge and ready yourself for the driving of the next day.

**Eat** Have dinner at the Barkly Bar and Grill, and have one of their popular steaks.

**Stay** Barkly Homestead.

**DRIVE**

**570 km** from Barkly Homestead | **about 6 h 45 min** by campervan

Via **Stuart Highway**

DAY 6

## Barkly Homestead to Daly Waters

LONGEST DRIVE

**Directions** Depart this morning and return to the National Highway 66. Turn right onto National Highway 87. Continue along National Highway 1 until you reach Daly Waters.

### All day

It's the longest drive of the trip, nearly 7 hours by campervan, so start early and share the driving.

**Stock and wildlife**
Many roads aren't fenced. Cattle, kangaroos, camels and birds are most active at sunrise, sunset and night, so plan to arrive before dark (wildlife on the road).

Daly Waters is the original Australian pub. Nowhere else will you find something so quintessentially Australian. From the décor, to the food and people, you will find something to love about this small town.

**Eat** The Daly Waters Pub serves the classic Aussie meals such as parmas and steaks, but also don't be afraid to try some kangaroo or crocodile.

**Stay** The Daly Waters Pub. Its caravan and camping sites are first come, first served, so arrive early.

***DRIVE***

**275 km** from Daly Waters | **about 3 h 30 min** by campervan | Via **Stuart Highway**

DAY 7

## *Daly Waters to Katherine*

**Directions** Depart this morning and take the National Highway 1. Turn right onto Chamber Drive, and then left onto First Street to enter Katherine.

### *Afternoon*

Discover Katherine through its waterways, and take a cruise through the mighty Katherine Gorge. View the landscapes as it slowly changes throughout your journey in Nitmiluk National Park, and try and spot the local wallabies. If you're up for something more adventurous, hire a canoe or kayak, and drift along the water.

**Crocodiles**
Saltwater crocodiles live in Top End rivers, billabongs and the sea. Swim only in signed swimming areas. Never dive or jump into rivers or waterholes.

**Stay** BIG4 Breeze Holiday Parks – Katherine (formerly BIG4 Katherine Low Level Caravan Park).

**DRIVE**

**315 km** from Katherine | **about 4 h** by campervan | Via **Stuart Highway**

DAY 8

# Katherine to Darwin

RETURN

**Directions** Depart this morning and return to the National Highway 1. Keep right and continue onto Tiger Brennan Drive. Follow the signs to Darwin.

### All day

Return your campervan in Darwin.

If you've added days to your hire, Kakadu National Park is a detour east from Pine Creek. Learn about the oldest living culture in the world, and how it connects to the sacred land. The national park is full of activities; so be selective in what you decide to do.

There is nothing quite like swimming in the natural pools around the park, including the Jim Jim plunge pool (closed in 2026, see below). Surrounded by the rainforest landscape, you are transported away from modern civilisation into this natural oasis. Another highlight would be one of the many cultural tours, where you can learn everything from rock art to searching for bush foods.

**Jim Jim Falls**

Jim Jim Falls, Twin Falls and Karnamarr campground are closed for all of 2026 while damaged roads are repaired, at the request of Traditional Owners. Parks Australia expects them to reopen for the 2027 dry season. In other years, the road to them is 4WD only, and rental companies restrict it, so check your rental terms or join a tour from Jabiru.

### Afternoon

If you're staying on in Darwin, the Top End is notorious for its crocodiles, so why not take a croc-spotting tour and see them for yourself. Visit one of the crocodile farms and research facilities, and watch the crocodiles jump out of the water as they are fed. A terrifying but mysterious animal, you will learn about its history in the indigenous culture, as well as the protective measures in place for the animals.

**Stay** BIG4 Hidden Valley Holiday Park (formerly Hidden Valley Tourist Park), Darwin.

## Returning in Darwin

**When you return your campervan, allow time for the return inspection. Return it by the time on your booking, as rental companies charge for late returns. Apollo, Britz, Maui, Maui Elite and Mighty have no toilet or grey-water emptying service in Darwin, so return their vans with**

**both emptied. Drop-off times are often earlier than people expect, so check yours (returning the van in Darwin).**

**Most branches take vans back until about 3pm to 3.30pm, so plan your last drive to arrive early (choosing a drop-off time). If you're running late, call the branch (late returns). More on returning your campervan. Branch addresses and hours: Darwin branches.**

## *Enjoy the drive across the top.*

### Traditional Custodians

**Cairns:** Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji, among the Traditional Custodians of the Cairns region (Cairns Regional Council (https://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/experience-cairns/facts-figures-history/first-peoples-history))
**Townsville:** Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun, Bindal, Gugu Badhun and Nywaigi peoples (Townsville City Council (https://www.townsville.qld.gov.au/about-townsville/history-and-heritage/townsville-history/traditional-landowners))
**Mount Isa:** Kalkadoon people (Mount Isa City Council (https://www.mountisa.qld.gov.au/City-Council/Welcome-to-Mount-Isa))
**The Barkly region:** Warumungu, Mudburra, Jingili, Wakaya, Wambaya, Waanyi, Warlpiri, Warlmanpa, Alyawarr, Anmatyerre and Kaytetye peoples (Barkly Regional Council (https://www.barkly.nt.gov.au/))
**Katherine:** Jawoyn, Dagoman and Wardaman peoples (Katherine Town Council (https://www.katherine.nt.gov.au/Profiles/katherine/Assets/ClientData/Documents/Municipal_Plan/Municipal_Plan_2024-25_WEB.pdf))
**Darwin:** Larrakia people (City of Darwin (https://www.darwin.nt.gov.au/community/about-darwin))

Country boundaries are approximate, and some are shared or contested. These names follow local councils and park managers. The AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia (https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia) shows the wider picture.

*Pay your respects to the Traditional Custodians of the land on which you are travelling, and to their Elders past, present and emerging. The Australian environment is fragile, so tread lightly: take only photos and leave only footprints.*

### DriveNow Disclaimer

DriveNow receives no money or commission for any holiday park, campground, hotel, restaurant, cafe, pub, tour or attraction named on this page. We include them because they suit a campervan trip, and we check them from time to time.

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