

Cape York Peninsula & Gulf Savannah



Epic pilgrimage, off-road adventure, wilderness experience or just plain fishing heaven – whichever way you look at it, Cape York and the Gulf country are true frontiers. Virtually undeveloped, this is a landscape of climatic extremes, stark but beautiful scenery and inimitable characters.

Although both share coastline with the Gulf of Carpentaria, they are very distinct areas. The Cape is northeast Australia's unmistakable 'dingo ear'; an overland pilgrimage to the northernmost Tip of Australia is one of the great 4WD routes on the continent. The Cape boasts big crocs, vehicle- and character-testing roads, remote Aboriginal communities, tropical rainforests and wetlands that rival Kakadu with their rich bird life. Only well-prepared expeditions make a success of it, and whether you drive yourself or take a tour, it's an unforgettable adventure.

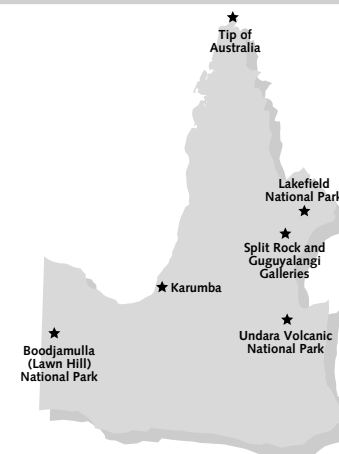
Running west from the Cape across to the Northern Territory border, the Gulf Savannah is a vast, flat and mostly empty landscape of tropical grasslands, shimmering horizons, saltpans and impenetrable mangroves. Connecting the scattering of historic mines, gem-fossicking centres, geological wonders and colourful fishing towns are the vital but tenuous Gulf roads – the main one being the Savannah Way, which shoots across the continent from Cairns to Broome. This is accessible country, even without a 4WD, and it's barely touched by tourism, save for a few sites such as the Undara lava tubes and the awesome fishing spots. A journey out here will give you a sense of what Australia's primordial outback is all about, but with the Gulf coast tantalisingly close by.

CAPE YORK PENINSULA
& GULF SAVANNAH

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the remote and wild **Lakefield National Park** (p410)
- Learning about Quinkan art from a local Aboriginal guide at the **Split Rock and Guguyalangi galleries** (p408)
- Popping champagne at the end of the epic journey to reach the **Tip of Australia** (p413)
- Camping and canoeing in the **Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park** (p423)
- Exploring the fascinating lava tubes and sleeping in a railway carriage at **Undara Volcanic National Park** (p418)
- Hauling in a big barramundi, then watching a serene tropical sunset over a beer at the colourful Gulf port of **Karumba** (p421)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 07

■ www.cypda.com.au

■ www.gulf-savannah.com.au

Climate & When to Go

Though most of the rain in northern Queensland falls between January and March, the first rains of the Wet can start in November, making road travel difficult from November to May. The best time to tackle a Cape trip is early in the dry season, generally from the beginning of June. The country is still green, there are fewer travellers and the roads are less chopped up than later in the season.

Likewise, travel is not recommended in the Gulf Savannah between the beginning of December and the end of March. Extreme heat and humidity make conditions uncomfortable and potentially dangerous, and heavy rain can close roads for lengthy periods. During the winter months, you'll encounter warm days and cool mornings and evenings.

If you plan to visit early or late in the season, it pays to check road conditions in advance. Calling local police, national-park rangers or roadhouses is recommended. You can also make use of the recorded **RACQ Road Reports** (☎ 1300 130 595; www.racq.com.au).

CAPE YORK PENINSULA

Many Australians might gaze at a map of Australia and wonder what it's like to forge through one of the country's great remote wilderness areas, but relatively few actually do it. The road up to the Cape is accessible to adventurous travellers in the dry season and there are lots of detours branching off to the coast: many of the highlights of this journey are found on the detours, planned and unexpected, and simply by experiencing the isolation and wilderness. You can get a good taste of the Cape travelling from Cooktown through Lakefield National Park and back down to Cairns.

Bordered to the east by the Coral Sea and to the west by the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York covers around 207,000 sq km but has only around 16,000 people, mostly in remote indigenous communities. The main towns are Cooktown, Weipa, Bamaga and Coen, and a handful of smaller settlements and cattle stations make up the remainder of the communities throughout the Cape. Most of the peninsula is a flat, low-lying patchwork of tropical savannah overlaid by wild, snaking rivers and streams, while along its eastern flank is the elevated northern section of the Great Dividing Range, whose northernmost

tip ends in Dauan, a remote outer island of Torres Strait.

Information

The foremost consideration of a Cape trip is good preparation. Before heading off to each new destination on the peninsula, seek advice on routes and conditions from police, national-park rangers, locals or other travellers, and make sure you're carrying at least one of the recommended maps.

You need all the usual gear for travelling in a remote area, including a first-aid kit, and you *must* carry food and water. Although you will cross a number of rivers south of the Archer River, water can be scarce along the main track, especially late in the dry season, and you can only pick up basic food provisions along the way – though if you stick to the main road it is possible to eat at roadhouses all the way up.

EMERGENCY

As well as emergency assistance, the following police stations can provide up-to-date information on road conditions to travellers:

Bamaga (☎ 4069 3156)

Coen (☎ 4060 1150)

Cooktown (☎ 4069 5320)

Hopevale Aboriginal Community (☎ 4060 9224)

Laura (☎ 4060 3244)

Lockhart River Aboriginal Community (☎ 4060 7120)

Weipa (☎ 4069 9119)

MAPS & BOOKS

The Hema maps *Cape York & Lakefield National Park* and the RACQ maps *Cairns/Townsville* and *Cape York Peninsula* are the best. Ron and Viv Moon's *Cape York – an Adventurer's Guide* is the most comprehensive guide for 4WD and camping enthusiasts.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospitals and medical clinics on Cape York Peninsula:

Bamaga (☎ 4069 3166) Hospital.

Coen (☎ 4060 1166) Clinic.

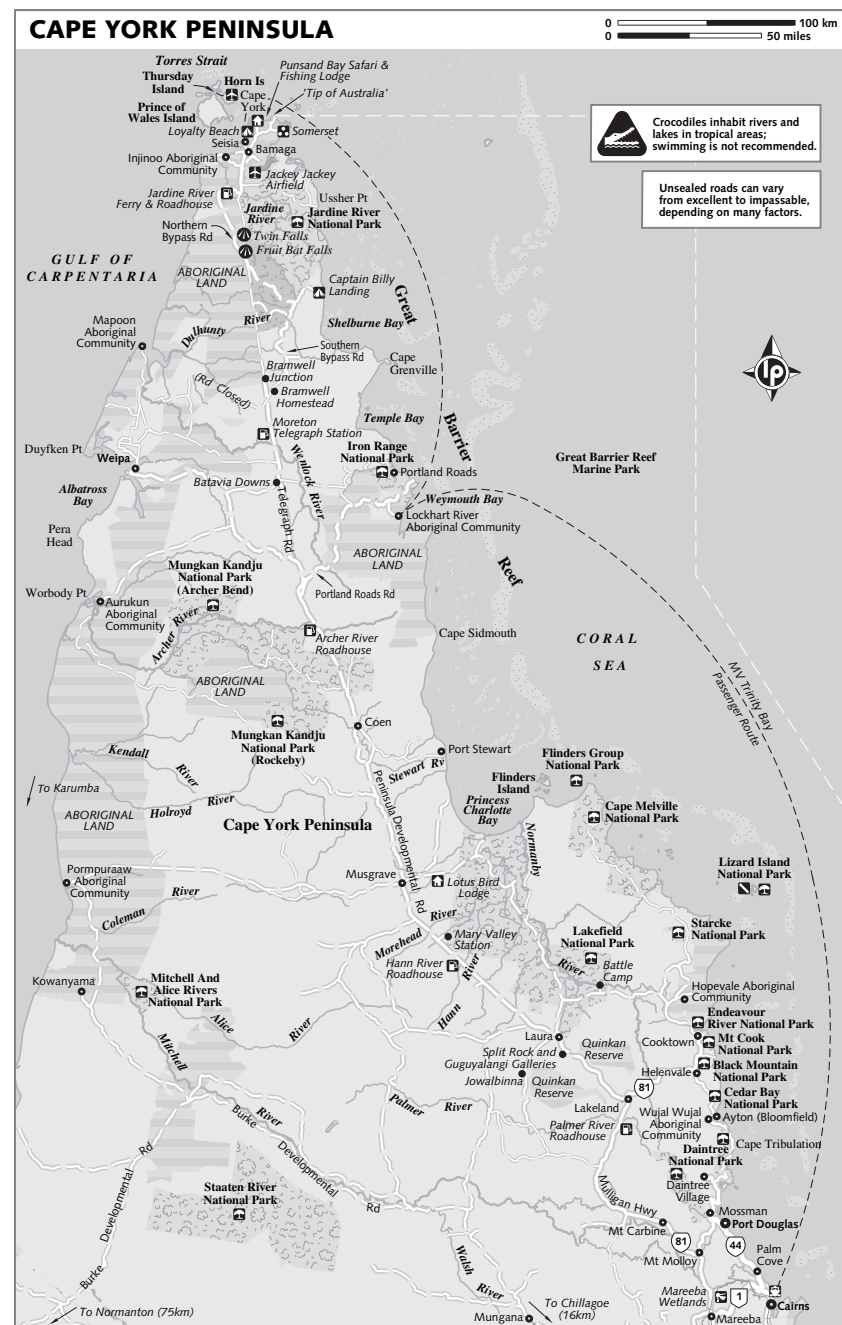
Cooktown (☎ 4069 5433) Hospital.

Laura (☎ 4060 3320) Clinic.

Weipa (☎ 4069 9155) Hospital.

MONEY

Banking facilities are limited on Cape York, and full banking facilities are only available at



ALCOHOL RESTRICTIONS

On the way up to the Cape you'll see signs warning of alcohol restrictions, which apply to all visitors. The restrictions are part of a Queensland government alcohol-management plan covering remote communities. It's worth knowing the rules because the fines for breaking them are huge – up to \$37,500. In some communities alcohol is banned completely and cannot be carried in. In the Northern Peninsula Area (north of the Jardine River) you can carry a maximum of 11.25L of beer (or 9L of premixed spirits) and 2L of wine per vehicle (not per person). Alcohol is still available at taverns in some communities (such as Bamaga) and roadhouses, but the rules are designed to stop people bringing in large quantities. For up-to-date information see www.mcmc.qld.gov.au.

Cooktown, Weipa and Thursday Island. There are ATMs at Laura and Coen, and Eftpos is readily available at most roadhouses, hotels and general stores. Credit cards, including MasterCard and Visa, are widely accepted.

PERMITS

Once you are north of the Dulhunty River you will need a permit to camp on Aboriginal land, which in effect is nearly all the land north of the river. The Injino people are the traditional custodians of much of this land, and the Injino Aboriginal Community, which runs the ferry across the Jardine River, includes a camping permit in the ferry fee.

Travelling across Aboriginal land elsewhere on the Cape may require an additional permit, which you can obtain by contacting the relevant community council. The website of the **Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation** (www.balkanu.com.au) lists contact details for all the Cape York Aboriginal communities.

Dangers & Annoyances

You are entering serious crocodile country, so while there are plenty of safe places to swim, be aware that many stretches of water can hold a big hungry saltie. Heed the warning signs and, if in doubt, don't swim.

The most common accidents on the Cape are head-on collisions in the heath country south of the Jardine River. The track is narrow here with many blind corners, and people often travel too fast. Keep in mind that there's a fair bit of traffic on these roads during the dry season.

Tours

Unless you're a well-prepared 4WD enthusiast, visiting the Cape on an organised tour is the way to go and there is a host of operators offering everything from swag camping to fully accommodated trips, and overland to

fly-drive. Four-wheel drive tours are the most popular and generally range from six to 16 days, travelling with five to 12 passengers, and taking in Cooktown, Laura, the Split Rock and Guguyalangi galleries, Lakefield National Park, Coen, Weipa, the Elliot River (including Twin Falls), Bamaga, Somerset and Cape York itself. Many tours also visit Thursday Island (often an optional extra).

Most companies kick off their tour from Cairns, and offer a range of transport options. Prices are usually inclusive of all meals, accommodation and national park fees.

Billy Tea Bush Safaris (☎ 4032 3127; www.billytea.com.au); 9-day fly/drive tours \$2750, 13-day cruise/drive tours \$2950, 14-day overland tours \$2750) An experienced operator with tours to all parts of the Cape.

Cape York Motorcycle Adventures (☎ 4059 0220; www.capeyorkmotorcycles.com.au); 5-day tour \$3400) This all-inclusive motorcycle tour is from Cairns to Cooktown via the coast, through Lakefield National Park and back via Laura. Bikes are supplied but if you bring your own it's \$2300. There's also an eight-day fly/ride tour to the Tip (\$4850).

Exploring Oz (☎ 1300 888 112, 4057 7905; www.exploring-oz.com.au); 6-day overland tour from \$875) Taking in Musgrave Station, Coen, Wenlock River, Seisa and the Tip; this is a backpacker option, sleeping in swags or tents.

Guides to Adventure (☎ 4091 1978; www.guidestoventure.com.au); 12-/16-day Cape York tours \$1194/1725) These are fully catered 4WD tag-along safaris, which means you need to bring your own 4WD vehicle and tent.

Heritage Tours (☎ 1800 77 55 33, 4054 7750; www.heritage-tours.com.au); 5-day fly/drive tours from \$1255; 9-day cruise/drive tours from \$3000) Big range of upmarket tours including fly/drive, cruise and overland with camping or accommodation options and all meals.

Oz Tours Safaris (☎ 1800 079 006, 4055 9535; www.oztours.com.au); 8-day fly/drive camping tours \$1855, 16-day overland tours \$2875) Numerous tours, air/sea/overland options, and camping or motel options.

Wilderness Challenge (☎ 1800 354 486; 4035 4488; www.wilderness-challenge.com.au); 7-day camping tours

\$1995, 7-day accommodated fly/drive tours \$2995) Huge range of camping and accommodation options, including a three-day safari to Cooktown and Jowalbinna rock-art sites.

CULTURAL TOURS

Aurukun Wetland Charters (☎ 0407-575 618; www.aurukunwetlandcharters.com.au); 3-day tour \$2040) In the remote western Cape south of Weipa, this cultural and wildlife tour is led by Aboriginal guides from the Aurukun community. Accommodation is aboard the *MV Pikkuw* (maximum eight passengers). These remote wetlands are exceptional for bird-watching.

Cape York Encounter (☎ 4069 9978; www.encountercapeyork.com.au); 7-day tour \$4999) This tour from Weipa combines three days at the Cape York Turtle Rescue Camp near Mapoon (see p412) and the remaining time on the Aurukun Wetlands.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies daily from Cairns to Weipa and Horn Island. **Aero Tropics** (☎ 1300 656 110; 4040 1222; www.aero-tropics.com.au) flies six days a week from Cairns to Bamaga, and from Bamaga to Horn Island. **Skytrans** (☎ 1800 818 405; www.skytrans.com.au), based in Cairns, has flights from Cairns to Coen and Lockhart River, as well as a charter service.

BOAT

MV Trinity Bay (☎ 4035 1234; www.seaswift.com.au) runs a weekly cargo ferry to Horn Island, Thursday Island and Bamaga, which takes up to 38 passengers. It departs Cairns every Friday and reaches Thursday Island on Sun-

OUTBACK MAILMAN

For a birds-eye view of Cape York Peninsula and a unique insight into its remote communities, join the world's longest mail run. The Outback Mailman delivers post to dozens of communities five days a week year-round, making it a good opportunity to see the Cape during the wet season. Departing from Cairns, there are five different routes – the longest is the Wednesday run going as far north as Heathlands. A trip costs between \$375 and \$550 depending on the day, and includes lunch and a tea stop at one of the stations.

For information contact **Aero Tropics** (☎ 1300 656 110; 4040 1222; www.aero-tropics.com.au).

day, returning to Cairns from Bamaga on Monday. The five-day return trip costs from \$860 per person in a four-share cabin, to \$1699 in a single cabin with en suite. It's certainly no cruise ship but meals are included and vehicles can be taken at extra cost.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Cape York Peninsula is a true 4WD adventure. From Cairns to the top of Cape York is 952km via the shortest and most challenging route. However, there are a host of worthy diversions from this route, including the Lakefield and Iron Range national parks, and these will add considerably to the total distance covered.

The first 175km of the Peninsula Developmental Rd from Mareeba to Lakeland is sealed. The journey from Lakeland to Weipa is nearly 600km of wide and reasonably well-maintained but often corrugated, unsealed road. As you head north of the Weipa turn-off, the real adventure begins along the Telegraph Rd (also known as the Overland Telegraph Track) to Cape York. The creek crossings become more numerous and more challenging; this is pure 4WD territory. Further north you have the choice of continuing on Telegraph Rd or taking the better-maintained bypass roads.

LAKELAND TO MUSGRAVE Lakeland to Laura

The Peninsula Developmental Rd is sealed all the way to Lakeland and from there turns northeast on the long trek to the Cape, while the Cooktown Developmental Rd runs through to Cooktown. From here you're on your way to Laura on a formed dirt road with sections of sealed road, and this is about as good as the run north gets.

Just past the Kennedy River crossing about 15km south of Laura, **Ang-Gnarra Festival Ground** (☎ 4060 3419; unpowered sites \$10) has self-registration camping with hot showers and a camp kitchen. The main reason to book a place here is for the biennial **Laura Aboriginal Dance and Cultural Festival**. (www.laurafestival.tv; tickets \$50; mid-Jun). Established in 1980, this three-day festival unites the Cape York and Gulf indigenous communities with traditional dance, song, art and tradition. It's one of the most spectacular Aboriginal festivals in Australia and an unrivalled opportunity to see authentic indigenous culture. Tickets are limited, so book ahead through the Quinkan Regional

QUINKAN ART

Quinkan is one of the great ancient art styles of northern Australia. Vastly different from the X-ray art of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, or the Wandjina art of the Kimberley in Western Australia, Quinkan art is named after human-shaped spirit figures with unusually shaped heads.

More than 1200 galleries have been discovered in the escarpment country south of Laura. The rock art is difficult to date, although Aboriginal people have been living in the Laura area for at least 33,000 years. Most of the existing paintings are comparatively younger; in a couple of galleries, images of horses echo the European invasion. Many of the Quinkan artists were killed by settlers or disease during the 1873 Palmer River gold rush, and much mystery still surrounds this art.

The **Split Rock and Guguyalangi galleries** (the Northern Art sites) are the main public-access sites. There is a number of overhangs in the Split Rock group of galleries, and while Split Rock itself is the most visually detailed, within 100m there are smaller galleries containing flying foxes, tall Quinkans and hand stencils. The Guguyalangi group of galleries consists of more than a dozen overhangs adorned with a vast array of figures, animals and implements.

A walking trail leads from the car park at Split Rock, past the galleries in this group and then up onto the plateau to a lookout at Turtle Rock. From this point the trail wanders through the open forest of the plateau for 1km to the Guguyalangi group. If you're going to do this walk, save it for the late afternoon or the early morning – the plateau bakes in the midday sun – and take water and food.

Percy Trezise, a pilot, artist, historian and amateur archaeologist, opened the sites to the world in the 1960s. Trezise established the wilderness reserve at Jowalbinna (see opposite), which specialises in guided walking-trips to the Quinkan galleries.

For more information on Quinkan art, visit the **Quinkan & Regional Cultural Centre** (☎ 4060 3457; www.quinkancc.com.au) in Laura, where guided tours of the sites can be arranged.

Cultural Centre in Laura. The next festival is in 2009.

Further on are the **Split Rock and Guguyalangi galleries**, magnificent Aboriginal rock-art sites (see the boxed text, above). The main rock-art shelters are a short walk uphill from the car park, where there's an honesty box (\$5 donation).

Laura

☎ 07 / pop 225

About 12km on from the Split Rock galleries, Laura is the first of the Cape York Peninsula towns – a good place to sink a beer at the pub, have a chat with the locals and explore the surrounding area.

Quinkan & Regional Cultural Centre (☎ 4060 3457; www.quinkancc.com.au; adult child \$5.50/2; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3.30pm Sat & Sun) is a cultural and heritage centre covering the history of the region in photos, murals and interpretive boards. Profiles of local Aboriginal elders and stories of pioneering settlement plaster the walls. This is the place to organise guided tours of the Split Rock art sites with an Aboriginal guide.

The historic, corrugated-iron **Quinkan Hotel** (☎ 4060 3444; unpowered/poweredsites \$10/13, s/d \$25/60) burnt to the ground in 2002. Of course, a new pub was built, and what it lacks in character

it makes up for in decent facilities, including camp sites behind the pub.

The **Laura Store & Post Office** (☎ 4060 3238), next to the pub, sells a range of groceries, including fruit and veggies, ice, gas and fuel. Laura also has a **roadhouse** (☎ 4060 3419; ☎ 6am-10pm) with food, fuel, an ATM, and camping across the road for \$10.

Laura to Musgrave

North from Laura, most of the creek crossings will be dry, but early in the season some may still have water in them. Some of these crossings, such as the Little Laura and Kennedy Rivers, offer great places to bush camp. Sections of road are sealed between Laura and Musgrave, making the going a bit easier.

On the banks of the Hann River, 76km north of Laura, the **Hann River Roadhouse** (☎ 4060 3242; Peninsula Developmental Rd; camp sites \$6) sells fuel, groceries and takeaways, and has a licensed restaurant (mains \$5 to \$19), as well as a camping area with shower and toilet facilities.

About 22km on from the roadhouse, there's a turn-off heading 6km east to **Mary Valley Station** (☎ 4060 3254; www.capeyorkfrontier.com; camping \$8.50, units \$88), a cattle property on the fringe of Lakefield National Park offering camp sites,

modern rooms and meals. The property has one of the largest colonies of red flying foxes (fruit bats) in the world – they make an amazing sight when they take flight and form a screeching cloud just on dusk every evening. Quality didjeridus are made here by the Appo family.

From here to Musgrave it's 61km (one hour). A few creek crossings and nasty dips will keep your speed down.

Musgrave

The **Musgrave Roadhouse** (☎/fax 4060 3229; camp sites per adult/child \$9/3, s/d \$66/77), built in 1887, was originally a telegraph station. It's now a licensed restaurant and roadhouse selling fuel, basic groceries and takeaway food. The rooms are simple and the camping area is popular as a first overnight stop on the road up to the Tip.

From near here, tracks run east to the Lakefield National Park or west to Edward River and the Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Community on the far western side of the cape.

MUSGRAVE TO ARCHER RIVER

About 95km north of Musgrave you come to a road junction. The Peninsula Development Rd leads left to Coen, while a rough road swings right, crossing the **Stewart River** and heading 63km to **Port Stewart** on the eastern coast of the Cape, with reasonable bush camping and good fishing.

Coen

☎ 07 / pop 253

Coen is the biggest town in the central Cape but there's not much to it: a pub, two general stores with fuel and supplies, a hospital, a

police station, a small museum and a couple of accommodation options.

On the road into town, the **Wunthulpu Visitor Centre** (☎ 4060 1192) has historical and cultural displays and crafts for sale.

Coen Camping Ground (☎ 4060 1134; unpowered/poweredsites \$15/20), next to Rosin general store, has toilets and hot showers.

Homestead Guest House (☎ 4060 1157; s/d \$65/80; ☎) has clean, comfortable rooms with ceiling fans (some with air-con) and shared bathrooms.

The rowdy **Exchange Hotel** (☎ 4060 1133; r from \$75, units from \$100; ☎) has dongas, rooms with shared bathrooms or self-contained motel rooms with en suites.

For the first 23km north of Coen the road is sealed, but once you pass the Coen airfield it deteriorates. A little further is the rugged access track to **Mungkan Kandju National Park**, an isolated wilderness park that straddles much of the Archer River and its tributaries. The **ranger station** (☎ 4060 3256) at Rokeby Homestead is about 70km west from the Peninsula Developmental Rd, or you can visit the district ranger in Coen for more information.

Archer River

Archer River Roadhouse (☎ 4060 3266; archerriverroadhouse@bigpond.com; camping \$8, s/d \$55/75; ☎ 7am-10pm) is a great place to stop and enjoy a cold beer and the famous Archer Burger (mains cost \$7 to \$24). Just down the hill from the roadhouse, the Archer River is a pleasant stream in the Dry, and its wide, tree-lined sandy bed is an ideal spot to camp. The banks are lined with tall paperbark trees (melaleucas), offering shade and the hordes of birds and fruit bats that love the sweet-smelling nectar.

DETOUR: JOWALBINNA

To visit some of the more remote Quinkan rock-art sites – and stay in a lovely bush-camp setting – head 36km southwest of Laura on a 4WD track to Jowalbinna.

Jowalbinna Rock Art Safari Camp (☎ 4035 4488; www.jowalbinna.com.au; camping \$9, cabins with meals from \$125) offers secluded camping and accommodation with good facilities including toilets and showers, a café, a small shop and campfire cooking. From the camp there are **guided walks** (half-day adult/child \$55/27.50, sunset tour \$35/17.50) to ancient rock-art sites you wouldn't have a hope of finding on your own. There are also self-guided bush walks and a safe swimming hole near the camp. The camp is usually open from mid-May to November; call ahead to book tours and accommodation.

The turn-off to Jowalbinna is signposted just north of Laura and follows a 4WD-only track through Olive Vale station.

Wilderness Challenge (p406) includes Jowalbinna on its Cape York itineraries and runs three-day tours to Jowalbinna from Cairns.

DETOUR: LAKEFIELD NATIONAL PARK

The 275km 4WD route from Cooktown to Musgrave via Lakefield National Park is a great alternative to the main road north. This route, however, is very isolated, without any facilities or fuel stops along the way, and you must carry enough water to get between the permanent water points.

Leaving Cooktown on the McIvor Rd, **Endeavour Falls** is reached after just 33km, most of which is along a sealed road. Here there's a good, year-round swimming hole and a tourist park with a grocery store and fuel. At the 36km mark is the turn-off for Battle Camp and Lakefield.

Continue straight on (north) to get to the **Hopevale Aboriginal Community**, established as a Lutheran Mission in 1949. The community has an arts centre and a couple of stores. Back on the Cooktown road, turn northwest to continue to **Battle Camp**. About 5km further on there is a stony river crossing and the magical **Isabella Falls** – well worth a stop and a cooling swim.

Lakefield National Park, covering more than 542,000 hectares, encompasses a wide variety of country around the flood plains of the Normanby, Kennedy, Bizant, Morehead and Hann Rivers. During the wet season these rivers flood the plains, at times forming a small inland sea. As the dry season begins, the rivers retreat to form a chain of deep waterholes and billabongs where birds and other wildlife congregate. Self-registration bush camp sites are scattered throughout the park but only Kalpowar Crossing and Hann Crossing sites have facilities. The park is generally only accessible between June and November.

The Laura River is crossed 25km from the park boundary (112km from Cooktown). The abandoned **Old Laura Homestead** is on the far bank. Continuing to Musgrave and deeper into the Lakefield National Park, turn right at the T-junction. The **QPWS ranger station** (☎ 4060 3260) at New Laura Homestead is 25km north of the junction. After another 33km, you pass another ranger station at **Lakefield Homestead** (☎ 4060 3271). About 3km before the ranger station is a turn-off for **Kalpowar Crossing**, an excellent camping ground with facilities and lots of bird life.

About 30km further on is the Hann Crossing of the North Kennedy River, another good camping area with toilets. Downstream from the crossing are waterfalls dropping into a large pool. The river is tidal to the base of the falls and swimming here is not advised.

The turn-off to **Low Lake**, a spectacular bird habitat, is found 28km on from the crossing. Continue straight ahead and in less than 2km you'll reach **Saltwater Creek Crossing**. The road then swings southwest as it begins to head towards Musgrave. Stay left at the next few track junctions, as the tracks on the right lead to Marina Plains Station. You leave the national park 16km west of Saltwater Creek, and 34km later you will hit the Peninsula Developmental Rd, right opposite Musgrave.

Lotus Bird Lodge (☎ 4060 3400; www.lotusbird.com.au; Marina Plains Rd; s/d \$320/516), just outside the park boundary 28km east of Musgrave, has accommodation in 10 comfortable timber cabins around a large billabong. It's perfect for birdwatchers, with an in-house naturalist and guided walks. Room rates include meals and tours, and the lodge is exclusive to prebooked guests – don't expect to pop in for a nice meal on your way through.

ARCHER RIVER TO LOCKHART RIVER

About 36km north of the Archer River Roadhouse, Portland Roads Rd turns off northeast towards Iron Range National Park and the Lockhart River Aboriginal Community. It's another 110km to the **ranger station** (☎ 4060 7170) at King Park Homestead.

Iron Range National Park is of world significance and conserves the largest area of lowland tropical rainforest in Australia. Bird life in the area is rich and includes the southern cassowary – this is one of the only habitats where the bird isn't endangered. Also look out for the spotted and the grey cuscus – a monkeylike

marsupial with a prehensile tail. Some 10% of Australia's butterfly species also reside in this park; of these, 25 species are found no further south and the park is their stronghold.

There are four bush camp sites in the park. Near the East Claudie River are the Rainforest and Cooks Hut camping grounds, while further east is the Gordon Creek site. Most campers head for the self-registration Chili Beach site on the coast at the end of the road. Permits for the first three sites can be obtained at the ranger station.

From the ranger station it's only another 11km to Lockhart River, which is worth a

visit for the **Lockhart River Art Centre** (☎ 4060 7341; www.artgang.com.au), a gallery and cultural centre exhibiting the works of local indigenous artists known as the 'art gang'. Some of these artists, such as Rosella Namoko and Silas and Samantha Hobson, have received national acclaim and their works sell for big bucks. Note that alcohol restrictions apply in the community.

About 45km north of Lockhart River at Portland Roads, **Portland House** (☎ 4060 7193; www.portlandhouse.com.au; \$75 per person) must be one of Australia's most remote holiday houses. The beachfront cottage is the ultimate getaway.

ARCHER RIVER TO WEIPA

About 50km north of Archer River, the road splits: the route straight up to the Tip becomes the Telegraph Rd, while the well-maintained Peninsula Development Rd heads northeast for 145km to Weipa on the Western Cape. At **Sudley Homestead**, 74km in, a rough track turns east to rejoin the Telegraph Rd at Batavia Downs. While it's often chopped up with a couple of creek crossings, it's a shortcut if you're heading up to the Tip after Weipa.

Weipa

☎ 07 / pop 2830

Weipa is a bauxite-mining town of red dirt, coconut palms and intermittent danger signs. The mine here works the world's largest deposits of bauxite (the ore from which aluminium is processed), but for most visitors Weipa is a fishing town, renowned for barramundi. All of Weipa's accommodation places can book various tours and fishing charters. A good start is on the **town and mine tour** (adult/child \$25/10) from the Weipa Camping & Caravan Park.

In the suburb of Nanum there's a credit union and ATM, post office and supermarket. At Rocky Point you'll find the police and a hospital.

Western Cape Cultural Centre (☎ 4069 7566; Evans Landing; adult/child \$2/1; ☎ 10am-3pm) tells the story of the region from indigenous, environmental and historical perspectives.

Weipa Camping & Caravan Park (☎ 4069 7871; www.campweipa.com; Newbold Dr; unpowered/powerd sites \$22/26, cabins \$60-85, en suite units \$100-115, lodge s/d \$140/150 ☎ ☎) is a relaxed camping ground by the waterfront and something of a town hub, operating as an informal tourist office, and booking mine and fishing tours.

Near the waterfront, the **Albatross Bay Resort** (☎ 1800 240 663; 4090 6666; albatrossbayresort.com.au; Duyfken Cres; bungalows \$130, r \$155; ☎ ☎) is a large resort with well-appointed motel rooms and cheaper dongas.

The comfy four-star **Heritage Resort** (☎ 4069 8000; www.heritageresort.com.au; Nanum; s/d \$150/160; ☎ ☎) has modern rooms and a restaurant serving local delicacies such as mud crab.

**ARCHER RIVER TO JARDINE RIVER
Telegraph Road**

Back on the northward journey, the Telegraph Rd starts at the Weipa turn-off, 50km north of the Archer River. The road begins to deteriorate here and can be rough and sandy in places. The Wenlock River was once a major challenge on the way north to the Cape, but it is now bridged. The sturdy concrete bridge is raised about 6m above the river, though it still floods in the wet season (when the waters might reach 14m).

On the northern bank of the Wenlock, the **Moreton Telegraph Station** (☎ 4060 3360; www.moretonstation.com.au; safari tents \$71.50) has a safari camp set up – the covered tents have two beds with linen provided. There are hot showers and meals available. Nearby the Cook Shire runs the public **camping ground** (☎ 4069 5444), with toilets and showers.

The 155km from the Wenlock River to the Jardine River is the best part of the trip, with some great creek crossings and beautiful bush camp sites. Take your time and enjoy all the delights the Cape has to offer.

The challenge of following the rough track along the historic Overland Telegraph Line means that the trip will take at least a very long day, even if all goes well. A newer and easier route, known as the Southern and Northern Bypass Rds (Bamaga Rd), avoids much of Telegraph Rd and bypasses most of the creeks and rivers between the Wenlock and Jardine Rivers.

The turn-off for **Bramwell Homestead** (☎ 4060 3237), with camping accommodation and meals, is 26km north of the Wenlock River and then it's 10km in. The homestead offers accommodation and camping, and meals are available.

The start of the major bypass roads, Southern Bypass Rd (Bamaga Rd), turns off Telegraph Rd 42km north of the Wenlock at **Bramwell Junction**. Staying on the more direct Old Telegraph Rd there are several challenging

TURTLE RESCUE

At Mapoon, 86km north of Weipa, **Cape York Turtle Rescue** (☎ 4069 7266; www.capeyorkturtlerescue.com) is a conservation project where researchers and members of the local indigenous community work to save turtles and other marine animals such as dolphins and dugong from stray fishing nets and other hazards. Volunteers are welcome to join the project, identifying turtle nesting sites, collecting research information and helping the rangers and researchers. Volunteering is organised in three- and five-day camps, staying at Camp Chivaree. The camp includes tented accommodation, meals and transfers from Weipa, and costs \$1275 for three days and \$2125 for five days. Apart from the conservation aspect, it's an opportunity to visit a remote community and work with the indigenous residents – and there's free time for fishing and bush walks.

creek crossings before you reach the **Dulhunty River**, 70km north of the Wenlock and a popular spot to camp.

After crossing another major stream, a road leaves Telegraph Rd 2km north of the Dulhunty and heads for **Heathlands Ranger Station** (☎ 4060 3241), the base for the Jardine River National Park ranger. This road bypasses the difficult Gunshot Creek crossing and if you keep going it joins up with the Bypass Rd.

After Gunshot Creek the track is sandy until you come to the **Cockatoo Creek crossing**, 94km north of the Wenlock River. Once again the steep banks can pose a problem. For the next 24km the road improves slightly. A couple more creek crossings follow, and 15km past Cockatoo Creek, Southern Bypass Rd joins up with Telegraph Rd.

Just 9km further north on Telegraph Rd, the second major bypass, Northern Bypass Rd, heads west to the Jardine River ferry crossing. At this point there's a turn-off 3km to **Fruit Bat Falls**, a lovely swimming area with a popular day-use picnic area (no camping). If you continue on Telegraph Rd, the turn-off to **Twin Falls** is a further 6.5km north. The Twin Falls track leads less than 2km to an excellent camping ground. This is the most popular camping spot on the trip north, and although it gets crowded, it's still very enjoyable and well worth spending a day or two lazing away at the falls and cooling off in the long swimming hole.

There are several challenging creeks to cross over the next 23km to the Jardine River, and several bush camping spots.

Bamaga Road (Bypass Roads)

As an alternative to sticking to the old Telegraph Rd, Southern and Northern Bypass Rds – jointly called the Bamaga Rd – avoid

most of the creeks and rivers between the Wenlock and Jardine Rivers. Both sections of this road are corrugated and people travel too fast on them. Each year a number of head-on accidents occur in the first two months of the Dry, most on Southern Bypass Rd – take care!

Southern Bypass Rd leaves Telegraph Rd 40km north of the Wenlock River crossing and heads east and then north. The turn-off east to Shelburne Homestead is 24km north of the junction, while another 35km will find you at the junction to Heathlands Ranger Station, 14km to the west.

When you reach a large patch of rainforest, 11km north of the Heathlands turn-off, the bypass road swings northwest, while a track to **Captain Billy Landing**, on the eastern coast, continues straight ahead. Keep on the bypass road for the next 45km to rejoin Old Telegraph Rd 14km north of Cockatoo Creek.

Northern Bypass Rd leaves Telegraph Rd 9km north of where Southern Bypass Rd rejoins Telegraph Rd. This route heads west and for 50km winds through tropical savannah woodland to the Jardine River ferry, where the two roads finally become one.

Jardine River

When you reach the southern bank of the Jardine River it's time to get in the queue at the **Jardine River Ferry & Roadhouse** (☎ 4069 1369; ☎ 8am–5pm). The ferry crossing is run by the Injinoo Community Council and operates only during the dry season (\$88 return, plus \$11 for trailers). The fee includes a permit that allows you to bush camp in the area north of the Jardine River, including Mutee Heads, Somerset, and the mouth of the Jardine. The roadhouse sells fuel and cold drinks and has a camping ground with toilets and hot showers.

JARDINE RIVER TO CAPE YORK

From the ferry crossing to the Tip is less than 70km and for most of the way the track is in good condition. A number of minor tracks in this area lead back down to the river and some reasonable camping grounds. The best is on the northern bank where the telegraph line crosses the river; an old linesman's hut marks the spot – remember that estuarine crocodiles inhabit this river. Keeping on the main road will bring you to Bamaga, the first and largest settlement north of the Jardine – the last 8km to Bamaga (and the road north to Seisia) are sealed, which by now will feel like riding on air!

Bamaga

☎ 07 / pop 784

In 1947, Chief Bamaga Ginau decided to move his community to the mainland from Saibai Island, just 8km from Papua New Guinea, to escape flooding and a lack of fresh water. Bamaga is the largest Torres Strait Islander community on Cape York Peninsula. The town has good facilities, with a hospital, police station, supermarket, bakery, newsagency and service station, but most travellers carry on to Seisia, 5km further north.

Resort Bamaga (☎ 4069 3050; resortbamaga.com.au; cnr Lui & Adidi Sts; r \$199; ☎ ☎), overlooking Mosby Creek, is a four-star resort. The restaurant is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Seisia

☎ 07 / pop 180

Australia's most northerly mainland settlement, the tiny Torres Strait Islander town of Seisia, gazes out over a blue-green sea to the outlying islands. It's an idyllic spot to relax after the long journey through the Cape and many people, including tours, spend a night here before making the final pilgrimage to the Tip. It's also the jumping-off point for ferries to Thursday Island and the cargo-passenger ferry to Cairns. The town has fuel, mechanics, takeaways, fishing charters and several places to stay.

Seisia Holiday Park (☎ 1800 653 243, 4069 3243; www.seisiaholidaypark.com; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/20, s/d \$66/106, cottage \$185; ☎ ☎) looks out over the waters near the wharf, and is the town's accommodation hub. As well as shady sites – some with prime beachfront – there are rooms in a lodge, and neat self-contained A-frame cottages. The park also has a general store and a restaurant, and acts as the booking agent for local tours

including guided fishing trips, croc spotting, 4WD tours of the Tip and scenic flights.

Loyalty Beach Camp Ground (☎ 4069 3372; www.loyaltybeach.com; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/22; lodge s/d \$95/120), 2km north of Seisia, has great beachfront camp sites and a fishing lodge.

Peddells (☎ 4069 1551; www.peddellsferry.com.au; adult/child \$47/23.50; ☎ ☎ 8am & 4pm Mon–Sat Jun–Sep, Mon, Wed & Fri only off-season) runs regular ferries from Seisia jetty to Thursday Island.

Bamaga to Cape York

From Bamaga, turn north towards the Tip along a well-formed dirt road. The ruins of Jardine's outstation, **Lockerbie**, are 16km north. Just north of Lockerbie a bumpy, sandy track heads 11km west to **Punsand Bay**, with a terrific camping resort. A few kilometres later the main track north begins to pass through an area of rainforest called the **Lockerbie Scrub**. This small patch of rainforest, only 25km long and between 1km and 5km wide, is the northernmost rainforest in Australia.

About 7km from Lockerbie a Y-junction in the middle of the jungle gives you a choice of veering right for **Somerset** or left for the top of Australia. There's not much left at the former British outpost of Somerset, save for the graves of Frank and Sana Jardine (a 19th-century government resident of Somerset and his Samoan wife) on the pretty foreshore. Back at the junction, the left fork will lead for about 10km to the now defunct Pajinka Wilderness Lodge and a camping ground. A walking track leads through the forest to the beach near the boat ramp. From the beach you can head overland on the marked trail, or when the tide is low you can walk around the coast to the northernmost **Tip of Australia**. Both are relatively easy walks. You know you've made it when you reach the cairn and sign declaring this the 'northernmost point of the Australian continent'. The larger of the two islands directly across is York Island.

One of the best and most scenic spots on the Cape is the beachfront **Punsand Bay Camping Resort** (☎ 4069 1722; www.punsand.com.au; camp sites \$10 per person, power \$2 per site, safari tents \$130–160, cabins \$170; ☎ ☎), beautifully situated on a north-facing beach tantalisingly close to the Tip. It's well set up with a licensed restaurant, bar and pool.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

Scattered across the reef-strewn waters of Torres Strait, running like stepping stones

from the top of Cape York to the southern coast of Papua New Guinea, are the far-flung Torres Strait Islands.

The 70-odd islands include the rocky northern extensions of the Great Dividing Range including Thursday Island; a central group of islands east of the Great Barrier Reef, which are little more than coral cays; and the picturesque Murray Islands in the far east of the strait. It was a successful claim by Torres Strait Islander Eddie Mabo to traditional ownership of Murray Island that led to the federal government's 1993 Native Title legislation (see p34 for more information).

While Thursday Island (or 'TI' as it's casually known) is the 'capital' of Torres Strait, there are 17 inhabited islands, the northernmost being Saibai and Boigu Islands, just kilometres from the Papuan coast.

Thursday Island

☎ 07 / pop 2546

No visit to the top of the Cape would be complete without a trip to fascinating, multi-cultural Thursday Island. The view sailing into the island is unlike anything you'll see elsewhere in Queensland. The timber spires of the 19th-century Sacred Heart Mission Church and the corrugated roof of the old Federal Hotel mark the skyline, as do the huge wind turbines making good use of the trade winds.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The island is little more than 3 sq km in area, with the town of Thursday Island on its southern shore. There are a few shops, including a general store, fruit barn, chemist, post office and bank (with an ATM).

Hospital (☎ 4069 1109)

Peddells' Ferry Island Tourist Bureau (☎ 4069 1551; Engineers Wharf) For tourist information.

Police station (☎ 4069 1520)

SIGHTS

There are some fascinating reminders of Thursday Island's rich history and pearl-ing heyday around town. The **All Souls Quetta Memorial Church** was built in 1893, in memory of the shipwreck of the *Quetta*, which struck an uncharted reef in the Adolphus Channel in 1890, with 133 lives lost. Today its walls are adorned with curious memorabilia, including a porthole recovered from the *Quetta* in 1906.

The Japanese section of the town's cemetery is crowded with hundreds of kanji-inscribed graves of pearl divers who died from decompression sickness. The **Japanese Pearl Memorial** is dedicated to them. **Green Hill Fort**, on the western side of town, was built in 1893 in response to fears of a Russian invasion. The small **Torres Strait Museum** is also here.

In a modern building designed to represent a pearl lugger, **Gab Titui Culture Centre** (☎ 4090 2130; www.tsra.gov.au/cultural-centre.aspx; cnr Victoria Parade & Blackall St; admission \$6) is a treasure house of Torres Strait Islander culture.

TOURS

Peddells (☎ 4069 1551; www.peddellsferry.com.au) has bus tours of Thursday Island (adult/child \$28/14), taking in the major tourist sites.

For a bird's eye view, **Cape York Helicopters** (☎ 4069 2233; www.capeyorkhelicopters.com.au) has scenic chopper flights from Thursday Island and Horn Island, including the 30-minute Dash to the Tip (from \$170 per person).

SLEEPING & EATING

Grand Hotel (☎ 4069 1557; www.grandhotelti.com.au; 6 Victoria Pde; s/d from \$140/160; ☺) On a hill behind the wharf, the Grand Hotel was rebuilt after it burned down in 1997. It has comfortable, modern rooms with ocean and mountain views. The hotel's Malu Paru restaurant has a balcony with sweeping views.

Federal Hotel (☎ 4069 1569; www.federalhotelti.com.au; cnr Victoria Pde & Jardine St; s/d \$140/160; ☺) The Federal's motel-style rooms with harbour views are spacious and comfortable.

Jardine Resort (☎ 4069 1555; www.jardinemotel.com.au; cnr Normanby St & Victoria Pde; s/d \$200/222; ☺) The motel rooms here are well appointed and the Somerset Restaurant has a seafood menu. Also at the resort, Jardine Lodge (single with/without bathroom \$125/105, double \$145/125) has budget rooms with full use of the motel facilities.

Horn Island

☎ 07 / pop 585

During WWII, Horn Island became a battle zone, suffering eight Japanese air raids. Among the 5000 troops once stationed on the island was the 830-strong Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. Today Horn Island, and its small town of Wasaga, is very quiet and undeveloped. The story of Horn Island is told in the **Torres Strait Heritage Museum & Art Gallery** (☎ 4069

2222; www.torresstrait.com.au; adult/child \$6.50/3.50) in the grounds of the Gateway Resort.

Gateway Torres Strait Resort (☎ 4069 2222; www.torresstrait.com.au; 24 Outie St; s/d \$139/159; ☺) Near the wharf, has reasonable self-contained units with kitchenettes and TVs. There's also a restaurant serving buffet dinners and lunch during the dry season.

Other Torres Strait Islands

The inhabited outer islands are not too difficult to visit, but you must plan well in advance. The islands have very small populations and virtually no tourist infrastructure. To visit any island other than Thursday or Horn, you usually need permission from the island's council; contact the **Torres Strait Regional Authority** (☎ 4069 1247; www.tsra.gov.au; Torres Strait Haus, Victoria Pde, Thursday Is).

Most inhabited islands have an airstrip and quite a few airlines operate light aircraft in the strait. Although it's only a few kilometres away, you cannot travel to Papua New Guinea from the northern islands of the Torres Strait. Under the Torres Strait Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea, only traditional inhabitants are permitted to cross the border here.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Qantaslink (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) flies daily from Cairns to Horn Island. **Aero Tropics** (☎ 1300 656 110; 4040 1222; www.aero-tropics.com.au) makes the short hop from Bamaga to Horn Island.

BOAT

There are regular ferry services between Seisia, on the mainland, and Thursday Island, run by **Peddells'** (☎ 4069 1551; www.peddellsferry.com.au; Engineers Jetty, Thursday Is). From June to September it has two daily services from Monday to Saturday (adult/child one way \$47/23.50), and from October to May it operates only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. These are basically day trips, departing Thursday Island for Seisia at 6.30am and 2.30pm, and Seisia for Thursday Island at 8am and 4pm, though you can stay on the islands as long as you wish.

McDonald Charter Boats (☎ 1300 664 875, 4034 2907; www.tiferry.com.au) operates a scheduled ferry between Thursday Island and Horn Island roughly hourly between 6.30am and 6.30pm (adult/child \$18/9 one way, 15 minutes), as well as a water-taxi service between other Torres Strait islands.

GULF SAVANNAH

Occupying a vast chunk of northern Queensland, the Gulf Savannah remains one of the state's least-discovered gems, yet you don't even need a 4WD vehicle to explore most of it. Of course, it's not a complete secret. Fishing enthusiasts certainly know about it – the warm waters of the Gulf boast some of the best fishing in the country – and round-Australia nomads trundle along the Savannah Way, which links Cairns and Broome. The Gulf Savannah is an immense, flat and often empty landscape of sweeping grass plains, scrubby forest and mangrove engraved by an intricate network of seasonal rivers and croc-filled tidal creeks that drain into the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The Gulf's major attractions are separated by vast distances with only a scattering of cattle stations, roadhouses and historic towns between them. The spectacular Undara lava tubes, an ancient geological wonderland, are near the eastern end of the Savannah Way. Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park, a stunning river gorge harbouring remnant rainforest, is an oasis in the midst of the arid far northwest. And strung along the steamy, indistinct coastline, the Gulf's main towns of Burketown, Normanton and Karumba retain a pioneer edge, independent flair and some extraordinary outback characters.

Information

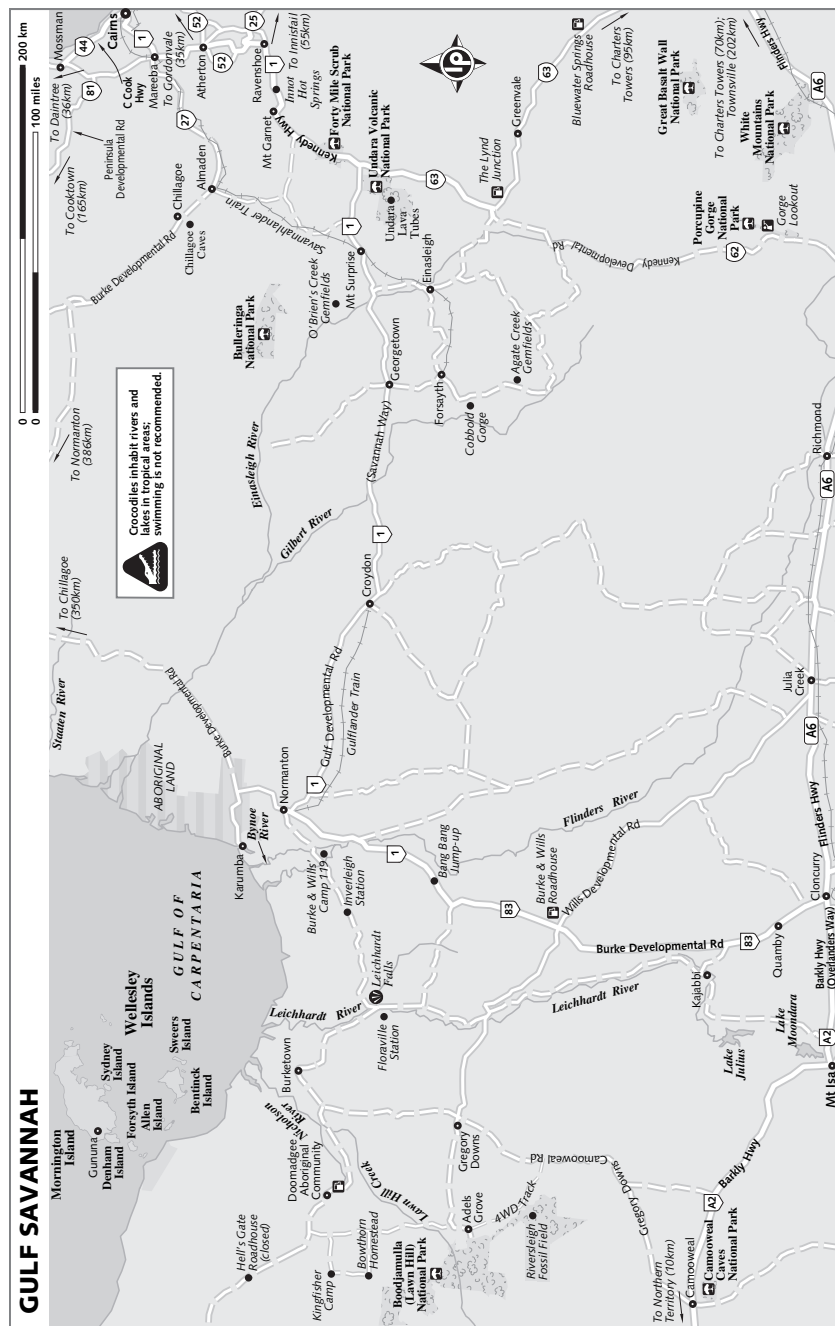
Gulf Savannah Development (☎ 4031 1631; www.gulf-savannah.com.au; 212 McLeod St, Cairns; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) Provides information on all aspects of travel, tourism and business in the Gulf Savannah region.

MAPS

The best road guide to use is *Sunmap's Gulf Savannah Tourist Map* (1:750,000), available from most newsagents and tourist information centres. If you're going all the way on the Savannah Way, Hema Map produces a *Cairns to Broome on the Savannah Way* map (1:2,200 000).

Tours

Several operators run guided tours of the Gulf Savannah out of Cairns. Their itineraries are all pretty similar, taking in a combination of Chillagoe, Undara, Cobbold Gorge,



Normanton, Karumba and Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park:

Billy Tea Bush Safaris (☎ 4032 0077; www.billytea.com.au; 5-day overland tours \$1495)

Heritage Tours (☎ 1800 77 55 33, 4054 7750; www.heritagetours.com.au; 9-day camping tours \$2245; 9-day accommodated tours \$2695)

Oz Tours Safaris (☎ 1800 079 006, 4055 9535; www.oztours.com.au; 7-/9-day accommodated tours \$2145/\$2740).

Wilderness Challenge (☎ 1800 354 486, 4035 4488; www.wilderness-challenge.com.au; 9-day accommodated tours \$2595; 11-day camping safari \$2695).

Getting There & Around

AIR

Macair (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) flies a few times a week between Cairns and Normanton (from \$173), Burketown (\$218) and Mornington Island (\$217); and between Mt Isa and Burketown (\$165).

BUS

TransNorth (☎ 4061 7944; www.transnorthbus.com) has a service from Cairns to Karumba (\$125, 12 hours) three times a week, departing Cairns Monday, Wednesday and Friday, stopping at Undara turn-off (\$55, 5½ hours), Georgetown (\$70, seven hours), Croydon (\$90, 9½ hours) and Normanton (\$120, 11 hours). The return service runs Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The main route is the Savannah Way, stretching from Cairns right across the top of Australia to Broome on the west coast.

From Normanton there's a sealed road down to Cloncurry, or you can continue on a gravel Gulf Track to Burketown and beyond to the Northern Territory border.

From Burketown you have two options if you're heading south: the unsealed road to Camooweal, via Gregory Downs and the Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park; or the Nardoo-Burketown Rd, which cuts across to meet the Burke Developmental Rd at the Burke & Wills Roadhouse.

There aren't too many options apart from these major routes, particularly if you don't have a 4WD. Even if you do, remember that this is very remote country. If you're thinking of attempting other routes, such as the continuation of the Burke Developmental Rd, which takes you east from between Normanton and Karumba to Mareeba via Chillagoe, you'll

need to be well prepared and carry good maps, plenty of water and preferably a UHF radio.

And a note on cattle, kangaroos and the monsters called road trains (trucks up to 60m long). Many of the roads in this area are still quite narrow – more like a single lane – so you need to slow down and move over to the shoulder of the road as oncoming traffic approaches. If there's a road train coming your way, just pull right over and wait for it to pass by. Cattle and kangaroos can suddenly appear on the road as if from nowhere, and hitting one will probably kill the animal and ruin your car for good; driving at twilight and night should always be avoided.

TRAIN

The historic *Savannahlander*, fondly known as the 'Silver Bullet', chugs its way along a traditional mining-route from Cairns to Forsyth and back as a four-day **tour** (☎ 1800 793 848; www.savannahlander.com.au; four-day tour from \$506). There's a range of tours, which include side trips to Chillagoe, Undara lava tubes and Cobbold Gorge – it's a must for rail buffs.

The quaint, snub-nosed *Gulflander* runs once weekly in each direction between Normanton and Croydon, alongside the Gulf Developmental Rd. There are connecting bus services from Cairns and Mt Isa to Croydon and Normanton. See p420 for details.

THE SAVANNAH WAY

The epic **Savannah Way** (www.savannahway.com.au) links Cairns to Broome across the top of Australia. The Gulf Developmental Rd forms a major section of this passage and is the main route into the Gulf from the east, passing through Georgetown and Croydon en route to Normanton. The highway is sealed through to Karumba and in reasonably good condition.

Mt Garnet to Undara

Leaving the tableland and just 15km from Innot Hot Springs, the landscape starts to thin out at the small mining town of **Mt Garnet**, revealing outback features of woodland savannah and multicoloured termite mounds. Just north of town is the Wurruma Swamp, a wetlands area that attracts a huge range of bird life. There's a pub, roadhouse, supermarket and a couple of cafes along the main street here.

Spectacular **Blencoe Falls**, the setting for the second US *Survivor* series, is 84km southeast

of Mt Garnet on the unsealed Gunnawarra Rd. The first waterfall drop is a massive 91m. It's an awesome spot to retire from life for a while and do some bush camping.

About 60km past Mt Garnet, the Kennedy Hwy passes through **Forty Mile Scrub National Park**. It's named not for its length, but because it's '40 miles' from Mt Garnet – a common system of distance markers used by early travellers, miners and drovers. There are toilets and picnic facilities, but watch your crumbs – the leaf litter is home to the giant cockroach. There's a short circuit-walk (300m, 10 minutes) that's boarded and wheelchair-friendly.

Undara Volcanic National Park

About 190,000 years ago, the Undara shield volcano erupted not with a bang but with a flow, like an overboiled pot of tomato soup, sending molten lava coursing through the surrounding landscape. The results are the world's longest continuous (though fragmented) lava tubes and one of outback Queensland's most fascinating sights. They formed when the lava flows drained towards the sea, following the routes of ancient river beds, and while the surface of the lava cooled and hardened, hot lava continued to race through the centre of the flows, eventually leaving enormous basalt tubes. The turn-off to the Undara lava tubes is 66km south of Mt Garnet.

Undara Experience (☎ 1800 990 992, 4097 1900; www.undara.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites \$20/30, dm \$25, tents from \$25 per person, s/d from \$100/150; 🚻) is an exceptional tourist complex plonked in the middle of nowhere and a credit to the Collins family, the station owners who opened Undara up to visitors some 20 years ago. As well as bush camping and van sites, there's accommodation in 'swag tents', a dormitory lodge and, best of all, lovingly restored railway carriages, still with original fittings but converted into comfy rooms (some with en suite). Facilities are excellent with barbecues, hot showers and laundries, a pool, restaurant and campfire entertainment. Guided tours of the lava tubes are booked from here – note that you can only visit the tubes and surrounding national park on one of these tours, so if your time is short it's worth booking in advance.

Undara Experience is a member of **Savannah Guides** (www.savannah-guides.com.au), an association of expert interpreters of Australia's tropical savannahs. It offers full-day (Lost World Adventure; \$125, including lunch); half-day

(Volcano Valley; \$80) and two-hour (Archway Explorer; \$45) tours. Visitors in the low (green) season get an added bonus on the sunset wildlife tours. Roughly between November and March, the microbat swarm occurs. Every evening around dusk, thousands of microbats (although about the size of a human thumb, they are named for their micro eating habits) fly out of their cave en masse in search of an insect feed. Standing at the cave entrance, it's a spectacular sight. If you're lucky you'll see nature's food chain in full swing – tree snakes known as 'night tigers' hang in wait to snatch the tiny bats in midflight.

The biggest weekend of the year here is **Opera in the Outback** (tickets \$85-110) in October, a cultural extravaganza of opera, theatre and Broadway music in a bush setting.

The lodge and lava tubes are 15km along a sealed road off the main highway. **TransNorth** (☎ 4061 7944; www.transnorthbus.com) can drop you at the turn-off on its run from Cairns to Karumba on Monday and Thursday, and someone from the lodge will collect you from there.

Mt Surprise

☎ 07 / pop 162

Back on the Gulf Developmental Rd, 39km past the Undara turn-off, there's nothing too surprising about the small township of Mt Surprise, first settled by prospector and sheep farmer Ezra Firth in 1823. It's a good base for gem fossicking – **O'Brien's Creek Gemfields**, 42km northwest of town along an unsealed road, is one of Australia's best topaz fields. **Mt Surprise Gems** (☎ 4062 3055; www.mtsurprisegems.com.au; Garland St) has a gem shop and café. The knowledgeable owners run fossicking tours between April and September and can provide tips, tools and licences.

Planet Earth Adventures (☎ 4062 3127; p.e.a.@bigpond.com.au; camping \$6 per person) is the home of Russell's Snake Show (\$10 per person), where you can see deadly taipans and king brown snakes, handle a black-headed python and learn about – God forbid – snake-bite first-aid. There's a small camp ground at the back.

Mt Surprise Tourist Van Park & Motel (☎ 4062 3153; 23 Garland St; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/22, cabins \$55-65, motel units \$82; 🚻 🚿) is set amid lush, shady gardens, and has quality cabins, a café and a gem and mineral display. Kids will love the miniature horse stud and bird aviary here.

Bedrock Village (☎ 4062 3193; www.bedrockvillage.com.au; Garnet St; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/22, cabins

DETOUR: EINASLEIGH, FORSAYTH & COBBOLD GORGE

About 32km west of Mt Surprise you can take a slow detour off the highway through the old mining townships of Einasleigh and Forsayth and on to the main attraction – Cobbold Gorge.

The road is mostly unsealed and fairly narrow and rough in sections – particularly between Einasleigh and Forsayth – but is passable for 2WD vehicles during the dry season. Forsayth can be reached directly from Georgetown via a partly sealed road. **Einasleigh** (pop 40), a former copper-mining centre and railway siding 43km south of the highway, is set in a rugged landscape of low, flat-topped hills. There's hardly anything to it today, but for a few houses, a pub and the black basalt **Copperfield Gorge**. An early morning or evening stroll around the gorge will reveal a wealth of wildlife including freshwater crocs, turtles, fish, birds and roos. The **Einasleigh Pub** (☎ 4062 5222; Daintree St; s/d \$33/44) is a character-filled, corrugated-iron pub. Its upstairs accommodation has been tastefully renovated, with rooms opening onto the east-facing veranda and sunrise views of the gorge. Ask the publican for a look at his fascinating, hand-carved, miniature period furniture.

Forsayth (pop 90), 67km further west, is the closest town to Cobbold Gorge. The **Goldfields Tavern** (☎ 4062 5374; First St; s/d \$45/76, units \$86) has basic cabins with shared bathrooms and two en suite motel units. Meals, fuel and groceries are available. **Prospector Caravan Park** (☎ 4062 5324; First St; unpowered/powerd sites \$13/15, s/d cabins \$45/60) has a good camp kitchen and amenities.

With swimming holes, rugged cliffs and an abundance of wildlife, the spring-fed oasis of **Cobbold Gorge** is one of those startling outback discoveries. Reached by an unsealed road 45km south of Forsayth, access to the gorge is by guided tour only, which includes a boat cruise through the narrow gorge. **Cobbold Gorge Tours** (☎ 1800 669 922, 4062 5470; www.cobboldgorge.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites \$14/24, s/d cabins \$70/98; 🚻 🚿) provides tours and comfortable accommodation at Cobbold Village. Facilities here include a restaurant, bar and store, so it's not hard to hang around for a few days. A full-day tour (adult/child \$110/55) includes a boat cruise, agate fossicking, lunch and swimming. A half-day cruise and walk costs \$77/38, or you can just do the boat cruise (\$37/18). Pick-ups to the gorge can be arranged from Mt Surprise and Georgetown.

from \$32/58, s/c units \$78; 🚻 🚿) is another good park set in native bushland just north of the main road. Tours to Undara and Cobbold Gorge leave from here.

Mt Surprise Hotel (☎ 4062 3118; Garland St; s/d \$30/50) is the local pub with basic rooms and hearty meals (mains \$10 to \$16).

Georgetown

☎ 07 / pop 254

During the days of the Etheridge River gold rush, Georgetown was a bustling commercial centre, but these days things are pretty quiet. The big surprise in this little town is the modern **Terrestrial Centre** (☎ 4062 1485; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-May; 🚻), home to the information centre, the town library, an internet café (\$3 per 30 minutes) and the outstanding **Ted Elliot Mineral Collection** (admission \$10), a shimmering collection of more than 4500 minerals, gems and crystals gathered from all over Australia and beautifully displayed in nine galleries.

The road south of Georgetown leads to Forsayth and Cobbold Gorge, about 30km of which is sealed. The town has fuel, a post

office, bakery, café, the Wenaru Hotel and two caravan parks. **Midway Caravan Park & Service Station** (☎ 4062 1219; unpowered/powerd sites \$15/18, s/d cabins \$47/60; 🚻 🚿) has a good range of cabins, shady sites and a café.

Latara Resort Motel (☎ 4062 1190; lataramotel@bigpond.com; North St; s \$75-85, d \$95-100; 🚻 🚿) is a modern motel with comfortable units and is the best place to stay.

TransNorth (☎ 4061 7944; www.transnorthbus.com) stops at Georgetown en route between Cairns and Karumba.

Croydon

☎ 07 / pop 255

Connected to Normanton by the *Gulflander*, this old gold-mining town was once the biggest in the Gulf. Gold was discovered here in 1885, and within a couple of years there were 8000 diggers living here. It's reckoned there were once 5000 gold mines in the area, reminders of which are scattered all around the countryside. Such was the prosperity of the town that it had its own aerated water factory, a foundry and coach-builders, gas street-lamps and more than 30 pubs – though only one remains. The

THE GULFLANDER

The *Gulflander* is one of the Gulf's great minijourneys – a historic train in the middle of the outback that has been resurrected just for travellers. The Normanton to Croydon railway line was completed in 1891 with the aim of linking the booming gold-mining centre with the port at Normanton. Today the *Gulflander* travels the 153km from Normanton to Croydon and back once a week, leaving Normanton on Wednesday at 8.30am and returning from Croydon on Thursday at 8.30am. It's worth planning for it and booking ahead to get a seat in peak season. The trip takes a leisurely four hours, with a couple of stops at points of interest along the way; most people stay overnight in Croydon at the Club Hotel, returning to Normanton the next day. The one-way/return adult fare is \$58/100; for children it's \$29 one way or return. If you're short on time, two-hour return trips run from Normanton to Critters Camp (\$40) every day except Wednesday or Thursday on demand. For bookings, phone the **Normanton train station** (☎ 4745 1391) or look up www.traveltrain.com.au.

boom years were during the 1890s, but by the end of WWI the gold had run out and Croydon became little more than a ghost town.

Croydon's **information centre** (☎ 4745 6125; cnr Samwell & Aldridge Sts; ☎ 8am–5pm Apr–Sep, closed weekends Nov–Mar; ☎) houses a museum, a craft shop and an internet café (\$2.50 per 30 minutes). Local guides lead one-hour **walking tours** (☎ 4745 6125; adult/child \$5.50/free; ☎ 10am, 2pm & 4pm) of the town's historic precinct.

Lake Belmore, 4km from the town centre and stocked with barramundi, is a popular fishing spot. On the way out to the lake are the Chinese Temple and cemetery ruins, remnants of Croydon's once thriving **Chinatown**.

You can camp at the **Croydon Caravan Park** (☎ 4745 6238; cnr Brown & Alldridge Sts; unpowered/power sites \$13/16, cabins \$60; ☎).

Club Hotel (☎ 4745 6184; cnr Brown & Sircom Sts; s/d \$50/65, units \$100; ☎) is the only pub left from the mining heyday and dates back to 1887. It's also the main accommodation in town with basic rooms and self-contained units.

Normanton

☎ 07 / pop 1100

Capital of the gigantic Carpentaria Shire, you might expect the long road to Normanton to lead to a bustling town, like a Mt Isa of the north perhaps. But no, it's a peaceful little community with one long main street, a train station and a fine river. Established in 1868, Normanton's boom years were during the 1890s, when it acted as the port for the Croydon gold rush. Since those heady days, it has existed as a major supply point for the surrounding cattle stations.

The historic Burns Philp & Co Ltd store houses the **visitor information & heritage centre**

(☎ 4745 1065; cnr Caroline & Landsborough Sts; ☎ 9am–5pm Apr–Oct, to 5pm Mon–Fri, to 1pm Sat Nov–Mar) with a display on local history. There's internet access (\$3 per 30 minutes) in the library next door. The **train station** is a lovely old Victorian-era building with a souvenir shop and a **museum**. When it's not running, the *Gulflander* rests under the station's arched roof.

One of Normanton's most impressive sights is the purportedly life-size model of **Krys the Crocodile** in the LEW Henry Park on Landsborough St. The real thing was shot by crocodile hunter Krystina Pawloski in 1958 – at a staggering 8.64m it's said to be the largest recorded croc anywhere in the world. Stand next to it and imagine meeting *that* on the river when you're out fishing!

Speaking of fishing, the Norman River is gold, producing some magic-sized barramundi; every Easter weekend the Barramundi Classic draws a big crowd. **Norman River Fishing & Cruises** (☎ 4745 1347) offers half-day fishing charters (\$100 per person), but if you just want to enjoy the river, take the 1½-hour sunset croc-spotting cruise (adult/child \$25/10) aboard the *Savannah Queen*.

The **Normanton Rodeo & Gymkhana** and the **Normanton Races** are both held in June and dominate the social calendar.

The pleasant **Normanton Tourist Park** (☎ 1800 193 4699, 4745 1121; 14 Brown St; unpowered/power sites \$20/22, cabins \$35–78; ☎) has en suite cabins, camp kitchen and a huge 25m shaded swimming pool with an artesian spa.

You can't miss the 'Big Barra' out the front of **Gulfland Motel & Caravan Park** (☎ 4745 1290; www.gulflandmotel.com.au; 11 Landsborough St; unpowered/power sites \$16/20, s/d \$80/90; ☎). Motel units, van sites and a licensed restaurant.

The brightly painted **Purple Pub & Brogla Palms Motel** (☎ 4745 1324; cnr Landsborough & Brown Sts; s/d \$80/100) on the main street is one of the town's more salubrious pubs and there's a little village of comfortable motel rooms at the side.

Macair (☎ 130 0 622 247; www.macair.com.au) has regular flights from Mt Isa to Normanton (from \$177), and from Cairns to Normanton (from \$195).

TransNorth (☎ 4061 7944; www.transnorthbus.com) stops at Normanton on its journey between Cairns and Karumba. There's no public transport between Normanton and Mt Isa or Burketown.

Karumba

☎ 07 / pop 518

Ay Karumba! When the fish are biting and the sun sinks into the Gulf in a fiery ball of burnt ochre, this is a little piece of outback paradise. This once sleepy town has well and truly been 'discovered' – mainly by voracious fisherman towing boats behind large 4WDs. But even if you don't like fishing it would be a shame not to drive the extra 70km from Normanton as this is the most accessible town anywhere on the Gulf coast. Karumba is a tale of two towns – the township itself is on the banks of the Norman River, while Karumba Point, where most people stay, is about 6km away on the beach.

Established as a telegraph station in the 1870s, Karumba became a stopover for the flying boats of the Empire Mail Service in the 1930s. The discovery of prawns in the Gulf in the 1960s brought Karumba alive, and today prawning, barramundi fishing and, increasingly, tourism keep the town humming. More and more travellers are enjoying Karumba Point sunsets, local seafood, and the meteorological wonder of the 'morning glory' roll cloud. This tubular cloud, or series of clouds, rolls across the sky with a following wind in the early morning. This phenomena only happens from August to November.

Did you know that barramundi change sex? Most start life as males and change to females after about seven years. For everything you ever wanted to know about the great barramundi, or if you just want to see some big fish up close, head to the **Barramundi Discovery Centre** (☎ 4745 9359; 148 Yappar St; adult/child \$7.50/5 ☎ 10am–3pm), a breeding centre and hatchery with daily shows. The souvenir shop here has whacky locally made leather goods (wallets,

bags etc) made from barramundi, crocodile, sea snake and even stingray. A cane-toad hat could be yours for \$150.

Fishing is the number-one activity in Karumba and most shops sell fishing gear, permits and bait. You can fish right off the beach at Karumba Point, or go out on a fishing charter. **Kerry D Charters** (☎ 4745 9275; www.kerryd.com.au; 5-hr charter \$100) has full- and half-day boat charters. Apart from barramundi, grunter, queenfish and bream are common catches.

Ferryman Cruises (☎ 4745 9155; www.ferryman.net.au) offers a two-hour River & Gulf Sunset cruise (adult/child \$30/14), a morning bird-watching cruise (\$35/15) and a night croc-spotting cruise (\$35/15), all departing from the Karumba boat ramp in town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most of the action, accommodation and the sunset viewing are at Karumba Point.

Karumba Point Sunset Caravan Park (☎ 4747 9277; www.sunsetcp.com.au; 53 Palmer St; unpowered/power sites \$25/29, cabins \$81–91; ☎) Neat park near the boat ramp with rows of young palms for shade.

Ash's Holiday Units & Cafe (☎ 4745 9132; www.ashsholidayunits.com.au; 21 Palmer St, Karumba Point; s/d \$75/82; ☎) Spacious motel-style rooms and compact but cute cabins, all self-contained and sleeping up to four people. Wireless internet is available to most rooms and the **café** (meals \$3–12; ☎ 7am–7.30pm) at the front is the best in town, serving up inexpensive breakfasts and legendary barra and chips.

End of the Road Motel (☎ 4745 9599; www.endoftheroadmotel.com.au; d \$110–150; ☎) The beach-side units here are Karumba Point's premium accommodation – especially the back rooms facing the water. Studios and one- and two-bedroom units.

Karumba Lodge Hotel (☎ 4745 9143; Gilbert St; d \$85) The hub of Karumba Town has plain but comfortable motel rooms and two very different bars. The famous open-sided Animal Bar was reputedly Australia's roughest pub when the prawning industry was in full swing. It's relatively quiet these days, but if you want something more sophisticated, the Suave Bar & Restaurant is next door.

Sunset Tavern (☎ 4745 9183; The Esplanade, Karumba Point; mains \$17–24; ☎ 10am–midnight) Perfectly positioned to take full advantage of those glorious sunsets – either from the garden or through the

big windows – this roomy pub is Karumba's gathering place. Meals run from burger and chips to kangaroo tenderloins or Gulf prawns.

Karumba Seafoods (☎ 4745 9192; Massey Dr, Karumba; platters \$55-66; ☎ 9-11am & 5-10pm) Specialises in prawn and crab platters; also open for scrumptious cakes and coffee in the morning.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

TransNorth (☎ 4061 7944; www.transnorthbus.com) connects Cairns and Karumba (\$125) three times a week.

NORMANTON TO BURKETOWN

From Normanton the Gulf Track/Savannah Way sweeps across the flat plains of the Gulf to Burke and beyond to the Northern Territory. The road, which follows the original coach route between Port Douglas and Darwin, was once also known as the Great Top Rd. This 233km route is open to conventional vehicles throughout the dry season, though the higher clearance of a 4WD will certainly make for an easier trip. The road is partly sealed between Leichhardt Falls and Normanton, and the Queensland government is working on extending this to Burketown.

The turn-off to get you back on the Savannah Way to Burketown is 5km south of Normanton (continue straight on to Cloncurry). After 33km you come to a signposted turn-off to the left leading 2km to **Burke and Wills' Camp 119**. Camp 119 is marked by a ring of trees surrounding a tree blazed by Burke and Wills. Back on the Gulf Track, it's 113km and several river crossings before you come to the Leichhardt River. A narrow, short bridge crosses the stream in one spot. The best place to pull over and camp is at the small, sandy, tree-covered island about halfway across the river's rocky bed, just past the narrow bridge. From here it is only a short walk downstream to the spectacular **Leichhardt Falls**. There are pools of water to cool off in (don't swim in the big stretch of water above the road crossing – there are crocs), the trees offer shade and the bird life is rich and varied.

It's only a couple of kilometres on to a road junction: continue straight to Burketown, or head left (south) to the sealed Wills Developmental Rd (69km) from where you can head southeast to the Burke & Wills Roadhouse, or west to Gregory Downs. A little further along the Burketown road is the turn-off to Floraville Station and a 'Historic Site'

sign indicates the 1.3km diversion to **Walker's Monument**. Frederick Walker died here in 1866. He had been sent out to find Burke and Wills. Although he didn't find them, he did discover Camp 119 (see the boxed text, opposite), from which they made their final push to the Gulf.

BURKETOWN

☎ 07 / pop 221

Isolated Burketown is a fishing mecca just 30km from the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Founded in 1865, Burketown almost came to a premature end a year later when a fever wiped out most of the residents. In 1887 a huge tidal surge almost carried the town away and, while nothing so dramatic has occurred since, the township is often cut off from the rest of the country by floodwaters.

Besides the excellent fishing, Burketown is the best place on the Gulf (if not the world) to witness the extraordinary 'morning glory' phenomenon – tubular clouds that roll out of the Gulf in the early morning, often in lines of three or four. This only happens between September and November, when atmospheric conditions are just right.

The Burketown and Gulf **Regional Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 4745 5111; Musgrave St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) can supply information and make arrangements for local tours. The **Burketown Rodeo**, held in the second weekend of July, is a good place to be in town, and there's a **barramundi fishing competition** over Easter.

Burketown Caravan Park (☎ 4745 5118; www.burketowncaravanpark.com.au; Sloman St; unpowered/power sites \$18/25, r/ cabins \$55/66, s/c units \$99; ♿) offers basic rooms and a range of cabins. Fishing charters on the Albert River operate from here.

Burketown Pub (☎ 4745 5104; Beames St; s/d \$60/60, units \$80/100; ♿) is the heart and soul of Burketown. Originally built as the local customs house, it's the oldest building in town – all its contemporaries have been blown or washed away! It's a friendly outback pub, the motel units are far enough away from the pub to be quiet, and there's a lovely beer garden and good meals.

Macair (☎ 1300 622 247; www.macair.com.au) has regular flights to Burketown from Mt Isa (from \$155) and Cairns (\$215).

BURKETOWN TO THE BORDER

This 228km section of the Savannah Way includes part of the historic Gulf Track, which stretches from Normanton to Roper Bar in the

CAMP 119

Camp 119 was the northernmost camp of the Burke and Wills expedition. Leaving their companions, Gray and King, to mind the camels and their equipment at Cooper Creek (near present-day Innamincka in South Australia), Burke and Wills pushed north across the wet, flooded country to try to reach the waters of the Gulf. While the water was salty and they observed a rise and fall in the tide, they were disappointed that the barrier of mangroves and mud kept them from seeing the coast. They turned back around 9 February 1861.

Returning to Camp 119, the explorers planned their dash back to Cooper Creek. No longer was it an exploratory expedition with mapping and observing a prime consideration, but an epic journey south for survival. In the end, only King made it back to Cooper Creek alive.

Northern Territory's Top End. The entire route is along unsealed roads, although a 4WD vehicle isn't required during the dry season. Travel isn't recommended during the wet season (between the beginning of December and March), when extreme heat and humidity make conditions difficult and heavy rains can close the roads. The only fuel stop for the 486km run between Burke and Borrooloola (NT) is at the Aboriginal community of Doomadgee.

After passing the deserted **Tiranna Roadhouse**, you cross the Gregory River, a lush scene of running water surrounded by tropical vegetation. In remarkable contrast, the Nicholson River, 53km further on, presents a desolate picture in the dry season. It's only about 4km further to the **Doomadgee Aboriginal Community** (☎ 47458188). While you are welcome to buy fuel (the last for almost 400km until Boorooloola) and shop at the store here, camping and village access is subject to permission being obtained from the council, and alcohol is restricted. It's another 80km of featureless Melaleuca scrub to Hell's Gate Roadhouse, which sadly closed its doors in 2007. Along the way you can take the signposted turn-off 42km to remote **Kingfisher Camp** (☎ 4745 8212; www.kingfisherresort.com.au; day pass \$3, sites per person/family \$8/18) on Bowthorn Station. The camping ground is set beside a gorgeous 5km-long water hole on the Nicholson River. Facilities include hot showers, toilets and a laundry. From here it's another 33km south to Bowthorn Homestead, from where you can head east 72km to join up with the Gulf Track east of the Nicholson River, or head south 100km or so to Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park.

BURKETOWN TO CAMOOWEAL

The 334km unsealed road from Burketown to Camooweal via Gregory Downs is the most direct way for people heading to the Boodjamulla

(Lawn Hill) National Park, although for 2WD vehicles the longer route via the Burke & Wills Roadhouse (sealed to Gregory Downs) provides much easier access.

From Burketown it's 117km south to **Gregory Downs**, near the banks of the beautiful Gregory River. You can stay in motel units at the **Gregory Downs Hotel** (☎ 4748 5566; camping \$7.50, s/d \$85/95; ♿) or camp behind the pub on the riverbank.

Travelling from Gregory Downs, it's another 217km to Camooweal. About 40km south the road turns from dirt to gravel as you start to move into a series of low hills.

BOODJAMULLA (LAWN HILL) NATIONAL PARK

Stuck between a rock (the Constance Range) and a hard place (the Gulf Savannah) is a beautiful, unexpected oasis. A series of deep flamed sandstone gorges, fed by spring water and lined with palms, provides a haven for wildlife and is one of the top natural attractions in the arid northwest of the state – Lawn Hill Gorge. Aboriginal people have enjoyed this oasis for perhaps 30,000 years. Their paintings and old camp sites abound. Two rock-art sites have been made accessible to visitors.

In the southern part of the park is the World Heritage-listed **Riversleigh fossil field**. The fossils include everything from giant snakes to carnivorous kangaroos.

There are 20km of walking tracks and a national-park **camping ground** (☎ 4748 5572; www.qld.gov.au/camping; sites per person/family \$4.50/18) with showers and toilets near the gorge; it's very popular and sites must be booked in advance. Canoes can be hired, and paddling up the emerald-green river with the red cliffs towering above is an experience not to be missed.

Adel's Grove (☎ /fax 4748 5502; www.adelsgrove.com.au; sites per adult/child/family \$10/5/25), 10km east of

the park entrance, is a lovely camping ground set amid trees close to the Lawn Hill Creek. In addition to camp sites, there are several permanently set-up tents with beds and linen (adult/child \$25/12). A tent or a basic room with dinner and breakfast included is \$80 to \$90 per person. As well as a bar and restaurant, fuel and basic groceries are available.

The park entrance is 100km west of Gregory Downs via a gravel road that is suitable for conventional vehicles in the Dry. The easiest route to Gregory Downs is the sealed road from the Burke & Wills Roadhouse. Coming from Mt Isa, the last 126km to Gregory Downs is unsealed. The Riversleigh Rd, which passes the Riversleigh fossil fields, is recommended for 4WD vehicles only.

WELLESLEY ISLANDS

There are numerous islands scattered in the Gulf of Carpentaria north of Burketown, most

of which are Aboriginal communities and not open to visitors. There are, however, a couple of places set up specifically to cater to people wanting to fish the abundant waters of the Gulf. Contact the resorts for information on charter flights to/from the islands.

The largest of the Gulf islands, **Mornington Island**, has an Aboriginal community administered from Gununa, on the southwestern coast. **Birri Fishing Paradise** (☎ 4745 7277; www.birri.com.au; 7-night all-inclusive packages \$3520) is a remote fishing lodge on the northwestern coast of the island. The minimum stay is a week and there's a maximum of 10 guests.

The smaller **Sweers Island**, midway between Burketown and Mornington Island, also has its own fishing resort. **Sweers Island Resort** (☎ 4748 5544; www.sweers.com.au) caters for families, and the cabins have shared bathroom facilities. The tariff (\$295 per person) includes all meals, boat hire, fuel, bait and hand lines.