

Too hot to handle Down Under



Geoffrey Boot takes time out from cruising off Northern Australia to sample the unique experience of Outback aviation

Jabiru – you’ve heard of the plane, but what of the place? Well, I now know it’s a mining town situated next to an open-cast uranium mine. Yes, that’s right, an open-cast uranium mine – that radioactive stuff we’re all so frightened of. In Australia they are digging it out of a big hole, and I can attest to the fact that the place does not glow at night, as I’ve flown over it.

Australia it’s a great place to fly. In fact, better than that, it’s a great place period. It’s also geographically huge and the only island continent in the world. You have to think about that one.

When we pitched up in Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, the distance thing became very apparent. Darwin is nearer Singapore than Sydney. As we’d just taken four days on a fairly fast cruise ship to get from Singapore to Darwin, it gave us a context by which to contemplate these vast distances.

Talking of cruise ships, before boarding we flew the inevitable economy class from London to Singapore non-stop in the controlled torture chamber that seems to be the modern air liner. Just 28 inches between seats, mini food packs and seating designed for midgets. Enough to put you off flying, especially when contrasted with the ship experience. It’s no wonder a number of our compatriots are moving away from aircraft and back to sea transport and boats.

In spite of this, by the time we made landfall in Australia I was getting that inevitable aviation withdrawal symptom. As there is no real general aviation in Malaysia, Indonesia or Brunei, of all our ports of call Darwin presented the first opportunity to get airborne under our own steam.

Problem. Although the Australians are happy to validate a JAA licence, in order to perpetrate the deed you need some time to pass their Aviation Law exam, and to follow the inevitable paper trail. Consequently, with our time restrictions, the only way to go was to hire an aircraft with an instructor. In Darwin

this proved to be no problem. With a hire car at our disposal we soon found our way to the international airport – in fact the only real airport for hundreds of miles, shared by the military and reputedly with a runway that is long enough to serve as a diversion for the space shuttle.

Darwin Flying School (a lot of thought went into that name; the Aussies like to keep it simple) proved a good find, situated as it is adjacent to the apron with a small fleet of single engine aircraft at charge-out rates that are easy on the wallet. We were soon itching to go. It seems that Brits and other Europeans are frequent visitors, as they knew the score in terms of P1 with an instructor to stay legal.

Now a few words about the differences between Aussie and European flying. Their legislation is a mix of European JAR and American FAA. They seem to be sitting on the fence, as it were, extracting the best or worst depending on your perspective from both disciplines. From a European view, particularly as an English pilot, the system is very similar

and even the RT, although tinged with a few g’days, it’s easier to follow than the machine gun American counterpart.

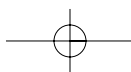
When it comes to flying in the Northern Territory, as soon as you step out of air-conditioned comfort the heat and humidity wrap around you like a blanket. 30-40 degrees C with 90% humidity is the norm, year-round. So Lesson One is that the best time of day to do anything is early morning or late evening. The trouble is, it gets hotter, and early soon turns to late, as we found later.

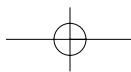
Weather can be a factor, although even in the rainy season, when in the afternoon huge CBs build up, they are usually fairly isolated. You either hold off for a while to let them clear or fly around them. As we found on our return journey a little later in the month when we ran into four days of Cyclone Ingrid, when the weather gets bad it gets really bad.

We wanted to get Outback without the hassle of a long drive, and take in some of the delights of the huge Kakadu National Park – reputedly the size of Wales – in just one day.



Right: the Outback is dotted with small unmade strips like this one near Corrinda





Left: Geoff, Suzie and hired PA28 at Darwin
 Above: looks flat, but swamps make the chances of a successful forced landing poor
 Below: JimJim falls in Kakadu National Park



This is where an aeroplane really comes into its own, and is the only option.

The Outback is dotted with small unmade strips, most of which charge no landing fees. Once you leave the Darwin area there is virtually no controlled air space – ideal for flying compared to the UK. Our intended flight took us to Corrinda on the edge of the Kakadu

National Park, over the park itself, around Jabiru then back to Darwin. We planned for just over three hours airborne, or about 340miles with one planned landing and lots of aerial photography.

We duly pitched up at the airport early although the temperature was still nearly 30 degrees C. We were soon strapped into an elderly PA28 Warrior which, we later discovered, had over 14,000 flying hours on the airframe and only 100 hours left before overhaul on the engine. As we climbed to an the initial 5,500ft, I soon realised that the Outback starts almost on the airport boundary, and there wasn't a lot of anything below except scrubby land and water – a very hostile environment for a forced landing. Hey, the engine had run 2,300 hours, so why should it stop now?

I wondered about our chosen altitude, and then discovered why we had no GPS. The altitude meant cooler flying, but more important for my instructor guide, the visibility was something we would kill for in the UK. It was almost limitless – we could see the coastline well over 30 miles away. Difficult to get lost, or so I was told by co-pilot and instructor Angela. The only problem was that



we had to fly over a mile high!

As always I was carrying my own GPS, which was soon up and running. We felt able to descend and take in the sights. I started to think about what would happen if the engine did stop, as below us the environment looked pretty inhospitable. We had no lifejackets, no survival kit, no emergency radio – although the aircraft did have an HF radio, evidence of long distance communication difficulties – and as we found out later when we explored the Yellow River on the Crocodile Cruise from Corrinda, what looked like grass areas below were in actual fact buffalo grass, which invariably had something like 2-3m of water below it. Good job we didn't know about the engine at that time, as I'm sure it would have run rough.

Even dunking in the sea if you can get there is not a good option without the necessary survival gear, as the blue waters are inhabited by Stingers (a particularly nasty and widespread poisonous jellyfish). If they don't get you then the sharks will, not forgetting the odd sea water crocodile.

We also found the reason for another essential ground check on departure – the application of sunscreen factor 30; the sun drilled a hole in the aeroplane and us through the perspex.

My trusty GPS confirmed Angela's high level coastal navigation and dead reckoning, but better still allowed us to descend to a more crocodile-friendly viewing altitude of 500 to 1000feet. After an hour of what seemed endless outback, JimJim Falls loomed large in front of us – thousands of tonnes of water

'The control column was literally too hot to handle. The only way I was able to take off was to wrap some of the discarded clothing around it'

rushing from the escarpment of Kakadu Park into a ravine and valley some 500 feet below. A spectacular sight, especially from just 500feet. I then turned north to Twin Falls. These were not at their best, as even

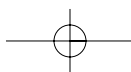
though it was the rainy season it had apparently been fairly dry.

The flight was punctuated by aircraft-to-aircraft advisories from other planes in the locality over the radio. Not surprisingly, aerial exploration is a considerable commercial enterprise with numerous sightseeing flights operating from Darwin on a daily basis. It did seem to me that some of them were overly cautious, bearing in mind there were probably three or four aeroplanes and several hundred square miles of sky. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Lunch at Corrinda was next on the agenda. Corrinda turned out to be a gravel strip, well over a thousand metres in length, hacked out of the bush close to the aptly named Crocodile River. When I say gravel I mean gravel, not good for braking, even worse for propellers. The idea is that once you are moving you keep moving, with no static power checks (as we found on departure).

A very hot interlude followed on the Crocodile River with a very in-your-face personal experience of what it would be like in case of an emergency landing. Don't even think about it – if you survive, you then need Crocodile Dundee along to keep the crocs off. We return to the aircraft.

Left: on finals for Darwin – the Outback begins almost at the airport boundary





Lesson Two: solar screens in the back of the aircraft are not there for decoration. We open the door and an oven-like interior greets us. With the sun beating down there is no way it is going to get any cooler so we have no alternative but to strip to our bare essentials and climb in, being careful not to burn ourselves on anything metal. (Suzie and Angela later censored the photos).

Somehow we manage to get the engine started but the control column was literally too hot to handle. The only way I was able to take off is to wrap some of the discarded clothing around it – I'm sworn to secrecy over which bits. So hot was it that I was only able to remove this covering as we climbed through two and a half thousand feet, probably eight or nine minutes into the flight. The heat also impedes engine performance. The poor old Warrior staggered into the air and didn't want to climb at much more than 3-400ft a minute.

We were soon on our way back to Darwin, congratulating ourselves on a real Outback adventure. Over three hours airborne time, even with an instructor to pay for, was a bargain compared to UK rates. No landing fees and fuel a third of the UK prices (that also applies to petrol for your car).

It was back to the welcome luxury of our air-conditioned cruise ship for another four days at sea before our next aviation interlude. Cairns is another one of those outposts of civilisation at the northern end of Australia. It is some 1,600miles from Darwin, and its real claim to fame is the access it gives you to the Great Barrier Reef. We only had a day to play with and although we'd been to the Barrier Reef before we thought it would be novel to hire a seaplane and mix aviation and aquatic recreation.

A de Havilland Beaver with its Pratt & Whitney radial engine seemed the ideal



mount. On this occasion I was going to have to play P2 in the right hand seat, but things didn't quite work out as we expected, or perhaps the owner/pilot knew something I didn't, as when I tried to adjust the P2 seat it collapsed backwards – one of the mounting bolts had sheared. This meant that my P2 experience had to be taken from the seat behind – not quite what I was expecting.

However it was an experience not to be missed, sedately flying at 90knots, 500 feet above what our pilot aptly termed the largest runway in the world. The Barrier Reef looked OK, too. We had a great picnic on a small island, complete with a bottle of champagne – no problem as there was no chance of getting anywhere near the controls on the way back.

Our little Antipodean adventure only nibbled at the possibilities – it's just a pity that Australia is so far away. ■

Top: de Havilland Beaver on floats – Geoff had to take a back seat
Left: flying over Green Island, off Cairns
Below: Beaver turns final for the waterfront at Cairns and the end of the adventure

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