

Five Days Away from Anywhere

The Jatbula Trail in Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park, Northern Territory, is a great Australian hiking experience. Best done in the cooler dry months May to September, this 66 km hike from Katherine Gorge to Edith Falls is the longest and most rigorous of the Nitmiluk trails. There are no supply points en route, except for water, so hikers must carry all their needs. The terrain varies from open country to scrambling steep, and short of hiring a helicopter or turning back, there is no way to shorten the walk once you begin. Solo hikers are not permitted to walk this trail.

Nitmiluk National Park is administered by NT Parks & Wildlife Service, which limits hiker numbers to 10 per campsite each night, and requires each hiking group to register at the Visitor Centre and pay a \$50 refundable fee before setting out. Add camping charges, \$3.30 per person per night and the initial \$5.00 river crossing ferry fee. A park map is available and recommended. The trail, marked throughout by reflective blue arrow signs, has a series of natural campsites, with emergency radiophones and checkpoint diaries to keep track of hikers. Fires are not permitted, so a portable stove needs to be part of your equipment. If you leave your car at Nitmiluk, you will need to arrange transport at Edith Falls, an 85 km drive away, at the end of the walk.

Fitness freaks and masochists may complete the hike in less than the recommended five days, but would probably miss seeing some of the best bits near the campsites. Not to mention the experience of spending five days savouring a safe, varied, tropical wilderness.

Day 1: Nitmiluk to Biddlecombe Cascades, 11.5 km. After registering (earliest 7 am), the journey begins with the river crossing for your \$5.00 fee. The trail undulates along a hillside, where you get the feel of your capabilities, pre-blisters, and make many adjustments to your pack, at its heaviest. Northern Rockhole, a pristine pool at the base of a seasonal waterfall, gives a welcome opportunity for a break and a swim. Then begins the first seriously uphill stretch, rocky and desiccated, inviting grave doubts about the wisdom of the whole expedition. It's surprising how much you need to drink in such conditions, even early in the day. Of course you have refilled every container at each creek, and are carrying at least three litres per person. Several changes of terrain and vegetation, and innumerable rest stops later, you reach the top of the escarpment, and have less than 3 km to go. The winding track through open forest seems longer, because the surface is quite sandy.

Biddlecombe campsite appears an anticlimax, until you shed your pack and investigate the watery sounds beyond. A series of shaded pools, falls descending into a westward-facing gorge, let you choose your personal jacuzzi with a view. Returning refreshed to the campsite, you will probably be outraged to find that the resident crows have been exploring your pack, finding a way into your food supplies. Don't underestimate their persistence! Biddlecombe and Crystal Falls campsites have longdrop dunny (pit toilet) facilities, as befits their greater frequency of use. The first checkpoint and emergency radiophone are beside the campsite.

Day 2: Biddlecombe to Crystal Falls, 12 km. Don't lace your boots too firmly, as you will probably have to remove them to cross Biddlecombe Creek shortly after starting. An alternative campsite on the far side looks more attractive than the official one, with possibly more mosquitoes. Today's trail follows north along the escarpment of seventeen-mile valley, mostly rocky going, descending into many tributary creeks, to keep you in good climbing form. Early in the day, watch for a large boulder on the right with a prominent Aboriginal rock painting. Short detours to the left of the trail offer several opportunities for "the vision splendid" west across the valley. Use your camera to appreciate a group of ancient gnarled silver-barked eucalypts at about the half-way point. I've seen their like nowhere else. Crystal Falls are even more audible than Biddlecombe Cascades, so you will know you are arriving. The small valley campsite is adjacent a magnificent swimming hole. Summon your energy reserves and investigate the source of the water sounds in the gorge, a few hundred metres downstream. But be warned - if you dislike heights, approach the edge with caution. What a drop!

Day 3: Crystal Falls to Seventeen Mile Falls, 12.5 km. Again a stream crossing at day's start, followed by a steep rocky climb. The checkpoint diary box is near a spectacular lookout over the gorge and waterfall - a definite photo opportunity. The trail turns west and rises to open gravelly country, ideal walking conditions with wide views. If you make good time you can take an early lunch break at Amphitheatre. This is the terminal end to a breakaway valley, a moist gorge in startling contrast to the dry flatlands above. A stream trickles over the cliff to a shaded, ferny butterfly haven below, amid massive trees. Leave your packs at the top, as the stairway and track down are a mountain goat's challenge. But remember your camera - there are a whole series of rock paintings to examine.

The Amphitheatre interlude precedes some rockier terrain before you reach Seventeen Mile Falls, the tallest waterfall in Nitmiluk. Detour left of the trail to the escarpment for a preview of the main falls and the valley, another photo opportunity, before descending to the watercourse upstream of the falls. The campsite on the far bank has a commanding view, though you may prefer a softer site in the sand beside the stream. Try walking upstream for more choice of campsites. Keep your boots on to explore the waterfall area - an unimpeded view of the main cascade requires some vigorous climbing downstream on the far side. Memorable images of water and rock await the enthusiast afternoon photographer in the area above the fall. Vertigo too for the timid. It's no place for an accident - this is the most remote section of your walk.

Day 4: Seventeen Mile Falls to Sandy Camp Pool, 16.5 km. Another stream crossing and climb to reach the checkpoint commencing the longest day's walk. The trail traverses west from the watershed of Katherine River to Edith River. Water may be scarce, depending on the season, so fill up everything. A variety of habitats is crossed - creeks, wetlands, rocky going, sand, black soil, descending slowly until you reach Edith River Crossing, a good place for a late lunch. Take a swim and a rest before another check point and the last six km south to Sandy Camp. Edith River must be crossed twice, possibly requiring boot removal. The trail follows the river downstream, flat going but sandy in spots, which can be enervating at the end of a long day.

An abrupt rock bar heralds the welcome sight of Sandy Camp Pool. But watch your tired step - it can be slippery! This must be the best campsite on the whole walk: a wide expanse of clear water with upstream spa pools, shady trees and an extensive beach of clean, pale sand under the trees. Just the spot for a rest and a feed, before lying on your swag, contemplating the stars and the meaning of life in congenial conversation.

Day 5: Sandy Camp Pool to Edith Falls, 14.6 km. Pleasant south-westerly walking in partial shade beside the meandering river, the trail traverses long-grass country, where you will probably see damage done by feral pigs and buffaloes, but are unlikely to meet any of the culprits. Botanists will be fascinated by the variety of wetland plants. A final checkpoint at Edith South, then squelch onwards through moist Lerombol Flats, where the river changes character and direction. Rocky terrain, many rapids and falls lead to Sweetwater Pool, a rock-bounded tropical gem, good for a lunch stop, a rest and a swim. Here you may observe a new species - homo sapiens - who have walked the five km upstream from Edith Falls campground. Don't underestimate that last five km walking northwest; it is rocky going and has some interminable uphill stretches. You have a deadline to meet - the kiosk where you redeem your \$50 fee and get a junk-food fix closes at 5 pm. Such civilisation can come as a shock after five days in the wilderness: the sight of relaxed clean tourists, lawn, bitumen roads, cars and flushing toilets may seem strangely alien.

Postscript. If you have the time and energy, take a swim, relax your aching body in the beautiful plunge pool at the base of Edith Falls and savour the sunset on golden cliffs, limpid water and pandanus trees. It is a 55 km drive to Katherine, or 300 km to Darwin, so you are still in never-never country, but not quite so isolated. Ease back into civilisation, and plan to repeat this unique experience.

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