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# Your guide to 3 Days in the Tiwi Islands

by **Fiona Harper**

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**Just 3 days doesn't seem long enough to spend in a region that takes most of the day to travel to. But, like many places in the Northern Territory, the journey is almost as much fun as the destination. Travel writer Fiona Harper boarded a light aircraft to check out the Tiwi Islands latest tourism venture.**

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Most Australians have heard of the Tiwi Islands but many would struggle to pinpoint them on a map.

An archipelago of 11 islands, the Tiwis are 80 km north of Darwin with most residents living on either Melville or Bathurst Island.

Aussie Rules football is a big deal in the Tiwis. Local boy Maurice Rioli was regarded as one of the best players of his era and was named in the Indigenous Team of the Century. The Rioli name is synonymous with talented footballers. His brother Sebastian played for South Fremantle, nephew Dean played for Essendon and nephew Cyril currently plays midfield at Hawthorn.

So it's a thrill to find football royalty in the guise of Cyril's mother Kathy Long, (her brother is football legend Michael Long), waiting as our little Cessna touches down at Wurrumiyanga airstrip on Bathurst Island. While football rules in these parts, art is not far behind with Tiwi Island artwork renowned globally. It soon becomes evident how integral art is to Tiwi Islanders. It's everywhere. The concrete 'arrivals hall' beside the landing strip is adorned with it. So too the toilet block nearby. We drive past a burial ground with carved and painted ironwood Pukamani Poles which are used as headstones to hold the spirit of those who have passed. Relatives know that their loved ones spirit has returned to country when the pole eventually falls over.

### Tiwi Designs

Kathy points out the 'crocodile free' swimming pool which was opened by Olympian Liesel Jones before we call into **Tiwi Designs**, one of the oldest and most artistically creative centres in Australia. A photo of Whoopi Goldberg draped in Tiwi Designs fabric is proudly pinned to the wall. Olivia Newton John is also known to be a big fan. We're welcomed to country with a traditional smoking ceremony intended to drive away evil spirits. Ladies with their faces elaborately painted slap us lightly on the shoulders with smoking leaves while men strike clapping sticks. Mario Munkara, a talented wood carver and painter, performs a Crocodile Dance before we're invited inside.



Stretched across a long table a strip of silk is transformed before our eyes into a striking work of art. Gallery manager Steve and artist Vivian transpose a design of renowned artist Jock Puatjimi onto the fabric. Vivian takes us through the screen printing process before allowing us to get our hands dirty in a hands-on workshop. We print a design onto fabric to take home as a treasured souvenir. Later we visit The Keeping House with its cathedral ceiling adorned with art – a divine Tiwi Islands version of the Sistine Chapel!

### Bathurst Island Lodge

The Cessna awaits to transport us to Bathurst Island Lodge which recently underwent a \$2m dollar renovation. Our digs for the night are perched atop beach sand a few metres from the water's edge. An open-sided lounge, bar and dining deck is the central hub of the lodge. We're in crocodile country and lodge manager Lyndsey advises us to 'stay on the deck, don't wander down onto the sand as there's crocs everywhere.'

We take the opportunity for sunset drinks further along the beach, towed behind a tractor on a flat top trailer kitted out with swivel chairs and all-weather carpet underfoot. The sunsets in the Territory are legendary and this one proves no exception. A chilled glass of sauvignon blanc along with an aperitif platter bathed in golden sunlight proves a delightful way to savour the days end in the tropics.

Next morning we're up early to board a fleet of small boats for some sport fishing and croc spotting. Massive Giant Trevally prove too cunning (and too heavy, just quietly!) to land. We spot a 3 metre long crocodile lurking amongst the mangroves, its belly bulging from a recent feed. After coming close to check us out it silently sinks below the surface unseen – a not so subtle reminder that swimming is off the itinerary despite the sweat trickling down my spine.

### Melville Island and Jilamara Arts

Departing Bathurst Island our zippy little Cessna takes us to Milikapti on Melville Island. We congregate on the shaded deck of Melville Island Lodge for a convivial lunch with artist Junior David Guy, lodge staff and guests. Jilamara Arts & Craft centre operates as a gallery, museum and artists workshop all rolled into one. Artist Brian Farmer, with his sparkling smile shining through a long grey beard shows us around the gallery, humbly pointing out his own pieces when I ask. He tells us he started painting in the 1990's, inspired by stories shared by his parents around the campfire. His soft voice is mesmerising as he describes the stories behind each piece. I could listen to him for hours.



This one on one interaction with artists is undoubtedly the highlight of the Ultimate Tiwi Islands Tour. Tiwi Islanders have an extraordinarily preserved culture, no doubt due in part to their isolation from the mainland. But so too, there is inherent pride in the preservation of their culture. It's a privilege to have elders like Brian Farmer share his country and its stories with us.

### Getting Around

The three-day **Ultimate Tiwi Island Tour** in 2016 runs from June until September. Costs from \$2425 pp including SeaLink ferry transfers or flights from Darwin, scenic flight to Melville Island, accommodation, meals and non-alcoholic beverages and art workshop with local artists, walking tour, wilderness adventure cruise, fishing options, turtle tour, and a museum and art centre tour

Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventures. Follow her at [Travel Boating Lifestyle](#). She was a guest of [SeaLink](#) and [Tourism NT](#).

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