COVER STORY:
TIMOR SEA GAS ONSHORE
ONE YEAR ON

NEIL PHILIP
Building an offshore explorer

CRUISERS SPARK DARWIN SALES

SEIZING the opportunities in Dubai

TALL POPPY
Welcome to the fifth edition of Territory Q.

Territory Q promotes business and investment opportunities across the Territory. It connects us with national and international audiences, and keeps Territorians up-to-date with what’s happening in their own back yard.

Our cover story takes us out to the Bayu-Undan platform in the Timor Sea, then behind the scenes at the Darwin LNG Plant where ConocoPhillips has just celebrated its first year of production.

There’s good news in Central Australia where economic opportunities and jobs are being created under the banner of the Red Centre Way. And we also travel to Dubai to see the role Territory companies are playing in that country’s remarkable development.

As Territory Q enters its second year, its message has never been clearer: the Territory is a great place to live and make a living – and a place of unlimited opportunity.

Clare Martin
Chief Minister of the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Government respects Indigenous cultures and has attempted to ensure no material has been included in Territory Q that is offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Acknowledgements

Territory Q is published by the
Department of the Chief Minister,
Northern Territory Government.
Correspondence should be directed to
The Department of the Chief Minister,
Communications and Marketing,
GPO Box 4396,
Darwin NT 0801,
Australia.
Telephone 08 8946 9544
Email communications.dcm@nt.gov.au

Writers

Dennis Schulz
Martin Blaszczyk
Stephen Garnett
Samantha McCue
Joc Schmiechen
Christine O’Leary

Photographics

Dennis Schulz
ConocoPhilips
Palm Photographics
Accrete
Athol Wark
Joc Schmiechen
Arafura Games
TourismNT
Didjeri Air Art Tours
Bushlight
Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries
and Mines

Design/layout

Boyanton Advertising, Darwin

Bayu-Undan and Darwin LNG: One Year On 4
Accrete: Preparing for the Worst 12
Launching the Red Centre Way 14
Kintore Celebrates New Artists’ Studio 18
Helen Read: Reaching Out-back 20
Taking on Dubai 22
Imparja Outgrows its Home 26
Athol Wark: Taking Wildfood to the World 28
Cruising to New Heights 30
Cruising — Territory Style 34
Bill Passey: The Lone Trawler 36
Matilda Mines: Mining the Ancient Dunes 38
Makin’ Hay in the Desert 40
Designer Flowers on Debut 42
Waterfront Update: the Centre of Attention 44
Arafura Games 2007: the Centre of Attention 45
HomeNorth: Approaching the First Thousand 48
The Waste Oil Warrior 52

REGULAR FEATURES:

TALL POPPY: Neil Philip 10
Indigenous Bizness
Larrakia Inc. 46

Stephen Garnett on the Knowledge Economy
Bringing Power to the People: Bushlight 43

Fast Facts: The Territory Economy 50

Paddock to Plate
Going for Green 56

Parting Shots!
Green Light for New Territory Mines in 2007 58

DOWNLOAD your Q

Enjoy the convenience of e-Territory Q. Download current and past editions,
fully bookmarked and hyperlinksted to the web!
Visit www.theterritory.com.au and click on “publications”.

© Northern Territory Government 2007

While all reasonable efforts have been made to ensure
that the information contained in this publication is
correct, the information covered is subject to change.
The Northern Territory Government does not assume and
hereby disclaims any express or implied liability whatsoever
to any party for any loss or damage caused by errors
or omissions, whether these errors or omissions result
from negligence, accident or any other cause. Opinions
expressed in Territory Q do not necessarily reflect those of
the Northern Territory Government. Requests and inquiries
concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed
to Communication and Marketing, Department of the
Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government. All images
appearing in Territory Q are protected by copyright.
Last month in Houston, Texas, the Chairman and CEO of ConocoPhillips, Jim Mulva, hosted the company’s annual worldwide SPIRIT of Performance Awards. These awards honor the people who best exemplify ConocoPhillips’ highest standards of performance in conducting business and contributing to society. The awards dinner was attended by hundreds of ConocoPhillips’ 38,000 employees from around the globe who saw Mr Mulva present the ConocoPhillips Spirit Award for Project Excellence to George Manning and his team from the Darwin LNG project.
“We think we deserve it,” says Mr Manning, the company’s Darwin Area Manager, a softly spoken 37 year company veteran. “Our first year was exceptional. It was the first year we had the whole project operating – offshore, the pipeline and Darwin LNG. We exceeded our production budgets offshore at Bayu-Undan and at Darwin LNG. We delivered considerable additional volume to our customers than had been forecast.”

The outstanding engineering feat of the Bayu-Undan Project was also recognised in Australia when it was awarded the prestigious “Sir William Hudson Award” in the Australian Engineering Excellence Award for 2006. The Sir William Hudson Award is the highest accolade for an engineering project and recognises world class expertise and innovation for engineering solutions.

The Bayu-Undan offshore facility, the 500 km pipeline, and LNG Plant was a project costing $3.5 billion, and it was not a coincidence that the date of the Wickham Point plant’s groundbreaking in 2003 coincided with the start of the Territory’s economic upswing that continues today. That economic activity is fuelled by the dozens of suppliers and contractors that ConocoPhillips deals with locally. “We spend significant sums running the operation and a great proportion of that is spent in the Territory. Our goal is to source as much support from here as we can,” explains Mr Manning.

The success of ConocoPhillips’ first year of general production was assured: It had everything to do with the investment the company made in ensuring that the people who would operate the offshore and onshore facilities would be involved from the drawing board to the commissioning stage. No longer would one group design the platforms and plant, another project team build them before handing the finished product over to the operators of the facilities. In 2001, the company employed 150 highly skilled people who would eventually operate the facilities, and involved them in all stages of its genesis.
When the green light was given to the Darwin LNG project, the first order of business was to design and build the Bayu-Undan offshore facility, 502 km north of Darwin. The plan was not simply aimed at the production of Liquefied Natural Gas, but to extract liquid hydrocarbons in the form of condensate, butane and propane, split them off and store them in a Floating Storage and Offloading (FSO) vessel before export. Approximately half the gas would then be injected back into the reservoir where it would later be extracted and sent to Darwin for LNG production.

The massive platforms for production, as well as the 250 metre long FSO, would be built in the shipyards of Singapore and mainly in Korea. Construction began in 2001, and the newly-recruited operations crew were integrated into the construction, moving between the operations centre in Perth and the shipyards in Asia. One of those was one of Bayu-Undan’s current field managers, Ian Stephenson, an animated Yorkshireman whose entire working life has been spent in gas and oil. “The people who were going to operate the facility were considered the customer,” recalls Mr Stephenson. “It was the future platform managers who signed-off on them. Management gave them responsibility for quality control.”

It was an innovative concept that has paid off richly in production figures because, when the facility was installed at sea, everybody knew how it worked. All they had to do was plug in the wells. “They got all that familiarisation during the building of the platform, says Offshore Installation Manager, Neville Carrington. “And that kind of training is gold.” The facility has been in production of liquids since 2004, with tankers arriving at the FSO regularly. The gas is piped to Darwin for processing into LNG.

Today Bayu-Undan is delivering its products with consistent regularity, and the attention of the 140 management and crew of the facilities (including 60 accommodated on the FSO), has turned to maintaining their production schedules as safely as possible.

“There’s a real buzz about working with a team that you know is the best around.”

Above > Maintenance Coordinator, Ian Antai (L), and Central Control Technician Brendan Kealy in Bayu-Undan’s Central Control Room.
Centre > Ian Stephenson, Bayu-Undan Offshore Installation Manager.
Right > Bayu-Undan platform in the Timor Sea.
They are a highly qualified cosmopolitan group, assembled from Australia and around the globe, with technical workers sourced from the Philippines and support staff from East Timor. At shift changes they are flown in from Darwin to Dili by fixed wing aircraft by Air North, and from Dili to the Timor Sea platform by CHC’s Super Puma Helicopters.

In the competitive atmosphere of skilled worker recruitment, ConocoPhillips has spared little in its efforts to retain staff. The accommodation and amenities on the platforms are excellent, with the workers on a three weeks on/three weeks off/six weeks off roster. The splendid conditions have attracted talented production specialists. “There’s a real buzz about working with a team that you know is the best around,” says engineer Dave Hutchison.

It is a complex operation, with electronic technology in every corner of Bayu-Undan, powered by subsea natural gas. All production systems from the extraction rates of gas and liquids to the pumping of gas to Darwin is monitored in the control room. A sophisticated communications system is used for daily phone conferencing between senior platform maintenance and engineering staff, and support staff in Perth and Darwin, including direct phone lines to Darwin and Perth in every workers’ room.

Besides their regular designated duties, all Bayu-Undan staff have emergency response roles as well, with regular drills taking place, simulating the kind of scenarios that can, and sometimes do, occur. Emergencies can include an approach by an unidentified vessel, like the one earlier this year that turned out to be Indonesian fishermen who were adrift for a month and survived a cyclone at sea. They were rescued and repatriated.

But the number one safety issue, in which all have a role, is fire, and fire in the accommodation area is the worst case scenario. Fires outside are easier to deal with. Inside you can have loss of light, thick, confined smoke. In a drill, where such a fire is simulated, engineers and technicians become firemen and stretcher bearers, with the clock ticking down their response time.

A concentration on personal safety resulted in no lost time accidents in 2006. Workplace safety is a company obsession as evidenced by a statement from Jim Mulva that is displayed in various places around the platform, saying, ‘No job is so important that we cannot take the time to do it safely.’

That’s an obsession that Ian Stephenson, who operated a North Sea facility for another company the night of the Piper Alpha tragedy, is proud to advocate. He says: “Our senior management believes that a person should be able to go through their entire working life with the expectation that they’ll never get an injury at work. That is quite an honourable position to take.”
What a difference a year makes. No longer does the sight of a huge LNG carrier stop us in our tracks like it did when they began regular pick-ups in February 2006. Then it was something to discuss at the family dinner table – the ship’s impressive length, its four white domes turned golden as the sun disappears behind the Cox Peninsula. It has now visited, as of this writing, 45 times, and, if you are to read the indicators with any objectivity, the story of LNG exports and Timor Sea gas development has only just begun.

Like the Bayu-Undan Project 500 km away, Darwin LNG has been an overwhelming success. It was a project that cost $1.5 billion and at the height of construction activity it employed 2500 workers on site. It is a project that changed the face of the Northern Territory economy, with gas sales producing continuing earnings, permanent employment opportunities, plus the potential for associated manufacturing using Timor Sea gas in a range of new industries.

Like its offshore associate, Darwin LNG saw ConocoPhillips integrate the future operations team into the project construction team operated by American construction giant, Bechtel. Together, they brought the project in ahead of schedule and below budget. “We were able to have a seamless transition from the project phase into the operating phase,” remembers George Manning. “As a result of that training and development, we had a much improved start-up time. We had less disruption to the plant than normal. Of all the plants that Bechtel have built, this is the best start-up they’ve ever done.”

ConocoPhillips brought Production Team Leader, Paul Bruner, to Darwin from Alaska early in the process, a man who knows the company’s technology. For Paul, Darwin displays a ‘frontier pride’ not unlike Kenai. “I feel that same sense in Darwin as in Alaska,” says Mr Bruner. “It’s that sense that you’re self supportive. There’s pride in being able to pull off the unexpected. Like this plant coming to a site that hasn’t been developed, with little infrastructure, but you’re still able to make it happen. That’s pretty exciting stuff.”

According to Mr Bruner, Darwin LNG is unique in many ways. It utilises Aero-Derivative Turbines - jet aircraft engines - to drive the big refrigeration compressors used in the chilling process. They are fuel efficient, with lower emissions than other engines. Waste heat recovery systems recycle heat for other plant uses. The storage tank is the largest above ground tank in the world – with 188,000 cubic metres capacity – and the innovative ground flare spreads the flame, creating no hazard to passing aircraft.

“For my family, Darwin’s been wonderful. It’s extremely underrated by lots of Australians and I think there’s a lot of incorrect perceptions about Darwin.”
The company also made administrative changes that saw 30 positions moved from Perth to Darwin to set up the Darwin Operations Centre, bringing the technical support, engineering and maintenance teams permanently on site where they can be most effective. One of those is Flemish Engineering Team Leader, Dirk Faveere, who, like many of the imported staff, has been pleasantly surprised by the Territory capital. “For my family, Darwin’s been wonderful,” explains Mr Faveere. “It’s extremely underrated by lots of Australians and I think there’s a lot of incorrect perceptions about Darwin.”

But what will the Wickham Point LNG Plant look like in a decade from now? If ConocoPhillips has their way it will look much different, representing a gas hub of processing in the Asia-Pacific region.

Under their licence with the NT Government, the LNG Plant is permitted to produce 10 million tonnes of LNG per annum, and is currently producing 3.2 million tonnes. The size of any extra development on the site will be determined by the size of the next Timor Sea gas field to get a green light for development. All potential sources in the Timor Sea are being considered, including Caldita and Sunrise.

Last month, Sunrise moved a step closer to development after Australia and Timor Leste exchanged notes to bring into force the two treaties which settle arrangements in the Timor Sea between the two countries.

Both countries would no doubt like to see the Sunrise gas processed on their home soil, but this is one of many issues yet to be resolved.

However, with LNG processing already successfully under way in Darwin, those in the Territory capital clearly believe that it has advantages to take up any opportunities for future expansion. “We understand and respect Timor Leste’s desire to have the LNG processing plant based there – but we hold our own hopes that Darwin could be the site for the development of Sunrise Gas,” says Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin. “The ratification of the treaty allows the Sunrise Gas Field to become another gas supply option for the expansion of LNG and gas manufacturing in Darwin.”
Who says Darwin hasn’t bred a wealth of prominent community and industry leaders? When it is inferred that somehow the Top End capital is relegated to importing its business expertise, Neil Philip hauls out a faded black and white photo of a local Waratah Colts Aussie Rules footy team taken in 1968.

He points out that among the scruffy young teenagers posing for the camera are Tom Calma, who went on to become Australia’s Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner. There’s Dwyn Delaney, owner operator of Delaney’s Country and Western Store in Darwin, and on the far right stands Andrew Liveris, the worldwide head of Dow Chemical. “He’s the most successful business product Darwin’s produced,” smiles Mr Philip, proud of his Territory heritage.

Mr Philip, now 53, is in the photo and he hasn’t done badly either. Retired from the Darwin-based legal practice Clayton Utz five years ago, he went on to begin a new career as Board Chairman of the Territory Power and Water Corporation as well as exploration rising star, Nexus Energy. He took a failed IT company and helped turn it into a major player in the Australian energy exploration industry.

That turnaround started in 2000 when Mr Philip and some friends launched a dot com company called eNTITy 1, a publicly listed company designed to bid for the multi-million dollar Northern Territory Government IT outsourcing contracts. But the fledgling company failed to win a contract, and as a result all its IT and management staff were let go.

However, one of eNTITy 1 investors, Victor Smorgon (of Victorian steel company fame), introduced Neil to people in Melbourne looking to list Nexus Energy, an unlisted oil and gas company with onshore exploration assets. “We liked the sector,” recalls Mr Philip. “We liked the way the people came to us through Victor Smorgon, a man with an impeccable track record. Their assets on shore were reasonable, they had some good people on their Board, so it made sense to us.”

Mr Philip put the idea to the company’s shareholders who voted in favour of buying Nexus. The company instantly became oil and gas focused, they had $3 million in the bank, and eNTITy 1 changed its name to Nexus in August 2001. Its Board Chairman, Neil Philip, knew nothing about oil and gas.

He learned fast. Using contacts in the industry, Mr Philip went out and found a new management team. He went to Perth, the home of mining and exploration in Australia, and talked to Ian Tchacos, offering him the job of managing director, with an open charter to set the new strategy for the company. “He works very well consultatively, always willing to listen and learn,” says Mr Tchacos. “Neil brings in a level of independence, commercial acumen and objectivity.”

The first step of that transition was to rid Nexus of its onshore assets and concentrate on acquiring offshore tenements. Success in Australian oil and gas seemed to be concentrated offshore.

They revamped the Nexus Board, bringing in Bob Boyson, an offshore oil and gas specialist, and workshops a plan over the next two months. Then luck intervened.

The Australian Government gazetted exploration permits in the Bass Strait for the first time in years. Nexus bid for some of that acreage and were successful, picking up two blocks, one of which included the existing Longtom gas discovery. The Government’s decision backed the Nexus technical team and showed confidence in the company’s ability to convince other industry players to come in and fund the exploration program.

A key to the company’s early strategy was to acquire a large interest in permits (preferably 100 per cent), then after the technical team worked it up, convince industry majors to come in and fund the bulk of the exploration program.
That way, Nexus shareholders’ exposure to drilling risk was reduced.

Nexus drilled two wells on the Longtom gas resource in the Bass Strait with a highly successful flow test on the second well.

“Longtom was a boomer. It did everything we said it would do,” remembers Mr Philip. “For us, that was a big milestone because it was a validation of our technical argument.” The field is due to begin production next year with the gas sold to Santos.

Longtom was followed by the acquisition of the Crux field, 600 km northwest of Darwin and Echuca Shoals west of Darwin. All three permits had promising backgrounds: Longtom had a well drilled by BHP in the 90s, Crux had a well drilled on it by Nippon Oil, and in 1983 Woodside drilled Echuca Shoals. In those days explorers were concentrating their efforts on oil rather than gas. That was before the gas price rose with demand. “Our role as a Board is to set the boundaries in terms of our risk tolerance and to ensure we operate ethically and professionally,” says Mr Philip.

During this tumultuous period of growth for Nexus, Mr Philip was also guiding the Power and Water Corporation through a significant phase as the corporation moved from being an Authority to the first Government owned Corporation and to secure a new source of gas for electricity production after 2009. “It’s an interesting contrast to chairing Nexus which is mostly about aggressive growth, and then on the other side you have Power and Water, which is a business with a big social obligation, so the commercial concerns don’t always dominate.”

So much for retirement. With Crux heading towards development in the Timor Sea, Mr Philip will see to it that Darwin gets its fair share of offshore service contracts. But, according to the former Waratah midfielder, the best is yet to come: “Nexus has gone from a $2 million business when we brought in our new people in 2002 to as high as $500 million. Our stated objective is that we believe that within three years we can be in the top five oil and gas companies in Australia. We believe we have the assets and the people to do it.”
It was the offshore oil and gas industry’s blackest night. On 6 July 1988, a fire broke out in Occidental Petroleum’s Piper Alpha platform in the North Sea. The resulting explosion caused the abandonment of the platform’s control room, leaving it without organisation. A second explosion occurred with gas from neighbouring platforms continuing to flow into the blaze, fuelling the fire and causing personnel to leap 200 metres to their death in the sea. That night 167 men died, forcing the entire industry to re-evaluate its safety practices.

The ripple effect of the Piper Alpha tragedy spread across the globe, with the resulting Lord Cullen Inquiry making far-reaching recommendations that place the onus for safety on the operating company. Among those changes aimed at the offshore industry are training as a prerequisite for any person who is a crew member or a passenger in a helicopter that’s flying over water. If a helicopter goes down, passengers should know how to get out of it safely.

It’s called HUET – Helicopter Underwater Escape Training - and as Darwin’s offshore oil and gas industry accelerates, more and more workers and contractors are requiring the basic HUET certification. A more comprehensive accreditation is OPITO (Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation) of which HUET is a component. It takes into account not only the journey to and from the rig, but emergency situations on the rig itself.

Two Darwin training organisations offer helicopter safety training courses, with one of them, IFAP (Industrial Foundation Accident Prevention), offering both the HUET and the OPITO course.
The new trainer on the block is Accrete, operated by long-time Darwin management consultant Mark Leahy, and businessman Greg Haig. Accrete is a botanical term meaning that after grafting two trees together, the resulting growth should be stronger.

Proper infrastructure is a prerequisite for quality training, and Accrete has invested heavily in its Hudson Creek facility where HUET training takes place along with certificate training in working at heights, confined space work, and smoke rescue. And, on the human development side: management skills training, corporate team building, leadership and procurement training.

The day-long HUET training takes place in their purpose-built pool where a module, with a capacity of four trainees, is dropped slowly into the water, then rotated to simulate a chopper crash. Trainees must unbuckle their seat belts, and swim through the exits to the surface. Lifeboat entry is also practised. “You’re trying to increase people’s chances at survival from 30 per cent to 85 per cent with a bit of training,” says Accrete instructor, Scott Kernahan.

The HUET training module is based on the design of a Super Puma helicopter, the chopper of choice for crew changes on offshore oil and gas platforms. But the Australian Defence Force has recently purchased the Tiger Helicopter from Eurocopter, and the new fleet of 22 Tigers (16 to be based in Darwin’s Robertson Barracks) are due in the second half of 2007. All crews must do HUET training so Australian Aerospace, the Defence contractor for the manufacturer, has designed a training module expressly for the Tiger.

Accrete expects to train all Territory-based Tiger crews in HUET. “That Tiger module is currently located here,” explains Accrete Managing Director Mark Leahy. “We are the custodians of it and our expectation is that as soon as the aircraft is accepted into service the defence training will occur here.”

The company also plans on operating a future OPITO course.

The current Top End OPITO course is run by IFAP, a not-for-profit organisation located at the Berrimah Research Farm. Previously known as the North Australian Safety Centre, the facility merged with IFAP last year, keeping all the services they used to offer, plus adding courses that were not previously available. “We’re a One Stop Shop for training,” explains Operations Manager, Craig Parrick.

Costing over $1000, the two day OPITO course is taken up by customs officers, the military, oil and gas, as well as Royal Darwin Hospital staff who fly on helicopters in emergency situations. IFAP puts its profits back into the business, and is planning the development of a second pool to run multiple classes at the same time.

The action, however, is taking place in the pool, where trainees, dressed in colorful helmets and coveralls, are rolled upside down underwater. Their belts are soon ripped off, the windows of the module pushed out, and the trainees confidently glide to the surface, hoping they never have to use their new-found expertise.

“You’re trying to increase people’s chances at survival from 30 per cent to 85 per cent with a bit of training.”
There’s only a few minutes of sun left and the photographers, gathered in a carpet of spinifex, are keen to use every second of the fading light. They know that as the sun slides to the horizon, the ranges take on a blazing glow that lasts for only a breathtakingly few minutes. Their electronic shutters silently, madly fire, punctuated by eyes leaving the viewfinders to dart across the landscape, desperate to seize the moment.

Melbourne Herald Sun photographer Alex Coppel breaks out in a spontaneous smile of satisfaction that spreads through the group like a bushfire.
but these visiting artists did not land at this glorious spot, at this opportune moment, by sheer luck. They were guided to this vantage point by legendary desert landscape photographer Steve Strike, the Alice Springs-based artist whose pictures have graced the pages of every quality periodical in Australia and many internationally. When Tourism NT, the Territory Government’s peak industry body, decided to bring these photographers to the Red Centre, they could think of no one better to guide the group than the man whose work is synonymous with the region.

This group of six photographers have been invited to the Centre as part of the launch of the country’s new National Landscape international marketing plan, with the Red Centre Way being the first of the National Landscapes. The international promotion of a group of between 10 and 20 National Landscapes was an initiative of the Australian Government: to designate areas of particular natural significance like the Great Ocean Road, the Flinders Ranges or the Great Barrier Reef, that would be better suited to marketing than featuring existing national parks. While marketing national parks in the USA is focused on just a handful of sites, Australia has more than 500 designated national parks, devaluing them as special tourism destinations.

Thirty of their best photographs will be printed onto canvas, each double poster size, and exhibited at a special show at Melbourne’s Southern Cross Station before moving on to exhibitions at a number of Voyages Hotels around Australia.

The Red Centre Way is the first destination to be identified as one of Australia’s National Landscapes. “Places that nobody has been able to put on their travel itinerary are suddenly going to be key features in the future.”

“Places that nobody has been able to put on their travel itinerary are suddenly going to be key features in the future.”

Above Left: Steve Strike (R) led photographers (from L) Grenville Turner, Gemma Pitcher and Alex Coppel to a variety of Central Australian sites.
The key to the designation of the Red Centre Way as the country’s first National Landscape is the sealing of existing gravel roads that will link some of the region’s most important destinations. While tourists visiting by road were often reticent to travel on gravel surfaces, they will now be able to pull caravans into previously inaccessible areas. Visitors to Uluru will be able to drive in a loop on a sealed road to Kings Canyon, as well as Hermannsburg, a variety of destinations in the MacDonnell Ranges, and Alice Springs. Road construction has already begun. “It redefines Central Australian tourism,” explains Craig Catchlove, General Manager of the Central Australian Tourism Industry Association. “People will no longer just do Uluru or just do Alice Springs. The question will be, not which destination they will visit, but how long are they going to take to see everything along the Red Centre Way.”

Comfortable sealed roads will entice Japanese tourists to venture beyond Uluru, and for the first time grey nomads will be pouring into the western desert looking for petrol or a campground. Figures show that upgrading roads produces increased tourism visitation. When the road to Kings Canyon was sealed, the visitation doubled in just two years. “Places that nobody has been able to put on their travel itinerary are suddenly going to be key features in the future,” says Mr Catchlove.

Opening this new highway system will be of particular interest to Aboriginal communities scattered across the region. Many groups and individuals have expressed interest in starting tourism based enterprises designed to provide services and tourism opportunities in the remote outback, creating wealth on their ancestral lands.

In order to plan for the opening of the Red Centre Way loop road, regional tourism consultant Sharyn Innes has been contracted to hold seminars across the region, informing all stakeholders about the changes that will occur, and deciding on the priorities for creating improvements in their ability to cater for the increase in visitation. At one such seminar in Hermannsburg, 120 km west of Alice Springs, she asks a group, “how do we get the best value of the tourism increases?
“People will no longer just do Uluru or just do Alice Springs. The question will be, not which destination they will visit, but how long are they going to take to see everything along the Red Centre Way.”

How can we make people’s stay a better experience? What do we need to provide for them? How can we best explain the protocols of visiting an Indigenous community?”

Some in attendance are weighing up the pros and cons of opening their land to tourism. One of those is Conrad Ratara whose family lives on an outstation in the picturesque Palm Valley area, near Hermannsburg. He’s considering a joint venture with an Alice tour operator who will bring visitors in where Conrad would talk to them about his country and guide them to some of its spectacular sites. “I want to try and make it happen,” says Conrad cautiously, “but it will mean big changes for me and my family.”

Others are certain of their desire to open new enterprises. Herman and Mavis Malbunka are the traditional owners of Ipolera, a desert landscape that includes Gosses Bluff, an isolated comet crater that remains a significant sacred site. The Malbunkas want to include visitors on cultural excursions with their family, as they teach the children the traditional stories associated with the land. They are also investigating the construction of a roadhouse, complete with motel accommodation that would insure their family’s economic future.

New tours are also in the planning stages for the gateway to the Red Centre Way, Alice Springs. Aboriginal entrepreneur and artist Jungala Kriss is already hosting school groups out to his family property, but is now investigating a guided tour following the Simpson’s Gap Bike Path, just outside town. Jungala would lead groups along the 17 km path in the shadow of the West MacDonnell Ranges, riding one of his distinctive dot painted mountain bikes.

Tourism NT’s Destination Development Officer Tim Hill thinks it’s an idea that will fly. He says: “We have four marketing pillars that are the base criterion for a new venture: does it have history and heritage, Aboriginal art, desert landscapes or outback adventure? Jungala’s has got to be a start-up winner. It has all of those things.”
The new Kintore (Walungurru) Artists Studio is more than an attractive architectural structure, it’s a symbol. At the studio’s grand opening, attended by the who’s who of the Australian Aboriginal art industry, some stated that it symbolised the magnificence of the Papunya Tula painters’ art, continually steering the industry into new aesthetic frontiers.

Others saw it as a testimony to the overall success of Aboriginal art worldwide. The local view, however, is closer to the bone. “It represents a place where we can come together as a people to teach our law and culture to our children, and pass it on to the next generation,” says artist Yua Yua Nampitjinpa, speaking in Pintupi. “It means we are united as one people, sitting here painting on our country.”

Over 100 people from around Australia and beyond came to celebrate the opening of the new art studio with the Papunya Tula painters and the people of Kintore, 500 km west of Alice Springs. The art centre cost $1.2 million dollars to build, taking over the best part of a year. More a statement than a structure, in tasty shades of desert ochre and blue, the studio was totally paid for by the artists’ organisation, the Papunya Tula Artists, without a cent of subsidy from government or anyone else.

The artists literally invested in their art centre. Like many other artists working through community art centres, they receive 60 per cent of their painting’s sale price, with 40 per cent going to the art centre, which markets their work. The difference with Papunya Tula’s painters from other art centres is that more than 30 of them regularly command five-figure prices for their paintings. “To pay for this art centre is a huge effort, and there’s no other way to describe it,” says Appoline Cohen, manager of the Territory’s internationally acclaimed Maningrida Art Centre. “I’m really impressed that they could put this together without funding from outside. It’s an amazing achievement. The artists must have really wanted it to happen because they must have contributed very heavily.”

The new art centre, designed by the Tangentyere Architects of Alice Springs and built by Alice’s Probuild, sits on the area where the artists began working in
remote Kintore 30 years ago. They started priming and stretching canvases under a tree nearby next to the footy oval. The artists and field workers, who stretch canvas and advise on quality control, finally got a one-room studio in the mid 80s, known as ‘the shed’, which was added to twice.

They painted in and around that old broken down shed for 20 years, still managing to produce some of the finest painting ever conceived in Australia. So, now that the artists have a flash new studio complete with wide verandas, open spaces, and air con if needed, will they miss the old art centre? “All the doors were broken. The roof was chattering in the wind. The walls were subsiding, the concrete was rotting, the windows didn’t open or close,” recalls Papunya Tula Manager, Paul Sweeney. “All the staff were walking around cursing the place. No, I don’t think they are too sorry to see it go.”

But those people gathered for the opening celebrations were not unduly surprised by Papunya Tula’s ability to construct and pay for their new art centre. They’ve witnessed that resolve before. When elderly community leaders were forced to relocate to Alice Springs for renal dialysis treatment, the Pintupi painters of Kintore and nearby Kiwikurra decided they needed to keep those people here, on their country. They decided to build a renal unit in the community, so they united to produce works that were auctioned off at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, raising over $1 million. Today that renal unit is in operation, with Papunya Tula paying for 10 per cent of its ongoing budget, and plans are afoot to extend it to a mobile renal unit, designed to service smaller remote communities.

But today is for celebration. The people of Kintore have welcomed visitors from afar for this special occasion. The women have painted themselves in traditional designs and dance for the admiring throng, their singing punctuated by the obligatory chaos of scrapping dogs and howls of support.

The art centre is Papunya Tula doing it their way. “For me this enterprise is an Aboriginal initiative,” explains Hetty Perkins, Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. “It’s Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land, Aboriginal language, Aboriginal life. That’s what this building represents. It’s a powerful, positive thing.”

“It represents a place where we can come together as a people to teach our law and culture to our children, and pass it on to the next generation.”

newARTISTS’ studio

But today is for celebration. The people of Kintore have welcomed visitors from afar for this special occasion. The women have painted themselves in traditional designs and dance for the admiring throng, their singing punctuated by the obligatory chaos of scrapping dogs and howls of support.

The art centre is Papunya Tula doing it their way. “For me this enterprise is an Aboriginal initiative,” explains Hetty Perkins, Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. “It’s Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land, Aboriginal language, Aboriginal life. That’s what this building represents. It’s a powerful, positive thing.”
Question: How many tourists are interested in paying $7850 for a five day tour by light aircraft that flies them to some of northern Australia’s most remote Aboriginal communities, isolated centres that have become renowned the world over for their Indigenous art?

Answer: A growing number, not only those involved in the international fine art industry, but also Australians anxious to experience the enigmatic country that lies within the country that they know. They also pay to be guided by a person whose relationship with the artists and her experience in the field is unsurpassed. She is Bristol lass, Helen Read, who doubles as the pilot.

Ms Read owns and operates Didgeri Air Art Tours, a business that takes buyers of Aboriginal art to the source of the fine art movement that’s become one of Australia’s most successful cultural exports. Whether she’s flying over the salt lakes of the western desert to communities like Kintore, Balgo or Yuendumu, or to those scattered across the north coast at Maningrida, Milikapiti or Ramingining, Ms Read and her charges always enjoy a warm welcome. And why not? In the 14 years she’s been guiding visitors to these communities, her charges have spent over $2 million dollars on Indigenous art.

But for the tourists, the experience of visiting remote communities with someone who can advise them on the proper protocols associated with traditional Aboriginal law is worth more than the paintings. “Quite often they break into tears over what they see. It’s an experience that changes their lives,” says Ms Read. “Some are fourth and fifth generation Australians and they didn’t know about the lifestyle, the sensitivities and the intelligence of Aboriginal people. To see the penny drop makes the whole thing worthwhile.”

Helen Read came to remote central Australia over 20 years ago as a flying nurse when the art movement was just taking off. Motivated by altruism, she hoped that by bringing people of influence to the bush, they would return to their southern capitals and, having experienced the poor living standards in some communities, they would press for change. But to accomplish that goal, she had to build a viable business. She also had to create a niche market. “I walked the streets of London, Singapore, New York and Paris, talking to people who exhibited Aboriginal art and they were the first people keen to come out,” she recalls. “Then I approached people in politics and gallery directors.”

She also had to caution her clients that when visiting Aboriginal communities, there is no such thing as a set schedule of activities. All movements are governed by events on the ground. Cultural duties take precedence, sometimes turning tour itineraries on their head. “I make it very clear to everybody that you pay your money but there’s nothing I can guarantee will actually happen. That way the pressure’s off because it’s not up to me whether things happen, it’s entirely up to their hosts,” explains Ms Read.

But even though tours were full and high prices were paid for Didgeri tours, Ms Read found it was not enough to sustain the business. With avgas and aircraft rental sucking profits, she had to find other markets. The answer came when she created Palya Art
in 1994, her own retail art outlet, because, she says, “People liked what I liked.” Setting up small private exhibitions in capital cities, Ms Read showcases art she has acquired while flying the outback, or sells paintings on consignment for community art centres, delivering them big city exposure minus the overheads.

Palya needed to be properly organized for royalty and tax purposes, so Ms Read turned to computer whiz David Head who designed a comprehensive ‘organic database’ for Palya. She took advantage of the NT Government’s Business Development Grant to organise her expanding business. “I was definitely a square peg in a round hole and DBERD (the Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development) really helped me by creating a business plan and showing me how to keep absolutely immaculate records.” She also took Palya shows to exhibit in France, utilising the Government’s Trade Support Scheme to help pay airfares and marketing costs.

Today, the future looks bright for Didgeri Air Art Tours, with Aboriginal art now estimated at a $100 million a year industry in the Territory. Seats on dry season tours are filling fast. It’s a unique business that Helen Read believes offers positives all round. “I make sure it’s a win, win, win, win situation - it’s a win for the artists, a win for the community, a win for the clients, and a win for me.”

“Quite often they break into tears over what they see. It’s an experience that changes their lives.”

art.tours@didgeri.com.au
If the strength of a country’s economy is measured by the number of construction cranes on the city skyline, as the old axiom would have it, then Dubai would rate as the financial centre of the universe. It is reported that a breathtaking 20 per cent of the world’s cranes currently reside in the United Arab Emirates megacentre, a figure made all the more remarkable when weighed against the frenetic construction growth in places like Russia and China. Today over US$1 trillion dollars in projects are under way in the Gulf countries, making the region the global leader in construction activity.
No longer reliant on gas and oil revenues, Dubai is becoming a tourism and trade powerhouse enjoying unprecedented investment from countries across the region.

“These buildings are filled by people from around the world, particularly from the Arab world: Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Saudi, Kuwait, and North Africa,” explains Geoff Wheatley, Regional Director of Schaefer and Chairman of the Australian Business Group in the Gulf.

“The vision of the late Sheik Al-Maktoum was that Dubai will become the focal point of the Arab world. To do that they needed to develop a tourism industry.”

Today the county’s ultra-modern shopping malls and luxury resorts are crowded with international tourists and the World Trade Organisation predicts that, in spite of war and terrorism, regional in-bound tourism growth will be the second fastest in the world. In 2005, 24.7 million passengers passed through Dubai Airport, among them a growing number of Northern Territory businesspeople eager to involve themselves in the region’s spectacular growth.

According to the Australian Government’s export arm, Austrade, UAE business opportunities abound. “Due to the lack of highly developed industrial and agricultural sectors,” Austrade says, “the UAE is heavily reliant on imports of goods and services. For this reason opportunities exist in a number of industry sectors including construction, education, food and beverages and pharmaceuticals. The UAE prides itself as having a comparatively free and liberal trading environment. There are no personal or corporate taxes.” The UAE Government is in the process of liberalising trading rules such as easing the requirement for a local partner.
One of the first Territory companies to make its mark in the UAE is NT Prestressing, a construction company taking its name from its home and its concrete production specialty. Set up in Dubai in 1997 by a pair of civil engineers, Australian Tom Wilson and Jordanian Said Kayyali, the company is now one of the major players in the UAE construction scene.

Mr Wilson heads the company’s operations in Australia while Mr Kayyali looks after the UAE and Europe. “The distance between us brings us together,” explains Mr Kayyali. “It is a relationship built on a handshake and total trust.”

After a few lean years establishing themselves in the Dubai market, NT Prestressing began winning contracts, now employing over 100 engineers, supervisors, technicians and administrative staff while maintaining a fleet of vehicles. “We gave our clients solutions and valuable engineering,” Mr Kayyali told Territory Q. “They saw the difference between us and our competitors and started to use us to save themselves time and money. We are now at the front line.” Last year NT Prestressing turned over AUS $35 million in Dubai.

The company is currently constructing 19 different projects in Dubai and the Emirates while expanding into the UK and Eastern Europe. Their prestressed concrete process sees that projects are completed faster and more economical than their competitors, with 90 per cent of prestressing components imported from manufacturers in Sydney, Brisbane and Albury.

The company can’t, however, stop former employees from going out on their own,
emulating the NT Prestressing technology. “NT Prestressing is not only a construction company but one that educates people,” says Mr Kayyali, 48. “In Dubai they call it the ‘Northern Territory Academy’. If someone has worked with us, our competitors snap them up like hot bread.”

The opportunities on offer for Territory businesses in the UAE were obvious to those who joined the NT Government’s trade mission to that country last year. They saw plans for the construction of the world’s largest airport at Jabil Ali (the size of metro Washington DC) the largest aluminium plant in world is now under construction, along with the first underwater hotel. Current UAE building projects are valued at US$295 billion. Given the general affluence of the local population and the development of Dubai’s tourism and luxury living sectors, one Territory company keen to maintain a retail presence there is Paspaley Pearls. The world’s foremost producer of South Sea pearls opened two shops in Dubai last year, with a third set to open when the enormous Dubai Mall is finished later this year. Paspaley attracted local industry attention by opening its operation with a gala dinner at the luxurious Madinat Jumeirah Resort where models draped in dazzling pearl jewellery welcomed guests who were later serenaded by the international group, Amici Forever.

The Darwin-based pearl producer’s retail shop at the up-market Mall of the Emirates is situated next to Tiffany & Co, just steps away from Louis Vuitton and Hugo Boss. The mall is also the home of the UAE’s only indoor ski resort, where enthusiasts can take a chilly break from the 50 degree plus heat on the street. While the company name may not be as famous as it is in the Territory, quality Paspaley pearls are revered by locals groomed in an age old seafaring culture where pearls have been traded for centuries. “It’s a booming market all across the Middle East right now, especially for quality products like ours,” says Paspaley’s General Manager in the UAE, Pegah Goldooz. “It was the perfect decision [to open here] because, with Paspaley, there is no competition for South Sea pearls.”

As far as Geoff Wheatley is concerned, the Australian business presence in the UAE is still far too limited. He arrived on 1 January, 2002 to open an office for German logistics firm, Schaefer, and went from zero income to round US$35 million in business with 20 staff today, five years on. “There are enormous opportunities here for Australian companies,” he says. “They just need to get here, take a look at it, spend a month, see what the opportunities are – and do it.”

Due to the lack of highly developed industrial and agricultural sectors the UAE is heavily reliant on imports of goods and services.”
Imparja Television’s 2007 product launch at the Alice Springs Convention Centre was different from past functions. Normally, the gala evening for the local sponsors offers dinner and drinks before previewing the upcoming TV season, screening excerpts from the latest American sitcom or drama to make it to Australian TV via the Nine and Seven Networks.

But this year the sponsors were treated to sequences of original TV from Imparja’s new 13 part, Artscape series, showcasing Aboriginal art and its relationship to the landscape. There were clips from its Outback Edition series of shorts, and talk around the venue centred around the station’s brand new digital studios, under construction a few hundred metres from its old home on Leichhardt Terrace. The sponsor’s applause was genuine, recognising Imparja as a TV station on the move.

Big changes are in store for Imparja, with their new facility set for opening in January 2008. The $10 million facility will be the first purpose-built, from the ground-up, digital TV plant in the country. But before the first broadcast minute goes to air, a lengthy testing procedure will ensue, making sure that every plug in every socket is going the way it should be going. After all, the programming goes out to the biggest reception footprint in the business.

Imparja, Australia’s only Aboriginal-owned and operated commercial TV station, broadcasts to an area of 3.6 million square kilometres, from Lord Howe Island in the east to the Tiwi Islands in the northwest – an area larger than western Europe, but with a permanent population of only 460,000.
It is a station owned by nine Aboriginal organisations acting as shareholders, where all profits are returned to the business or spent on sponsoring special events. No shareholder has ever requested a dividend. “All the money goes into social platform,” explains Imparja CEO Alistair Feehan. “We spend in cash and in kind about $3.5 million to $4 million a year supporting events within our footprint. So while Imparja’s commercial, it’s set up to provide lots of community based service.”

Imparja will also soon play an important part in the development of the new National Indigenous Television service (NITV) that is set to be based in Alice Springs. Funded by $48.5 million from the Australian Government, NITV will not be a TV channel as much as a content provider, its programs screening on the Imparja satellite network. “We want to build up a creditable TV service and it will reflect content made by and about Indigenous people throughout Australia,” explains NITV Chief Executive, Pat Turner. “We’ll start to broadcast on Imparja’s second channel in mid-June, and then build the service up.”

A high percentage of Aboriginal people are among the 60 people employed at Imparja, with an innovative program of multi-skilling currently under way. Three years ago the station found itself short of resources and skills, so they began widespread cross-training platforms working within the station. The station had a high turnover in jobs that can be quite mundane, like tape operators, but rather than continuously recruiting they decided to upskill, so now tape operators can operate a camera or work in an editing suite or master control.

“We give people an opportunity to work in areas that they are interested,” says Mr Feehan. “People who work for 9 Darwin or Imparja for a year get an opportunity to do things it takes six or seven years in the industry elsewhere to do. It’s a reality of where we are.”

No one exemplifies Imparja’s willingness to ‘give employees a go’ more than newsreader Ryan Liddle. Mr Liddle started at Imparja when he was just 17, working at the Traffic Department doing data entry, then the Programming Department, then on the Yamba Children’s Show, and finally worked his way into the Newsroom. After a short stint reading the weather, at the age of 21, he now reads the nightly news, and consequently is the face of Imparja. “He’s good to camera,” says Mr Feehan, “but now we have to get him to that next stage which means we’ll probably have to send him to Sydney or Melbourne to sit inside that hard core news regime, just to open his eyes to new things.”

‘Bring it on’, says Mr Liddle, a youthful member of the widespread Central Australian Liddle family. “I’ve been given such an awesome opportunity here and it would be wrong of me not try to take it further,” says Ryan. “I want to take it to the next level and try and chase a job with a network. Having worked at Imparja, the amount of experience I’ve got now is unique for someone my age.”
With the Waikiki’s iconic Diamond Head as a backdrop and the cameras rolling, the celebrity chef begins to describe his latest creation for the US national TV audience.

But this culinary evolution was a long time in the oven. Mr Wark, (of ‘Wark-about Consultancy’ fame) is originally a Rhodesian whose family sent him to England to be educated in the culinary arts. From there the sky was the limit: silver service aboard the QEII, the French Alps, the Beaufort Hotels in Darwin and Brisbane, Conrad Jupiter’s and the Crowne in Melbourne, and then - because he’d always wanted to open a convention centre – Alice Springs.

The new Convention Centre in Alice was an exciting place to be in 2001, in the Year of the Outback. As head chef he began using the taste of food sourced from the desert, ground up and mixed with other herbs, creating intense new tastes. “People kept asking for Central Australian fl avours and native menus,” recalls Mr Wark, “so I threw away my thyme, rosemary and basil and just value-added using these great Indigenous ingredients.”

When added to Australian animal products like barramundi and kangaroo, you had something totally unique. But do you market it as bushfoods? “No. ‘Bushfoods’ was a term too harsh for the international market,” recalls Murray Hird, food

But wait. He’s not talking about French cooking, Italian, Chinese or even Thai. His exotic recipe for Waka Paka Duka was born in Central Australia and includes the sexy wildfood taste of saltbush and wattle seed.

“And this is my Caesar salad with honey lavender smoked bacon along with kutajera and bush tomato….to give it that point of difference and native fl avour,” says chef Athol Wark to the Hawaiian TV reporter. “It’s all identifiable food…I just give it an Australian twist.”

Athol Wark, 41, is Australian native cuisine’s timely answer to Jamie Oliver. In the past few years he’s created dozens of recipes using the distinctive tastes of Australian native plants, many of them sourced from the sprawling country around Athol’s hometown of Alice Springs. With international interest in his Aussie cuisine soaring, the Territory chef is now in demand from exclusive island hotels in the Pacific to respected culinary universities in the USA.

Enthusiastic and knowledgeable, Mr Wark is different from other bushtucker men. He comes at the use of bushfoods from a strictly professional culinary angle. He’s not interested in surviving on wattle seed but he is interested in baking bread with it and developing a new taste sensation that’s strictly Oz in nature.

But this culinary evolution was a long time in the oven. Mr Wark, (of ‘Wark-about Consultancy’ fame) is originally a Rhodesian whose family sent him to England to be educated in the culinary arts. From there the sky was the limit: silver service aboard the QEII, the French Alps, the Beaufort Hotels in Darwin and Brisbane, Conrad Jupiter’s and the Crowne in Melbourne, and then - because he’d always wanted to open a convention centre – Alice Springs.

The new Convention Centre in Alice was an exciting place to be in 2001, in the Year of the Outback. As head chef he began using the taste of food sourced from the desert, ground up and mixed with other herbs, creating intense new tastes. “People kept asking for Central Australian fl avours and native menus,” recalls Mr Wark, “so I threw away my thyme, rosemary and basil and just value-added using these great Indigenous ingredients.”

When added to Australian animal products like barramundi and kangaroo, you had something totally unique. But do you market it as bushfoods? “No. ‘Bushfoods’ was a term too harsh for the international market,” recalls Murray Hird, food
marketing expert from the Territory’s Department of Business, Economic and Regional Development. “We said let’s call it ‘wildfoods’ and not only include bush tucker but foods like camel and buffalo and barra, and put them all together into a wildfood cuisine.”

The idea took off like a bushfire across the savannah. Mr Wark and restaurateur Jimmy Shu were named the Territory’s first culinary Ambassadors in 2005, promoting Australian flavours wherever they went. Mr Wark was the first Territory winner in 15 years of the International Specialised Skills Fellowship, that included a $10,000 grant. “It was all about value adding to regional produce,” he says.

With the support of the NT Government, Mr Wark went to Miami to be a guest lecturer at the Johnson and Wales University program called ‘Taste Down Under’. There he taught American students in the country’s most prestigious culinary educational forum about the opportunities that await those using Aussie wildfoods like lemon myrtle dressing, the bush tomato chutney, the quandong. Waiters in white gloves decanted Emu Egg Pavlova from the avocado-colored shell of the emu.

Through Aussie food marketing impresario, David Dopell, Athol was soon cooking at the Australian Embassy in Washington for members of Congress celebrating the signing of the Free Trade Agreement. There was catering for the opening of the multi-million dollar Territory Aquarium recreation in Baltimore, and then Hawaii and demonstrations at the Hilton. Sponsored by Melbourne’s Robins Foods as their bushfood ambassador, the company couldn’t be happier by his success. “Athol opened the Hawaiian market for us and put us in touch with buyers and now we have product in opening stores nationally and internationally over the next two years.

That all leaves very little time at home with a young family, but they’ve decided to go for it. “My wife and I agree that this is the future for us and we’ll take the ride,” sighs the Warkabout Chef. “We need to grab those opportunities. Nothing’s going to happen unless you make it happen.”

This year the demand continues. Mr Wark now enjoys a regular gig at the sensational Yasawa Island Resort and Spa in the Yasawa Islands in Fiji (of Blue Lagoon fame), where he Aussie-izes the menu with wildfoods. He’s also doing a consultancy for Calibre Management International, who produce major events like World Expo in 2005 and are now designing a restaurant line featuring an Aussie Grill theme of kangaroo, emu and barra burgers,
“There are billionaires on this cruise,” Chief Officer Arno Jutten remarks casually as he takes us through one of the many elegant lounges of the liner *Amsterdam*. This is not surprising – most of the floating luxury hotel’s 1300 passengers are in the middle of a 104-day trip circumnavigating the globe. They have docked for the day at a curious little port called Darwin; a long line of successful retirees, mostly Americans, is disembarking to take a look at the town – and spend up big time.

On board, the pampered guests have a remarkable choice of activities, from daily variety shows at the 500-seat theatre, to cooking demonstrations by regional gourmet chefs. But there is no resisting the temptation to take a break on land to sample some local delights, and Australian industry research shows that passengers will each spend approximately $180 per day while in port.

Darwin is doing extraordinarily well from what is a veritable boom in cruise ship tourism in Australia. In 2005-06, the Territory earned an estimated $13.4 million from cruise ship visits – a massive 97 per cent rise on the previous year. Passengers particularly favour local crafts and Aboriginal art, souvenirs and luxury goods. After a photo op with Crocodylus Park’s baby croc at the wharf, many are tempted into day excursions to experience the local wildlife.

Richard Doyle, Tourism NT’s representative and current Chairperson of Cruise Down Under, an umbrella organisation which markets the Australia/South Pacific as a world-class cruising region, says that Darwin is capturing a growing share of a rapidly expanding market. “International cruise lines view Australia as an exotic destination and Darwin is uniquely positioned because of its culture, nature, access to world-heritage, warm friendliness and laid-back lifestyle,” Mr Doyle says.