

An aerial photograph of a river delta, showing a complex network of channels and distributaries. The water is a light brownish-yellow, and the surrounding land is a mix of light tan and white, likely sandbars or salt flats. In the lower right, there is a small, irregularly shaped island or peninsula covered in dense, dark green and brown vegetation. The overall texture is intricate and organic.

STORIES OF THE GULF SAVANNAH

Unveiling the Heart of Resilience

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Government Support

This project was supported through the joint Australian and Queensland Governments Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Local Government Partners

We acknowledge the support of the participating Councils of Burke, Carpentaria, Doomadgee and Mornington.

Project Team

A huge thanks to our project team: Stephanie Toy, Tourism Recovery Officer – Gulf Savannah Development and Dianne Dredge and Nadine Schmidt Rojas from The Tourism CoLab for your expert guidance, patience and partnership in bringing the Gulf Savannah stories of resilience to life.

Participating Tourism Operators

We extend our deepest thanks to the tourism operators who generously shared their stories and experiences: Yvonne (Ash's @ the Point Café/Ash's Holiday Units, Karumba); Clay, Michelle and Matt (Balloon Aloft); Fred, Troy, Kelly and Nouki (Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council); Glen and Alicia (Gulf Country Caravan Park); Denise and Matt (Gulfland Motel & Caravan Park); Jenny (Hell's Gate Roadhouse); Hylton (Elite Aviation Services); Ben and Jemma (Kerry D Fishing Charters); Renee (Mornington Island Art Centre); Dan (Northern Heli-Co); Amanda and Paul (Savannah Lodge); Tim and Jil (Tirranna Springs Roadhouse); Mick and Kathleen (Sweers Island Resort); and Melissa (Wugudaji-Adels Grove).



Australian Government



Queensland Government



Although funding for this product has been provided by both the Australian and Queensland Governments, the material contained herein does not necessarily represent the views of either Government.

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Front and inside front cover images: Aerial photograph of Gulf Savannah salt pans. Courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.

Publication year: 2026

ISBN 978-1-7646623-0-7 (Digital copy) ISBN 978-1-7646623-1-4 (Print copy)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we live, learn, and work. We honour their enduring connection to Country and pay respect to their Elders, past and present, recognising that their cultures, knowledge, and traditions are the oldest living continuous cultures on Earth.



Foreword

The Gulf Savannah is a place that asks a great deal of its people. Distance, weather, isolation and uncertainty are constants in daily life. Yet if there is one thing we have observed, the operators who have built their livelihoods here do so with extraordinary commitment, ingenuity and care for their communities and Country.

This collection of stories exists because those operators agreed to share their experiences. On behalf of Gulf Savannah Development, we want to thank each of them for their time, their trust, and their candour. Their stories come from deep experience of the Gulf and speak to what this region truly asks of its people and what they give in return.

These are not stories about hardship. They are stories about what it takes to keep the remote Gulf Savannah in Far North West Queensland open, connected and alive, told by the people who know that better than anyone.

Cr. Ernest Camp

Chair, Gulf Savannah Development

Neil O'Brien

CEO, Gulf Savannah Development

Top: Ernest Camp. Image courtesy of EJ Walden.
Bottom: Neil O'Brien. Image courtesy of Gulf Savannah Development.

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Wild horses on the Gulf Savannah plains.
Image courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.



THE GULF SAVANNAH

Place, People, and Resilience

Cobbold Gorge. Image courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.

Everything got washed away: horses, poddy cows, chickens and pigs. Water tanks and pumps, diesel tanks and generators, cars, trucks and mowers. Every bed, pillow and blanket. Every pot, pan and cup. Every piece of roadhouse merchandise, wet season food stores, building materials, kids' toys, family heirlooms, and office paperwork.

Jil, Tirranna Springs Roadhouse

NATURE AND PLACE

The Gulf Savannah has been teaching resilience and recovery for tens of thousands of years. It is a living system more powerful than all of us. The drought-to-flood cycle dominates the landscape. The Traditional Owners, and those that have chosen to live here, understand this. There is knowledge within seasonal patterns, the river systems, and the way water moves across catchments. It's wisdom that lives in the land and in the people who have watched these rhythms for generations. Across the Gulf, that resilience is measured in generations, in continuous cultural practice, and in self-determination. When we talk about adaptation in the Gulf Savannah, we must begin with the land.

That deep knowledge of seasonal rhythms, when water comes and when it recedes, shapes how everyone in the Gulf understands time. But those rhythms are shifting. Between late November and March, when most of Australia talks about summer holidays, the Gulf experiences what outsiders call the "wet season." But that language tells an outdated story. It suggests the region is closed and inaccessible for half the year. The operators who've built businesses here push back against that narrative. Instead, they talk about the wet "green season" and the dry "red season", terms that acknowledge seasonal transformation, the ebb and flow of time, rather than a shutdown.

The green season is a time to slow down and enjoy a landscape that is renewing and regenerating itself. Several tourism operators explained that it is the beginning of a new cycle of growth and a new colour palette. The wet season is not a problem to be solved. It is the rhythm of life and you learn to move with it. That's resilience.

The changing Gulf rhythm now sees the green season arriving earlier and lasting longer. The seasonal changes are no longer as predictable as they once were, and operators like Glenn and Alicia at the Gulf Country Caravan Park in Karumba need to be skilled in reading the weather patterns while also embracing the opportunities of the green season.

For the slow, intrepid and meaningful traveller, this season offers the opportunity to experience nature's unfolding. In all this change, there is also opportunity.

PEOPLE AND WATER

When the rain falls in the Northern Territory catchment, it doesn't stop at the Queensland border. The Gregory and Nicholson rivers meet at Tirranna Springs, and when both decide to flow, everything in between becomes a floodplain. Jil and Tim at Tirranna Springs Roadhouse know about floods. Not from policy briefings or weather reports. They know from living through three life-changing floods in 18 months. As a young couple barely five years into owning the Roadhouse before the first flood hit, they also know that water brings devastation, grief, and tears that fall as steadily as the rain.

In March 2023, the water rose to 2.6 metres. When their neighbour flew overhead they contacted him to ask what he could see. "The water is still rising. You need to leave right now," came his urgent reply. When they returned, everything was lost. "Horses, poddy cows, chickens and pigs. Water tanks and pumps, diesel tanks and generators, cars, trucks and mowers. Every bed, pillow and blanket. Every pot, pan and cup. Every piece of roadhouse merchandise, wet season food stores, building materials, kids' toys, family heirlooms, and office paperwork," Jil recalls.

After the flood, everyone said it was a once-in-a-lifetime event. "Why are you lifting all these buildings up? It won't happen again," they told Jil. Tim and Jil lifted the roadhouse and home metres into the air anyway. They raised infrastructure, built hills, and designed petrol bowlers that could be unclipped and winched out. Before they'd finished rebuilding, the second flood arrived less than a year later. The elevated buildings survived, their innovations had worked.

In Karumba, Ben and Jemma from Kerry D Fishing Charters also made innovations. Where roads had disappeared under water and communities were cut off, the boat became the only road. They navigated flooded waterways, ferrying people across swollen rivers and delivering food supplies to where they were needed most.



Top: Tirranna Springs Roadhouse in flood 2023. Image courtesy of Jil Wilson.
Bottom: Karumba foreshore. Image courtesy of Dianne Dredge.

Local knowledge and lived experience flows like the water, across properties, between neighbours, through networks and over boundaries. It accumulates in people and in places where formal systems don't necessarily reach, and like water, it flows to where it is needed most. At that moment, the local community showed up for the Roadhouse, cleaning, fundraising, and supporting the business.

In the middle of all that mud and devastation, Tim stopped to build Jil a chicken coop on a new hill he had built. It is not that Tim thought chickens mattered more than the roadhouse, but because he understood that resilience is also about caring for the people who are holding all the recovery work together. And Jil needed chickens. Mental health, practical and tender, underpins resilience. It is the knowledge that flows between people who've learned what the other needs to keep going when everything else has washed away.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

What carries people through devastation is also the knowledge and capability they have spent years building. Dan's knowledge can't be downloaded or taught from a manual. "My whole life I've been fishing for barramundi," he explains. Any pilot can learn to fly a helicopter, but understanding where fish move as water temperatures shift, which spots work when weather conditions change, that's accumulated through caring about the Gulf's rhythms.

It is why Northern Heli-Co operates year-round, building multiple capabilities, including helifishing, feral animal control, sling work, survey, and wet season charter. "Our season doesn't stop, our work just shifts," Dan smiles. Before helicopters, he was a diesel mechanic on remote cattle stations. "I still am," he corrects himself. "Life is an accumulation of the complementary experiences that got me here."

At Wugudaji-Adels Grove, Melissa demonstrates the same principle. Self-taught across the broad-ranging skills remote operations demand, including customer service, hospitality, site maintenance, and physical grit. While others might have given up under the physical and psychological demands of recovery work, a deep sense of responsibility, perseverance, and belonging have created the deep well of knowledge she carries.

On Sweers Island, sixty kilometres offshore in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Mick and Kathleen know the island's fishing, but they are still learning everything else that remoteness demands. "Distance punishes precision," Mick says. Every repair part, every meal, every building material must be ordered two weeks before the barge arrives. The lesson is about understanding ripple effects in a system where one missing sheet of roofing iron cascades into delayed wages, stalled bookings, and weeks of waiting. Resilience here is built in buffers, in over-ordering, and in getting a pilot's licence so that when something goes wrong, a response is possible.

Our season doesn't stop, our work just shifts.

Dan, Northern Heli-Co

Amanda and Paul, at Savannah Lodge, arrived in Burketown with no business plan but a willingness to learn. They figured things out whilst eating two-minute noodles and living in a shed. Now Savannah Lodge is an oasis and under the welcome mat are decades of accumulated expertise that extends well beyond a hospitality business.

The business was built incrementally, by experimenting, learning and adapting, long before new age agile entrepreneurs were promoting business sprints. It is knowledge gained by doing rather than planning. While resilience is bouncing back to a previous state with a little more knowledge and stronger support network, the real challenge is to become antifragile. Antifragility is to break a little less each time a shock happens. It is to grow stronger despite the stress, where new capabilities, adaptation strategies, and resilience are built creatively in the moment. It is to be flexible, emergent, and experimental. It is where knowledge accumulates, skills multiply, and understanding deepens.

These operators have shown that when systems fail, the systems thinkers adapt faster. When conditions shift, accumulated wisdom surfaces and diverse capabilities enable creative problem-solving. Operators who know how to do what needs doing, and who learn by necessity, are also able to activate networks of support and problem-solving. In the Gulf Savannah, these stories have shown that remote operators are natural systems thinkers, they connect dots and manage complex challenges, all while welcoming visitors, sharing a story or two, and being generous hosts.

Antifragility is the secret ingredient Dan at Northern Heli-Co has with pastoral properties. It is Amanda's volunteer networks at Savannah Lodge and Clay's partnership with the Gangalidda and Garawa people at Balloon Aloft, where cultural knowledge makes the operation possible. It is Melissa's sense of belonging at Wugudaji-Adels Grove, and Mick and Kathleen's discipline of thinking in fortnights at Sweers Island Resort. It shows up in Renee's commitment to stewardship while staying focused on culture, connection and community at Mornington Island Art Centre. To be antifragile is to draw upon more than facts and figures. Antifragility is an accumulation of lived experience, local knowledge, and intuition where the capabilities that each person builds has become woven into their relationships. It's the soft infrastructure that holds remote places together in times of flood.

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

When disaster recovery arrives, it often comes with forms, eligibility criteria, and processing times. There are rules about how long you must have operated, employment thresholds that don't fit seasonal workforces, and financing conditions that bear no relation to remote realities. Machines that cost \$50,000 pre-COVID with 3% loans now cost \$180,000 with 12% loans. The recovery landscape is challenging to navigate for any operator.

While financial support might be slow to reach remote communities, what shows up is Josh the carpenter and his partner Brianna, arriving to help clean at Tirranna Springs Roadhouse. Then it's boilermaker Troy, who'd also lost everything, who turned up with his tools. Support also came in the form of Kerry D Fishing Charters on flooded waterways, food supplies loaded, heading for cut-off communities.

Renee Wilson at Mornington Island Art Centre understands antifragility through the lens of traditional custodianship. The art centre is where Elders' knowledge flows to young people, where culture becomes visible, where connection to Country gets passed on through making and sharing. She is staying focused on building learning networks, cultural knowledge and continuity rather than focusing on what is slow to arrive.

Jenny at Hell's Gate Roadhouse has built her entire workforce on this principle of mutual support and reciprocity. Travellers become friends and are transformed into community. "They'll break down out there, come in and stay for three weeks, help us out by cleaning amenities, gardening or helping us build. Then we become friends." What makes this possible is a deep mutual connection, and that connectivity extends beyond the road. Hylton at Elite Aviation Services provides charter and scenic flights in and out of this remote corridor, keeping Hell's Gate accessible when roads are submerged.

Amanda at Savannah Lodge in Burketown describes being deeply connected and integrated into the community. For someone who arrived without a plan, she's learned how integration creates capacity. "The different hats we wear, like wildlife carer, marine rescue, and road assistance, these interconnections make us response-ready." Glenn and Alicia at Gulf Country Caravan Park describe the same pattern where visitors become regulars, and regulars become part of the fabric of the place. This integration is how resilience is built, where formal support systems can't reach fast enough when a crisis happens.

For Clay operating Balloon Aloft, 'community' takes another form: partnerships with Traditional Owners that enable operations. Cultural protocols are not a form of training, a course, or a box to tick. Cultural protocols are relationships that provide permissions to work on Country, access to knowledge about seasonal patterns, and the connections that make business possible.

When a remote roadhouse stops functioning, many other things stop. Road maintenance crews have nowhere to stay. Government projects stall. Yet some operators couldn't shake the feeling that disaster responders treated them as just another business seeking handouts. "We are one of the biggest employers in the area, so without our accommodation, without our food, without our fuel, services cannot be delivered."

Cultural protocols are relationships that provide permissions to work on Country, access to knowledge about seasonal patterns, and the connections that make business possible.

Businesses, especially those deeply embedded in the community, provide diverse services well beyond the tourism function. They are the support service. This role is accentuated during crises. These networks are what holds the system and what policy makers might call "informal support mechanisms", but operators experience this as survival.

ADAPTATION AND PURPOSE

Adaptation in the Gulf Savannah often means using new tools, information and practices whilst staying anchored in a purpose. At Mornington Island Art Centre, Renee demonstrates this clearly. The Centre can extend their sharing of cultural knowledge and stories using technology, but it serves the Centre's deeper purpose rather than defining it. Adaptation means using these tools to strengthen what matters most – culture and connection. Elders' knowledge flows to young artists, cultural continuity is maintained, connection to Country is deepened through making and sharing.

This principle holds across the region's operations. Amanda and Paul at Savannah Lodge built their business incrementally over twenty-plus years, experimenting, adapting, filling empty planes with grocery orders on the way back from Mount Isa. Resilience was baked-in long before anyone called it that.

Denise at Gulfland Motel & Caravan Park manages a dual-purpose facility: tourism accommodation plus essential worker housing for nurses. Different markets, different needs, sometimes creating management challenges, but together they provide income stability and diversification when seasonal tourism drops.

At Hell's Gate Roadhouse, Jenny has spent a decade quietly redefining what a roadhouse can be. She's redefined it as homemade food, green gardens, fire twirling shows under the stars and long table dinners when coaches arrive. Resilience is adapting to what comes up and hospitality as a daily practice.

At the Gulf Country Caravan Park, Alicia and Glenn have established preparedness routines including pre-wet season stockpiling and shutdown procedures. "Adaptation is about thinking at scale", they offered. "From small actions to infrastructure investments, all create regional benefits when put together. It is not about one or the other," offers Glenn.

Yvonne at Ash's Cafe maintains "a bit of flexibility, particularly in financial planning." The annual strategic review has become a critical point: "Take a good look at all the operation to try to see where we can juggle." When conditions are variable, rigid planning doesn't work. "You need flexibility in everything, good planning, and all the rest is up to a combination of luck and grit," she reflects.

At Doomadgee, adaptation is happening at a community scale. Since 2023, sixteen new local businesses have emerged, from solar panel maintenance and cabinet making to bush soap production and wild cattle mustering. These are businesses designed to work regardless of whether the Nicholson River floods or flows gently. Alongside this enterprise wave, the community has co-designed a bold plan for transformation: four precincts covering economic, cultural, tourism and recreational renewal. Doomadgee is not waiting to become resilient because of the actions of others. It is building the architecture of self-determination, incrementally, on its own terms.

These are stories of strength and courage from people who have found ways to persist.

WHY THESE STORIES MATTER

Policy frameworks describe resilience in abstract terms, such as capacity building, adaptive governance, systems thinking, and multi-hazard preparedness. These frameworks are useful for structuring investment and coordinating responses but they miss a fundamental truth. Resilience combines a range of human qualities including lived experience, strength, courage, adaptability, creativity, and connection. It's these human inputs that often get missed in policy responses.

These stories of the resilience and recovery in the Gulf Savannah reveal the wisdom of lived experience. They show how resilience actually operates in remote contexts. Formal support systems can arrive too late, infrastructure is often fragile, and seasonal shifts create both opportunities and constraints. Policy settings are, in many ways, a broadbrush instrument, and can be hit and miss. It's the local know-how, understanding what the community needs, and how it activates precisely when needed that matters in times of crisis.

These operator stories demonstrate systems thinking in practice. Systems thinking is more than a theoretical approach. It is the navigation of complex, interconnected subsystems that seem unconnected, like weather, water flows, seasons, operational logistics, geography, community connections, insurance, risk, infrastructure, transport, policy, grant guidelines, and politics.

It's practical things like understanding floodwaters do not respect state borders and knowing how the water runs locally. It's operational things like adjusting to emerging markets that demand year-round operation in a region that has traditionally had a well defined 8-9 month peak that has now shortened to a 4-5 month peak. Systems thinking requires anticipating the unimaginable and paying attention to the ripple effects. It's thinking outside the box by imagining solutions to protect your business when the rains come. Systems thinking is not a thing that any of the operators in these stories name, but it is present in all their stories.

The stories that follow serve multiple purposes. For policy makers, they provide evidence of where systems are failing and where informal networks have created workarounds. For operators themselves, they offer validation that their knowledge matters, that their adaptation strategies have value, that their networks constitute infrastructure even when not recognised as such. For visitors, they reveal the depth of commitment required to sustain remote places, the expertise embedded in seemingly simple operations, and the community connections that make experiences possible. These are stories of strength and courage from people who have found ways to persist; they are evidence of what works and what requires attention. The workarounds operators have developed are signals that reveal gaps in support and opportunities to strengthen the resilience of the Gulf Savannah.



NORTHERN HELI-CO

The View From Above



Northern Heli-Co provides air work and tourism services from Karumba Airport in Queensland's western Gulf country. Services include heli-fishing charters, scenic flights, aerial photography, survey work, sling operations, aerial burning, feral animal control and air transport. Owned and operated by experienced pilot Dan Horsford, the R44 helicopter is equipped with safety equipment, satellite phone and GPS tracking.

northernheli.co

Looking out to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Image courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.



Dan's helicopter sits ready at the Karumba hangar. Inside, everything is organised, equipment checked, ready for the next opportunity to show visitors the Gulf Savannah from the air. This is a bucket-list experience just waiting for its next guests. "Our business is relatively new," explains Dan. "We only began operating at the start of 2024". Prior to that, Dan was flying for other companies in the Kimberley, and in the Northern Territory. The journey to establish Northern Heli-Co in Karumba represents years of building skills, making sacrifices, and understanding what makes this region truly unique.

FROM MECHANIC TO PILOT

Dan is a North Queenslander at heart. "I've always lived up here in the North," he says. "I was a diesel mechanic by trade – and still am," he corrects himself. The transition from diesel mechanic to helicopter operations grew from living and working remotely on cattle stations, being in and out of helicopters, and recognising an opportunity waiting to be unpacked.

"My partner and I travelled around Australia for two years working, and during that time we made the decision to start Northern Heli-Co," Dan recalls. The decision required significant sacrifice including completing the study and flying hours to become a commercial helicopter pilot while his partner lived interstate. "Once I completed my commercial licence the real challenge began. With a few smaller jobs here and there, and some short-term opportunities presenting themselves, I soon realised I just needed to make my own dream happen."

FINDING THE NICHE

The choice of Karumba as a base just made sense. "In Karumba I found a niche market, a gap between tourism, flying and fishing. A lot of people come to Karumba because it's a fishing destination. So I thought, 'how can I put helicopters into this?' and one thing led to another." The concept quickly found its market. Northern Heli-Co offers helicopter services across the wider Gulf region, with heli-fishing as a signature offering.

"Our niche market is heli-fishing, and it's the best way for people to see the Gulf. All these beautiful patterns from nature and the creek lines in the salt pans that you'd never otherwise see, we get to show our clients firsthand."



Dan with his Robinson 44, Karumba. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.



THE EXPERIENCE

Northern Heli-Co showcases the Gulf in all its remoteness and wilderness, in a way that is not accessible from the ground. It's an unforgettable experience which is available all year, not just during the dry season. "Every trip is unique and tailored. It's not a cookie-cutter tour," explains Dan. The landscapes, wildlife, and fishing are different for every single trip. To see the Gulf region at sunset is something that never ceases to amaze and move those who witness this incredible landscape from above."

Our clients get a completely unique experience, Dan explains:

"It's a bucket list experience. They come here, they get to see the Gulf from the air, the crocodiles, the pigs, and all the wildlife. When we go out to remote places where people haven't been and boats and cars can't reach, when you can catch barramundi off a remote river bank, you know it's special."

The mechanics of the experience are straightforward, but the execution requires knowledge and skill.

"We start here at the airfield just outside Karumba, fishing rods are secured on the helicopter, and we fly out to our destination. We land and fish off the bank. I pick destinations based on the weather and where the fishing is really good." On a typical half-day charter, Dan might take clients to five or six different spots. They leave at 7:30am and return just after lunch. They can take some fish home but catch and release is encouraged. For dedicated anglers, full-day charters offer an extended experience. "The full day heli-fish is a massive day, and it's for dedicated anglers who really, really want to go out and put in a full day."



Remote river fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Images courtesy of Dan Horsford.

KNOWLEDGE AS CURRENCY

Dan's years of fishing in the Gulf has become an important element of the experience. "My whole life I've been fishing for barramundi," he says, explaining why he'd be nearly impossible to replace. Any pilot would need not just flying skills, but an intimate knowledge of where to find fish. Understanding how water temperatures shift, where fish move as conditions change, how each day requires different spots, this becomes part of what clients experience. It's knowledge that can't be taught from a manual but accumulated through years of reading the Gulf's rhythms.

"I try to make every day different," Dan explains. "I don't want Northern Heli-Co to be a commercial visitor experience, to take off from here, go and land at a set spot, then come home. I want it to be, and remain, very unique and where every day changes. The fish aren't in the same spot. Water temperatures change. It's different every day."

WHAT VISITORS DISCOVER

While each day is special, it's watching the transformation unfold that Dan never gets tired of seeing. "Our relationship with our clients is one of the most enjoyable aspects of Northern Heli-Co. Repeat work means we are doing our job well", Dan says.

"A lot of times, I drop my clients off and they'll message me the next day and say, 'I still can't get over what we did yesterday. I'm still buzzing.' They're sending photos to me, and I'll send my photos back to them. So the experience lasts. It's not just once the trip's over, it's done. They're still thinking about it days, months, and even years later."

For now Dan's focus is on what he has always known: quality matters, relationships matter, and no advertising budget matches a client who cannot stop thinking about what they experienced the day before. It is, he says, simply the best way to see the Gulf.

A recent example stands out, shares Dan. "Two clients booked in a full day heli-fish tour departing from Karumba and each brought along their young fellas. The expectations of the day were already fulfilled before we had landed at the first fishing spot with all passengers absolutely blown away by the view of the Gulf from the air.

By lunchtime they had hooked onto and caught over 50 barramundi and both kids had fought their own metre+ barra with one landed at 110cm! This was a bucket list fish for everyone, so to be able to be a part of the father/son celebrations when this fish was caught was my highlight. After a stop in at the Burketown pub for lunch, enjoying a few cold ones over the bar, the second half of the day fishing just got better! As we landed back in Karumba later that afternoon they were beaming, 'Mate, that well and truly exceeded our expectations by a long shot. Let's make this an annual experience from now on.'"

RESILIENCE IS DIVERSIFICATION

Heli-fishing is Northern Heli-Co's signature offering, but Dan's business model is deliberately diversified. Feral animal control, sling work with the cargo hook underneath, and low level surveys are all part of the year round services on offer. It's a practical response to operating in a region where conditions dictate what's possible.

Dan likes to point out a common misconception about the wet season: "Generally, it's not flooded," Dan emphasises. "While a lot of road reports indicate that we're closed, we're not. We're open all year." Dan sees the wet season as an opportunity for Northern Heli-Co to showcase a different side of the Gulf.

"People can fly from Cairns on a plane to Normanton, and the heli-fishing experience starts from there. It's a very different and unique experience, seeing the Gulf in the wet season, where everything is green and beautiful, and the bird life is extraordinary."

BUILDING ON RELATIONSHIPS

Northern Heli-Co's operations depend on relationships built over years. Dan holds permissions to land on pastoral properties across the Gulf region, contacts established during his diesel fitting days on remote stations and deepened through subsequent collaboration when aircraft were needed. "Permission is a big one," he emphasises. "Everywhere I land, I need to have permission, especially for heli-fishing. I need landowners to know I'm doing the right thing by them for my operations to run successfully."

In the Gulf, building resilience requires collaboration. Dan's relationship with other helicopter operators reflects a collaborative rather than competitive approach. "We each have different niches, but we're friends. If I can't do a job, I'll pass it on to them, and vice versa."

That spirit extends into the broader community. Northern Heli-Co works alongside other operators, whether chartering their clients, moving people across swollen rivers, or delivering food supplies. Community volunteering and sponsorship of local events are part of regional life, and part of what good business looks like here.

LOOKING FORWARD

Despite being relatively new, Northern Heli-Co already has repeat clients who book two or three times a year. Many do not discover the service until they arrive in Karumba, then they see the signs, hear about it from other travellers at the caravan park, or watch clients walk in at sunset carrying a barramundi.

Growth will come when demand warrants it, but for now Dan's focus is on what he has always known: quality matters, relationships matter, and no advertising budget matches a client who cannot stop thinking about what they experienced the day before. "It is," he says, "simply the best way to see the Gulf."



KERRY D FISHING CHARTERS

Where Every Fish Tells a Story



Kerry D Fishing Charters operates from Karumba in the Gulf of Carpentaria, offering full-day offshore charters, half-day experiences, and specialised ladies' fishing days. Their two boats accommodate groups from intimate family outings to larger corporate and special interest groups.

kerrydfishing.com.au

Fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.

For me, Karumba now feels like it's home. I couldn't imagine going back to an office job or being stuck in a classroom after being on the water all the time.

Jemma, Kerry D Fishing Charters

When Jemma and Ben bought Kerry D Fishing Charters at the end of 2021, it was a leap of faith.

FROM SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND TO THE GULF

Jemma was a schoolteacher, and Ben had spent 15 years as a plumber in south-east Queensland. Neither had tourism and hospitality experience, and they were purchasing a business in remote Karumba during an uncertain period: the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We bought the business at the end of 2021, right after Covid," Jemma recalls. But timing, it turned out, was everything. "It was probably the best two years after Covid. Everyone was travelling up this way, so those first two years were fantastic. We got a handle on things."

The decision to move from the south of Brisbane to Karumba involved more than buying a business, Ben and Jemma wanted to completely reimagine their lives. While Ben had visited the Gulf on a previous fishing trip and harboured a long-term dream of owning his own fishing charter business, Jemma had never even been to the Gulf.

When news reached Ben that the previous owners of Kerry D Fishing Charters were about to retire, Ben brought Jemma to Karumba in September, when the weather was at its finest. "The weather was beautiful, the sunsets were spectacular, and then we moved up in January. It was hot, so hot. I remember saying 'What have we done?'" Jemma laughs. "But you get used to it after a while."

What they discovered went far beyond adapting to the heat. "For me, Karumba now feels like it's home. I couldn't imagine going back to an office job or being stuck in a classroom after being on the water all the time," Jemma explains. "You've got the ocean and the remoteness. That's what we love about this place."

BUILDING A BUSINESS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

Ben's philosophy shapes their approach to business: "When we bought the business, we identified the things we can control, and we do them really, really well. The things we can't control, we learn from and work with. I can't control the weather and I can't control the fishing. But I've learned where fish are because I'm on the water every day. The things we can control, like a fun atmosphere, plenty of chat, background music, a home cooked morning tea, we do them well, and the rest takes care of itself," Ben explains.

This focus is the foundation of their success. Jemma bakes the morning teas and lunches. They've curated a Spotify playlist that customers regularly ask about. Both boats have toilets on board. "That makes a big difference for ladies who want to go fishing," Jemma notes. They create connections between passengers, linking people's stories and backgrounds, so conversation flows naturally.

"We see it as a whole experience, more than just catching fish. It's about experiencing fishing in the Gulf," Jemma explains. "People might say, 'I caught a fish in Karumba', but they'll talk more about the experience they had of fishing in the Gulf than the fish itself."

EXPANDING TO MEET DEMAND

The couple's most significant business decision came when they expanded from one boat to two. "We had one boat. Ben would drive, and I would be the deckhand," Jemma recalls. "Then we decided to expand. We purchased the second boat and I got my tickets. So now I run the Sandy Bell and Ben runs the new boat."

This expansion allowed them to diversify their offerings. Ben's boat caters to offshore anglers wanting day trips. Jemma's Sandy Bell offers half-day experiences, including specialised ladies' days.

What hooked us was the kids and the first-timers. You get people who have never fished before, and they catch their first fish. We've had people who go out because their husbands want to, and they end up catching a fish. It becomes an extraordinary experience. That's why we do what we do.

Jemma, Kerry D Fishing Charters

"We meet our guests where they are staying – offering half day trips that cater to all types of anglers, from the very experienced to those wanting a lighter combination of fishing and sightseeing. I'll often go in the morning and again in the afternoon," Jemma explains. Occasionally, Jemma takes a female deckhand with her on the Sandy Bell which always gets a reaction. "It's unusual to have an all-female crew, and our clients often comment on it very positively".

Ben and Jemma's strategy has worked. "We've got so many repeat customers that now come every year". A father and son from the Gold Coast came four years ago when we first bought Kerry D, and they've been back every year since," Ben shares. Based on their post-experience survey, their satisfaction rate sits at 94%.

THE STORIES THAT STAY WITH YOU

But the Kerry D experience is so much more than consistently high visitor satisfaction. Jemma recalls two sisters, one of whom had polio as a child, which had left her without strength in her hands. "She said to us, 'I really want to go and I really want to experience it, but I will need help'."

When a strong fish hooked on to her rod, it pulled the rod straight out of her hands and into the water. "The deckhand at the time pounced into action. 'I've got this' they yelled, and in moments the offending rod was being reeled back in, fish still in tow. It was then passed back to the passenger, who reeled it in with a little extra help from the crew. Not only did she get her fish," Jemma recounts, "but she also got the experience of a lifetime which made us all very happy."

The next day, the sisters called at Jemma and Ben's house before leaving town to thank them. "I think that story will stick with us forever because it was just those two ladies, and they had the best time. They didn't get to do adventurous stuff very often together and we made their dream experience come true."

These moments reveal why Ben and Jemma love what they do. "What hooked us was the kids and the first-timers. You get people who have never fished before, and they catch their first fish," Jemma says. "We've had people who go out because their husbands want to, and they end up catching a fish. It becomes an extraordinary experience. That's why we do what we do."

FINDING NEW MARKETS THROUGH CONNECTION

For Jemma and Ben, resilience and innovation go hand-in-hand. A podcast group from Bathurst followed their social media page and invited them to provide fishing updates. "They contacted us and asked if we could jump on their podcast and do a fishing update, share the weather and what's the fishing like."

"They were a group that just loved fishing. They got talking to us one day, and expressed an interest in doing a trip here," Jemma explains. "So they put it out to their listeners, explaining that they wanted to organise a trip to Karumba, a once in a lifetime trip. They calculated how much it was going to cost to get the fishing charter, accommodation, flights, meals – everything." The response was overwhelming. "It just went crazy", smiles Jemma. "They've done two trips a year with us and it'll be three trips a year from now on." The April and July trips bring 32 people over approximately two and a half weeks, a substantial boost to Kerry D Fishing Charters business in the lead up to peak season.

THE GULF SAVANNAH DIFFERENCE

What keeps Jemma and Ben thriving is the constant flow of people and their stories. "The tides are different, the weather is different, the species... everything is different," Jemma says of Karumba. Even visitors from Cairns, not far away on a map, arrive to find a fishing experience entirely unlike anything they have known. "Some people have never been here before and they just want to experience this place."

For a former teacher and plumber who made the leap at the riskiest possible moment, that sense of difference runs both ways. "Everyone's from all over. You never get the same story. Even though we're doing the same thing every day, we just meet so many different people." Karumba is home now, and neither of them can imagine going back.

Sandy Belle and Nete in Karumba ready for another day's fishing adventures. Right image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland. Below image courtesy of Jemma Probert.



ASH'S@THE POINT CAFE /
ASH'S HOLIDAY UNITS

The Recipe Doesn't Change



Ash's@The Point Cafe / Ash's Holiday Units provides accommodation in units, cabins, and a cottage. They operate a café known for their fish and chips made with a traditional batter recipe that hasn't changed for over 40 years.

ashsholidayunits.com.au

Yvonne from Ash's@The Point Cafe. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.



A bold splash of colour welcomes visitors to Ash's@The Point Cafe. Along the front of the building, a vibrant painting "Karumba – Outback by the Sea" maps the Savannah Way with photographs of fishermen holding barramundi and king threadfin.

THE SIGN ON THE WALL

On the wall outside, bold letters proudly display Lonely Planet's declaration from decades earlier: "World Famous Barra & Chips". This accolade stands as a testament to the café's long-standing reputation that has drawn visitors for 40 years. The recipe hasn't changed since Ashton and Cheryl started the business in the late 1980s with a couple of old caravans. What began as a way to serve travellers and locals evolved through the 1990s with the addition of cabins and a relocated house. Now Ash's@The Point Cafe / Ash's Holiday Units is firmly established as an institution in Karumba.

When Yvonne and Mark purchased Ash's Cafe in January 2005, they recognised Ash as a local icon and made a commitment to honour his legacy: "We haven't changed the batter recipe from what Ash used to do. It's exactly the same, and people just love that. They can come here any day, year after year, and it's the same. It never changes," she smiles.

Prior to running the cafe Yvonne and Mark, together with Mark's two brothers, were co-owners and managers of Esmeralda Station south of Croydon. They were in a transition phase when Mark saw the cafe go on the market. They knew the cafe in Karumba from their regular travels from Esmeralda Station to swap beef for prawns and fish. So when Mark saw it, the stars aligned and they made the move.

Yvonne shakes her head as she remembers the handover. The interim owners had departed without a word. "They just left. We didn't know where the water tap was, how to turn the gas off or where the gas mains were," Yvonne recalls. But that is all history now. These days, Ash's@The Point Cafe is a hub of social connection.

People come for the fish and chips, but stay for the home-baked cake, coffee, and a chat. This is where you find local knowledge and conversations that become connections.

ADAPTING TO THE GULF'S RHYTHMS

Operating in Karumba means working with extremes. The seasons dictate visitor numbers, deliveries, road access and business rhythms. "The traditional season used to run reliably May to September, with strong shoulders from March to April and from October to November," Yvonne explains. "Now, it's compressed from June to August with weaker shoulder periods, so we've had to adapt in the last five to six years."

"The March–April 2024 monsoon was late, which meant four weeks of lost bookings" recalls Yvonne. Updates on road conditions were slow, heightening the concerns of travellers that roads were impassable even though they were open. "It pays to call ahead and get local advice", says Yvonne, but it is the cumulative change over recent years that Yvonne draws attention to.

"Every ingredient, every supply must be freighted from Cairns, Townsville, or Brisbane. Freight costs have soared. Insurance premiums have more than tripled and include a tsunami levy for a geographically impossible event in the Gulf. At the same time, storm surge coverage, a real risk, is excluded. Power costs continue to climb despite the solar panels we've installed across the café and accommodation."

STORIES OF THE GULF SAVANNAH



Despite these challenges, Yvonne and Mark have recently expanded by purchasing the neighbouring holiday units, a calculated risk in a changing environment. Rates, fuel, and wage costs keep climbing, yet Yvonne's love for this place is unwavering: "I love the Gulf. It's where my heart is and has been ever since the station days. The first time I arrived here, I just fell in love with the country, the environment and the people.... It's really about the people," she emphasises.

Through it all, Yvonne adapts, learning to read the seasons and to prepare. Her days on the station taught her some core lessons about resilience: stockpiling before the start of the wet season, maintaining menu flexibility, and cross-training staff to enable them to slot into any role. When supplies run low or weather delays deliveries, the menu shifts. What's fresh becomes featured and local catches are highlighted.

"Our customers understand they're part of a real place adapting in real time to real conditions. This is not a manufactured tourism experience."



Top: Welcome to Ash's@The Point Cafe. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.
Bottom: Sunset at Karumba foreshore. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

I love the Gulf. It's where my heart is and has been ever since the station days. The first time I arrived here, I just fell in love with the country, the environment and the people.... It's really about the people.

Yvonne, Ash's@The Point Cafe / Ash's Holiday Units

WHEN THE TOWN IS CUT OFF BY THE FLOODS

When Karumba is isolated from the main roads, Ash's Cafe is a community lifeline. It becomes an emergency food provider, a gathering place, and an information hub. Remembering the 2009 floods, Yvonne explains that despite not having water inundate the town, they were cut off for over 15 weeks. Being the only community in the Gulf of Carpentaria without a sealed airstrip, this situation led to a community-initiated campaign to "Seal Our Strip", with over 600 people forming a human "SOS". Eventually, the campaign was successful and the strip was sealed.

The 2023 floods did more damage as they came over land, from places that locals hadn't seen water come from before. Organic material washed into the river systems, further contributing to the town being cut off. The timing was particularly difficult since COVID-19 had devastated businesses, then created a boom when people could travel. Some of the busiest days on record happened during that period, but as Covid restrictions were lifted, everything slowed, and then the 2024 floods came.

The availability of accurate travel information frustrates Yvonne from time to time. When heavy rain hits anywhere in North Queensland, reports generalise across the entire region. Roads might be open in Karumba, but visitors see footage of flooding in Cooktown and assume the whole north is cut off.

"People avoid coming here early in the season because they believe it's inaccessible," Yvonne explains. She usually recommends checking the council's daily road report as they are accurate, but acknowledges that potential visitors tend to trust online platforms, which are slow to update their information, sometimes by months. Yvonne's advice to visitors is to come without expectations, but come with a sense of adventure, an inquiring mind, a good attitude, and an open heart. "Just let it emerge," she smiles.

RESILIENCE RUNS THOUGH EVERYTHING

After twenty years running Ash's@The Point Cafe / Ash's Holiday Units, Yvonne is thoughtful about what resilience means. "It remains critically important to enjoy what we do," she reflects. "If we, or our staff, are not happy or enjoying each day, then customers are not going to enjoy themselves either. A happy team who can slot into any role, be flexible and engage with customers, is really important." It's about creating conditions where staff thrive and want to stay because staff retention creates the knowledge, flexibility, and genuine connection that customers can feel.

That continuity runs through everything. Maintaining the tradition and quality established by Ash's Cafe remains important to Yvonne and Mark. They honour the "World Famous Fish and Chips" sign because it's part of the story. Consistency and authenticity matter. With the expansion of the accommodation offered, as well as continuing support for the local and regional community through sponsoring events and donations to the local childcare centre and sporting groups, Ash's Cafe remains a vital part of the Karumba community. The business that was once about maintaining a recipe for fish and chips has become something larger: a demonstration that resilience is a state that is carried in the hands of staff who stay, in the habits of customers who return, and in the knowledge of what it means for a business and its owners to belong somewhere.

Fresh local Karumba prawns. Image courtesy of Yvonne Tunney.





GULF COUNTRY CARAVAN PARK

Desert Roses and Internet Connections



Gulf Country Caravan Park operates in Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria, offering powered and unpowered sites, cabins and amenities for touring visitors, fishing enthusiasts and seasonal workers. The park welcomes travellers during both wet and dry seasons and is the perfect stay for those seeking to experience this remote region.

gulfcountrycaravanpark.com.au

Mates for life, Brolgas at the Park. Image courtesy of Alicia Tempany.

There's a generational shift that's happening. There are more families travelling and more pre-retirement couples who are working and travelling. It's not just retirees moving around the country anymore. Technology hasn't just enabled remote connection on a road trip; it's fundamentally changed what the freedom to travel means.

Glenn, Gulf Country Caravan Park

A stone's throw from the Karumba foreshore, where extraordinary sunsets stretch across the horizon, lies the Gulf Country Caravan Park. Offering caravan sites, units, cabins and a holiday house, the park is also home to a variety of wildlife, including kites, hawks, brolgas, owls, monitors, turtles, frogs and wallabies.

One could be mistaken for thinking that this is another home for grey nomads and families travelling around Australia, but Alicia and Glenn see it differently. Glenn and Alicia have spent nine seasons watching visitor markets shift in real time. They don't talk of years, but in seasons, and patterns:

Travellers are changing, and the way people think about travel is also changing. Travellers now are thinking differently. They see the world differently and are seeking different kinds of adventures too.

SEEING POTENTIAL

Glenn and Alicia heard about Karumba years before they bought the caravan park. Park managers in Broome mentioned the Gulf town during their around-Australia trip. "If you like Broome, you'll love Karumba," they were told. The comment stuck. Years later, during a Cape York trip, word reached them that a caravan park in Karumba was on the market. When they saw the park, Glenn saw infrastructure already in place including ten acres of gardens, rooms, and established sites.

Alicia, coming from a hospitality and nursing background, saw community, the kind of friendly town feel that makes or breaks remote operations. The park needed tending but the bones of the business were sound. They bought it and with the assistance of their daughters Chantelle and Rebekah (Bec), they dived into their first season, splitting their lives between Brisbane and the Gulf.

THE POWER OF OBSERVATION

Over the last nine seasons Glenn and Alicia have taken many photographs documenting changes that aren't always evident at first glance. "We have photos of the park in August 2016, and it's nearly empty. The same week in 2025 is so much busier. Study the photos and the patterns reveal over time what casual observation misses," offers Glenn.

"The traditional pattern of visitation, which was Mother's Day to Father's Day has dissolved. But it's also a different crowd. There's a generational shift that's happening. There are more families travelling and more pre-retirement couples who are working and travelling. It's not just retirees moving around the country anymore. Technology hasn't just enabled remote connection on a road trip; it's fundamentally changed what the freedom to travel means."

Visitors who would have to be home for family events now video call and stay for longer. They can monitor their houses with cameras, see their properties in real time, and make informed decisions about whether to extend their Gulf Savannah stay.

This strategic insight about how the market is changing is gathered through conversations, observations and local knowledge. It will take years to see this in data. Tourism operators who understand this shift can market differently, design experiences to cater for emerging demand, and capture the interest of potential visitors during quieter periods.

CHANGING PREFERENCES

Bec noticed it first. "A lot of people used to want shade and a slab site, but now those with satellite connections want open sites. So, this year our open, sunny section filled up first." What seemed like a minor shift in site preferences signals deeper change in how people work, travel, and maintain connection whilst in remote regions.

Glenn sees this pattern extending beyond the park. "You can put satellite in your boat and go further afield. The world has changed so much in the last few years and opened up the possibility of travelling and working simultaneously and seamlessly."

Visitors monitor weather systems, adjust routes, operate within safety buffers that were impossible to anticipate before satellite connectivity. "This Gulf is still reasonably untouched. It is one of the few places where there is more wildlife than people, and technology is helping visitors experience this safely. Reliable telecommunications matter more than ever in opening up the Gulf Savannah to new visitor experiences," reflects Glenn.



SEASONS OF OPPORTUNITY

"This area has two seasons. You have the travellers who don't mind the heat and wet and don't care if they get washed in. Then you have the ones who want to come up for the cool dry weather, and for fishing and nature."

The common view is that the traditional tourism season is compressed into a window after the rains, but Glenn and Alicia see opportunity in the wet season. "Water lilies stretch from horizon to horizon along the Normanton-Karumba road. Yellow flowers mist across floodplains and helicopters tour over watery landscapes. Migratory birds are also breeding. For me, it's very beautiful during the wet season," Alicia notes. "That's when we want people to come, because they're going to see things that they won't see any other time."

But the Gulf has a reputation as a challenging place to travel, especially during the shoulder season, but this risk has been substantially reduced in recent years. Technology provides real-time road condition monitoring, accurate weather radar information, and emergency communication capacity. Alicia recognises the value of technology in extending the season, and her approach is to educate rather than discourage travellers. She builds transparency about conditions, appealing to visitors who want authentic experiences and are prepared to work through uncertainty.

"They're not seeking risk-free travel; they are seeking honest information that lets them make informed decisions about acceptable risk levels. It's a different way of thinking."



Clockwise from top: Karumba foreshore. Gulf Country Caravan Park reception. Black Throated Finch at Gulf Country Caravan Park. All images courtesy of Gulf Country Caravan Park.

For Glenn and Alicia, business resilience is reading and adapting to signals in the market and showing up every day with authentic values that mean something deeper.

ECOLOGICAL VALUES ON SHOW

When Alicia started fertilising the gardens with fishing scraps, she wasn't thinking about a marketing opportunity. "Guests were leaving the scraps from their catch, and I needed a way to dispose of them. It saved me buying fertiliser," she explains. Alicia was not only solving a composting problem and a bio-fertiliser challenge, she was creating an ecosystem where none had existed. Seven varieties of bumblebees arrived. Two types of bush bees, five pollinating wasp species, and praying mantises have all been photographed and documented.

The on-site coffee van distributes desert rose seedlings to visitors who return their cups. Plants carry the Karumba connection as far as New South Wales and Victoria. "When visitors go home and plant the seedling, they'll look at it for the next 20 years. "They send us photos and remember their time with us in Karumba." This is evidence of ecological regeneration and circular waste solutions at work. It is also a demonstration of Gulf Country Caravan Park's values, which invite visitors into a deeper connection with this place and its nature.

When Alicia is not caring for desert roses, she and Bec are registered wildlife carers. They care for injured wildlife before rewilding them. "A lot of the animals find the park a refuge," says Bec, "So we have to teach visitors not to feed them and how to respect the wildlife."

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Nine seasons after purchasing the caravan park, Glenn and Alicia think of success differently. Younger demographics and different markets now discover Karumba and technology enables experiences that were impossible a decade ago.

Alicia keeps photo albums documenting the changes. She sees how dirt has become gardens, silence turned into the hum of insects, sunny sites became popular, and empty shady sites became a sanctuary for wildlife. She catalogues the arrival of bee species. She monitors wallaby behaviour across seasons, and she distributes desert rose seedlings that will carry memories of Karumba.

The future of remote tourism belongs to operators who understand changing demands. They recognise that satellite connection and accurate information can change behaviour, from caravan site preferences to making the shoulder season more viable. They understand that the internet creates both the freedom to travel and the ability to connect back home.

They also understand the value of weaving real ecological actions through their business as a deep commitment to their place. For Glenn and Alicia, business resilience is reading and adapting to signals in the market and showing up every day with authentic values that mean something deeper. The desert roses Alicia gives away will outlive most tourism campaigns. Visitors will keep arriving and they will be younger, more connected, and more discerning. They will be seeking not just accommodation but alignment between their values and the places where they spend time.



A Desert Rose seedling ready to travel. Image courtesy of Alicia Tempany.

BALLOON ALOFT

Where Country Meets Sky



Balloon Aloft operates hot air balloon flights over the Gangalidda and Garawa lands in partnership with 100% Indigenous-owned Yagurli Tours. Experience breathtaking views of Australia's largest salt plain, braided river systems, and stunning sunsets in the unique Gulf Savannah environment.

balloonaloft.com

Ballooning over MOUNGIBI (Burketown). Image courtesy of Michelle Wills.



Every afternoon in the flying season, when conditions are right, the salt pans shimmer under the outback sun, and a hot air balloon rises over Mounigibi (Burketown). Inside the basket are visitors seeing this Country from a perspective few people ever experience. Guiding them are pilots who return each June because the combination of an extraordinary landscape and remarkable people makes it impossible to stay away.

When Yagurli Tours approached Balloon Aloft about bringing hot air ballooning to Burketown, owner Matt was both excited and honoured. His company had 40 years of experience flying over the Hunter Valley, Byron Bay, Mudgee, and Camden, but the Gulf Savannah was unlike anywhere else they had operated before.

“We were blown away by the beauty of this remarkable landscape and the incredible, welcoming people who live here,” he recalls of those first test flights.

What began as a brainstorming session between Gangalidda and Garawa elders and Yagurli Tours management evolved into something unprecedented: Australia’s first Indigenous-owned hot air balloon visitor experience.

A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON COUNTRY

The initiative came entirely from Burketown-based Yagurli Tours. During a planning session about five years ago, local elders and management were exploring new tourism experiences when the idea of hot air ballooning emerged. As Australia’s largest and most experienced ballooning operator, Balloon Aloft was the natural partner. But this wouldn’t be a standard franchise arrangement, the Gangalidda Garawa people would own the balloon itself.

Yagurli Tours acquired their own aircraft, a stunning blue balloon adorned with the Yagurli Fish logo. Yagurli means “fish,” a symbol of the region’s rich culture and heritage. The balloon was launched in March 2023 at the Canberra Balloon Spectacular before returning to fly over its true home: the vast salt pans and wetlands of the Gulf Country.

For pilot Clay and the dedicated crew which include local Gangalidda and Garawa people, the partnership represents something deeper than business. “It’s what keeps us coming back each June,” they say of their return to Burketown each winter season.

OVER MOUNGIBI

Burketown's Indigenous name is Mungibi, meaning "little island". It's a word that reflects how the town appears during the wet season when the surrounding salt pans flood. But the true magic unfolds during the dry winter months when floodwaters recede, and Australia's largest salt pans reveal themselves.

"The Gulf Savannah is special because of its vast, untouched landscapes, extraordinary salt pans, and unique natural phenomena like the Morning Glory cloud. It's also special because of its people, their resilience, warmth, and cultural knowledge. The combination of big skies, powerful country, and rich Indigenous culture creates an experience that can't be replicated anywhere else in Australia," Matt explains.

Flights operate from late June through to early September, carefully designed to work with local weather, tides, and land conditions. Unlike the company's other locations where morning flights are standard, Gulf flights typically happen in the afternoons when conditions are calm. The experience includes cultural interpretation from local guides, giving visitors both natural and cultural perspectives of the landscape. At the end of the season, the balloon is carefully packed and transported south, protecting it from the heat and humidity of the wet season.

Respect for the land and the conditions in the Gulf underpin every operational decision, the team emphasises. "Building strong partnerships with Yagurli Tours and the local community has been our priority. Offering a safe, professional, world-class experience and helping visitors connect deeply with the Gulf Savannah and its stories is why we are here."

WHEN THE FLOODS CAME

The Gulf Savannah is a land of extremes, and 2023 delivered a harsh reminder. Extreme flooding devastated the region that year, washing away roads, destroying fencing, and cutting off access to Burketown for an extended period. For Balloon Aloft, the impact was immediate and severe. Their usual three-month season shrank to just three weeks of operations.

"The media coverage of the event led to many tourists bypassing the town for months," Matt explains. "People were under the impression that the town was not open for business." The reality was more complex: The town needed tourists to come back as soon as possible to help assist with the economic recovery.

The Balloon Aloft team managed their response by working closely with Yagurli Tours to understand conditions on the ground. Once the town had recovered enough to operate, they pivoted to active promotion trying to counter the lingering media narrative that Burketown remained closed. But fast forward, and the 2025 season was a different story.

"We had a great 2025 season and are looking forward to flying even more visitors over this extraordinary landscape in coming years," shared Clay, the balloon's pilot.

NATURE AS AN OPERATIONAL PARTNER

Operating in the Gulf means accepting that nature sets the terms of the operations. The short flying season depends entirely on weather, tides, and the drying of the salt pans. Floods can delay operations or make it impossible for retrieval vehicles to access landing sites. "Flexibility is key," explains Clay. "We adapt each year to what the environment allows."

This adaptation starts before each season. The crew scouts the country, maps out safe access routes and works closely with local rangers and community members who possess deep knowledge of the land. They never take risks with the Gulf's extraordinary weather phenomena, including the famous Morning Glory cloud that rolls across the morning sky in September and October.

"The Gulf demands respect, and flights only happen when conditions are right," offers Clay. Sometimes floods reshape the landscape in unexpected ways, washing salt concentrations and changing drying patterns. The team has learned to read these shifts, adjusting operations to match what the country offers each year.

The combination of big skies, powerful country, and rich Indigenous culture creates an experience that can't be replicated anywhere else in Australia.

Matt, Balloon Aloft

Balloon Aloft shows that tourism development can serve the community's vision. It's a regenerative model of tourism that creates and reinvests value back into the local community.

MORE THAN A BUSINESS

In 2024, Balloon Aloft became the first hot air ballooning company to be recognised for sustainable practices by Ecotourism Australia. It's an achievement the team takes particular pride in, as it reflects their commitment to minimising environmental impact, working with local communities, and celebrating Indigenous culture.

"We respect the local culture of the Gangalidda and Garawa people," they explain. "We work closely with local elders and the community to ensure our hot air balloon flights do not fly over or land on sacred lands." This respect also extends to business relationships. Balloon Aloft actively promotes other local tourism businesses to passengers through their website, social media, and direct staff recommendations. "Collaboration is so very important in this region and to our business model," emphasises Matt.

RESILIENCE AS PARTNERSHIP

The Balloon Aloft team identifies their partnership with Yagurli Tours as central to their resilience. "It's an incredible environment that we get to witness and share every day, as well as the people that we've had the honour to meet and work with on a day-to-day basis. Our partnership with Yagurli Tours is a real strength". The partnership is so much more than operational support. It offers deep place-based knowledge about weather patterns, land conditions, and cultural protocols. It creates accountability and shared purpose.

Most importantly, Balloon Aloft shows that tourism development can serve the community's vision. It's a regenerative model of tourism that creates and reinvests value back into the local community. "We're not just a balloon company passing through," the team emphasises. "We're here in partnership with Yagurli Tours, with a genuine commitment to community and Country."

Building strong community relationships provides another layer of resilience. We have crew support, ranger involvement, and friendships that last beyond the season. The local community embraced the venture from the beginning, creating cultural exchange and sharing stories around the experience.

IT'S BIGGER THAN ALL OF US

Balloon Aloft's operation stands as proof that a genuine partnership and cultural respect can thrive in one of Australia's most challenging and remote environments. The Indigenous ownership model ensures that community benefit and cultural authority remain central. "Our presence here is more than tourism. It's a partnership," the team explains.

"The Gangalidda and Garawa people own the balloon that flies over their country, and their stories are central to the experience. We're here to support the community's vision, create opportunities, and share the Gulf with the world in a respectful way."

"Country itself is the main character, and when paired with local storytelling from our local crew, it creates a deep emotional impact on visitors." The balloon belongs to the Gangalidda and Garawa people and the stories belong to them too. Balloon Aloft simply provides the vessel. In doing so, the realisation emerges that true resilience in remote tourism comes not from control, but from partnership with Country and the people who know it best.



Sunset flight over the salt pans. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.



MORNINGTON ISLAND ART CENTRE

An Island Where Culture Breathes



The Mornington Island Art Centre is a community arts centre on Mornington Island (Gununa). The islands and surrounding seas are the traditional lands and waters of the Lardil, Yangkaal, Kaiadilt and Gangalidda peoples. The Centre supports artists to produce and sell their work, provides a space for cultural knowledge to be shared between Elders and young people, and connects visitors to the living culture and Country of the island.

morningtonisland.com.au

Mornington Island Art Centre dancers welcoming visitors. Image courtesy of Skye Price.

In the Gulf of Carpentaria lies something truly extraordinary – a fusion of art, culture and Country. It's a place where women paint, dance comes alive, and the stories of millennia are told. This is Mornington Island, or Gununa as it is known by the Lardil people. They have been the original custodians for over 8,000 years and their traditional lands encompass the North Wellesley Islands of Mornington, Sydney, and Wallaby.

WHERE CULTURE FLOWS ACROSS TIME

Neighbouring islands hold the Countries of other nations: Yangkaal people's lands include the islands between Mornington and the mainland, while Kaiadilt people are Traditional Owners of the South Wellesley Islands, Bentinck and Sweers. Together with the Gangalidda people, these nations have maintained their lands and waters, passing down deep cultural knowledge through generations.

Following European settlement and the establishment of a Presbyterian mission in 1914, people from Aboriginal groups across mainland Australia and other islands were brought to Mornington Island. Referred to as 'mission times' (1921–1965), these years disrupted cultural continuity. Yet culture did not disappear, it simply transformed. Visual art and performance allowed stories to be shared, and today, that living continuity pulses through Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation's cultural enterprises (also known as the Mornington Island Art Centre).

Renee is the incoming General Manager of the Mirndiyan Gununa, which encompasses MI Art, MI Dance, MI Festival, and a keeping place for repatriated cultural items. With a lifetime of experience as a dancer, storyteller, and curator, Renee is also a community builder. At the young age of 16, she started dancing and touring, both nationally and internationally. Her career path mirrors the evolution of cultural expression itself within this community-owned organisation.

For Renee, the Art Centre represents an important conduit between culture, connection, and Country. "It's very community oriented," she explains. "It's run in the community, for the community, and by the community." What began as separate entities, an art centre and a dance company, merged organically over time, just as Renee's own journey intertwined with both. Visitors who make it to Gununa/Mornington Island step into a world where art is inseparable from story, dance becomes connection, and culture flows across and within the community.



BRIDGING WORLDS, BUILDING CONNECTIONS

The Mornington Island Art Centre operates in a unique space between cultural conservation and innovation. “We had to move with the times,” Renee reflects. “We were always verbal people, you know. Now we can tell our stories through our phones. This evolution hasn’t replaced tradition, it has expanded it.” Traditional storytelling sits alongside contemporary art and film, each telling stories of the land, the people, and Country.

The core group of artists, mostly elderly women, paint alongside younger generations learning to express culture through new mediums. Some continue the traditional styles, while others break into contemporary art scenes. “They can sit side by side because they’re still telling the stories of the people and country. But within a contemporary space, I suppose, while others still continue to paint traditionally. They still continue to paint the traditional stories as well as a contemporary side of it,” Renee explains. This duality has allowed the Art Centre to not only be resilient, but also to thrive. Artists exhibit in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney, and participate in Indigenous art exhibitions across the country, establishing themselves within the contemporary art scene on a national level.



INTENTIONAL, RESPECTFUL EXPERIENCES

When small groups of travellers come to the island, the experience is intentional and respectful. The Art Centre provides morning tea and cultural induction, introducing visitors to the artists who work in the space. “They take away a lot from the experience,” Renee notes. “You can tell that they appreciate it.” Visitors witness artists at work, hear stories directly from the creators, and often fall in love with pieces instantly. “I take a lot of pride in that,” Renee says. “It means we make something that others value. Because they’ve met the artist, it just gives that more personal connection to the artist and to the artwork.”

The biennial festival represents another dimension of the Art Centre’s capacity to showcase culture. After a ten-year pause, the festival was revitalised in 2023, bringing together traditional dance with contemporary Indigenous musicians.

“The whole community was so happy that something like that was being presented within our community,” Renee recalls. Local dancers performed alongside artists from Doomadgee, the Northern Territory, and even Fijian and Pacific Islander community members, creating a fusion that honoured tradition while embracing contemporary expression.

Renee ready for traditional dance and below with a Jayed (traditional ladies dance skirt). Images courtesy of Renee Wilson.

THE REALITY OF REMOTE OPERATIONS

Operating remotely has taught the Art Centre valuable lessons about tourism. "It's difficult for us to take our art to city audiences. It's the expense of travelling when living remotely," Renee acknowledges. "You can't jump in the car and drive somewhere. You have to fly and that costs." While this limits the Art Centre's ability to send artists to exhibition openings in major cities, it has sharpened their focus on bringing the right visitors to them.

"It really does make a difference when you have the artist there, telling their own story," Renee says. Since most artists are elderly and travelling with the required support becomes expensive, welcoming visitors to the Centre has become central to their approach, creating those face-to-face connections where artists can share their work directly.

The dance troupe faces similar realities. Previously, touring meant a month on the road performing across Australia and internationally, but now bookings depend on available budget. "A minimum of six dancers are needed," Renee explains. "Costs add up quickly. This makes each visitor interaction at the Centre even more valuable."

Hosting small groups of visitors who come specifically for the art, who want to meet artists and hear stories, who understand they're experiencing something meaningful is what we offer. When visitors make a connection with the artist, it's a beautiful experience.

Renee, Mornington Island Art Centre

Experience has clarified what kind of tourism serves the Art Centre. When a cruise ship visited, four-wheel drive tours sharing stories of Country, bush medicine, and bush tucker worked well. The Art Centre's experience was different. "The Art Centre put on a big lunch for the visitors, and it ended up costing them because nothing was purchased from the gallery," Renee recalls. "It wasn't the right audience. These visitors wanted souvenir t-shirts, not fine art with deep cultural stories." Hosting the right visitors matters.

"Hosting small groups of visitors who come specifically for the art, who want to meet artists and hear stories, who understand they're experiencing something meaningful is what we offer. When visitors make a connection with the artist, it's a beautiful experience."

A DEFINING PURPOSE

The relationship between the Art Centre and tourism has emerged from experience rather than a single moment. Renee understands that the Art Centre's survival has been because of how remoteness has shaped its purpose. "The foundation that it was built upon is still surviving today," she reflects. "Our Elders were the ones who stood up and said, we want to create the capacity for our people to showcase our culture. It's allowed us to survive. I think that's why we're still here today."

The Art Centre isn't trying to maximise visitor numbers or revenue. Instead, it's asking "How can tourism serve our community and our purpose as an arts community?" It's creating space for culture to be lived, practised, and shared on its own terms. "It's a place where the old women can come and just share and catch up," Renee explains. "It's their safe space and a healing place at the same time."

This understanding reshapes what both resilience and success look like. When a visitor meets an artist in the community and comes to the gallery specifically to see their work, then falls in love with the artist's painting, that's success. When visitors take away genuine appreciation for the stories they've heard, that's success. When the next generation of dancers sees the festival and thinks, "Maybe I want to do that too," that's the work of Mirndiyan Gununa bearing fruit.

CULTURE AS STRENGTH

Today, Renee paints and dances, her children and grandchildren carry the traditions forward in their own voices, and the keeping place receives cultural items being repatriated from as far away as Baw Baw Shire in Victoria. These are pieces of heritage finding their way home. The festival, revived after its decade-long break, bridges traditional and contemporary, Elder knowledge and youth energy, in exactly the way the community needs. The Art Centre continues to attract smaller groups of the 'right visitors' with genuine interest in fine art and cultural storytelling. It's a visitor experience that allows time for morning tea, cultural induction, and real connection with artists. For Renee, resilience has always been about maintaining cultural continuity across generations, and the Art Centre is now doing precisely that: holding what the Elders envisioned and passing it forward.



SWEERS ISLAND RESORT

A Story Larger Than One Lifetime



Sweers Island Resort is a remote fishing and island destination located on Sweers Island, sixty kilometres offshore in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The resort offers accommodation and guided fishing experiences and is accessible by light plane or boat. The resort operates seasonally, closing from December through March, and relies on fortnightly barge deliveries for supplies.

sweers.com.au

Sunset from the foreshore. Image courtesy of Sweers Island Resort.

Twenty years ago, Mick was a young diesel fitter in Mount Isa. Back then, Sweers Island was a place where he would go with his work mates on their annual fishing trips. They would charter a plane and be fishing in pristine reef waters within an hour of landing.

RETURNING TO SWEERS ISLAND

Decades later, Mick is standing on that same island with his partner Kathleen. They are now the owners of Sweers Island Resort, stewards of its extraordinary history, and navigating the logistics of remote island tourism in the Gulf. Not only could Mick never have imagined returning in such a role, but he's now discovering a larger story.

Some circles close without any planning, you simply arrive and then you understand. That's what happened when Mick and Kathleen returned to Sweers Island Resort in 2023. Mick's family has been in Australia since 1837, when James Allen McConachy arrived as a convict. His descendants became drovers moving cattle across the emerging colony. By the 1860s, Mick's great-great-grandfather Charlie had settled in Burketown as a drover, although his work took him to the far corners of the Gulf Savannah and beyond. Around 1880, Charlie was returning from Darwin to Burketown and would have likely booked a passage on the Pioneer, a vessel that routinely stopped at Sweers Island. Almost 150 years later, his great-great-grandson, Mick, would return to that island.

But Mick knew nothing of this history. His journey to Sweers Island was a series of serendipitous moments. Mick's introduction to Sweers was through annual fishing trips to Sweers with his work mates. These annual trips continued after he started his own diesel fitting business, and over the years he built a strong relationship with the Island's then owners, Lyn and Tex.

When Sweers came on the market in 2022, Mick paused for a moment to dream about owning it, but wasn't able to pursue his dream. However, twelve months later, when the Cairns Post shared an article about the island, he realised it was still on the market. Lyn and Tex had not sold the property because they were keen to keep the Island as a family destination. "They didn't want it to be bought by a corporate company that would change the experience," Mick explains. The stars had aligned and by the end of 2023 Mick and Kathleen had taken ownership of Sweers Island Resort.

THREADS OF HISTORY

While Mick and Kathleen loved Sweers Island Resort and all that it offers as a fishing destination, they also became custodians of a place where history layers upon itself. The island's history reaches back through the ages. The Traditional Owners have known these waters for tens of thousands of years. In 1644, Abel Tasman likely became the first European to sight Sweers Island, and in 1802, Matthew Flinders landed and carved the name of his ship, the Investigator, into a tree near the beach. "That tree was blown over in 1887, and part of it is now on display in the Brisbane Museum," explains Mick.

In 1861, William Landsborough's expedition to search for the explorers Burke and Wills nearly ended in disaster when a cyclone drove their brig onto a reef. After makeshift repairs, they limped to Sweers Island, establishing it as a crucial Gulf staging point for exploration. Landsborough went on to become police magistrate and commissioner of crown lands in Carpentaria, helping transform the Gulf from frontier to settled territory.

The island's most dramatic chapter came in the late 1860s when disease struck Burketown. William Landsborough evacuated the sick and remaining townspeople to Sweers Island, establishing the temporary town of Carnarvon. Somewhere during those three years of exile and uncertainty, William and his wife Caroline Landsborough carved their initials into a cave on the island "CHL 1866'. No one knows what drove them to leave their mark. Perhaps it was hope for the future or a small moment of joy amidst the uncertainty. Only the cave holds the answer and the legacy of the citizens of Carnarvon once they returned to the mainland.

Later came a lime kiln mine which operated from 1918 to 1924 before the island fell quiet again. Time leaves its traces. "On a low tide, you can still see the old rail line tracks lying in the sand, and the old stumps are where the wharf used to be," Mick notes. Old anchors mark the bay floor. On calm days, when the water stills, you can make out the remains of the Governor, another vessel which wrote its chapter in these waters before being claimed by the tides.

THE PARADOX OF DISTANCE

Running a resort on an island 60 kilometres offshore brings unique challenges. Distance shapes everything. It's a daily exercise in thinking two weeks ahead whilst preparing for problems that might emerge in two hours. To illustrate, Mick explains building maintenance challenges. "Once we were short on one piece of roofing iron. That piece was probably only worth \$150, but it would have cost us probably 20 times that to get it here. So we learned to anticipate and over-order." The lesson was about understanding the system and the ripple effects caused by one missing piece of roofing iron. On an island, every element connects. A missing sheet of iron doesn't just delay roofing, it also affects wages, schedules, bookings, and the other tradepeoples who may have come to do the job. Everything cascades.

"Experience teaches us how to adapt," explains Mick. "When we first bought Sweers, we tried to budget for exactly what was needed and we were always coming up short. Now we over-cater. If I think I might need 10 of these, I'll get 20. That's resilience. We build in buffers everywhere because distance punishes precision."

Getting his pilot's licence in late 2024 was a transformative step for both Mick and the business. Since then, Mick has logged about 100 hours flying to and from the island. The plane helps to create certainty in an inherently uncertain environment. When problems emerge, the plane creates possibilities and remoteness is no longer the challenge it once was.

Unlike most other Gulf operators, Sweers Island didn't flood in 2023. But isolation doesn't mean immunity. The wet season still dictates everything. "We shut from December through March," Mick explains. "When it rains heavily on the dirt runway, operations have to pause. There are no guests, no income, just maintenance and waiting."

This is the paradox of running a remote tourism business in the Gulf Savannah. The same forces that create a unique, adventurous visitor experience also create operational challenges. When asked about resilience, thinking in fortnights not days, building in redundancy as a foundation not a luxury, and accepting that certainty must be created within what you can control are three lessons Mick shares. "Resilience is about systematic adaptation to remote conditions, and that is quite different to running a business in an urban area where there are alternative supply chains and logistics available," he offers.



Left: Family time at Sweers Island Resort. Image courtesy of Mick McConachy.

Right: Fish weigh station on Island. Image courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.



True resilience is more than adapting to constraints: it is holding a place well for the brief time it is in your care, respecting what comes before, and leaving a legacy for the next custodian.

THE MEANING OF STEWARDSHIP

Mick understands that he and Kathleen are custodians of an extraordinary place. His great-great-grandfather walked the Gulf country in the 1860s and most likely visited Sweers Island. Now Mick and Kathleen's children travel to the island regularly, and this understanding shapes how they are building toward the future. Kathleen has obtained coinvestment to create accommodation for more diverse kinds of travellers. They are rethinking their digital presence, finding the balance between sharing enough to entice whilst preserving the sense of discovery that makes that first arrival so powerful.

The deeper lesson from Mick's story is that resilience and stewardship are inseparable. True resilience is more than adapting to constraints: it is holding a place well for the brief time it is in your care, respecting what comes before, and leaving a legacy for the next custodian. This understanding shapes how Mick and Kathleen are building toward the future.

So, more than twenty years after his first fishing trip, Mick knows what drew him back, and it was never just the fishing or the sunsets. It was belonging to a story larger than one lifetime. Some circles close so quietly you do not notice. You simply arrive at a place that was always waiting, and it just makes sense.

Clockwise from top left: Cabins, Sweers Island. Image courtesy of Tourism Tropical North Queensland. Family fishing catch. Image courtesy of Mick McConachy. Mick takes to the skies in his 2007 Beechcraft Bonanza. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.



SAVANNAH LODGE

Home and Hospitality



Savannah Lodge, a true oasis in the outback, offers self-contained, air-conditioned accommodation in Burketown, including accessible options. Perfect for both business and leisure guests, the Lodge provides all the essentials for a comfortable and enjoyable stay. Be sure to visit Poppy Joe's Bar, where Gulf Savannah hospitality shines.

savannah-lodge.com.au

Poppy Joe's at Savannah Lodge. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.





Arriving from Melbourne some 35 years ago, Amanda and Paul had very little money, no hospitality experience, and no business plan. What they did have was a shed to live in, and Paul had a Commercial Pilot licence.

THE DIP OF A WING AND A PROMISE

This story began a few years earlier when, on a flying trip from Townsville to Darwin, Paul stopped to get fuel at Burketown. "In that short visit, a fleeting thought crossed his mind: he could live in a place like Burketown," Amanda explains. "But that was before he'd even met me."

Several years later, when they started going out, Paul invited Amanda on a flying holiday from Melbourne to the Gulf, including Sweers Island. "As we flew over Burketown, Paul dipped the wing of the aircraft and said, 'We're going to live there one day.' I thought to myself 'I don't think so!'" Amanda smiles at the memory because, a year later, they were on their way to Burketown to make it their home.

"We arrived with all our worldly possessions on the back of an old Bedford truck, with the overflow packed into a Holden EH station wagon. We had our dog Tara, and our galah, Baby, no money and a carefree attitude," Amanda recalls. "We just had a loose plan but no real idea how it was all going to go!" Paul had completed his Commercial Pilot licence with the idea of starting a flying business. It was a business that required an aircraft that they didn't have, but that soon resolved itself when Tex, from Sweers Island, offered his Piper Arrow for them to use.

BUILDING SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

Amanda had been working in school administration in Victoria. She had no hospitality background, but a willingness to figure things out. They rented a shed, which was home for five years. "We lived very basically, no real luxuries," she laughs. "Such an adventure, and the lifestyle was incredibly carefree." Even to the last night spent in the shed, 5 years later, when a 14ft olive python crawled into their bed and bit Amanda on the foot, the memories are treasured.

Savannah Lodge itself emerged without a blueprint or vision. "We're spontaneous, I suppose," Amanda says. The Lodge began with "two little cabins and a couple of sheds" purchased from people connected to Sweers Island. "There was very little here," Amanda reflects. "One of the sheds was upcycled from the original kitchen at the Commonwealth Hotel built in the late 1800s."

Growth came in stages, funded entirely by the flying business. "It had to be funded from the flying. The income from the flying was what was going to support whatever we did here until it could hold its own." It's called bootstrapping your business now, but back then it was called being sensible.

They replaced the original rooms, added two more, then eventually the operation really kicked into gear. "We put the kitchen in, we built the deck, the pool, and added another three rooms. Not all at once. It was all to do with cash flow." Today, Savannah Lodge counts 10 rooms.

I love getting everyone to sit together and connect. Having everyone have a chit chat together, rather than two people sitting over there, and two somewhere else, we just join everyone together. The connection is the experience.

Amanda, Savannah Lodge

THE HOSPITALITY GENE

Amanda's transition from school office to lodge operator reveals something she didn't know about herself.

"I suppose I've always enjoyed entertaining or looking after people," she reflects. "I enjoy providing something that people like," and the feedback confirms Amanda's intuition. "When they are leaving, a lot of people say, 'I feel like I'm just leaving my family,'" she shares. "One guest drove all the way back from Broken Hill just weeks after his first visit. He rang me and said, 'I'm coming back. I just loved it up there so much, and I loved your hospitality.'"

The Lodge serves a mixed market: government and council workers primarily, some tour groups, and the occasional traveller seeking a night off from setting up the camper trailer. "The higher-end air tour and birdwatching groups book well in advance, and rarely cancel despite the remoteness," Amanda explains. A constant on their books are government workers who have been returning for 25 years through the various departments they work for. Amanda sees this as customer loyalty that transcends both job changes and agency restructures.

MORE THAN ACCOMMODATION

Walking through Savannah Lodge, visitors notice a quirky attention to detail everywhere. Signs made by a former staff member and vintage memorabilia create points of interest among the shade trees. Visitors consistently say the same thing: "Wow, we didn't expect to walk into this. It feels like it could be Bali, or a bar somewhere else."

Savannah Lodge's personality comes from it being a home. "We do all of our living here. This is our home," Amanda explains. "We've got a house behind the shed that we just sleep in, but we're always here." In the kitchen by six in the morning, tending the bar until 10pm, Amanda admits it's the hospitality that she loves. But her favourite moments justify the long days: "I love getting everyone to sit together and connect. Having everyone have a chit chat together, rather than two people sitting over there, and two somewhere else, we just join everyone together. The connection is the experience."

BEYOND BUSINESS

Amanda's integration into the Burketown community extends far beyond the Lodge. The friendships forged in the early days when they arrived in Burketown still anchor them. "We initially made good friends that really bonded us to this place," Amanda reflects. "Having made those couple of very close friends, that really kicked us off into feeling like...you belong here."

Now Amanda honours the local community that supported her and Paul in the early days by giving back. She is also a wildlife carer, often taking care of joeys behind reception. "The guests bring them if they've been hit on the road", she explains. "I love bringing them out and showing them, there's lots of photos and questions from guests." She also cares for birds and flying foxes, and in other community work, the Lodge sponsors kindergarten events and other community activities, contributing both financially and through volunteer work.

THE WET SEASON OPPORTUNITY

After 35 years, Amanda has watched weather patterns shift. The wet season "is a lot more than monsoonal weather, where it would once rain every day, nearly constantly for a few weeks on end. That seems to have changed a bit." Big floods in 2023 and early 2024 bookended years where "the wet seasons weren't very much at all."

But she sees opportunity in the wet. "I think more people are interested to come here in the wet," she observes. "We often say, come up in the wet." But the advice also comes with pragmatism: "Be prepared to stay for a little bit longer than you'd hoped for." The wet offers something distinct," Amanda explains. "The weather's so different. It's hot, quite humid, but then the storms come through. The country starts changing, and the green landscape just bursts out of itself."

The aviation business complements the Lodge perfectly. “The scenic flights over the majestic gulf rivers and vast salt pans showcase the landscape to the fullest. It’s absolutely amazing.” This independence matters for resilience. The aviation work provides flights to Sweers Island and general charter work, but it’s the hospitality, making people feel at home, that defines the Lodge’s contribution.

WISDOM WITHOUT REGRETS

Looking back at their younger selves arriving with very little, Amanda could never have imagined what has been achieved. “We developed the Lodge as resources became available and based on what was possible at the time.” Savannah Lodge succeeds because of countless small consistent actions. It’s the communal tables where strangers become friends over evening drinks, and the unexpected wildlife encounters shared with guests in Amanda’s wildlife caring role. Savannah Lodge is a hub of connection, shown in Amanda’s willingness to share storm-watching moments with visitors who have never experienced the intensity of a tropical wet season.

It’s this combination of hospitality and personality that makes the Lodge work. No business plan could predict that a school administration officer from Melbourne would spend 35 years making Burketown guests feel like family. Sometimes you don’t plan life, you just say yes to a shed, trust in the process, connect authentically, and build something that becomes exactly what the place needs.



Clockwise from top: Savannah Lodge oasis. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.
Poppy Joe's is a friendly meeting place. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.
Amanda greeting guests. Image courtesy of Amanda Wilkinson.



GULFLAND MOTEL & CARAVAN PARK

Where Care Meets Community



Gulfland Motel & Caravan Park operates year-round in Normanton, offering motel accommodation, caravan sites, and long-term worker housing. The facility is owned and operated by selectability as part of their commitment to providing quality aged care services in remote Gulf communities.

gulflandmotelandcaravanpark.com.au

The Big Barra at Gulfland Motel Normanton. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.

When Denise received a call in April 2024 asking if she would like to come to Normanton as an emergency relief manager, she never expected to still be there over a year later. “How long am I coming? Two weeks, three weeks?” she enquired. Now, she reflects on the year gone by and how much the Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park has transformed, deepening its purpose to become so much more than a motel and caravan park.

MORE THAN TOURISM

Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park is a unique blend of accommodation and community service that reflects true Gulf Savannah innovation. It stands on the edge of town, where an iconic Big Barramundi sculpture marks the spot, welcoming visitors to the remote community of Normanton. Behind it lies a spacious and shady caravan park and the newly renovated motel. A small pool invites kids and adults alike to cool off after a long drive. Denise notes with a smile that the iconic barramundi sculpture by a local artist is anatomically correct.

To get the dimensions just right, he froze a barramundi and took detailed measurements to ensure authentic proportions and features. It’s the Gulf’s quirkiness at its best!

Owned by selectability, which operates the local aged care facility, Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park provides essential housing for visiting nurses and healthcare workers while welcoming grey nomads, adventurous families, business and government workers who are passing through. It’s a story about a one-of-a-kind business model where a not-for-profit aged care provider has recognised an opportunity not just to house their own workers, but to become part of the economic and social fabric of a remote community.

The spirit of Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park hasn’t changed, it still hosts weary travellers but has also found a deeper purpose and a sustainable business model serving the community.

TAKING ON A LOCAL ICON

When selectability began delivering residential aged care services in Normanton, Doomadgee, and Mornington Island in 2024, they faced a critical challenge: how to attract and retain committed staff to care for older people in remote communities when there is very little housing available.

Stepping back a little, it’s important to understand that the social and economic dynamics of the Gulf Savannah are complicated. A shortage of both housing and healthcare workers means that when elderly residents need to leave their homes, there are few options to age on Country. At the same time, there is limited accommodation to house the workforce needed to sustain the system of care.

The answer arrived when Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park came up for sale. For Denise, selectability’s accommodation manager who now runs the property, it was a chance to get involved in something with purpose. “What a great opportunity for us to be able to buy and house our aged care workforce and look after the community as well.” What could have been simply an employee accommodation solution became something more—a chance to contribute to the community and reimagine what a sustainable outback hospitality business could look like.

Renovations have given the motel a new lease on life. Twenty-eight air-conditioned rooms received a makeover with modern interiors, premium bedding, and smart amenities. Caravan sites housing up to 50 people were upgraded beneath shady trees, the pool provides relief from the heat after a day of exploring, and a quirky assortment of Gulf memorabilia provides plenty of curiosity.

“The spirit of Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park hasn’t changed, it still hosts weary travellers but has also found a deeper purpose and a sustainable business model serving the community.”

DANCING WITH THE SEASONS

Running tourism accommodation in remote Queensland means dancing with the seasons. The dry season brings grey nomads, fishermen chasing barramundi, government workers, and travellers ticking the Gulf Savannah off their bucket lists. Rooms fill, and the caravan park buzzes with social chit-chat.

Then the wet arrives. Visitor numbers slow to a trickle and the rhythm changes. Summer hits hard with temperatures over 36 degrees and high humidity. It’s a different kind of visitor who wants to see this place in the wet season. They stay longer, make deeper connections, and often they will find work. “People with vans come for the season and work at places like the supermarket,” Denise says, emphasising that the park provides a home for local workers in other sectors.

The importance of people ageing in place within their community, maintaining that connection, resonates with the guests and when they understand, as travellers, how they are supporting this model, their stay becomes more personal, more connected, and more value-driven.

The key is to work with the seasons rather than fight them. When the weather in the wet season presents challenges such as increased fuel prices and accessibility issues, Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park manages these by offering long-term stays for workers, including nurses, fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) employees, and government contractors. People need accommodation regardless of whether it’s wet or dry, so the key is to adapt. The motel also partners with local tour operators and regional tourism bodies, as well as hosting local events and investing in digital marketing to reach beyond traditional touring routes and promote seasonal campaigns.

When it rains and floods, road access can be cut off and delay supplies, leading to a reduction in visitor numbers. The 2022 floodwaters came very close but luckily did not inundate the property. Through adequate planning for these disruptions, Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park maintains flexibility within operations and uses the time to focus even further on community needs.

But more than strategy, they offer something deeper: genuine outback hospitality and care for the local community. Meals on Wheels is one of the initiatives which supports the local community and contributes to allowing older people to age in place. “They do 30 a day, so 30 meals go out into the community. They’re not just in the residential aged care facility,” Denise explains.

It is difficult to attract workers to service the housekeeping and hospitality operations. Operating in a remote location with seasonal fluctuations can deter interest from potential employees. The dry season requires more staff, whereas the wet season means a slowdown in business, making it difficult to retain staff all year round. Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park overcomes this by offering onsite accommodation, employee benefits, and flexible working arrangements.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Gradually, visitors have begun to see beyond the Big Barramundi photo opportunity. They discover a place where connection to the community and its purpose is something that guests get excited about. For visitors, the Gulfland Motel offers newly refurbished ensuite rooms where Denise’s personal touch is evident in the detail. She hand sews pillowcases and runners with different designs for each room, with no two alike. It’s the kind of care which can’t be mass-produced, that speaks to knowing each guest deserves something special, something that connects them to this place and its people.

The business model that also fascinates guests. They discover that half of the rooms are used as long-stay accommodation for healthcare and government workers, and they start to understand the challenges of life in the Gulf. The importance of people ageing in place within their community, maintaining that connection, resonates with the guests and when they understand, as travellers, how they are supporting this model, their stay becomes more personal, more connected, and more value-driven.

The tension between what tourists expect and what's sustainable in remote Australia surfaces constantly.

BALANCING TWO WORLDS

The tension between what tourists expect and what's sustainable in remote Australia surfaces constantly. Decisions about infrastructure made in distant capital cities can make or break a season by giving people the confidence (or not) to travel. Fuel prices and economic downturns ripple outward. As a tourism and hospitality operator in a remote area like the Gulf Savannah, these are the challenges and uncertainties that must be addressed with flexibility and creativity.

Some guests don't understand why things take longer out here, why certain services aren't available, why the wet season shuts everything down. In those moments, the question surfaces: Are we running a motel, or are we building something bigger, and more essential? Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park is an example of an adaptable multi-purpose business model – a lifeline for aged care workers, a gathering place for weary travellers, a stay-a-while place for itinerant workers, and a welcome stay for government and business travellers.

Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park is the soft infrastructure of care for community. Rooms are filled with healthcare workers enabling elders to age with dignity in their own community. Every booking serves this purpose. Every tourist who leaves understanding the complexities of life here becomes an ambassador for the region. Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park is a vital part of the regional social and cultural ecosystem.

For the broader tourism ecosystem, the Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park has become a model of what's possible when accommodation providers think beyond occupancy rates. Long-term worker accommodation and seasonal tourism can coexist. Authentic outback character and modern comfort aren't mutually exclusive. Profitability and community benefit can align when they're rooted in delivering a purpose that addresses the challenges of seasons and the economic and social pressures of Gulf Savannah life.

UNVEILING THE HEART OF RESILIENCE



Top: Fresh and light rooms at Gulfland Motel. Bottom: Savannah hospitality welcomes you. Images courtesy of Gulfland Motel and Caravan Park.

HELL'S GATE ROADHOUSE

A Slice of Heaven



Hell's Gate Roadhouse is a family-owned roadhouse located on the Clifffdale Station, 50km east of the Northern Territory/Queensland border. They offer scenic flights over the Gulf and nearby rock formations, meals, accommodation and camping facilities.

hellsgateroadhouse.com.au



Elite Aviation Services provides essential air transport connecting remote Gulf Savannah communities and businesses across the region's vast and remote landscape. The service forms part of the vital infrastructure supporting tourism and community connectivity throughout the Gulf Savannah.

eliteaviationservices.com.au

Fresh water swimming hole at Hell's Gate Roadhouse.
Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.



Good quality homemade food is a big plus for travellers who are a long way from home. It's what Hell's Gate Roadhouse is famous for these days.

Jenny, Hell's Gate Roadhouse

Fifty kilometres east of the Northern Territory border, where the red dirt meets the sky, Jenny Hays stands in the kitchen of Hell's Gate Roadhouse. It's early morning, and Jenny's already preparing her iconic and famous vanilla slice, the ones which sell out in hours, the ones for which travellers drive hundreds of kilometres. "I'm just the quiet one in the background, in the kitchen," Jenny says, deflecting attention as she has for ten years. But her story, like that of this remote outpost on the Savannah Way, is far more than it first appears.

A LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN

In December 2015, John and Jenny bought Hell's Gate Roadhouse and the surrounding 422,000-acre Cliffdale Station, sight unseen. Their son, working on nearby Wollogorang Station, had suggested they take on both the property and the roadhouse. John had always wanted a roadhouse, however never thought it would be in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

So just before Christmas in 2015 Jenny found herself walking into the roadhouse for the first time. Lost for words she said to her son Scott, "What have you done to me?" It was hot and humid, it wasn't air conditioned, and the roadhouse hadn't been fully utilised for some years. There was a lot of work to be done to make this little roadhouse shine again.

But Jenny is practical. "I just do whatever I have to do, and I'm happy wherever I am as long as my family's here," she explains. And so the work began.

There was no grand vision for the roadhouse, just work to be done. "I think the vision just evolved as it went along," Jenny admits. "First things first, we just had to clean it up to see what we could find underneath." Family members came to help: her son-in-law, a builder, did the heavy work outside while her family pitched in. Everyone cleaned, painted, and rebuilt the roadhouse.

BUILDING ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

What has emerged over ten years is something travellers now describe as heaven rather than hell. The green lawns surprise everyone. "We get so many comments because the grass is green, but our water's also amazing. We're so lucky with our water, you can drink it, and we don't have any water tanks". Jenny says. The croc-free waterhole down the back, the playground, the 39 accommodation units they've added – it's all evolved organically and become so much more than a roadhouse. It's a destination.

But the heart of Hell's Gate remains the country hospitality. Coming from a background running a health food shop and motel in Roma, Jenny brought her knowledge and experience with her. "I like to offer homemade fare," Jenny explains. "The fish comes fresh from Karumba, crumbed by hand on site. The chicken is freshly prepared. Even dietary requirements, gluten-free and vegan, are available."

Good quality homemade food is a big plus for travellers who are a long way from home. It's what Hell's Gate Roadhouse is famous for these days.



The most common question people ask is, “Why do you call it Hell’s Gate? Shouldn’t it be Heaven’s Gate?”

THE REALITY OF REMOTE

Running a roadhouse 700 kilometres from Mount Isa brings challenges most people never consider. “The wet season changes everything out here in the Gulf Country. Roads can close for weeks, freight can be delayed and the weather decides who comes and goes.” Planning ahead is the key to managing the monsoon season. It’s the cycle of life. “We always plan by doing a large order of groceries to cover at least 3 to 4 months. If we do a good order before the wet, you’re not going to have fresh fruit and veggies, but you’ve got frozen veggies,” Jenny explains.

During the 2022 and 2023 floods, Hell’s Gate recorded 70 inches of rain. The roadhouse itself did not flood, but the roads closed, cutting off road access for weeks. The only way in and out was by plane. Even when the roads reopen, there is always a problem with the accuracy of road information. Jenny receives 10 to 15 phone calls daily from travellers asking about road conditions. “We can’t find any information on the road,” they tell her. “Unreliable information is the number one reason for the lack of business here even when the roads are open,” Jenny states plainly.

THE STORIES THAT STAY WITH YOU

What is it that keeps Jenny loving this roadhouse life? There are a lot of stories in this landscape, past and present, and they linger in conversations and connections. The most common question people ask is, “Why do you call it Hell’s Gate? Shouldn’t it be Heaven’s Gate?” She points outside. “Hell’s Gate Roadhouse takes its name from a narrow gap out there in the nearby escarpment. In the late 1800s, it was the last point to which police escorts would accompany travellers. So the ‘gate’ is symbolic. Settlers faced hundreds of kilometres of travel in remote country before reaching Katherine in the Northern Territory.”

While the landscape has not changed for millennia, travel itself has changed a lot since the 1880s, and that’s a story that resonates even today. People engage with the landscape differently. Hearing the story of Hell’s Gate causes visitors to pause, reflect, and deepen their connection. Since Jenny and John restored the roadhouse, the business has evolved from an overnight stop to a destination. Many travellers now stay two or three nights instead of one. Bus tours that used to stop for lunch now stay for two nights, experiencing helicopter or small aircraft flights over ancient rock formations, farm tours on the working cattle station, trivia nights, and long table meals under the big sky. These experiences create their own stories.



Top: Hell’s Gate Roadhouse. Image courtesy of Nadine Schmidt.
Bottom: Heavenly vanilla slice. Image courtesy of Hell’s Gate Roadhouse.

BUILDING THROUGH QUIET RESILIENCE

Jenny doesn't think about resilience, she embodies it. She has learned to manage the roadhouse in a practical, unshowy, focused way. "It's about managing the problems with a clear head – and not letting anything get the better of you," she explains.

Broadening what the roadhouse offers, appealing to a wider range of customers, has been a natural process. As Jenny explains, the roadhouse used to attract guests in their 60s and 70s, the 'grey nomads,' but now there are families coming through with their children.

Noticing how the pause, connect and restore moment changed travellers into extended family, they added a water hole and landscaping, a children's playground, and new accommodation called 'The Hellton' – 12 ensuited twin and queen bedrooms perfect for group stays. "Getting multiple groups consistently is probably one of our biggest achievements," reflects Jenny. "They book and keep coming back, which means we are delivering consistent, high-quality hospitality, service and cleanliness."

Roadtrain at Hell's Gate Roadhouse. Image courtesy of Dianne Dredge.





Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

FRIENDS FOR LIFE

Building long-lasting friendships contributes to the resilience of the roadhouse. When visitors become friends and then extended family, this brings great connections and positive experiences. "We've met a lot of great people over the years, and you become friends. A lot will stay; they'll have a moment of peace, even transformation, and they stay for three weeks. Soon they are ducking around the counter helping us out, cleaning amenities, then helping us build the accommodation. We become friends. We've made a lot of friends in the last 10 years," Jenny reflects.

One of those travellers who became family is Timbo, a mechanic who arrived in 2017 offering to do a fire-twirling show. He stayed three months that first year and has returned every year since for what is now his eighth season. He performs fire shows to raise money for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, collecting two to four thousand dollars annually. These connections between staff, repeat guests, and the roadhouse family illustrate what Hell's Gate has become.

Being good to staff is a core component too, which reflects in the work ethic and delivery of the service. It's a beneficial, reciprocal relationship resulting in excellent reviews. The authenticity of a family-run business clearly shows. John and Jenny actively work in the business with staff. "We're a team. We all work together," and this authenticity shines through in every interaction.

GOING BEYOND SIMPLY BEING A ROADHOUSE

The collaboration with Elite Aviation Services has been another bonus for the roadhouse, and this has unfolded into something John and Jenny could not have imagined. Opportunities such as scenic flights to view spectacular rock formations or side trips to Sweers Island create an additional reason to stay.

What Jenny and John have created goes beyond a successful and resilient business. As an historic resting point for travellers, the Hell's Gate Roadhouse continues to play a vital role in the Gulf community, providing fuel, food, accommodation and information. It is the contact point for truck drivers and emergency services on some of Australia's most remote roads. The Royal Flying Doctor Service flies in regularly. Road trains stop. Families on extended outback journeys make Hell's Gate a highlight.

Maybe Hell's Gate is Heaven's Gate after all. "Our 'word of mouth' is amazing. People will come in and say, 'Oh I've been told to come here because of the vanilla slice, the fire show, the green grass, or the water hole down the back,'" Jenny says. In such a remote area, where the nearest big town is over 700km away, Jenny and John have created something truly special: a resting oasis where isolation becomes connection, travellers become friends and the outback spirit lives in every homemade slice of cake.

When visitors become friends and then extended family, this brings great connections and positive experiences.

Up here, you understand what ‘untamed’ actually means. It’s the presence of forces larger than any human timeline. Nature creates landscapes in real time, and we can witness its work.

Hylton, Elite Aviation Services

ELITE AVIATION SERVICES

In 2020, Hell’s Gate Roadhouse and Elite Aviation Services formed an unlikely partnership that neither could have predicted would transform not just their businesses, but how visitors experience the Gulf Savannah itself. What began as a helicopter service based at a remote fuel stop has become a gateway to the kind of country that roads can’t reach.

From the ground, it is impossible to capture the vastness of the land. But lift off from the red earth and everything changes. Scale reveals itself. Colour intensifies. Time and space merge. Ancient rock formations expose stories written in stone over millennia. “Up here, you understand what ‘untamed’ actually means. It’s the presence of forces larger than any human timeline. Nature creates landscapes in real time, and we can witness its work.” reflects Hylton.

Elite Aviation Services offers more than scenic flights. When floods isolate communities or fires threaten, or Parks and Wildlife Service require aerial surveys, Hylton is there. “That’s where we shine,” he notes quietly. Government contracts, emergency services, and geologists who return each year to read the rocks provide business diversification.

Hylton tries to accommodate everyone, but demand comes in waves. Some days there is no one, then one person books a flight which cascades into another and another. Other days a bus group books the whole day solid. “Once you’ve seen the Gulf from above, you can’t help but tell others,” Hylton reflects, “So booking early helps our planning.”

Back at the roadhouse, diversification is key. The partnership works because it creates unexpected encounters. Tour groups alongside emergency responders. Grey nomads sharing sunset stories with geologists. All drawn to this green oasis in a red country, all departing with a different understanding of scale, time, and what ‘remote’ means when you’ve seen it from the air.

Hell’s Gate has evolved from a necessary fuel stop to a chosen destination. The partnership with Elite Aviation Services adds dimension, literally and figuratively. Now when people arrive, they’re not just passing through. They’re standing at the threshold of an inaccessible experience, deciding whether to cross it and enjoy what unfolds. Most come back changed, and it shapes how they see everything else.



Top: Mudcrab catch of the day. Bottom: Remote waterhole in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Images courtesy of Hylton Ward.



DOOMADGEE

A Community Building its Future

Nicholson River, Doomadgee. Image courtesy of Dianne Dredge.

Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire sits on the banks of the Nicholson River in remote North West Queensland, on the traditional homelands of the Waanyi and Gangalidda peoples. The community is also home to Garrawa and Yunjulla people.

A COMMUNITY ON THE RISE

The Gunnalunja (Nicholson River) rises in the Barkly Tablelands of the Northern Territory and flows down through the Gulf Savannah wetlands. The Waanyi are also keepers of Ngumarri (Lawn Hill country), where the Lawn Hill Creek flows through the ancient gorges of Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park, then carves through tropical savannah country before joining the Bidunggu (Gregory River), on its journey to the Gunnalunja then out to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Boodjamulla is 1.5 hours from Doomadgee via a scenic back road or 3 hours via Gregory on mostly sealed roads through this Savannah Country. It is a journey many Savannah Way travellers have come to appreciate.

The river defines life in Doomadgee. During the dry season, it becomes a focal point for recreation. Locals cast lines for barramundi, sooty grunter, and bream from tranquil banks. Late afternoon sunlight catches in the eucalypts on the riverbank and reflects on the river, revealing amber and ochre tones that belong only to this country. A 5km riverfront walkway showcases and celebrates this stunning waterway, which is part of a longer 7.2km footpath and cycleway.

But the river also challenges.

In 2023, when the big floods came, the Nicholson River reached a record flood level of 8.54 metres, threatening to engulf the community. The wet brings new life with it every year. It also brings road closures for months on end, which is a way of life for the people of Doomadgee, but 2023 was different. This time the event created severe food shortages, requiring supplies to be flown in multiple times per week. Airlifted groceries came at dramatically increased costs, creating economic stress and health impacts for community members during those extended months of isolation.

Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire is a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) community covering 1,863 square kilometres, home to around 1,500 residents. Over 91% of the population are the Aboriginal people who have a deep cultural and spiritual connection to the land, waterways, and environment. This is their home, where memories and connections go back further than the first contact.

The original mission, known as “Old Doomadgee,” was established in 1931 on the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, directly north of where “New Doomadgee” now sits. It was moved to its current site beside the Nicholson River after a cyclone hit the coast in 1936.

The community was administered by the Brethren church up until 1983, when the Queensland government took over administration.

Decades later in 2010, Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council was established, guided by a mayor and four councillors who are elected every four years. Today, Doomadgee is a community actively writing its own future.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH ENTERPRISE

Since 2023, sixteen new local businesses have emerged, from solar panel maintenance and cabinet making to bush soap production and wild cattle mustering. This wave of enterprise emerged from the simple recognition that increased participation in the economy was the best way for the community to create a more prosperous pathway to the future. These are businesses designed to work regardless of whether the Nicholson River floods or flows gently. They are businesses based on local talent and are deeply rooted in this place.

But the people of Doomadgee’s ambitions extend far beyond economic participation. The community has developed a bold vision for transformation through the Doomadgee Precincts and Partnership Project, which aims to redefine the town through urban and economic renewal, community, culture, tourism, health, and recreation.



Doomadgee's Vision: Four Precincts for the Future

The community has identified four major development precincts designed to reverse decades of poor social and physical planning that characterised the colonial mission. Co-designed with the local community, these precincts will revitalise both the town and the economy.

01

The New Town Heart will create what Doomadgee has never had, a town centre. A new Business Hub will bring together a supermarket, retail spaces, cafes, galleries, and council buildings around a main street designed to capture views across the beloved footy field to the future Community Hall. An Art Hub with workshops, gallery, and a kiln will provide local artists with facilities they've never had access to before.

02

The Tourism Precinct will feature a new Visitors Centre, a cultural planting walkway, and conservation spaces to create a gateway for visitors to engage with Doomadgee's culture and country, all hosted by the community.

03

The Caravan Campgrounds positioned on the scenic banks of the Nicholson River will welcome adventure seekers, grey nomads, backpackers, and birdwatchers travelling the Savannah Way. Visitors can picture themselves listening for the early morning calls of the kookaburras, casting a line for barramundi, or watching the sunset through the eucalyptus trees.

04

The Riverfront Walkway will provide a 7.2km loop track that residents have long needed, with day-use areas and viewing sites showcasing the stunning Nicholson River. The walkway will offer visitors the opportunity to experience the tranquillity of the remote Gulf Country, the kind of peaceful immersion in a landscape that this region offers in abundance.

These are shovel-ready projects with architectural designs, community co-design, and detailed costings. Doomadgee is seeking investment partnerships to help deliver this vision, demonstrating that this is a community committed to self-determination and to closing the gap locally.

Headdress exhibition at Dumaji Festival of Arts and Culture. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

VISITING DOOMADGEE

Doomadgee welcomes travellers and asks visitors to respect their cultural protocols and Indigenous traditions. Tourism is growing, particularly for those interested in experiencing Aboriginal culture, the natural riverine beauty that intersects the Savannah Way and the Indigenous arts and crafts that celebrate cultural heritage.

The tourism experiences you'll encounter in Doomadgee are a vision of what the local Indigenous people want to create for their community. It's a community that aspires to significantly develop its tourism and cultural heritage experiences, building its resilience and its role as both a living community and a custodian of culture. To drive this change, the community seeks investment in local businesses, organisations and people so that visitors to Doomadgee experience a working community that's building something special.

Cultural Protocols Matter

The community has developed a business protocol document and Cross-Cultural Awareness training to help visitors prepare for their visit. These protocols are an expression of cultural practice and a desire to welcome visitors to Country.

Sorry Business

During funeral periods (Sorry Business), community activities pause out of respect. These events can happen with little notice. The council is installing electronic signage to inform visitors when Sorry Business is occurring and what it means. Visitors' understanding and patience during these times matters deeply.

Group visitors can understand Doomadgee's history and cultural context by booking into the Council's Cross-Cultural Awareness Workshop (5 hours), facilitated by local Waanyi and Gangalidda woman Kelly. The training, which can be arranged for visiting groups or organisations, covers aspects such as the history of Doomadgee from a community perspective, how historical policies still impact decision-making today, current social structures and informal protocols, and how to show up in an informed and respectful way.

WHEN YOU VISIT: SUPPORTING A COMMUNITY ON THE RISE

Doomadgee is part of the broader Gulf Savannah region, a region where communities need to demonstrate remarkable resilience. Here, resilience means taking control of economic futures, building businesses that work regardless of season or flood, and demonstrating what self-determination looks like in practice. The sixteen new businesses that have emerged are creating their own pathways.

What You'll Experience Today

When you visit Doomadgee, you'll find essential services run by local businesses: a roadhouse with motel units, a bakery serving fresh bread, a well-stocked supermarket, the Doomadgee Guest Lodge, fuel and supplies, local arts and crafts. You're arriving as a guest in a living, working community that's actively building its future, a community that is not a museum or attraction. You might cast a line into the Nicholson River from its banks, purchase sandalwood bush soap made in the community, or watch dusk reflections dance across the Nicholson River. This is the essence of the Gulf Country at its most peaceful.

What Your Visit Supports

Every dollar you spend in Doomadgee stays in the community, supporting families today while helping build tomorrow. Your purchases at shops or from local artisans are investing in the community's bold vision for economic self-determination: the planned bush tucker gardens, the Art Hub with workshop facilities, cultural planting walks, fishing tours, a Riverfront Walkway, and authentic cultural experiences designed and delivered by the community.

THE INVITATION

The businesses here represent determination. The Precincts Plan represents ambition. The protocols represent self-governance. Doomadgee is building something extraordinary and inviting travellers along the Savannah Way to be part of that journey.

This is a community that knows how to deal with its history, record floods, and remoteness. Now it's writing its own future. When you visit with respect for cultural protocols and genuine interest, you are supporting a remote community taking control of its journey. Doomadgee is on the rise, and you are invited.

Doomadgee is building something extraordinary and inviting travellers along the Savannah Way to be part of that journey.



TIRRANNA SPRINGS ROADHOUSE

When the Water Came



Tirranna Springs Roadhouse sits at the confluence of the Gregory and Nicholson rivers, providing fuel, food, accommodation and essential services in one of the region's most flood-prone corridors. The roadhouse also hosts the Telstra communications tower and provides accommodation and employment for the local community. It is a critical service point for government workers, service providers and business travellers moving through the region. The business was substantially rebuilt at their own expense following major flood events in 2023 and 2024.

tirranna.com.au

The elevated Roadhouse. Image courtesy of Dianne Dredge.

“The water is still rising and more rain is coming,” he warned. “You need to leave right now.”

Jil didn’t see Tirranna Springs Roadhouse in its worst state. Tim made sure of that. “Please don’t,” he said. “You’re going to have nightmares for the rest of your life.” When Jil and the children finally returned, the roadhouse and their home had been gutted and partially cleaned. The worst was already over, but the recovery was just beginning.

THE PERFECT PLACE

It was 2014 when Tim met Jil while working on a station in Julia Creek. Jil, from Germany, was working as a jillaroo in the Australian outback. Tim was a builder from Victoria, doing station maintenance. They soon found themselves travelling and doing remote station work across the Gulf. It was on one of those trips when Tim came across Tirranna Springs Roadhouse, which had seen better days. It had been closed for several years prior and needed renovating, but Tim was determined that it would make the perfect place to call home, so they purchased it in 2018.

They’d barely finished their first dry season when COVID turned the Gulf into a pandemic exclusion zone. As they had been operating for less than 24 months, they were not eligible to receive the business support offered by the government. Their seasonal staff couldn’t access assistance either. They’d only worked nine-month contracts instead of the required 12 month contracts. That’s the way seasonal work rolls in the Gulf country. When the wet season comes around work slows, businesses shut, and the seasonal staff move on.

The carpentry business kept them going during the Covid pandemic. Contracts for renovations and maintenance of government housing in Burketown and Doomadgee meant they could access exclusion zones, so Tim could continue to work. But tourism stopped, the roadhouse closed, and Jil waited.

When restrictions were lifted, something unexpected happened. “We became a full occupancy caravan park. People were still not allowed to travel in other parts of Australia or internationally, but Queenslanders, and eventually others, were allowed to come here. So they did, in droves,” Jil explains.

Queenslanders flooded the Gulf. The roadhouse had over 40 caravans at times. Families from Cairns were coming for weekends. Everyone wanted pins and stickers and merchandise to prove they’d been somewhere. Jil’s animal farm, including poddy calves, chickens and ponies, became an unexpected drawcard. “Everyone loves an animal farm. They’d pet the poddy, feed the chickens and stay for a while.”

Jil and Tim added powered sites. The roadhouse shop was fully stocked with food and souvenirs. They had built the business they’d imagined. By 2022, they had plenty of stock, excellent staff, and a steady thriving operation. The future looked good. Then it started raining, and it didn’t stop.

THE FIRST FLOOD

The wet set early in October 2022 and in March 2023, markedly increased rain fell across the Gregory and Nicholson River catchments. Jil, Tim, their young family, and Tim’s brother Mick who was a partner in the business, were all at home as the waters rose. They had moved from their house to Uncle Mick’s donga 200 metres away, on slightly higher ground, but the water kept rising. Weather information and news were patchy as they watched and waited.

On one of those endless days, Jil heard a mustering helicopter overhead and recognised her neighbour. She phoned him to ask if he could see their horses. He was shocked to hear they were still at home. “The water is still rising and more rain is coming,” he warned. “You need to leave right now.”



With rising floodwaters surrounding them, the rescue operation was challenging but thankfully safely accomplished. Jil convinced Mick and Tim to come as well. The kids and Jil were flown out by helicopter to Burketown first. Mick and Tim secured the remaining dogs on the roof of a shed so they wouldn't jump into the flood waters and the helicopter returned for the men as well.

They landed in Burketown and were immediately pulled into meetings with government and local council, all desperately seeking information. No flood height marker information was available, and rain information for the Nicholson catchment in the Northern Territory wasn't available either. The decision was made to evacuate the town.

THE CHAOS

The following days and weeks were chaotic. "We moved 11 times during March and April 2023," Jil recounts. "From house to house in Burketown until none was deemed safe, to a station across from Normanton where friends invited us. It was also flooded in but safe on a hill with plenty of supplies. Back to Burketown where they camped in the kindergarten on the floor, then a house a friend kindly rented to us".

Meanwhile, Tim and Mick were flying in and out of Turranna every day, confronting the devastation.

Not only was Turranna inundated by almost three metres of water, but the roadhouse and their home was positioned exactly where the water flowed. "Everything got washed away: horses, poddy cows, chickens and pigs. Water tanks and pumps, diesel tanks and generators, cars, trucks and mowers. Every bed, pillow and blanket. Every pot, pan and cup. Every piece of merchandise, wet season food stores, building materials, kids' toys, family heirlooms, and office paperwork," recounts Jil.

The solar batteries, panels, and power system were destroyed. The fridges and freezers stopped working, and all the food rotted in the heat. Deep fryer oil mixed with mud. A cow washed into the house along with snakes and lizards. One of the diesel tanks from the generator dislodged, crashed into their house, and contaminated everything.

Tim told Jil not to come home. "Please don't," he said. "You're going to have nightmares for the rest of your life." So whilst Tim and Mick worked through the devastation, Jil stayed in Burketown.

Josh, their carpenter, and his partner Brianna, as well as their boilermaker Troy, who'd also lost everything they owned, came to help Tim and Mick in the cleaning effort. They cleaned what little could be saved. Helicopters ferried rubbish bags of salvaged belongings and contaminated debris out to Burketown. Jil received the bags in Burketown and set to work. Using a tiny 3.5 kilo washing machine, she washed everything they'd managed to save, spreading them across every surface to dry. In all of this chaos, Jil's parents arrived from Germany to help. So many other friends and family from far and wide offered help from afar but access issues, lack of accommodation and limited food supplies made hands-on help extremely difficult.

Local rangers came to help clean the roadhouse building, though health and safety regulations meant they couldn't touch the rotten meat. Friends arrived with machinery, replacement furniture, and tools. Others gurnied out rooms, picked up endless amounts of rubbish, and sent essentials like torches and portable fridges. A business acquaintance started a GoFundMe page that spread around the world. "The support was truly overwhelming, and we are still thankful every day for everyone that helped," Jil recalls.



Top: Jil's beloved chickens safe above the floodwater. Image courtesy of Jil Wilson. Bottom: Farm animals at Turranna Springs Roadhouse. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

“This was a once-in-a-lifetime event. It will never happen again,” they said. Tim and Jil went ahead anyway.

When Jil finally came back to Tirranna, she and Tim worked together in masks, scarves and gloves, with Vicks up their nostrils to clear what was left. They wire-tied wheelie bins shut and buried what they could.

Then Tim made a decision that everyone said was over the top. They’d lift the buildings three metres in the air and build several hills above flood level. They would tie down every water tank and lift their power supply. Everyone told them it was wasted effort. “This was a once-in-a-lifetime event. It will never happen again,” they said. Tim and Jil went ahead anyway.

THEN IT HAPPENED AGAIN

After an exhausting year, in January 2024 the family spent four weeks on holiday in Germany. Jil’s parents had flown from Germany to help with the 2023 recovery and upon leaving, they had urged their daughter and son-in-law to rest.

The flight home was scheduled for early February 2024, well ahead of the previous flood in March. But on 30th of January, the phone rang. The water was coming back up. The race to return and prepare was on. As they landed in Mount Isa, the roads to Tirranna were already closed, so they paid for a helicopter to fly them to Tirranna. The plan was to lift everything and clean up as soon as possible to stop the mould and mud.

This time they were ready. The main building was already elevated. The 2023 flood was around 2.6 metres. In 2024, it was 1.6 metres, then three weeks later, there was another peak at 1.2 metres.

They lost fences again. Roads washed away again. Gardens suffered. But the elevated buildings survived. The hills they built gave the animals and machinery dry ground to stand on. The fridges and freezers and mattresses they had replaced and stored in the lifted buildings were safe, the raised solar plant and generator did not electrocute everything. Water tanks stayed where they had been fitted. The work everyone had called ‘over the top’ saved them from starting over yet again and made cleaning up this time around so much more manageable.

RESILIENCE THROUGH DETAILS

Tim and Jil’s response to the flooding reveals something about how adaptation works in remote Australia. Resilience is dozens of small everyday innovations to prepare for the unimaginable. It’s adapting, learning, and fine tuning rather than a grand strategy or checklist that lives outside us. It’s being prepared and ready at all times because when the rain starts, it’s already too late.

This time, they upgraded to a bigger generator and lifted the solar plant higher. Local businesses who helped as first responders right after the flood to make safe and restore power, came every few months with new ideas and innovations to solve challenges. “When the roadhouse opened, we needed more power.” Jil explained. “We needed more solar. We needed to make the solution more clever.”



Top: Jil and her family during the flooding. Images courtesy of Jil Wilson.

The fuel bowzers posed a particular challenge. Standard installation meant extensive damage every time it flooded. The bowser supplier and Wilson team designed a system that could be unclipped and moved, something they'd never heard of, and that bowzers weren't meant to do, but it worked. Now Tirranna Springs Roadhouse has a 24-hour credit card fuel bowser with no cables back to the roadhouse, ready to lift away when needed. Each detail was "one less thing you have to pick up and carry away before the flood," as Jil put it.

But in amongst all this chaos, Tim understood something else. Whilst working through the devastation, covered in mud and diesel, he stopped to build Jil a hill for a new chicken coop.



"You'd better get some chickens," he said.

"What's the point without a safe place for them to live? And the incubator drowned anyways," came Jil's reply.

"Well you had better buy an incubator. We need more chickens."

"You don't even like chickens," Jil queried.

"No, but you like chickens. So, we need chickens."

So, before they even moved back into the house, Tim and Jil had horses and chickens living back at Tirranna, because mental health comes in many forms! They also had a pair of baby blue tongue lizards for Hunter and Holly thanks to a friendly freight company who shipped them in from Townsville on one of the first truck runs back into the region.

SEEING THE INVISIBLE

The physical recovery was hard, but being invisible to the systems that were meant to help was even tougher.

Out of five fuel stations across the entire region, Tirranna is one. Out of 200 beds, they provide 20. They employ indigenous apprentices, generate local jobs, host the Telstra tower that gives the area phone service, and provide accommodation and meals for government work crews and travellers. "We are one of the few employers in the area," Jil explains. "And without our accommodation, without our food, without our fuel, services can't be delivered."

When Tirranna stops functioning, many things stop. Road maintenance crews have nowhere to stay. Government projects stall. The community loses a gathering place, a fuel source, and information hub during the next disaster.

Yet Jil couldn't shake the feeling that the government response treated them as just another business seeking a handout. The community understood what government was unable to decipher: the role of the roadhouse as soft community infrastructure.

"They said: 'We need this place. We love this place. Let's fix it,'" Jil recalls. Doomadgee services were one of the first paying customers, booking a kids camp at Tirranna. Previous carpentry and roadhouse staff rallied back to help rebuild. Business acquaintances became trusted friends. Strangers sent handmade gifts. At the start Tim and Jil responded: "We don't have any business at the moment, we can't employ you." But that didn't stop anyone.

The systems designed for disaster recovery can't see what a community sees. In remote regions, businesses like Tirranna Springs Roadhouse are more than service providers. They are community weavers, knowledge brokers, and the nodes that hold fragile networks together. Government assistance came in fragments: crisis support, a reimbursement, a loan. But they needed \$3 million to properly rebuild. The response Jil heard? "You're just one human. You're just another person. Why should we give you money?" Because those same government services couldn't function without Tirranna, the argument was circular and exhausting.

Their federal member understood. He called often, sometimes late in the evening to listen to Jil trying to get their story out beyond the Gulf. Tourists still arrived at the gutted building months later, wanting to book in. People from interstate who had no idea there'd been a flood, didn't know there was no fuel or power. It created a long tail of frustration well after the flood event.

The invisibility wasn't just about the difficulty of obtaining government support. It was about recognition – about holding space for what had happened and recognising the presence of both personal and community trauma. Understandings about recovery differ. It's more than a process, a checklist, or funds to be allocated and managed. Recovery is the trauma, grief and loss that each person carries differently. It's rebuilding not just a business, but a community hub and a network that is invisible to those outside.

WHAT BROKE AND WHAT HELD

After the second flood, Tim's brother Mick, who'd been co-owner from the start, moved on. It was stressful losing a business partner whilst still dealing with recovery, but it was a necessary step to recovery and, ultimately, happiness. Mick still lives close by and Tirranna will always be his second home.

Josh and Brianna stayed. Troy stayed. Stuart came back and is still the best woodworker around. Repeat travellers, Wendy and Steven, arrived back again in their caravan and are the face of the roadhouse kitchen. They offered to help when Jil and Tim couldn't be there and are already making plans to come back next year. This kind of commitment from people who choose to return, who call it their home away from home, reveals why Tirranna has become so much more than a roadhouse.

Being part of the community and offering what the community needs is the philosophy that shapes everything at Tirranna. Jil sells locals' handcrafts without taking commission. Burketown Rodeo Association shirts, where all proceeds go back to the association, and books by local authors are also sold. When locals approach with ideas for products they need, such as poddy calf milk, fishing gear, work shirts, she tries to stock them.

The roadhouse hosts kindergarten visits to the farm animals, gardening days for the community, and donates to the rodeo, camp drafts, the Ranger Forum, local footy clubs, the fishing competition, and Naidoc Week events. "We try to help where we can," she says.

The trust with Doomadgee runs deep. "We lived there when we first arrived, and our kids still have strong ties there, learning language, culture and bush tucker from people who've become family." The Tirranna Springs Roadhouse provides a meeting place where Doomadgee locals and Burketown residents, workers and visitors all overlap. It's a neutral ground in a region where connection matters. "We're a tourism business but also so much more. We don't just harvest income. The money stays and circulates in the local community, where giving back is how you live in a place where people matter."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Today, Tirranna Springs Roadhouse sits three metres above the ground, its water tanks are tied down, its solar panels and generator are elevated, its fuel bowsers are ready to disconnect, and its gas bottles are caged. The grass has grown again. Hunter is turning nine, Holly is six. The chickens are back. Every adaptation Tim was told was "over the top" is now just how Tirranna works.

Josh and Troy are furthering their careers. Brianna operates machinery, collecting tickets and qualifications. The roadhouse hosts over 40 visitors at a time when it's busy. The carpentry business is employing local staff and indigenous apprentices working on local infrastructure and housing projects.

Tirranna is a roadhouse that floods. It's in a place where insurance markets have failed, where infrastructure is scarce, and community connection is the means of survival. However, Tirranna Springs Roadhouse stands proud. Ready for the next wet season, the next flood, the next challenge that everyone will say is unprecedented.

"Wildlife has returned and our community enjoys the space once again. It serves fresh food again, our staff have a home again, so do we. We feel more resilient and better prepared. We are not scared of the rain and look forward to the quieter season. We also feel very connected to the Gulf community, now more than ever. We feel a part of this place and this place is within us." says Jil.

When asked what community and her business needs, Jil's answer comes quickly. "We still need more notice, we need better river height reporting, correct river systems information and flood rain monitors with connectivity even in bad weather. We need greater connectivity and custom evacuation plans."

Looking back, Jil reflects that she and Tim learned something important about resilience through two floods and a pandemic, "Listen to your own knowledge of place, not to people who say it can't happen again. Build what works for your conditions, not what the regulations say should work. And when you fall apart (because you will fall apart), standing in a gutted building wondering why anyone would do this, make sure you have chickens waiting when you come home."

Those small acts of care, of planning, of understanding what matters beyond just rebuilding structures is resilience. Resilience is when you're standing at the edge of the map, on a deck three metres above the ground, watching the horizon for the next rains.

WUGUDAJI-ADELS GROVE

The Meaning of Resilience



Wugudaji – Adels Grove is owned by Waanyi Advancement Limited and operates year-round at Lawn Hill Creek. Diverse facilities are on offer including unpowered sites, a café, a licenced bar, a food truck, camp kitchen, laundry, fuel, shop, canoe and bike hire, pontoon boat rides and an airstrip with AvGas. The site is approximately 10 kilometres from Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park.

wugudaji-adelsgrove.com.au

Canoeing at Wugudaji-Adels Grove. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.



We went to bed that evening with the water levels higher than usual, but we weren't concerned. By morning, everything had changed.

Melissa, Wugudaji-Adels Grove

Adels Grove sits on Lawn Hill Creek just 10 kilometres downstream from Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park. The creek carves through ancient Cambrian limestone, creating gorges which have watched water rise and fall for millennia. The grove itself is an oasis, a pocket of lush vegetation fed by permanent spring water, and a jewel in the Gulf Savannah visitor experience. It has survived countless wet seasons, each one reshaping the land. For thousands of years, the Waanyi people have known this country's moods and understood its cycles.

In 1920, Albert de Lestang took up the property as an experimental botanical garden, and by the 1930s was supplying seeds to botanical gardens worldwide. A fire destroyed Albert's home and his entire research collection in the early 1950s and, heartbroken, he passed away a few years later. The grove was sold and began its new life as a campground in the 1980s. Waanyi Advancement Limited purchased the property in 2018, returning the land to its Traditional Custodians.

By early 2022, the property was being managed by Melissa and her partner as part of a management team alongside Ken, the Project Manager from Waanyi Advancement Limited. Arriving from France in 2019, Melissa and her partner first started working at the neighbouring Lawn Hill Station and then moved to Wugudaji-Adels Grove to work in the restaurant. By 2022, they had stepped into management roles. "There's something really special about this place," says Melissa. "It's the only place in all my travels that I've felt truly at home." At the end of the 2022 season, Melissa and her partner agreed to stay on as caretakers for the wet season. Then the rains came.

WHEN THE WATER ROSE

The 2023 wet season was extreme. In the lead up to the flood event, Lawn Hill Gorge had recorded 242mm and 413mm of rainfall in January and February respectively. On 3 March, 196mm fell in just 24 hours. Upstream in the National Park, where the cliffs of the gorge constrain water flow, post-flood modelling suggested flood depths in the order of 30m and a velocity of flow greater than 6 to 7m/sec causing significant vegetation loss and posing significant risk to park staff. Downstream, at Wugudaji-Adels Grove, modelling suggested a flood level of 15 to 20m with velocities of 3 to 4m/sec.

"The rain fell for nearly three months without a break", Melissa says. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service staff observed flood levels rising between 3 and 7 March, which was considered higher than usual but not exceptional. "We went to bed that evening with the water levels higher than usual, but we weren't concerned. By morning, everything had changed," Melissa recounts.

"We woke to find the water levels significantly higher" recalls Melissa. "Mature trees by the creek were no longer visible, having been dislodged by the sheer volume and velocity of the water. The water had almost reached the steps of the accommodation, about 200 metres from the usual creek line." Evacuation took place the same day.

The response was immediate: Packing everything they could and moving what they could to higher ground, the team of six waited for helicopter evacuation later that day. From the helicopter and later at Lawn Hill Station, the scale of what was happening became visible. "It was a sea all around," Melissa said of the view.

"Only the tops of the trees were visible, everything else was under the water." Upstream, the park's staff had also been evacuated, observing from the air the funnelling effect of the walls of the gorge, containing and then accelerating the water's flow below the gorge mouth. In its path downstream lay Adel's Grove.

After more than two weeks in Mount Isa waiting for assessment teams, Melissa and her partner finally returned on 22 March 2023 to find devastation. Where there were once inviting riverbeds and stands of shade trees, there were now rocks and mud. Debris was caught in fences and clogged the waterways. A tank from Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park 10 kilometres away was lodged in a tree. The landscape had been transformed.

Lost in the floods were 16 dongas, with a total of 57 rooms (including 15 brand new staff accommodation), the reception with three medical/storerooms, the full restaurant/bar/deck, two cold rooms, two containers, three restaurant storerooms, a toilet block, a shower block, two fuel pumps and underground tanks, two small offices and four decks with sheds.

THE LONG RECOVERY

The physical exhaustion of the cleanup was matched by the emotional weight of the devastation. “We didn’t know where to start,” Melissa remembers. “We were working maybe five or six hours a day and just sleeping. There was no clean water and for the first couple of weeks we caught fish to eat.”

The Grove itself was perhaps the most challenging area to clean. Between March and May 2023, they mostly worked alone to tackle the recovery with occasional assistance from tradespeople. A team of ex-Armed Services volunteers arrived to help shovel mud. It was a help, but more was needed. Eventually four workers on international visas joined them, and on 14 July 2023, just months after the disaster, they reopened the campground to visitors.

For Melissa, the last years are a mix of accomplishment and frustration. “Before coming here I’d spent seven years studying philosophy and sociology. I’d never done anything with my hands”. At Lawn Hill Station and during their initial work at Wugudaji-Adel’s Grove they had learned new skills, but the scope of what was required in the recovery process was staggering and included operating chainsaws, moving earth, and debris and vegetation. “It was the first time in my life where I’ve been confronted with a potentially dangerous environment and having to make it safe to live”.

THE RESPONSE THAT WASN’T THERE

Adding to the trauma of the flood itself was what came after, and what didn’t come.

For a remote tourism operation to recover from catastrophic flooding, certain support systems are required. The public assumes that insurance covers losses. Government grants provide recovery funding. Volunteer networks mobilise. Equipment and expertise arrive. But the reality can be quite different and the Wugudaji-Adels Grove story unfolds differently.

Few volunteers arrived because distance and isolation made it impossible. The recovery team was sourced from international backpackers working on visas. There were no grants for immediate recovery because the government didn’t release recovery programs until much later. Funding timelines, assessment processes, and priorities that work for coastal centres don’t reach places like Wugudaji-Adels Grove quickly enough to matter during the critical recovery window.

What Wugudaji-Adels Grove needed in the moment was basic: “Road trains to remove the rubbish and a big excavator would have made it a lot easier for us,” Melissa reflects. Instead, we faced a mountain of waste including broken buildings, waste, and vegetation, with no financially viable way to dispose of it properly. What Wugudaji-Adels Grove needed was three months of sustained heavy equipment operation and waste removal. Much like the rest of the region, most of what it received was financed and arranged by themselves.



Left: Melissa showing flood height in the restaurant area. Image courtesy of Melissa Gerard. Right: Melissa with a kangaroo. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

THE VISITOR DIVIDE

When Wugudaji-Adels Grove reopened to the public, visitors fell into two types.

"Some people didn't know that we had floods, and that Boodjamulla National Park was closed. They just complained," Melissa says. "Others had been through a natural disaster, and they understood a little of what we were going through."

The contrast was clear between the parts which were clean and the parts which hadn't been cleaned. For those willing to see it, Wugudaji-Adels Grove offered visible evidence of catastrophe and ongoing recovery. "We were just working flat out all the time – clearing, rebuilding, restoring.

But that didn't stop some visitors from complaining, and those complaints stung. Any suggestion that the place was rundown because workers were foreigners was hurtful and untrue.

WHAT VISITORS NEED TO KNOW

For Melissa, helping visitors understand is crucial. Understanding how natural processes shape this ancient landscape, and what a flood event looks like, should be part of the visitor experience. "They need pictures of before and after. They need to understand what was lost and what has been rebuilt. They need to understand that recovery here is not the same as what happens in the city. There is no volunteer army and repairs take a long time."

Understanding how natural processes shape this ancient landscape, and what a flood event looks like, should be part of the visitor experience.

Understanding the landscape's transformation matters too. Since the floods, "it's a lot greener...there are a lot of creeks which were dry for years and years and which are now flowing."

Melissa sees this as part of a larger perspective that visitors need to understand. The process of nature regenerating itself and being conscious of what is around them can help them see this place as an ancient and evolving landscape. "We need to encourage them to be more conscious of what is around them".

WHAT RESILIENCE LOOKS LIKE

Three years after the floods, Wugudaji-Adels Grove operates again. The campground is open. The Grove has been painstakingly cleared. Mountains of flood debris have 'disappeared'. The cafe building that remained above water serves visitors who come seeking rest and to admire the beauty of this ancient landscape.

But the recovery is incomplete, constrained by resources and the reality of remote operations. The story Melissa wants told is the story of what happens when people are left to rebuild in remote locations. They show up with the dedication, tenacity and perseverance that only a true love of place can muster. It doesn't matter where they are from, it matters where they belong. From European philosophy to flooded grounds to finding home in the Gulf Savannah, Melissa's story reveals that resilience requires a willingness to stay, to rebuild, and an invitation to visitors to understand the magnitude of what has happened and what that means.



Caring for a baby joey at Wugudaji-Adel's Grove. Image courtesy of Stephanie Toy.

STORIES OF THE GULF SAVANNAH

Key Insights and Learnings



Albert River near Burketown. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

In 2022–23, the Gulf Savannah region experienced impacts from severe monsoonal flooding and the region was activated under joint Queensland and Australian Government Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. This joint funding has supported the Gulf Savannah Stories project, a key strategic investment in regional tourism resilience and business capacity development across one of Australia's most remote and challenging operating environments. Delivered by Gulf Savannah Development (GSD) in partnership with the Tourism CoLab, this story telling initiative identifies critical insights into how tourism operators cope with crises and build resilience in the Gulf Savannah region.

This project leveraged storytelling as a practical mechanism to:

- Strengthen tourism business recovery and resilience
- Build storytelling capacity among individual businesses
- Create a marketable regional narrative while celebrating local uniqueness
- Support the extension of the tourism season for tourism operators
- Strengthen business networks across council boundaries.

Following an expression of interest process, the project engaged 14 tourism-related businesses in a storytelling process, producing both individual business stories and a regional story that represents the collective character and resilience of Gulf Savannah operators. Individual and collective learning is a natural outcome.

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

The Gulf Savannah Region encompasses approximately 186,000 square kilometres of tropical savannah, and supports a population of over 6,000 residents, including several Indigenous communities. Covering 10% of Queensland's land mass and less than 1% of the population, the region spans the islands and coastline of the Gulf of Carpentaria – six Local Government areas from west of the Atherton Tablelands to the Northern Territory border – and has many major river catchments that carry monsoon rains across flat, low-lying terrain flowing into the Gulf of Carpentaria. The region's remoteness defines both its tourism appeal and its operational challenges.

Flooding is woven into the rhythm of life in the Gulf. Monsoonal rains feed the vast river systems each wet season, replenishing floodplains and sustaining the cattle industry that dominates regional land use. However, in recent years, successive extreme flood events have tested communities and businesses beyond typical seasonal disruption.

In early 2023, prolonged monsoonal rains caused extensive flooding across the Gulf Country, isolating towns including Burketown, Gregory, Normanton, Karumba, and Doomadgee for weeks and triggering mandatory evacuations. In late 2023, Tropical Cyclone Jasper brought record-breaking rainfall to Far North Queensland, with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority activating Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements to support affected communities. Flooding in 2024 resulted in parts of the region evacuated and again isolated for long periods of time. The 2025 wet season delivered another significant blow when the North and Far North Tropical Low (January–February 2025) produced record-breaking flood conditions, again isolating Gulf communities and prompting further disaster recovery initiatives.

Most recently, in late December 2025, heavy monsoonal rainfall once again severed road access to Burketown, Normanton, Karumba, and Doomadgee, with floodwaters persisting into early April 2026. The cumulative impact of these events on tourism has been profound.

Gulf Savannah communities include Normanton and Karumba in Carpentaria Shire, Burketown and Gregory in Burke Shire, Croydon Shire, and Georgetown, Forsayth, Einasleigh and Mount Surprise in Etheridge Shire. Normanton and Karumba serve as the primary fishing and coastal tourism hub.

Indigenous Australians represent significant proportions of local populations: 86.1% on Mornington Island, 91.9% in Doomadgee, and notable numbers in Burke and Carpentaria Shires. The Traditional Owners maintain deep connections to Country.

The Gulf Savannah economy is dominated by cattle grazing, fishing and mining, with small scale tourism representing 7.5% of the regional economy. Annually, 98,000 visitors stay 625,265 nights and spend an estimated \$73 million (at June 2023). Across the broader region, tourism products span heritage rail journeys (Savannahlander and Gulflander services), World Heritage fossil sites (Riversleigh), geological attractions (Cobbold Gorge, Undara Lava Tubes, Talaroo Hot Springs, Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park), world-class fishing experiences, Indigenous and cultural experiences, and authentic outback encounters that attract grey nomads, families, and adventure travellers seeking remote Australian experiences.

Based on DRFA funding guidelines, Carpentaria Shire (covering Normanton, Karumba), Burke Shire (Burketown, Gregory), Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire, and Mornington Shire were eligible to be included in this project.

Targeted investment in infrastructure, promotion, development of small businesses and new experiences, would significantly increase the Gulf Savannah's visitor economy.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY CONSTRAINTS

Road accessibility is the most critical constraint on tourism business viability in the Gulf Savannah. The Savannah Way contains approximately 100 kilometres of unsealed sections in Queensland, several sections of single lane paved roads, and many river crossings highly susceptible to flooding during the green/wet season (traditionally late November–March).

The challenge is twofold: physical infrastructure and information. Roads are frequently impassable during the wet, but road condition information is often inaccurate, slow to update, or inconsistent across platforms. Operators report that roads are quick to be listed as closed but slow to be reopened on state and national platforms, even when local councils report accessibility conditions on a daily basis.

Visitor information centres have been known to advise against travel on routes that are open, and travellers unable to find reliable information simply choose alternative destinations. This information gap compounds the infrastructure challenge, effectively extending the impact of each weather event well beyond the period of actual disruption. While recent funding commitments for road infrastructure are welcome, they are already under pressure from the increasing frequency of major flooding and the cost and complexity of delivering and maintaining infrastructure in remote settings.

Other structural impediments in the Gulf Savannah region include: reliable energy, technology and digital connectivity, long term housing for residents and workers, short term accommodation for visitors, commercial passenger transportation for residents and visitors. Investment in fit for purpose infrastructure would strengthen community and business resilience, while also growing the regional economy.

CLIMATE VULNERABILITY AND SEASONAL CONSTRAINTS

The tropical monsoonal climate creates two distinct operational seasons that fundamentally shape tourism business models. The red or dry season (April–October) delivers optimal conditions for outdoor activities and tourism access, concentrating visitor demand and revenue generation into this period. The green or wet season (late November–March) brings humid northerly flows with intense rainfall that can isolate communities and strand visitors.

This seasonality creates business challenges including a concentrated operating window, extended periods of minimal revenue, cash flow constraints, workforce retention difficulties, and the need for substantial financial reserves to sustain operations through the wet season. Tourism operators must adapt their business models to generate sufficient revenue during a shorter operating season to sustain year-round viability.

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling serves as a strategic capacity-building tool particularly suited to the Gulf Savannah context for several reasons:

01

Stories function as knowledge capture and transfer systems, documenting adaptive practices, coping strategies, and resilience responses. This experiential knowledge, when articulated and shared as stories, becomes accessible to other operators facing similar challenges.

02

Storytelling strengthens regional identity and fosters “connective tissue”. Shared narratives build social cohesion across diverse groups, create mutual understanding and collaborative opportunities. The process of sharing stories helps communities process trauma from disruptive events, and supports psychological resilience and wellbeing.

03

Authentic local stories shape value alignment between visitors and the authentic experiences on offer, which in turn differentiates the Gulf Savannah from competing destinations. Compelling narratives about seasonal experiences enable operators to articulate shoulder season value propositions, potentially extending operating windows, and building resilience against extreme seasonality.

04

Stories can influence policy by humanising statistics and demonstrating real-world impacts of infrastructure deficits, funding decisions, and regulatory frameworks on remote communities. Well-crafted narratives make abstract policy challenges tangible for decision-makers, potentially accelerating support for regional development initiatives.

05

The storytelling process itself builds business capacity by helping operators articulate their unique value, understand their market positioning, develop marketing content, and forge meaningful connections with visitors and fellow businesses. This capacity remains with businesses, creating a legacy rather than temporary intervention.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The Gulf Savannah Stories project employed a co-creation methodology involving a combination of face-to-face visits and online sessions between September 2025 and January 2026. Facilitators conducted in-depth interviews with operators, capturing their experiences in responding to disruptive events, adapting to infrastructure constraints, managing seasonal operations, and maintaining commitment to place and community despite hardships. These interviews form the foundation for individually crafted business stories that represent each operator's unique offering, values, and journey.

The project delivered three interconnected outputs:

1. A business story suitable for marketing and communications use for each of the participating businesses;
2. A collective regional narrative that positions the Gulf Savannah as a distinctive tourism destination characterised by authentic experiences and extraordinary operator resilience; and
3. A storytelling toolkit, as a tool to guide future storytelling activities.

The approach honours operators' deep knowledge of the business environment, and helps translate this knowledge into compelling narratives for external audiences.

Resilience operates across multiple interconnected dimensions, reflecting both the challenges faced and the strengths developed by Gulf Savannah tourism operators.

RESILIENCE IN OPERATOR NARRATIVES

Analysis of operator stories reveals that resilience operates across multiple interconnected dimensions, reflecting both the challenges faced and the strengths developed by Gulf Savannah tourism operators:

Economic resilience: adapting to vulnerability

Operators demonstrate sophisticated responses to the region's economic vulnerabilities, including high seasonality, the limitations of the traditional operating window, and shifting market opportunities. Successful businesses develop diversified revenue streams, flexible operational models that accommodate seasonal fluctuations, and financial reserves to sustain low-revenue periods. Pricing structures, booking policies, and operational rhythms align carefully with seasonal patterns, particularly the compressed April–October visitor window. This adaptive business practice represents a crucial strength, with operators showing remarkable innovation in identifying market gaps, observing new opportunities, and creating multiple income streams.

Social resilience: community connections as foundation

Social resilience emerges as perhaps the most critical dimension, directly addressing the challenges of physical isolation and mental health wellbeing. Strong social networks, commitment to place, sense of belonging, and community support systems provide crucial buffers against isolation. Operators consistently emphasise the importance of relationships with neighbours, other businesses, local communities, and repeat visitors. These connections create informal safety nets, knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and emotional support structures. Mental health challenges arising from isolation, disaster trauma, and business pressures are mitigated through these social bonds, although access to formal support services remains limited.



Leichhardt River at Floraville Downs. Image courtesy of Tourism and Events Queensland.

Operators exhibit remarkable determination, viewing obstacles as problems to be solved rather than insurmountable barriers. This personal agency combines with a deep attachment to place and a commitment to community, which in turn creates a powerful foundation.

Environmental Resilience: Surviving Climate Variability

Climate impacts and natural disaster present ongoing challenges, including extreme weather events (flooding), the Covid-19 pandemic, prolonged wet seasons affecting accessibility, and cumulative impacts on infrastructure. Operators develop deep environmental literacy, reading seasonal patterns, understanding local microclimates, and adapting operations accordingly. This includes flexible booking policies accommodating weather uncertainty, infrastructure designed for extreme conditions, and business models that adapt in real time. Innovation includes site-specific, custom solutions to flooding, off-grid energy solutions, and building construction and site selection based on local knowledge of flood history and terrain, while managing planning or regulatory requirements.

Infrastructure Resilience: Managing Isolation

Physical isolation and infrastructure limitations shape every aspect of operations. Single supply routes, distance from services, limited road access (especially during wet season), and vulnerability to supply chain disruptions require sophisticated adaptive strategies. Successful operators maintain substantial stockpiles, develop multiple supplier relationships, invest in self-sufficiency (fuel storage, water systems, backup generators), and build strong logistics knowledge. Workforce challenges, including the difficulty of attracting and retaining staff, seasonal employment patterns and skills shortages, demand creative recruitment strategies, multi-skilling, and reliance on 'hands-on' owners and family members.

Institutional Resilience: Navigating Policy Landscapes

Operators face significant challenges accessing government support, with policies often failing to recognise specific circumstances and the multiple roles of operators. Limited advocacy mechanisms and geographic distance from key decision-makers compound these difficulties. The resilience of operators shows up in how operators develop policy literacy, build their advocacy capacity, leverage regional development organisations (e.g. Gulf Savannah Development), respond and recover from disaster events within a limited operational window (i.e. the dry season) and create evidence of regional needs. The solution-oriented thinking and personal agency demonstrated by operators often involves proactive engagement with government processes, despite frustration with outcomes.

Personal Resilience: Determination and Passion

Underpinning all other dimensions of resilience are personal characteristics. These include resilience mindset, perseverance, passion for the region, and willingness to face challenges. Operators exhibit remarkable determination, viewing obstacles as problems to be solved rather than insurmountable barriers. This personal agency combines with a deep attachment to place and a commitment to community, which in turn creates a powerful foundation. However, this strength can also create vulnerability, with operators sometimes persisting beyond limits they are personally comfortable with.

Interconnected Dimensions

Resilience is an interconnected system of skills and knowledge rather than a set of isolated characteristics. Economic adaptability depends on social networks and local knowledge. Environmental resilience requires infrastructure investment and institutional support. Personal determination sustains efforts across all dimensions but requires social connection for long-term wellbeing. Understanding these interdependencies is crucial for developing effective support mechanisms that strengthen the entire resilience system.

Karumba foreshore. Image courtesy of Dianne Dredge.



KEY INSIGHTS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The Gulf Savannah Stories project generated several critical insights for policy-makers addressing regional development, tourism resilience, and remote community sustainability.

01 Improved Access to the Gulf

Investment in fit for purpose road infrastructure is critical to improving access to the Gulf, enabling growth of the visitor economy and supporting community resilience and economic development.

Sealing and widening roads and raising frequently flooded causeways and bridges is important for future proofing. In particular, the Gilbert River bridge between Georgetown and Croydon, the Norman River Bridge between Croydon and Normanton, and the Normanton–Burketown and Burketown–Doomadgee sections of the Savannah Way would deliver immediate accessibility improvements with cascading tourism, economic and community benefits.

02 Business Support

Business support programs need to be designed for remote contexts, acknowledging that generic tourism development initiatives often fail to address specific challenges facing remote Gulf Savannah operators. Support mechanisms should recognise limited operating cycles, higher infrastructure costs, workforce attraction challenges, and longer timelines required for business development in remote locations. Programs should facilitate knowledge sharing between operators, support collaborative approaches to shared challenges, and build regional capacity rather than creating dependency on external expertise.

03 Place-Based Approaches

The project demonstrates the value of place-based, co-created approaches that centre on operator knowledge and experience. Policy development for remote regions benefits from deep engagement with operators and communities, ensuring initiatives address actual rather than assumed needs. The storytelling methodology employed in this project offers a replicable model for other contexts requiring authentic stakeholder engagement and an understanding of how decisions are made on the ground.

04 Mental Health and Wellbeing

In the context of disaster recovery, mental health and wellbeing support for remote operators requires attention. The isolation, exposure to disaster, and seasonal intensity create psychological pressures inadequately addressed by current service provision. These operators sustain community infrastructure, volunteer in emergency services, and fill service delivery gaps well beyond their commercial role, yet these contributions remain largely invisible in policy and funding frameworks. Being heard and acknowledged is paramount. The opportunity to share stories and have the realities of remote operation recognised is itself essential to sustaining resilience. Support designed for remote tourism contexts, rather than adapted from metropolitan models, would strengthen both operator wellbeing and long-term business sustainability.

05 Investment to Embrace Seasons

The feasibility of developing and sustaining new tourism products can be limited due to the Gulf's remoteness and seasonality. At the same time, these conditions also offer a distinct opportunity to design tourism that is place-based, culturally grounded, and aligned with the Gulf's seasonal rhythms.

To support this, targeted investment and policy programs should include weighted consideration for developing new regional tourism experiences by assisting remote Gulf and Outback operators.

Support for Indigenous-led, culture and nature-based tourism should be grounded in Traditional Owner leadership and decision-making, with frameworks that enable communities to determine whether, how, and when tourism development occurs. Significant Indigenous populations across the Gulf Savannah are ready to share their cultural strengths and economic aspirations – we need to ensure any development occurs at the community's pace and direction, respecting cultural protocols and supporting genuine Indigenous participation in every aspect. This requires fit-for-place policy and investment settings, and where appropriate, mentorship and partnerships that build long-term value for Indigenous and remote communities alongside sustainable regional visitation.

This approach can help extend the Gulf tourism season in ways that support community wellbeing and a more resilient visitor economy.

OUTCOMES AND LEGACY

The Gulf Savannah Stories project aims to build storytelling capacity within participating businesses in addition to a cohesive regional narrative. The project also honours the commitment, creativity, and resilience of tourism operators who have chosen to build businesses in one of Australia's most challenging environments. Their stories deserve to be told and valued for the insights they provide into business ingenuity and adaptation, and the human connections that sustain remote communities.

Participating Businesses

ASH'S@THE POINT CAFE / ASH'S HOLIDAY UNITS

Ash's@The Point Cafe / Ash's Holiday Units provides accommodation in units, cabins, and a cottage. They operate a café known for their fish and chips made with a traditional batter recipe that hasn't changed for over 40 years.

ashsholidayunits.com.au

BALLOON ALOFT / YAGURLI TOURS

Balloon Aloft operates hot air balloon flights over the Gangalidda and Garawa lands in partnership with 100% Indigenous-owned Yagurli Tours. Experience breathtaking views of Australia's largest salt plain, braided river systems, and stunning sunsets in the unique Gulf Savannah environment.

balloonaloft.com/locations/burketown

DOOMADGEE ABORIGINAL SHIRE

Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire is a remote community on the traditional country of the Gangalidda, Garawa, Waanyi and Yunyulla peoples. Since 2023, the community has supported the establishment of sixteen new local businesses through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business incubator One Business, spanning industries from solar maintenance and construction to bush product manufacturing and cattle mustering. A community-designed development plan is building four precincts focused on economic, cultural, tourism and recreational renewal on the community's own terms.

doomadgee.qld.gov.au

GULF COUNTRY CARAVAN PARK

Gulf Country Caravan Park operates in Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria, offering powered and unpowered sites, cabins and amenities for touring visitors, fishing enthusiasts and seasonal workers. The park welcomes travellers during both wet and dry seasons and is the perfect stay for those seeking to experience this remote region.

gulfcountrycaravanpark.com.au

GULFLAND MOTEL & CARAVAN PARK

Gulfland Motel & Caravan Park operates year-round in Normanton, offering motel accommodation, caravan sites, and long-term worker housing. The facility is owned and operated by selectability as part of their commitment to providing quality aged care services in remote Gulf communities.

gulflandmotelandcaravanpark.com.au

HELL'S GATE ROADHOUSE

Hell's Gate Roadhouse is a family-owned roadhouse located on the Cliffdale Station, 50km east of the Northern Territory/Queensland border. They offer scenic flights over the Gulf and nearby rock formations, meals, accommodation and camping facilities.

hellsgateroadhouse.com.au

ELITE AVIATION SERVICES (HYLTON)

Elite Aviation Services provides fixed-wing charter and scenic flights in the remote corridor around Hell's Gate Roadhouse, and connects people and the surrounding region to other Gulf Savannah destinations including daytrips to Sweers island. The service offers bus tour passengers and independent visitors aerial access to the Gulf country, and is part of the visitor experience at Hell's Gate.

eliteaviationservices.com.au

KERRY D FISHING CHARTERS

Kerry D Fishing Charters operates from Karumba in the Gulf of Carpentaria, offering full-day offshore charters, half-day experiences, and specialised ladies' fishing days. Their two boats accommodate groups from intimate family outings to larger corporate and special interest groups.

kerrydfishing.com.au

MORNINGTON ISLAND ART CENTRE

The Mornington Island Art Centre is a community arts centre on Mornington Island (Gununa), and operates on the traditional country of the Lardil, Yangkaal, Kaiadilt and Gangalidda peoples. The Centre supports artists to produce and sell their work, provides a space for cultural knowledge to be shared between Elders and young people, and connects visitors to the living culture and Country of the island.

morningtonisland.com.au

NORTHERN HELI-CO

Northern Heli-Co provides air work and tourism services from Karumba Airport in Queensland's western Gulf country. Services include heli-fishing charters, scenic flights, aerial photography, survey work, sling operations, aerial burning, feral animal control and air transport. Operated by experienced pilot Dan Horsford, the R44 helicopter is equipped with safety equipment, satellite phone and GPS tracking.

northernheli.co

SAVANNAH LODGE

Savannah Lodge, Burketown, is an oasis in the outback, offering self-contained, air-conditioned accommodation, including accessible options. Perfect for both business guests and leisure travellers, the Lodge provides all the essentials for a comfortable and hospitable stay. Be sure to visit Poppy Joe's Bar, where Gulf Savannah hospitality shines.

savannah-lodge.com.au

SWEERS ISLAND RESORT

Sweers Island Resort is a remote fishing and island destination located on Sweers Island, sixty kilometres offshore in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The resort offers accommodation and guided fishing experiences and is accessible by light plane or boat. The resort operates seasonally, closing from December through March, and relies on fortnightly barge deliveries for supplies.

sweers.com.au

TIRRANNA SPRINGS ROADHOUSE

Tirranna Springs Roadhouse sits at the confluence of the Gregory and Nicholson rivers, providing fuel, food, accommodation and essential services in one of the region's most flood-prone corridors. The roadhouse also hosts the Telstra communications tower and provides accommodation and employment for the local community. It is a critical service point for government workers, service providers and business travellers moving through the region. The business was substantially rebuilt at their own expense following major flood events in 2023 and 2024.

tirranna.com.au

WUGUDAJI – ADELS GROVE

Wugudaji – Adels Grove is owned by Waanyi Advancement Limited and operates year-round at Lawn Hill Creek. Diverse facilities are on offer including unpowered sites, a café, a licenced bar, a food truck, camp kitchen, laundry, fuel, shop, canoe and bike hire, pontoon boat rides and an airstrip with AvGas. The site is approximately 10 kilometres from Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park.

wugudaji-adelsgrove.com.au



gulfsavannahdevelopment.com.au

ISBN 978-1-7646623-0-7 (Digital copy)
ISBN 978-1-7646623-1-4 (Print copy)