

Ubirr Art Site Ubirr (Oo-beerr)

There are three main art sites at Ubirr:

- the Main Gallery
- the Namarrgarn Sisters
- the Rainbow Serpent.

The sites can be reached by following a one kilometre circular walking track from the car park. The walk takes about an hour. The lower sections of the track provide

wheelchair access. For fitter visitors it's worth allowing another thirty minutes to climb to the lookout. Ubirr is open from 8.30 am until sunset in the dry season (1 April - 30 November) and from 2.00 pm until sunset in the wet season (1 December - 31 March).



The main gallery of rock art



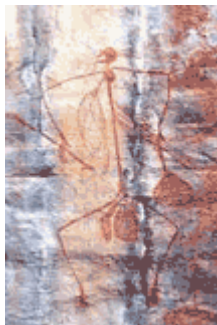
Tourists examine the main gallery of rock art at Ubirr

Groups of Aboriginal people camped in rock shelters around Ubirr to take advantage of the enormous variety of foods available from the East Alligator River, the Nadab floodplain, the woodlands, and the surrounding stone country. The rock overhang of the main gallery provided an area where a family could set up camp. Food items were regularly painted on the back wall, one on top of the other, to pay respect to the particular animal, to ensure future hunting success, or to illustrate a noteworthy catch. Among the animals painted in the main gallery are barramundi, catfish, mullet,

goannas, long-necked turtles, pig-nosed turtles, rock ringtail possums, and wallabies. Although Aboriginal people no longer live in the shelter, the animals depicted are still hunted for food today.



Most of the X-ray art in the main gallery is from the freshwater period, so it is less than 1,500 years old. There are also some interesting examples of contact art. One 'white fella' is depicted in trousers, shirt and boots and with his hands in his pockets; another, with a pipe in his mouth and his hands on his hips, is 'bossing us Aboriginal people around'. These figures are probably early buffalo hunters painted around the 1880s. Buffalo hunters employed Aboriginal people to help them hunt and run buffalo camps-they paid them with 'a little bit of tucker and some tobacco'.



Mabuyu figure Ubirr

A painting by Mimi spirits can be seen high up on the ceiling of the overhang. Aboriginal people describe how the Mimi spirits came out of the cracks in the rocks, pulled the ceiling rock down, painted the yellow and red sorcery image, and then pushed the rock back into place.

Close to the main gallery is a painting of a thylacine (Tasmanian tiger). As noted, archaeological evidence suggests that thylacines became extinct on the mainland about 2,000 to 3,000 years ago.

The Namarrgarn Sisters

The Namarrgarn (pronounced nar-marr-garn) sisters are depicted at Ubirr pulling string apart. They live in the stars, from where they can throw down pieces of string,

attach them to people's organs, quickly travel down the string, and make people very sick. The story of the Namarrgarn sisters told at Ubirr goes like this.

The two sisters spent a great deal of time playing and talking together-they were good friends. One day, while they were sitting and chatting by a billabong, one of the sisters decided to go for a walk. When she got to the end of the billabong she jumped into the water and changed into a crocodile. She swam back under the water to where her sister was sitting and leapt out, terrifying her.

Out of sight, she changed back to herself and returned to where her sister sat. She was so amused when her sister told of being frightened by a crocodile that she played the trick over and over again. One day the sister who had been tricked so many times realised the truth and decided to retaliate by playing the same trick on her sister.

Over and over the Namarrgarn sisters played the trick on each other, until one day they realised that if they changed into crocodiles permanently they could eat anything or anybody they liked. They went to a freshwater spring near the mouth of the East Alligator River. An old man heard of their intention to become crocodiles and chased after them to stop them, but it was too late. The palms that are found around the spring grew from the teeth the sisters pulled from their mouths and planted in the earth.



Ubirr

The Namarrgarn sisters are represented as crocodiles, evident by the lumps behind their eyes and their cunning ability to detect prey above and below the water. The story of the sisters is told to children to warn them about crocodiles and explain why they are so dangerous. It is part of longer series of stories that take a lifetime to learn. As an individual passes through ceremonial life they are told more and eventually may be given responsibility for the stories, songs and ceremonies. Spiritual life and the Law are inseparable. It is very important that Aboriginal people obey the Law these stories embody and that the stories are not told to the wrong people.

The rainbow serpent

Rainbow serpents, or rainbow snakes, are powerful creation ancestors that are known to many Aboriginal people throughout Australia. They are believed to be one of the oldest artistic symbols used in the world and seem to hold value and power wherever they are depicted. Rainbow serpents have different names in different languages throughout Australia. Here are a few names from the Kakadu region:

In Gun-djeihmi it's known as **Almudj**;
in Kunwinjku it's known as **Ngalyod**;
in Gagudju it's known as **Nama'rdeedjurr** or **Garranga'rreli**;
in Jawoyn it's known as **Bolung**.

--Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre

As is common with oral traditions, stories about the rainbow serpent vary from place to place, to reflect differences in environmental and social conditions. In Kakadu, Aboriginal people describe the rainbow serpent as the 'boss lady', all powerful, ever present and usually resting in quiet waterways unless disturbed. Common features of rainbow serpents in this area are that they are generally female, they are associated with water, they will eat anything except flying foxes, and they dislike loud noises. If irritated, they are capable of causing serious natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes.



The rainbow serpent

At Ubirr the rainbow serpent is known as *Garranga'rreli* (pronounced garr-rarn-gar-ree-lee). In her human form, she was called *Birriwilk* and travelled through this area with another woman looking for sweet lily roots. As she passed through Ubirr she painted her image on the rock to remind people of her presence. She rested in the forest at Manngarre, digging a hole in the cool sand. The heap of sand from the hole became a rock where a huge banyan tree now grows: the raised walkway on the Manngarre rainforest walk passes over the rock. Birriwilk stopped to rest in the East Alligator River; the round rocks in the middle of the river near Cahill's Crossing mark the place where she rested. From here she crossed the river into Arnhem Land, where she remains in a quiet water hole. Her visit to Ubirr is part of a

creation pathway that links Ubirr with Manngarre, the East Alligator River, and other places in Arnhem Land.

One story Aboriginal children are told about the rainbow serpent at Ubirr concerns caring for children. It goes like this.

A child was crying for sweet lily root. That evening the mother gave the child sour lily root because she could not find any sweet ones. This caused the child to cry even more, all night. In the morning there was a sudden gust of wind and the people felt cold, a sign that the rainbow serpent was near. The rainbow serpent rushed into the camp, trapping everyone with her huge coiled body and eating most of them, including the crying child.

The moral of the story is that crying children should be cared for and comforted.

Generally, in an extended family there is always a mother, father, brother or sister to comfort a crying child. As children grow older they may be taught about the path the rainbow serpent took, her connection to the land, her spirituality, and the ceremonies, dances and songs that relate to her. The stories, paintings and features in the landscape are interlinked and are reminders of the moral and ethical codes of Aboriginal culture.