



Darwin: Australia's Top End

BASIC INFORMATION ¹	
Urban Area Population: 2006	95,000
Urban Land Area: Square Miles: 2006	48
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers: 2006	124
Population per Square Mile	2,000
Population per Square Kilometer	750

31 December 2007

The Setting

Darwin is located at Australia's "top end," on the northern coast of the continent. Darwin is located on a peninsula on the Timor Sea, approximately 300 miles (500 kilometers) south of the island of Maluku in Indonesia and East Timor. Darwin, like Perth is closer to Jakarta than to Sydney or the Australian national capital in Canberra.

Darwin is the capital of the Northern Territory and its largest urban area. The Northern Territory covers 550,000 square miles (1,400,000 square kilometers), which is nearly as large as the state of Alaska and more than twice as large as the state of Texas. Northern Territory is very sparsely populated, with little more than 200,000 residents.

Much of Australia is very lightly populated. Darwin is the most isolated capital city in the country, at more than 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) from the closest urban area with more than 50,000 population. Darwin is more than 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) from Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane.

The Urban Form

The Darwin urban area consists of two adjacent settlements, Darwin and Palmerston, to the southeast. Darwin has been virtually destroyed twice in the past, in World War II by bombing and in 1974 by Cyclone Tracy.

Darwin is a relatively sparsely populated urban area, with a population density of 2,000 per square mile (750 per square kilometer). The form of the urban area is somewhat unusual because it surrounds the international airport. In a larger urban area, this would not be so unusual. But in a small urban area, a large airport tends to overwhelm the residential and commercial geography.

¹ For definitions of urban terms see <http://www.demographia.com/db-define.pdf>.

Because of being rebuilt so recently, virtually all of Darwin is new. Some of the residential areas display the stunning architecture that results from the Australian practice of retailing houses and land separately. Unlike in the United States and Canada, new home buyers tend to purchase their own land from developers and then choose their house from separate home builders. As a result, in Darwin, as in the rest of the nation, suburban developments tend to have considerably more architectural variety than in North America.

At the same time, however, this arrangement has not resulted in higher costs. In the middle 1990s, the Australian home building industry was considered to be the most efficient in the world (according to McKinsey Global Institute studies). This resulted from the use of many small contractors and the consequent competition.

This, however, has changed. Despite the broad availability of land for residential development, the Northern Territory has followed Australian governments in implementing “urban consolidation” (“smart growth”) policies that prohibit development on most land. As a result, land prices have been driven “sky high,” and house prices have followed. These policies have been generally copied from the United Kingdom, where they have created an unprecedented housing affordability crisis (as they also have done in Australia).

Climate

Darwin and the top end have a tropical climate. There is lush tropical vegetation virtually all over the urban area.

Potential

Despite its isolation and small population, Darwin appears to be placed well for growth. The tropical climate is not that much different than in much larger urban areas, such as Jakarta or Miami. Darwin has the feel of a Florida suburb, perhaps more like Orlando or Tampa-St. Petersburg than Miami. Darwin is the closest major Australian port to much of the growing Orient, especially China. It is not hard to imagine the Darwin area supporting an urban area as large as Brisbane or even Sydney. There appears to be plenty of fresh water in the area to support such an urban area.

At the same time, there are serious disadvantages about the Darwin area. The urban area has water on three sides. Yet, it appears that the waters are well stocked with crocodile and sharks and as a result, the beaches are not as attractive as they would be elsewhere.

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Northern Territory Parliament Building

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Darwin

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Darwin

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Downtown Darwin

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Downtown Darwin

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Downtown Darwin

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Downtown Darwin

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Road to Palmerston



Palmerston



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