



Ayal Aboriginal Kakadu Tours Case Study



Purpose

This case study will provide information on an Aboriginal owned and operated remote tourism business in the Northern Territory which has grown to now enable the owners to be self-employed on country. It highlights the importance of selling your idea, knowing the back end of running a business and details how this particular business sought business and other financial support to allow for continuous improvement and planning for future growth.



Description of Ayal Aboriginal Tours Kakadu

Victor Cooper (Guruwalu), a Minitja man and Traditional Owner of Kakadu owns and operates Ayal Aboriginal Tours Kakadu with his family. In 2008, Victor established Ayal Aboriginal Tours to share his culture with visitors to Kakadu National Park.

Ayal - pronounced

- ay as in 'eye'
- 'al' as in 'yell'

In Victor's mother's language / dialect. Ayal means 'We follow that track, the Milky Way' (the galaxy's appearance from Earth). In the old days, when the Minitja people travelled by canoe they would navigate by the stars at night.

There are 13 Aboriginal clans in Kakadu National Park and multiple dialects. Ayal also translates to 'River' in other local languages.

Located in the South Alligator River region of Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Ayal operates in the dry season (May to October) each year. In 2019, Ayal had 500 visitors, operated 156 tours and provided guiding services for 2 tour companies. Ayal Aboriginal Tours has seen an increase in visitor numbers year on year.

The majority of Ayal clients are Australians (Domestic visitors) with a small percentage from Europe and America (International visitors). These visitors are mostly in the age brackets 20 – 30 or 50+ and the majority are couples.

Ayal Aboriginal Tours Kakadu offers an exclusive guided walk around the Gabarlu Billabong and the South Alligator River mangrove forest. The tour includes seeing local wildlife, experiencing traditional bush foods, listening to ancestral stories, and developing a connection to the country.

Ayal's private charter tours include the famous rock art sites of Ubirr and Nourlangie (Barrungkuy) as well as the Anbangbang Billabong. Victor, a local Aboriginal (Bininj) Traditional Owner, has the credentials to tell and interpret the important stories associated with the ancient images at the cultural rock art sites in Kakadu. The rock art tells the stories of how Bininj lived, hunted and gathered in the area.

Victor holds the Kakadu Knowledge for Tours Guides accreditation and provides guiding services to various tour companies.



Early Days

Victor was one of the first Indigenous Rangers for Kakadu National Park and remained in the position for over 25 years. Eventually he wanted to do something different and aspired to share his culture and stories with other people, at that stage it was suggested to consider tourism. Given his land management background, Victor learnt about tourism and considered his options.

Fortunately, an Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) consultant was in Kakadu and Victor took the opportunity to talk to her about commencing a tourism business. The business development consultant assisted with ideas and provided information to commence a tourism business within Kakadu National Park. Parks Australia assisted in outlining the permits, licences and insurances required. Ten years later Victor still cross checks business ideas with the consultant and appreciates their advice.

Prior to commencing a tourism business especially within the National Park Victor was required to gain:

- Kakadu Knowledge for Guiding training course
- Kakadu National Park Commercial Land-based Tours commercial tourism permit
- Senior First Aid training (also gained Remote First Aid)
- Careflight Medisim (Trauma Care)
- Defensive driving training
- H endorsement Drivers Licence (licence to carry paying passengers)
- Commercial passenger vehicle registration for any buses / 4WD's
- Public liability insurance up to \$20 million.

Due to the lack of external capital, Victor utilised some of his superannuation money as his initial start-up funding, purchasing a touring 14-seater bus and all insurances and permits.

IBA provided a grant for a business plan, which guided the commencement and future growth of the business. Victor also received a grant from Tourism NT to establish a website for the business.

Victor feels one of the biggest challenges was learning guiding skills to ensure he was sharing with visitors accurate stories and interpretations of the land in a way they would easily understand.

A tourism consultant was vital in encouraging and strengthening Victor's guiding skills. A key learning for Victor was the importance of being reliable if the business was to be successful. Ayal Aboriginal Tours operates during the months May to September and Victor prides himself in providing a consistent quality of service.

Consolidation of the Business

Ayal Aboriginal Tours ask all visitors where they heard about the Ayal business. Some indicated it is during researching their trip to Kakadu prior to their holiday (they are usually looking for an Aboriginal guided tour) that Ayal is identified. A large portion find out about Ayal via TripAdvisor followed by word of mouth from previous clients. Currently a smaller percentage are made aware of the tours via Facebook, travel agents, publications like Lonely Planet Guides, and other media articles.

Victor's daughters Alice (Ukidanban) and Savana (Iylkpanen) have joined the business in the last few years and enjoy sharing their culture and passion for their country with visitors.

Victor and family are keen to share their great great-grandmother's country and the cultural stories handed down. This land is culturally

significant to the family and includes missionary history from the early twentieth century and buffalo hunting in the area with local Aboriginal men and women's involvement. Ayal Aboriginal Tours gained a Kakadu Licence to operate at their exclusive location at Gabarlgu Billabong in 2018 and commenced their new Kakadu Historical Buffalo Camp and Wildlife Tour in 2019.

Ayal has maintained their ECO Tourism Australia – Respecting Our Culture (ROC) Certificate for the last 10 years. Being ROC certified shows Ayal Aboriginal Tours Kakadu are committed to protecting cultural authenticity and integrity, developing sound business practices, environmental protection and acknowledging Indigenous peoples spiritual connection to the land and water.

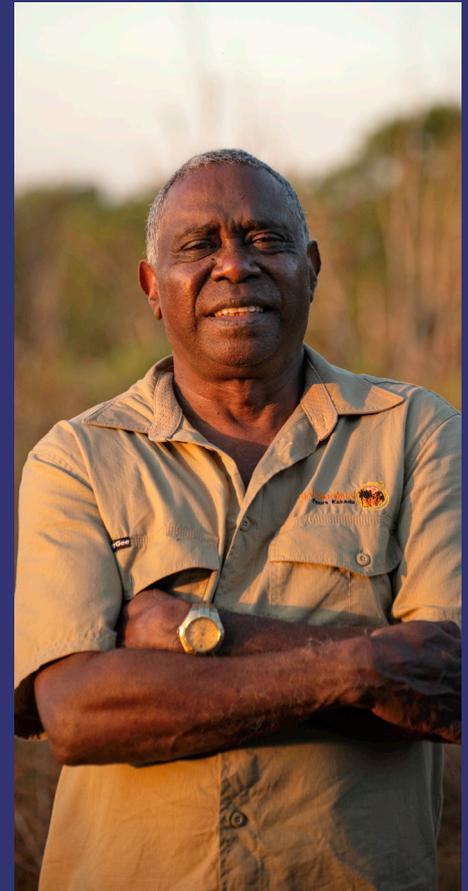


Future Business Development

Victor is proud he has grown the business to hand over eventually to his daughters both whom have the passion as the fifth generation to continue sharing the family's legacy on country. Alice and Savana will guide future expansion or changes to the business as they continue the Ayal Aboriginal Tours business journey.

As a member of the previous Aboriginal Tourism Advisory Council (ATAC), Victor has provided input and guidance into the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Tourism Strategy 2020 - 2030*. A few of the key initiatives that Victor feels will assist new Aboriginal tourism businesses to become a viable tourism business like Ayal Aboriginal Tours Kakadu include:

- support and advice from both Government, private enterprise and fellow tourism businesses, guidance on investment and the requirements for permits, insurances, administration, finance, future planning and marketing
- tourism businesses working together to offer an authentic cultural experience and overall great holiday for the visitor to ensure the growth of NT Aboriginal tourism products
- regular Aboriginal tourism forums which benefit all of the tourism industry and give a platform for Aboriginal people to showcase their culture
- a strong representative voice to ensure awareness and foster partnerships that produce a resilient Aboriginal tourism sector
- business mentoring support to increase skills development, allow discussion of ideas and assist in overcoming challenges for all Aboriginal tourism businesses.



Further Information and Key Contacts:

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