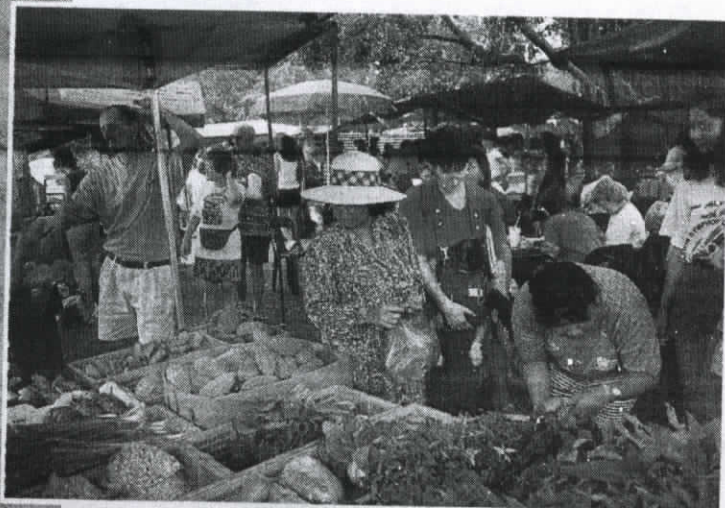




Cosmopolitan:
local children at
the Parap Pool in
Darwin; shopping
at the weekly
Parap markets.



More than 80 per cent of all primary schoolchildren in Darwin study Indonesian from the age of five.

"This is a distinctly different place and we are not ashamed of that," says Chief Minister Stone. "In the Territory, you can be anything you want to be; no-one will ask you where you went to school, or if you went at all, or how long you've been in the north. All that matters is that you are prepared to have a go and that you can do the job."

FEW PEOPLE have observed Darwin's growing-up and maturation as closely as Suzanne Spinner, playwright and author of the one-woman play *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, a vivid look at the foibles, fantasies and flavours of living in Darwin. Spinner wrote the monologue after moving – initially unwillingly – to Darwin in 1987 with her husband and family.

Filled with a sense of dripping humidity and overhead fans; walls where clicking geckos and creeping mould compete for space; a world invaded by fecund vegetation, crocodiles and lurking box jellyfish; and the horror of cyclones and tidal surges, Spinner's play encapsulates better than any tourist brochure or travel book the incongruous conglomerate that is Darwin today.

Yet Spinner, surprising even herself, fell in love with the place. After initial reluctance and great homesickness for the cappuccinos and bookshops of her native Brunswick Street in Melbourne's Fitzroy, she was seduced by Darwin's beauty and tropical ease.

In the last edition of her play, she described Melbourne and Sydney as having become "frightening, frantic, dirty and noisy", while she was "on the veranda, wrapped in my sarong, smoking

clove cigarettes, drinking coffee and studying the squabbling fig birds and Torres Strait pigeons feasting on the crimson berries of the umbrella tree. I'm finally at home here – in Paradise."

But after 10 years, Spinner and her family recently made the decision to return south. Now living in Melbourne, good memories of Darwin linger. Spinner says her daughter, back at primary school in the Melbourne suburb of Sorrento, has already been struck by the lack of racial diversity there. When her daughter talks of her Aboriginal friends in Darwin, she has discovered ignorance and racism among her classmates. Says Spinner: "There just aren't the people rubbing along together here, like everyone does in Darwin. There, you'll find every race, every mixture under the sun, and it's absolutely normal."

Reflecting on the city that Darwin has become, she admits that it has changed remarkably – at least on the surface – in the past decade. Gone are the harsh, bare and broken images of the Cyclone Tracy days. Almost gone, too, is the redneck frontier town filled with dusty station hands, giant bulldozers, demountables and beer cans. The infamous, if colourful, Prawn and Porn nights at the local pub have largely disappeared; bistros, mini-skyscrapers and arts culture have arrived. "But the intractable truth," says Spinner, "is that Darwin remains a very small town. In the end, we just wanted access to a larger, faster, more competitive world."

IT HAS always been Darwin's dream to be the Singapore of the south. When, despite cyclones, floods, tropical humidity and crocodiles, the British established Palmerston (now Darwin) at the fourth attempt in 1869, a new Singapore was their vision. Now that vision has been adopted by Stone and the Territory Government – but whether it can be achieved is another matter. There is no denying that a multiracial and Asian-oriented population and culture is already a reality in Darwin. But the dream of being Australia's gateway to Asia, or even a large-scale business and trade gateway, still seems a long way off.

Political rhetoric aside, Darwin is no fledgling Singapore or Jakarta. It has a minuscule population base, almost no manufacturing sector and its rail and shipping links to the populated and industrialised south and east of Australia are next to non-existent. Its attempts at establishing a special Asian Trade Zone ended in a cheap imported labour scandal.

In hard trade figures, the Northern Territory produces just \$1.5 billion of goods, mostly mineral resources (although Stone points out that this is not bad for 180,000 people). Exports to its

"In the Territory you can be anything you want to be; no-one will ask you where you went to school, or if you went at all, or how long you've been in the north."