

## Inside the Darwin quarantine camp, where life is 'like a holiday' for people escaping lockdown

By [Kate Ashton](#)

Posted Thu 10 Sep 2020 at 4:13pm, updated Thu 10 Sep 2020 at 6:45pm



People arriving in Darwin are quarantined at this Howard Springs camp. *(Supplied: Charlotte George)*

Over a Zoom game of Settlers of Catan, Sheree Rubinstein's friends urged her to escape Melbourne's lockdown and head north to join them in the Byron Shire, on the north coast of NSW.

While it was tempting, she says the logistics of escaping Victoria's lockdown with her newborn daughter seemed impossible.

"We just thought, 'We're not going to quarantine in a hotel room with Goldie,'" the 34-year-old mother said.

"You know, with a five-month-old, if you're locked in a room, it's just too hard."

But the family soon became aware of another option.

While travellers from COVID-19 hotspot areas such as Victoria and Sydney face restrictions on interstate travel, they can travel to Darwin.

Once there, they have to quarantine at a facility in the city's rural area for two weeks, at a cost of \$2,500 for individuals and \$5,000 for a family.

Unlike hotel quarantine for international arrivals — where travellers forfeit fresh air and the freedom to exercise — residents at the Howard Springs facility are able to walk around the facility, enjoy Top End sunsets and even go for a swim.

The facility is a disused workers camp about 25 kilometres south of the Darwin CBD.

It has been owned by the NT Government since 2019 and had been sitting vacant, costing the government millions of dollars in annual maintenance.

At the start of the pandemic, in February, it was used to house Australians who had been evacuated from Wuhan.

"Once we had found out about that, then we seriously considered it," Ms Rubenstein said.

"We then told our families, packed up our house, and within about three days we left.



34-year-old mother Sheree Rubinstein with her daughter Goldie. *(Supplied)*

## 'It was almost like a holiday'

Ms Rubinstein travelled with her partner, Rod, her mother and her daughter, Goldie, to Darwin.

They were each given their own little cabin with a television and kitchenette (she shared with her daughter) and all had adjoining balconies, so they could hang out together and go for walks.

"We thoroughly enjoyed it," she said.

"Honestly, it felt like it was almost like a holiday from the experience in Melbourne."

"Each day we did virtual Pilates classes on the balcony or we played cards at night."



Sheree Rubinstein with her baby at the Howard Springs quarantine facility. *(Supplied: Sheree Rubinstein)*

"We always wore our mask whenever we were outside"

She says both she and her partner were able to work remotely: there was internet access, and the cabins were air-conditioned for when it was hot during the day.

The family spent a few days in Darwin but are now on the Gold Coast, with their ultimate plan still to move to the Byron Shire, where they plan to work remotely.

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## 'Better than lockdown in Melbourne'

Melbourne film student Lexi Spurr had to celebrate her 21st birthday in quarantine in Howard Springs.



Lexi Spurr came back to Darwin after losing her job during Melbourne's lockdown.

*(Supplied: Lexi Spurr)*

But she still thinks her experience there was more enjoyable than living under Melbourne's lockdown.

"You can go out for walks for 20 minutes a day, just have to keep your mask on and keep 1.5 metres from all the people around you," she said.

"And when we had our meals and stuff, [we] were able to sit outside on our balconies and talk to our neighbours.

"It was better than my lockdown experience in Melbourne."

Ms Spurr grew up in Darwin, but moved to Melbourne for several years before losing her job in the March lockdown.

She said she figured she'd come home and enjoy the freedoms of the Top End while continuing her studies online.

Her lockdown period gave rise to a university assignment where she took photos of fellow quarantine residents.

"Some of them were my [quarantine] neighbours, some of them I met in there and then there were a few people who I actually went to primary school with, and I just found them in there, so that was really fun as well," she said.



Lexi Spurr spent her quarantine period hanging out with fellow inmates. *(Supplied: Lexi Spurr)*

## **How does it compare to hotel quarantine?**

Forty-one-year-old Darwin woman Kim Totham is still in Howard Springs at the end of a long journey home from overseas.

A trip to Vietnam to care for her elderly father was extended during the pandemic and since then she's been struggling to get back to Darwin.

Cancelled flights and thousands of dollars later, the single mother-of-two has had to quarantine twice: first in a hotel room in Sydney, and now in Howard Springs.

She said her experience in hotel quarantine from Sydney was awful.



Kim Totham stayed in a hotel when she quarantined in Sydney. (Supplied: Kim Totham)

"I am mentally very strong, but there's no window, you can't go outside," she said.

She said she could hear the people on her floor crying or yelling out during her time in the hotel.

"They might have been stuck overseas for God knows how long and you know, now the Government's going to ask for another \$3,000 off them," she said.

Ms Totham said returning home to Darwin was a relief, even though she had to quarantine again.

"I couldn't ask for anything better than this," she said.

"There's so much freedom here compared to the Sydney hotel."



41-year-old Darwin resident Kim Totham in quarantine at Howard Springs. (Supplied: Kim Totham)

## 'I don't know how to pay it'

Ms Totham still thinks it's unfair she had to quarantine again on arrival in the Territory, given she went straight to the airport after finishing her quarantine period in Sydney.

She's particularly worried about how she's going to pay for it given she's been out of work for months.

She said her quarantine bills in Sydney (\$3,000) and now Darwin (\$2,500) were making her anxious.

"In my case, I've got two children. I'm a single mother. I haven't got a job. I don't have a place to stay," she said.

"Now it's \$5,500 and I don't know how to pay it."

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