

AUSTRALIAN BEAUTY

AUSTRALIA KEEPS SECRETS IN ITS EVER-CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS. ISOLATED BY IMPENETRABLE TERRAIN AND IMPASSABLE DISTANCE, THERE ARE PLACES THAT PROVOKE A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THIS ANCIENT COUNTRY, ITS RAVISHING LANDSCAPES AND ITS INTRIGUING HISTORY. NOW, VISITORS CAN JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF AUSTRALIA THANKS TO A UNIQUE LUXURY TRAVEL CONCEPT CALLED WILD BUSH LUXURY

1860, Melbourne, Australia. An ecstatic crowd has gathered at Melbourne's Royal Park to send off an intrepid band of explorers racing to be the first to travel from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, 3,250kms away. Headed by the charismatic duo Burke and Wills, this tragic adventure must be the most ironic embodiment of "so close yet so far" in Australian history. After a 59-day struggle across Australia's most isolated places, at the mercy of the elements, disease and desertion, Burke and Wills' arrival at the Gulf was barred by an Escher-like impenetrable swampland. As the teal ocean glittered playfully through the tangled mangroves, the defeated explorers headed for home and died on the way, leaving the prize to Scotsman John McDouall Stuart, who set foot on the beach two years later.

The romance for adventure and exploration is imprinted on the Australian psyche. In return, Australia's stunningly diverse and awesomely massive landscapes have long played Pied Piper to travellers in search of the same thing. My arrival in The Territory, in a Chieftan light aircraft piloted by a James Bond blonde named Julia, oozes adventure of the comfortable, contemporary Australian kind. The charter plane buzzes noisily over Burke and Wills country – an opalescent Pandora of glassy floodplains and tousled rainforests threaded with serpentine rivers looping through the landscape like silver arteries. My fellow passengers include a doctor and his wife, a pair of lawyers from Perth and some honeymooning Spaniards.

Our destination is Bammaru Plains – a 303sq km working buffalo station located 10kms from the legendary Kakadu National Park. Here, tourism innovators Wild Bush Luxury have accessorised the fringe of the Mary River Floodplain with nine private safari suites and a central lodge framed with an irresistible terrace positioned to appreciate the flamenco sunsets. Guests are treated to stripped-back luxury, inspired local fine dining, and an intimate immersion into this extraordinary environment. The suite walls are made of mesh, allowing appreciation of the nightly bush orchestra, and the swag-style beds are lined with the highest-quality linen. Guests dine and partake in guided activities together, and can help themselves to a fridge





loaded with chilled water, juice, beer and wine. There is a well-stocked library and Aboriginal art hanging on the walls.

Wild Bush Luxury (WBL) was Charlie Carlow's idea. A Brit originally, Carlow spent a chunk of his childhood in South Africa before moving to Australia, and was convinced that Africa's luxury safari-style camps would translate well in the Australian environment. He also hoped to open some previously inaccessible corners to tourism in an environmentally and culturally sustainable way. Since the 2007 opening of Bammaru Plains, their first property, WBL has hit the ground running. Today, with its unique collection of specially tailored properties, Wild Bush Luxury is delving into the landscapes, spirit and culture of these remote Australian locations with their informal brand of educational luxury.

"It's a good sign," says Lucy, the doctor's wife, sitting beside me in the open Land Cruiser as a large eagle flaps off a fence into the Elsyian skies. "The Aboriginals believe eagles are lucky." Our guide, an Aboriginal from Darwin named Colin Rogan, points to another flash of feathers. "They're rainbow lorikeets," he says. "That's the best picture you're likely to get; they remind me of little fighter jets, they're so hyperactive." At the bend a giant "prize bull" with handlebar horns emerges from the undergrowth, staring down the jeep with Alpha male melodrama. A pretty faced wallaby hops into the bush. I can't stop taking photos.

Back at the lodge, we had been marvelling at the superb views from the crocodile-proof infinity pool embedded in the deck.

PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Buffalo and magpie geese on the Mary River Floodplain; great views from Bammaru's safari suites; on safari; the bush bathroom at the Blue Mountains; out on the floodplains
THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: Arriving at the Blue Mountains private safari camp by helicopter; delicious local cuisine at the Blue Mountains camp; airboats are the only way of getting out onto the floodplains in the Northern Territory

WILD BUSH LUXURY IS DELVING INTO THE LANDSCAPES, SPIRIT AND CULTURE OF THESE REMOTE AUSTRALIAN LOCATIONS WITH THEIR INFORMAL BRAND OF EDUCATIONAL LUXURY

It's breeding season and the floodplains are busy. Buffalo and their adorable doe-eyed babies gamble in the mud and the afternoon sun throws gold off the flanks of wild horses and their high spirited foals. But even the mighty buffalo is humbled by the sheer avian life force. From whistling ducks to magpie geese, from Jabiru to kites, from kingfishers to kookaburras, the 236 bird species that live here own these floodplains. I shrugged off thoughts of Alfred Hitchcock's film, *The Birds* as Rachel Gough, the lodge supervisor, waved goodbye.

Steering the Land Cruiser along the bush track, Colin, who has recently returned from military service in Iraq, explains the area's significance to the Aboriginal people: "This place was a food bowl," he says. "[John McDouall] Stewart and his men all got scurvy from eating tinned food from Melbourne. But there was food all around them!" Within minutes, we can identify bush apple trees, wild peach trees and Darwin blackbutts, which Aboriginals use to make didgeridoos. Having a young and articulate local Aboriginal guide infuses the experience with an air of authenticity.

Colin points to a huddle of leaves. "This is a green ant's nest. If you boil it and inhale the steam, it is a good cure for a cold, flu or sinus problems. Also, the ants taste really good – you can eat one!" After a moment's shock, we each eat a wriggling ant, which has a tangy, citrusy flavour. The Land Cruiser passes through open savannah until we arrive at

a billabong (waterhole) where a herd of buffalo wallow in the shallows. We get out for a celebratory drink before heading to the lodge as the day bleeds from the sky in a blockbuster eruption of red, purple and gold. After champagne and canapés, the chef invites us inside for a gourmet feast of mussels, honey roasted duck, lemon myrtle bread and persimmon cheesecake.

The following morning, a polite knock at 6am wakes me with promises of coffee and muffins. While the safaris are special, the airboat rides are the highlight of any visit to Bammaru Plains. The boats leave at 7am, returning by about 11.30am when it starts to get hot. Thrust along by jet propellers, the Teflon-coated beasts are the only vessels that can enter into this wonderful water world, which is coated with reeds, rushes and lilies. After breakfast, Colin starts up the airboat and we roar along the water, sending thousands of whistling ducks, magpie geese and ibis wheeling into the air in a blizzard of feathers.

Along the way to Swim Creek One, Colin points out the birds, butterflies and plants of the floodplains. The area is raucous with life. As Colin shows us a magpie goose nest – a floating mound of reeds with two brown eggs – the daddy goose flaps his wing in an attempt to distract us. Swim Creek One, where the waters pour into the Gulf of Carpentaria, is a place where open floodplains surrender to the mangrove forests that hedge the coastlines. We cut the engine and watch as a kite devours a baby magpie goose. "Be careful not to fall in," Colin warns. "There are so many crocodiles here you could not pay me enough money to swim over the other side of the river." We don't spot a crocodile, but we are treated to a rare viewing of a leggy Jabiru poking around in the reeds.

THRUST ALONG BY JET PROPELLERS, THE TEFLON-COATED AIR BOATS ARE THE ONLY VESSELS THAT CAN ENTER INTO THIS WONDERFUL WATER WORLD, WHICH IS COVERED WITH REEDS, RUSHES AND LILIES

Colin strikes out across the floodplain towards Kingfisher Café, a magical place that is spoken of with Alice in Wonderland awe. Along the way, the boat is buried in pink lotus plants with their green umbrella leaves, as voluminous clouds in various shades of purple chase race overhead. Kingfisher Café is a shady waterhole in a Melaleuca (paperbark) forest. The trees stand in water blanketed with a galaxy of snow white lilies, the trees molting their parchment bark in the shadows. Even the airboat seems to quiet in reverence. As Colin cuts the engine, I spot the first kingfisher, an azure fellow perching on a skeleton branch. There are also parrots, kites and aquiline darter birds. As Colin lays out morning tea, he tells about his grandmother who was a member of Australia's "stolen generation", a policy that saw Aboriginal children removed from their parents.

Heading back to camp, I realise that no one leaves Bammaru empty handed. Some come away hypnotized by the dazzling life on the floodplains. Some come away with the nightly chorus of bird life, frogs and animals. But I came away with memories of a paperbark forest with kingfishers darting overhead.

Far across the country in New South Wales's southern Blue Mountains, the Australian sun knives through eucalypt trunks as old and indestructible as lighthouses. The afternoon



illumination brings the temperate forest into focus – a red gum's blushing flank; the luxuriant scrawls along a scribbly bark branch; the plump saffron belly of an eastern yellow robin; the burnt barrel chest of a xanthorrhoea. The air smells clean, fresh, like rain. Somewhere, a lyrebird croons its copycat call. WBL's Mark Titchner strikes up the side of a crest, pausing for wildlife and biology lessons.

"All along these cliffs, there are grooves in the sandstone where the Aboriginals sharpened their tools," Mark muses in his Aussie drawl. "They're always at high points with great views – the Aboriginals also liked their real estate!" Breaking out onto the escarpment, we step into a scene dripping with Baz Luhrmann drama. The yawning valley tumbles into a rippled labyrinth of forested dales and wrinkled ridges with a snaking silver river glinting far below. High above, the muscular arms of interlinked plateaus fade into their namesake shade of midnight blue, pierced with terracotta bolts of sandstone. Carpeted with a biosphere of UNESCO-listed eucalyptus forests, laced with dappled tracks and historic bridle paths, and loaded with Dreamtime tales and legends of explorers, there could scarcely be a more provocative stage for Wild Bush Luxury's latest venture – Blue Mountains Private Safaris.

After falling in love with the mottled glens and platypus streams of the Blue Mountains' lesser-known southern extremity, Mark realised its huge potential for a low impact, highly exclusive tourism concept – couture camping if you will. The magic of sleeping under a massive sky erupting with stars had never faded, and Mark figured other people could like it too. Charlie Carlow agreed, Mark threw in his job and now spends his days introducing other people to this striking ancient location in Australian-style luxury. The idea fleshed out into a remote private campsite accessible only by four-wheel-drive or, preferably, helicopter. Hosting just one group at a time, campers have exclusive use of the site, enjoying private guided mountain walks with the ever-knowledgeable Mark, lazily kayaking down rivers home to the famously shy duck-billed platypus, scrumptious local cuisine and heavenly beds under a canopy of stars.

Mark's Land Cruiser humps down the dirt road plunging into the valley we admired from the escarpment. Eastern wallabies scatter down golden cardiac hillsides and corellas whirlpool overhead. A dedicated environmentalist and fly fisherman expert in bushcraft, Mark built this zero-impact campsite using local materials in an elbow of the Wollondilly River. The focal point is the covered dining area illuminated with nautical lanterns and a crackling fireplace. Walled by red gums and river oaks, Mark's "lounge room" boasts a reference library, a collection of fine vintages, canvas chairs, fly fishing rods

WALLED BY RED GUMS AND RIVER OAKS, MARK'S "LOUNGE ROOM" BOASTS A LIBRARY, A COLLECTION OF FINE VINTAGES, CANVAS CHAIRS, FISHING RODS AND A STASH OF CHEESE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Four-wheel driving up the Wollondilly River; a pretty faced wallaby at Bammaru; campers enjoying Australian folk stories

and a stash of olives, strawberries and cheeses. Some 50m away are three handmade sleeping platforms laid with Australian-style "swags". The bedding of generations of bushmen, these deluxe swags are lined with fine cotton linen, puffy duvets and profiterole pillows. Behind a timber screen is the ensuite area complete with a nature-loo, a bush shower and washing facilities. Mark, who has spent one season up at Bammaru Plains, has seamlessly imported WBL's concept of intelligent luxury into this extraordinary new setting.

Mark is great company. Sitting me near the fire with a glass of Joadja Malbec and a wedge of brie, he slaps a pair of salmon steaks on the barbeque. "I had some Aboriginal guys come and stay with me," Mark says. "At the time, there were several goannas (large monitor lizards) living in the trees. The guys said 'Mark, we make you a treat, mate'. They gathered around the bottom of the tree and were debating who was going to climb up there and catch it. I really didn't want them to kill the goanna, but they insisted. Eventually I told them that they were 'friend goannas'. After a hurried discussion, the leader said 'don't worry mate, we won't kill no pet goanna'."

After dinner, the velvety night wraps around the campsite. I say goodnight to Mark and retreat into my cocoon. As the fire dims to a pile glowing coals, I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep as shooting stars zigzag across the night sky.

www.wildbushluxury.com ✦

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