

## Photographers' Top End paradise

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The serene Mary River Floodplains, a short distance from bush teeming with water buffaloes and Brumbies.

**Photos: Peter Braig**

### Peter Braig

Richard l'Anson is a world-renowned photographer and author of *Lonely Planet's* best-seller *Guide To Travel Photography*. The intrepid Australian has seen some of the world's most stunning destinations, so when he says nature photography enthusiasts should put the Mary River Floodplains in the Northern Territory on the bucket list, take note.

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"It's hard to beat," he said. "With its expansive floodplains, teeming with an amazing array of bird and wildlife, and quintessential billabong landscapes, photo opportunities and challenges are right on the doorstep."

In early May, l'Anson led a luxury photography retreat in the Top End, in collaboration with Wild Bush Luxury's privately owned remote lodge Bamurru Plains.

After an overnight stay in Darwin (for logistical reasons), seven other guests and myself board a small aircraft for the short flight to Bamurru Plains. We fly north-east of Darwin, over astonishing scenery, only a short distance from Kakadu National Park.

I find myself in good company: there is a lawyer couple from Melbourne, a couple of doctors, a photographer from Brisbane and an IT couple from Canberra.

After a 30-minute flight we land on a dirt strip at Swim Creek Station. We're greeted by the lodge manager John and his assistant Tristan, and climb into their open jeeps to head off to the safari camp. This is something of a misnomer as it's far more of a luxury hotel than a campsite.

Set on the edge of the Mary River Floodplain, each bungalow is designed to blend into the surrounding bush. There is no internet



A jabiru stork takes flight.



On safari with cameras.

access, television or mobile phone coverage. A true escape.

After a quick bite, Richard l'Anson gives us an introductory tutorial. He says the best light for photography occurs early in the morning and evening, so we'll head off on our sojourns then. We're warned to have a slide show of best shots ready to present on the last day.

## Out of Australia

As late afternoon arrives, we head off on our first pictorial mission, cameras and tripods packed in the back of the jeeps. On the short drive through the bush we spot dozens of water buffaloes and brumbies. It's almost overwhelming: the landscape, the trees and the setting feels like being on safari in Africa, not in Australia.

As the sun sets, the changing colours paint a magical scene, and every picture we take looks perfect – like something out of a coffee table book. We can't contain our excitement and every single one of us is pushing our camera buttons with enthusiasm. We can't get enough.

As the light fades, the temperature is still sitting in the low 30s as we sip on glasses of champagne and happily – and excitedly – discuss the award-winning photographs we are sure we've just snapped. We head back to camp, take a dip in the pool under the stars and enjoy a beautiful dinner of fresh barramundi and salad.

We're up very early the next morning. After coffee, John and Tristan transport us by airboat across the floodplains. It's only minutes away from the lodge and we're surrounded by thousands of magpie geese (Bamurru in the local Aboriginal dialect), and hundreds of other water birds. The noise of the flying birds passing overhead, the magnificence of a 360-degree view and an emerging sunrise call for little conversation. Instead, our cameras are working hard again.

After our successful morning session we head back to camp to download our photos and enjoy a delicious breakfast. We then join Richard in the lounge area for another educational tutorial, in which he shares his best pictures and tricks so we will be able to take pictures as good as his.

Our first bit of free time for me means a quick power nap. I head back to my bungalow where the view of the surrounding wilderness is relaxing in itself. The bungalows are very simple and very stylish. The bed is literally outdoors and the walls are netting wall screens. They're set among the vegetation on the edge of the wetlands and surrounded by wallabies, birds and wild Brumbies – it feels like camping in the middle of a wildlife park. During the day it's quiet, but as night falls a change occurs as the animals come alive and the air is filled with their sounds.

At 5pm, the airboats take us to a sunset adventure. We stop at our location, right amongst water lilies and water birds.

On one side, the sun is going down in a vibrant array of contrasting colours; on the other, the soft light reflects on paperbark trees and water. It's striking and our cameras start their chatter.

## Magic at sunset

Up again early the next day to get the best light. We head off to Arnhem Land to experience the mixture of traditional and living culture. We have a guided tour of Injalak Hill, renowned for some of the best rock art examples in western Arnhem Land.

The next evening is our last chance to get that hero shot for slide night. After a short drive in the jeeps, we settle in with bush on one side of us and wetland on the other.

We've been so spoiled for choice over the past few days that this all looks a little – dare I say it? – bland. However, half an hour later it was as if Richard had turned on a switch. The paperbark trees become bathed in the soft evening sunlight and, as if on cue, a few water buffaloes walk past in the foreground. A few minutes later we experience another perfect composition with hundreds of whistling ducks flying past.

It's magic.

We head back to camp to get ready for our presentations. The oohs and aahs and clapping hands of the lodge staff and ourselves pay homage to the striking aesthetic beauty of the shots. We're thrilled with what we've created.



Bush-dwelling water buffalo.

## Top End Wilderness Photo Safari

- **Need to know**  
Bamurru Plains, NT  
From \$4799 a person, limited to 10 people. Next safari April 2014.
- **Bring** Camera, tripod, laptop, cable release.

It's been a fabulous few days, rich in some of the most visually arresting scenery I've ever seen. We've seen a vast array of wildlife including a saltwater crocodile, dingoes, a snake and turtles, and kingfishers. Having Richard constantly by our side with his skills and experience was invaluable. The locations he and John chose were always at the right time, the right place and just minutes away from the lodge. Who needs Africa when we have our own Top End?

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Peter Braig is the picture editor of the AFR.

He was a guest of Wild Bush Luxury, Virgin Australia and Toga Hospitality

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