

Firstclass

Travelling in style

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SPACE ODYSSEY

Travel to Australia's remotest reaches is the earthly equivalent of a moon landing, but this crop of eco-correct camps starring both creatures and comforts makes the journey worthwhile.

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Skimming via light aircraft over the Aralura Sea, I began to suspect that I'd taken the concept of "getting away from it all" a step too far. From the cockpit of a single-engine Cessna, I watched the northern fringe of Australia unfurl like lush abstract art, the wild green expanse of mangroves delicately laced with the sensual coils of tropical rivers. In Africa you might see cattle tracks, villages, fires. But in this lost universe, there was nobody, nothing.

I was heading toward Bamurru Plains (www.bamurruplains.com), a safari camp run by a group called Wild Bush Luxury, which provides high-end base camps for excursions into Australia's remotest areas. Even so, I had a sneaking suspicion that, out here on the frontier, the definition of luxury would hardly be conventional.

About half an hour later, the pilot tapped his GPS system and nose-dived our plane toward a red-dirt runway that appeared out of nowhere. "Welcome to Bamurru International Airport," said the single-person welcoming committee, ▶

A Safari suite, with mosquito-screen walls, at Bamurru Plains in Western Australia.



Clockwise from left: a tent room at Sal Salis camp facing the Ningaloo Reef; on the road to Mornington; in a Sal Salis room.



a dust-covered guide named Lauren, with a grin. For the next half hour, we rattled along, passing fields of termite mounds that rose like giant shark fins from the red earth. Soon we glimpsed the camp of Bamurru Plains, which leases a prime spot at the edge of the floodplains. I was about to pass from the uncompromising heat and dust into an altogether more civilised dimension of the Outback. Another staff member received us with cool towels and a chilled glass of sparkling wine. The airy timber structure had a vaguely Balinese feel, with a 10-metre pool and gazebos where guests were unwinding with canapés, enjoying the view of the plains through spidery pandanus trees. At dusk, a pageant of wildlife appeared: dozens of wallabies were hopping idly in the golden light. The only soundtrack, beyond the chortling of guests, was the cackling laugh of the blue-winged kookaburra.

Recently, a new wave of tented bush camps, styled loosely on African safari lodges, have sprung up in remote areas. The sheer logistics of operating in such far-flung locations means that these resorts are very much at the high end of the travel market. They provide soft beds and gourmet meals with fine ingredients brought in almost daily, use all the latest eco-technology and put a premium on educating guests about urgent conservation issues. With Australia on the front lines of world climate change, environmentalists are encouraging select travellers to get out into these fragile places. Tom Lovejoy, the biodiversity chair at the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment in the US, argues that sensitive travel to remote ecosystems can only have a positive effect. "We need global solutions to the world's problems," he says.

"In the greater scheme of things, if people are unaware of the reality, we won't be able to move the global agenda along." The reality for Australia, he says, is that the land is "a lot more environmentally sensitive than other places. The combination of introduced species, land clearing and vulnerability to fire has wreaked havoc."

And so my own heroic, selfless project was to zigzag by light plane across the northwest of the continent, visiting three of the remotest and, yes, most luxurious of the safari camps, to see first-hand what is at stake – and Bamurru Plains was my first stop.

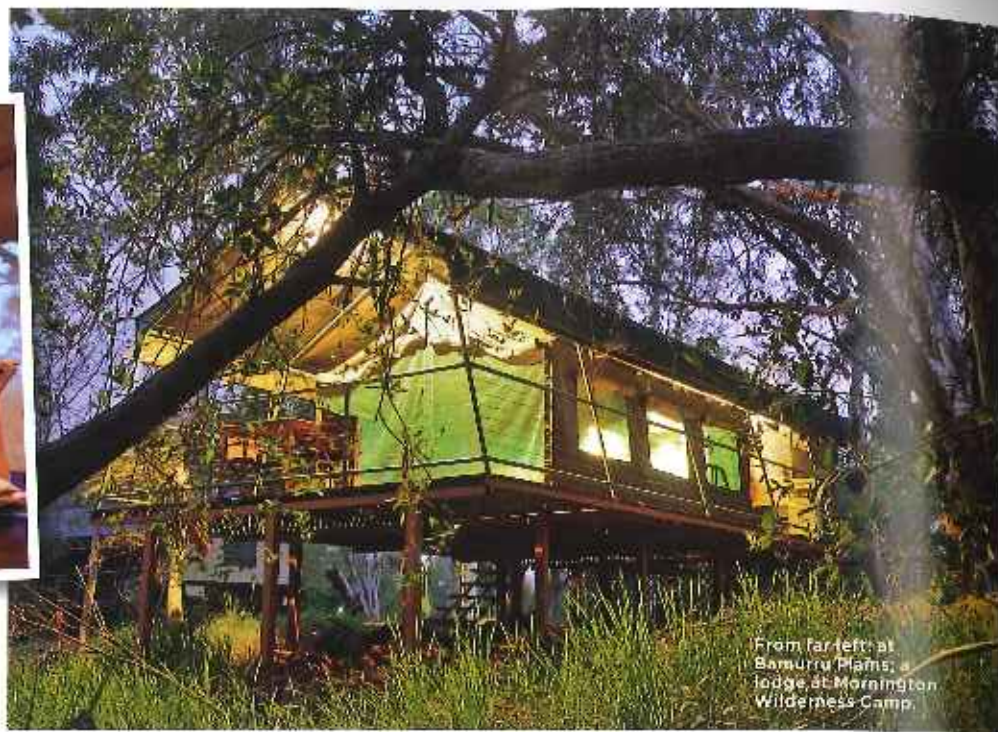
I was right in guessing that it wasn't a conventional view of luxury. Each of the nine Safari suites is raised on a platform and built from corrugated iron and timber to survive cyclones, with insect screens for walls. In fact, from the outside they can look a bit like bunkers, but they are magical from within. When I switched off the lights after dark, the space was filled with moonlight, with the only sound the meanderings of marsupials in the foliage. You don't need an alarm clock at Bamurru – the chorus of birdsong gets going before dawn. But there are also vivid glimpses of the bush's vulnerability: at night, the paths are dotted with cane toads, whose venom has visited untold harm upon local wildlife, and one also sees the flashing eyes of feral cats, another devastating introduction.

The location is the real luxury. On the first morning, I set off before dawn to explore the wetlands by airboat, where the peeling trunks of paperbark trees

were reflected in the inky, mirror-smooth waters. The next day, I hopped onto another light plane to the Aboriginal reserve of Arnhem Land, where a young Bininj guide took me clambering up a hill to see rock galleries of tribal art suffused with reflected light from the honey-coloured sandstone. By sunset, I was back at Bamurru Plains for dinner, choosing between Angus steak *au jus* or barramundi in lemongrass, washed down with a cheeky Margaret River chardonnay.

My next stop, Mornington Wilderness Camp, deep in the Kimberley, is arguably Australia's purest eco-lodge (www.australianwildlife.org). It is operated by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), a non-profit organisation that purchases strategic chunks of land in the most biologically diverse corners of the Outback and turns them into private sanctuaries. Funded by donations, AWC now has 21 reserves covering 2.5 million hectares, and Mornington is its showcase. All profits from Mornington go straight into conservation, but its real purpose is to give travellers a privileged view of AWC activities, and to inspire support.

Of course, you have to get there first. One way is to drive for nine gruelling hours across north-western Australia, along a bone-rattling dirt road from Broome, the nearest town. Or you can, like me, arrive via a 90-minute Cessna flight, feeling ▶



From far left: at Bamurru Plains, a lodge; at Mornington Wilderness Camp.

Only recently have most of us learned that Ningaloo is the country's largest fringing reef, 250 kilometres long and virtually untouched by divers. Located at the point where warm tropical currents meet the cooler southern waters, it has a riotous fertility that lures marine migrations from around the world, including

humpback whales and, most famously, whale sharks – the earth's largest fish, which can grow to more than 12 metres in length and weigh 18 tonnes. Ningaloo Reef hit the news in 2002, when local developers proposed a tourist resort and marina, prompting celebrities like Toni Collette and Tim Winton to campaign for its preservation. The plan was shelved, Ningaloo Marine Park was enlarged, and in January 2010 the Ningaloo Coast was nominated for World Heritage site status.

It's hard to imagine a lower-impact resort than Sal Salis (Latin for "salt of salt"; www.salsalis.com.au), the only accommodation right on the reef. After parking at Oyster Bay, I walked for 10 minutes along the beach, spotting a pair of humpback whales breaching on the horizon, and found the nine sun-bleached tents hidden among the dunes.

Life was simple at Sal Salis. The lodge is decorated with driftwood and turtle shells polished by the sea. At night, guests sit on the balcony counting shooting stars. Again, the real luxury is the setting: it's the only spot on Ningaloo Reef where the coral begins six metres from the white sand beach, so you can snorkel at whim. On my first foray, I raced with green turtles and stingrays through canyons of staghorn coral, their thousands of purple and pink tips glowing like fairy lights. The next day, I kayaked to Blue Lagoon, a sand-floor enclave in the reef that is, in

effect, a natural aquarium. My only regret, I confessed at dinner one night, was that I'd missed the annual whale shark migration; in season, a homespun industry gets people out to snorkel with the creatures. "Maybe not," said the manager. "They've been running late this year."

And so, on my last morning, I found myself being picked up in a Zodiac inflatable along with three sunburnt couples. After a couple of hours of snorkelling, an urgent radio call came through. "Whale shark!" bellowed dive master James. As the skipper opened up the throttle and sped toward the spot, we gathered around for a crash course in whale shark etiquette. Marine park authorities strictly regulate interaction, including how close swimmers can get to the whale sharks: three metres from the flanks, just over three and half metres from the tail. "So, um, can they bite?" asked one of the women. "Well, they do have 300 rows of teeth," said James. "But no, they're filter feeders, so they only eat plankton."

Soon we were lined up with snorkels and fins in the stern. I leapt into the surging waves, blinded by the bubbles of the other swimmers and swallowing mouthfuls of salt water. Which way was I supposed to swim? It was impossible to tell. And then, without warning, I saw it coming toward me. The shark was the size of a bus – a creature right out of a medieval monster compendium – its yellow eye watching our awkward flailings with sublime indifference. I took a deep breath and flipped down to swim alongside it. In the silence, I could take my time admiring its sun-dappled skin, the ridges on its back, the languid flicks of its tail that propelled it effortlessly along. As I hovered goggle-eyed in the blue, it was hard to imagine being more immersed in nature. ■

refreshed and ready for a dip. And a most scenic journey it is from an aerial vantage, as the grasslands break into rugged bluffs and stark gorges.

For my personal nature-immersion program at Mornington, I borrowed a four-wheel drive for a dawn trip to Sir John Gorge. After grinding across sandy tracks and broken creek beds, then hiking a field of giant boulders, I saw the river looming like the cataracts of the Nile. Its waters are divided into a string of thin lakes, and staff conveniently leave canoes hidden in each, so guests can paddle into the farthest recesses. The silence was complete: the only sound was the slapping of my oar in the water, which echoed from the cliffs. The solitude even became slightly unnerving, as if I were being watched by Aboriginal spirits, and I found myself whistling just for the company of the sound. As I went for a dip, a small (and harmless) freshwater crocodile watched me from a distant riverbank. This, I thought, is as remote as I need to get.

When the Indian Ocean burst onto the horizon, it was a shocking sight after all the ochre tones of the Kimberley: the lavish shades of the water, undulating from turquoise to electric blue, were almost too much to absorb. This last stop on my air safari was Ningaloo Reef, an underwater world that has become a *cause célèbre* for marine biologists.