



Wilson Island, Great Barrier Reef

# Back to nature, *in style*

Sleeping under canvas, immersed in nature – what could be better? How about a king-sized bed, an ensuite, a personal chef and assorted other comforts? It's time to pull back the tent flaps of Australia's top "glamping" resorts. **BY LOUISE SOUTHERDEN**

**Short for "glamorous camping", glamping is to camping what high-heels are to hiking boots. With one important difference: safari-style tents with proper beds, ensuite bathrooms and a few of life's little luxuries are luring people who pale at the thought of pitching their own tent, sleeping on the ground and using shared amenities, back to nature. Besides, glamping and camping actually have more in common than first impressions might suggest: they both involve sleeping under canvas that "breathes" when the wind blows, being in intimate contact with the great outdoors and experiencing some of Australia's most pristine places, wildlife and all. You could say glamping offers creatures and comforts. Following is a sampler of glamping experiences around the country, from coastal escapes to island idylls, from wilderness hideaways to desert retreats.**

## THE PIONEER Paperbark Camp, Jervis Bay

Paperbark Camp's owners Irena and Jeremy Hutchings kicked off the whole glamping movement when they opened the flaps of their first luxury tents in 1998, inspired by an African safari experience. It took them several

years but they eventually found 35 hectares of bushland close to Jervis Bay, three hours south of Sydney. There are six "original" safari tents and four "deluxe" safari tents, right on Currumbene Creek, which flows into Jervis Bay. They're actually tents within tents — canvas tents with hardwood floors and verandahs,

and an outer canvas canopy — and have king-sized beds, solar lighting and private ensuites open to the bush (so the birds can hear you sing); the deluxe tents have claw-footed baths as well. A highlight is dining at the Gunyah restaurant, which has a wide verandah at tree level and features bush-tucker flavours and local, organic produce.

**Things to do:** Canoe or kayak on Currumbene Creek, wander nearby wetlands, bike to Jervis Bay (15 minutes, or it's five minutes by car), go dolphin watching or stand-up paddleboarding.

**Tent rates:** \$370 a night for an "original" safari tent, \$520 a night for a "deluxe" safari tent. Two-night minimum when you stay Friday or Saturday night. Paperbark closes for the winter, between mid-June and early September. See [paperbarkcamp.com.au](http://paperbarkcamp.com.au)

## CAST AWAY

### Wilson Island, Great Barrier Reef

If you've ever wondered what it would be like to be a castaway, Wilson Island is the place for you. Situated at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, it's 30 minutes by boat from Heron Island, which is a two-hour boat ride (or 30-minute helicopter ride) from Gladstone, about a third of the way up the coast of Queensland. Only 12 people at a time (plus two hosts, one a trained chef) can stay on this tiny coral cay and the six Advanced Eco-accredited luxury safari tents are the epitome of simple comfort: king-sized beds, cotton bathrobes, wind-up torches and battery-powered reading lights, hammocks big enough for two and views out the front flaps to a layer-cake of sand, sea and sky. But the remoteness and the accommodation are only part of Wilson's story. The other part is its bird life — thousands of black nobby terns that nest in the native pisonia trees, and muttonbirds that nest in burrows under the tents, their "ooh" and "aah" calls competing with the sound of the waves to lull you to sleep.

**Things to do:** Between November and March, watch nesting turtles lay their eggs on the beach; see turtle hatchlings between January and May; see humpback whales cruise past June–October; snorkel with turtles, sharks, rays and more than 900 species of tropical fish anytime; relax.

**Tent rates:** \$1080 a night (minimum stay two nights) including return boat transfers from Heron Island, all meals and drinks, and snorkelling equipment. Wilson Island is closed from 26 January to 2 March 2012 to allow resident seabirds to nest in peace. See [wilsonisland.com](http://wilsonisland.com)

## DESERT DREAMING Longitude 131°, Uluru

Watching the sun rise and shine on Uluru

is a once-in-a-lifetime experience — and at Longitude 131° you don't even have to leave your king-sized bed for it; you can just raise the remote-controlled blinds to see "the rock" in all its ochre-coloured glory. This Advanced Eco-accredited resort in the desert near Uluru (it's nine kilometres away, which is virtually next door in the Red Centre) set new standards for ecotourism when its 15 tented rooms were planted on the edge of the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in 2002. The entire property was built so that it could be dismantled and relocated without leaving a trace, and the tents designed by Australian architect Philip Cox to "float" above the ancient sand dunes. Each tent is named after an early explorer, such as Burke and Wills, Eyre and McDouall Stuart, and has more in common with 5-star hotels than campsites: under the billowing canvas ceilings there's air-conditioning (a necessity in the Red Centre), sliding glass doors, a mini-bar and Bose sound system. Longitude 131° even provides guests with warm, chocolate-brown ponchos to wear on chilly desert nights.

**Things to do:** Dine under the stars at Table 131°, do a guided walk around Uluru and Kata Tjuta; take a camel safari, Harley ride or helicopter flight; visit Aboriginal art galleries and communities.

**Tent rates:** \$2070 or \$2190 a night (depending on the time of year) including all meals, tours, 4WD airport transfers and national park entry fees. See [longitude131.com.au](http://longitude131.com.au)

## CITY ESCAPE

### Tandara Luxury, Lane Cove

A mere 10 kilometres from Sydney's busy CBD, Tandara Luxury is a little haven of calm close to home, for Sydneysiders at least. Lane Cove River Tourist Park began offering a glamping option in November last year and its single tent, which is on the western edge of Lane

Cove River valley in Lane Cove National Park, has been booked every weekend since (every second weekend in winter). As you'd expect, the tent has a king-sized bed and timber flooring, but it's more spacious than many other luxury tents; there's Wi-Fi, a flat screen TV (with Foxtel), electronically controlled entertainment and lighting, a two-person shower and a bath. The enormous timber deck, with sun-lounges, chairs and a barbecue, faces the morning sun and barbecue hampers can be provided — including such delicacies as spatchcock and scallops. Tandara is a founding member of Eco Lodges of Australia, a consortium of 14 Advanced Eco accommodation providers (including Paperbark Camp) set up in 2010.

**Things to do:** Go bushwalking or mountain biking; hire canoes, kayaks or pedal-boats at Lane Cove Boatshed.

**Tent rates:** \$390 a night (for two people) Sunday–Thursday, \$450 a night Fridays or Saturdays, including two bottles of wine, continental breakfast, bikes and entry fees to Lane Cove National Park. See [tandarasydney.com.au](http://tandarasydney.com.au), [ecolodgesaustralia.com.au](http://ecolodgesaustralia.com.au)

## WHALE SHARK WILDERNESS Sal Salis, Ningaloo Reef

Not only is Sal Salis exclusive — its nine luxury safari tents offer the only accommodation in Cape Range National Park, adjacent to the famed Ningaloo Reef — it's in the world's newest World Heritage Area, the 600,000-hectare Ningaloo Coast, listed in June this year. The beauty of Ningaloo Reef, 70 kilometres south of Exmouth, is that, unlike the Great Barrier Reef, it's so close to the coast you can see it from the beach — or from the Sal Salis tents, which are nestled in the coastal dunes. Kangaroos and wallaroos come close in the evenings and, offshore, 300–500 whale sharks gather every year, the largest aggregation of whale sharks in the world. The philosophy behind Sal Salis is that wilderness experiences need not be 5-star, but they can have selected comforts such as "supremely comfortable" king-sized beds, 100 per cent cotton linen, soft bath towels, ensuites with good showers, and delectable food. Because they're in a national park, the tents adhere to strict minimal impact and sustainability standards. The camp is completely solar-powered, for instance, ensuite bathrooms have state-of-the-art composting toilets, there are no televisions, phones or other appliances and water usage is carefully managed.

**Things to do:** Swim with whale sharks (April to June) and manta rays, kayak and snorkel with 700 species of fish on Ningaloo Reef, see nesting turtles, explore nearby limestone gorges.

**Tent rates:** \$730 per person per night, minimum stay two nights, including transfers, all meals, guided sea kayaking and snorkelling →



Paperbark Camp, Jervis Bay

trips and gorge walks, boat cruise on Yardie Creek and national park entry fees. See [salsalis.com.au](http://salsalis.com.au)

### TOP END WETLAND Bamurru Plains, near Kakadu

Like Sal Salis, Bamurru Plains is run by Wild Bush Luxury along similar lines: wilderness with a few key comforts. Location is almost everything to these two properties. Sal Salis has Ningaloo Reef, Bamurru Plains, three hours' drive (or 20 minutes by air) from Darwin, has the Mary River wetlands, an 8000-square-kilometre wildlife wonderland just west of Kakadu National Park. Bamurru's nine tents even look like they're on safari, blending into this savannah setting so well because they're relatively spartan (relative to other glamping experiences) — their screen walls make you feel as if you're sleeping right in the bush, not in a tent at all. Each sits atop a timber platform that is a perfect viewing deck from which to see, and listen to, whistling kites, blue-winged kookaburras and buffalo wading through the water.

**Things to do:** Take an early-morning airboat trip on the Mary River wetlands to see magpie geese and some of the other 235 species of birds, an afternoon safari in an open-top jeep or a river cruise (April–October) on the croc-infested Sampan River.

**Tent rates:** \$930 per person per night, minimum stay two nights, including transfers, all meals, beverages and guided activities. See [bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com)

### BUSH RETREAT Ketchup's Bank, Queensland

It's almost a secret, or should be. Just 90 minutes' drive south-west of Brisbane, in 40 hectares of eucalypt forest, is Australia's newest glamping experience: Ketchup's Bank Glamping (its distinctive name comes from a steep track on the property that was once used by pioneering cattle farmers and bullock trains). Its first eco-tent, called Knapps after a nearby peak, opened in May this year;



Paperbark Camp, Jervis Bay



its second, Ironbark, opened in July. And that's it: seclusion is Ketchup's promise, with a little luxury, of course. Each tent has a queen-sized bed, quality linen, an ensuite, Sheridan towels, a private deck, a flat-screen TV (just for watching DVDs) and plenty of peace. This is cool-climate glamping, meaning you get your own campfire — and an electric blanket if desired. It's as serene as you would expect, tucked away in the hills of south-east Queensland's Scenic Rim.

**Things to do:** Commune with the locals — koalas, three kinds of wallabies, bettongs, goannas, king parrots and wedge-tailed eagles; go rock climbing in Mt French National Park, 15 minutes from the camp; visit nearby wineries and lavender farms.

**Tent rates:** \$250 a night (per couple); breakfast baskets cost \$30. See [ketchupsbankglamping.com.au](http://ketchupsbankglamping.com.au)

### CASUALLY COASTAL Eco Beach, Broome

In April 2000, Cyclone Rosita hit the Kimberley coast 130 kilometres south of Broome and slammed into the award-winning Eco Beach resort, destroying most of its 41 wooden huts, its reception area and its much-loved Jack's Bar. But owners Karl Plunkett and Natalie Kimpton were determined to rebuild and the new Eco Beach — with 25 safari-style EcoTents and 30 solar-powered EcoVillas, all built and operating according to the highest environmental standards — opened in July 2009. The tents are right on the beach to ensure natural ventilation from sea breezes. Each tent has a king-sized bed (or twin beds), ensuite, private verandah and a 20-litre esky for snacks and drinks. The hub of the resort is the new Jack's Bar and Grill, an open-air restaurant with infinity pool — the perfect spot for Indian Ocean sunset drinks, or for spotting dolphins and migrating whales.

**Things to do:** Go whale-watching (July–October); take a kayaking, fishing or turtle (October–December) tour.

**Tent rates:** Garden View tents start at \$165 per night, Ocean View tents start at \$200 per night, including daily yoga. See [ecobeach.com.au](http://ecobeach.com.au)

## OTHER GLAMPING OPTIONS

**Walk this way:** Tasmania's spectacular four-day Maria Island Walk, which operates October–April, offers accommodation for two of the three nights in simple but comfortable tents with twin beds and timber floors; sleeping bags, gourmet meals, wine, guides and transfers are included in the cost, \$2150 per person. See [mariaislandwalk.com.au](http://mariaislandwalk.com.au).

**Sleep in a swag:** Blue Mountains Private Safaris has two-day Swag Camp Safaris with "accommodation" in luxury swags

on three raised timber platforms in remote bushland, for \$850 per person including hot bucket showers and gourmet meals cooked over a campfire. See [bluemountainsprivatesafaris.com](http://bluemountainsprivatesafaris.com).

**Glamping Victoria:** Parks Victoria has Wilderness Retreats at Wilsons Promontory National Park (\$250 a night) and Cape Conran Coastal Park and Buchan Caves in eastern Victoria (both \$150 a night). Each tent has a queen-sized bed and there's a communal kitchen. See [parkweb.vic.gov.au/wildernessretreats](http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/wildernessretreats)