

Safari, Aussie style



Mike Grenby photo

The lookout at Injalak Hill (Long Tom Dreaming).

Mike Grenby
Special to the News

BAMURRU PLAINS, AUSTRALIA

It's 6 a.m. and the buffalo are silently walking by our open-sided safari bungalow, one by one, following a narrow but well-marked path. A couple of wallabies (small kangaroos) are boxing; a brumby (wild horse) is rubbing up against one of the bungalow's poles.

Each day my companion and I feel like we are an integral part of their animal kingdom, not just next to them: waking up with them, going to bed when they are ready for the night's rest. No ringing phones, no bombarding emails, no loud TVs; we are totally connected with nature.

Breakfast awaits in the lodge, then an airboat trip out over the wetlands and the Sampan River to get up close and personal with more of the 280 different birds, 28 mammals, eight frogs, 25 reptiles, 19 snakes and 26 common trees, shrubs and wildflowers here in Australia's Top End – the country's Northern Territory, which was popularized in the movie *Crocodile Dundee* and has a frontier feeling similar to that of the Yukon.

My research had turned up several options for a Top End trip, including Lord's Kakadu & Arnhemland Safaris (www.lords-safaris.com) with a six-night Luxury Safari Lodge tour for \$19,762.50.

I checked around whether an all-inclusive \$3,000 a day was the going rate for a private safari.

"Who are you going with?" asked the various industry people I contacted. When I replied, "Sab Lord, and we're staying at Davidson's and Bamurru," the response was: "You won't get anybody better than Sab, and those are the two most amazing places to stay."

Sab took over the business from his dad and has maintained the contacts with Aborigines to give a trip that extra depth perhaps not available from other

operators.

Not all trips cost \$3,000 a day. For example, a four-day trip (two nights camping, one night at Bamurru) costs \$10,260 for two, \$12,828 for four.

Day One: Sab picks us up in his 4WD and on the drive to the Adelaide River, regales us with stories of his many international clients.

"A big-name movie star flew in on his private jet with his entourage and wanted to handle a snake," Sab tells us. "He didn't realize he'd been bitten and although it wasn't a particularly poisonous snake, I was glad when he didn't have a bad reaction. It wouldn't have been very good publicity."

And you don't mess with Sab – even if you are paying \$3,000 a day.

"An anthropologist from the US booked me for three weeks," he said. "But when she started touching Aboriginal artifacts even though I'd told her specifically not to, I told her the trip was over and drove her back to Darwin."

The "snapping handbags" (Sab's term for crocodiles) are in fine form on our Adelaide River cruise, with even the elusive five-metre Old Man of the River saltwater croc jumping to take the raw meat bait dangled over the side of the boat. We often see warning signs about the crocodiles, which regularly take (kill and eat) unwary visitors and even locals.

Day Two: After a night at "The Croc" (the crocodile-shaped hotel at Jabiru in Kakadu National Park), we head into Arnhem Land for a picnic lunch we will never forget.

As we hike up through the boulder-strewn scrub, Isaiah, our Aboriginal guide who is also an artist in his own right, tells us the stories of his ancestors as he takes us to see some dramatic rock art.

"Don't talk to him at first," Sab warns Leo, my female companion. "We have to observe local traditions."

"It's fine for Mike to talk to



Mike Grenby photo

Above, a sunset cruise at Davidson's in a field of waterlilies. Right, a juvenile croc. Bottom right, buffalo at Bamurru Plains.

him but it's customary for him to get to know you a bit and then you'll be fine." Fearing our tour could be cut short, Leo temporarily sets aside any inclinations of feminist equality, does as she is told and all goes well.

In the meantime, Sab has taken a short cut to carry the makings for a deluxe picnic 220 metres up to a lookout spot on Injalak Hill (Long Tom Dreaming).

Shaded by the rock overhang, we gaze out at the view over the floodplains and around the escarpment while we feast on fresh rolls, salad vegetables, cold cuts and fruit. Sitting there in silence, with Isaiah and Sab, we feel at one with our environment, with both the present and the history of this ancient land.

Sab is already back at the 4WD by the time we hike a longer route down, waiting with iced towels to wipe the sweat from our brows.

Day Three: Leo, stymied by Sab's broad Australian accent, falls asleep in the back seat as we drive to Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris (www arnhemland-safaris.com), at Mt. Borradaile, a registered Aboriginal sacred site nestled against the Arnhem Land escarpment.

Dinner is three very large, very delicious lamb chops which Leo, who had previously maintained she didn't like lamb, devours with delight.

The next day we visit a rock art site to see a large Rainbow Serpent, an image which features predominantly in Aboriginal lore. We also meet the brightly orange-



coloured Leichhardt's grasshoppers quietly feasting on their favourite bush, and cruise local rivers and billabongs (ponds and lakes) in a flat-bottomed boat.

At one place close to shore, Sab does his imitation of a buffalo calf in distress – which attracts several large buffalo. At another spot, he leaps on to a sand bar to try to catch a small crocodile for us but it slips into the water.

We enjoy fishing even though

the dozen barramundi we catch don't quite measure up to keeper size. A sunset cruise with a glass of wine on the lily-covered waterways provides a return visit to the thousands of magpie geese, whistling ducks and other wildlife.

Days Four to Six: Now we are at Bamurru Plains resort (<http://bamurruplains.com>), west of Kakadu on the Mary River floodplains, which definitely lives up to



Mike Grenby photo

A sign warning both visitors and locals of the dangers of getting “taken” (= killed and eaten) by crocodiles.

its “Wild Bush Luxury” name.

We stay in one of the nine safari bungalows, whose walls are airy screens through which we see the buffalo, wallabies and brumbies.

We explore the area; our air-boat trips take us skimming over the shallow wetlands, startling buffalo splashing frantically out of our path, and through myriad

“fields” of waterlilies and big-leaved lotus plants in flower.

Like Davidson’s, Bamurru’s accommodation has ensuite bathrooms, a swimming pool and communal dining. Bamurru also features an open bar.

We even get room service one night when Leo doesn’t feel well, prompting Sab and chef Mick to bring a four-course dinner to our

bungalow.

Day Seven comes all too soon as Sab delivers us back to Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory. Was it worth the money? For the experience, for the memories, simply for Sab – definitely.

Travel writer Mike Grenby teaches journalism at Bond University on Australia’s Gold Coast – mgrenby@bond.edu