

TRAVEL

Great
Escapes

THE

A Bird in the Hand

GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH A DAZZLING ARRAY OF WILDLIFE AT THE MOST LUXURIOUS GAME LODGE IN AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY, WRITES NICHOLAS WALTON

CALL OF THE WILD
Herds of water buffalo graze peacefully, shrouded in morning mist



SITTING UNDER A FAN in a Balinese-style pavilion with an ice-cold Bombay Sapphire gin and tonic in hand and a dinner of stuffed burramundi with wild potatoes roasting on a nearby campfire, life at Bamurru Plains is about as idyllic as you could possibly imagine. That is until nature takes this magical experience one step further with a Noah's Ark-like procession of wildlife passing metres in front of the luxury lodge, just as the fiery sun completes its daily descent.

Bamurru Plains, arguably the most luxurious game lodge in Australia's Northern Territory, can't take credit for the conga line of wild boar,

water buffalo and brumby horses that pass within a hair's breadth of my dinner table. The camp's immersion into its stunning surroundings – seemingly endless flood plains, eucalyptus forests and red rock formations – make wildlife-spotting here, miles from anywhere, more of a certainty than a novelty.

Located near the border of the acclaimed Kakadu National Park, Bamurru Plains offers the ultimate in wild-bush luxury and is the perfect place to escape to when the traffic jams, supermarket queues and deadlines of city living become too much to handle. The park covers 2,687sqkm, linking the flood belts of the Adelaide and Mary Rivers, and is home to a myriad of wildlife, including bird species such as the whistling duck, pied heron, little curlew, sharp-tailed sandpiper and more than 800,000 squawking magpie geese.

Situated on what Territorians would refer to as a "lifestyle block" (the lodge's owner has a ranch nearby that's three times larger), the

305sqkm station plays host to all manner of wild creatures. In typical Northern Territory fashion, Bamurru Plains is a three-hour drive east from Darwin, the state capital, and a further 20-minute drive from front gate to front door. Guests can tackle the dust-blown highway from Darwin by 4x4, or fly into the lodge's landing strip by helicopter or light plane.

Although the setting is untamed, the accommodation at Bamurru Plains hardly constitutes roughing it. Forget tents: each of Bamurru's nine luxurious cabins features comfy beds, air conditioning and outdoor showers. All cabins are close enough to the main lodge that you can call for help when your sauvignon runs low, but far enough not to interfere with your environmental voyeurism.

There's no television, no DVD player and no internet, but you'll love slipping between 100 per cent cotton sheets at night, and waking each morning to high-pressure showers and the raucous cacophony of blue-winged kookaburras.



SAFARI SENSATIONS
CLOCKWISE
FROM ABOVE

No lack of creature comforts at the luxurious Bamurru Plains; bird-watching at a nesting site; an airboat, vehicle of choice on the flood plains

The world is silent, tranquil and at peace, and after the bustle of the city, the quiet seems deafening



Each individual cabin is raised on stilts and opens out onto the surrounding landscape, allowing exceptionally close access to birds and other wildlife.

At sunrise, coffee and wattleseed muffins are delivered and I enjoy mine in the “viewing gallery,” a sun room located off the cabin’s living room that has a unique one-way fabric for great early-morning wildlife-spotting. For the patient, silence will be rewarded with an up close and personal encounter with anything from a shy wallaby right up to a snorting water buffalo.

Wild boar, dingoes, wallaroos, agile wallabies, lumbering water buffalo, lurking estuarine crocodiles and more than 236 bird species are all around, and can be viewed from the comfort of the shaded hotel deck, by airboat excursion or from an open-boat cruise up the river.

Helicopter flights over the property and along the coastline of Northern Australia offer a bird’s eye view of flocks of magpie geese and corellas, graceful egrets and massive saltwater crocodiles baking on the river banks. During the dry season, guests can explore the flood plains on guided afternoon drives, the open-top vehicles offering perfect photographic opportunities.

It’s early in the morning, yet the sun is already high in the sky. I join a handful of other guests trekking out to the edge of the flood plains, where a flotilla of boats awaits. Steam rises in the distance as a family of water buffalo splash their way towards the shade of the cabbage trees on dry land. The world is silent, tranquil and at peace, and after the bustle of the city, the quiet seems deafening and all-consuming.

Squawking black magpie geese climb sluggishly from their hidden nests among the reeds and rouse the landscape from its slumber. The airboat glides effortlessly across the emerald-green flood plain, so covered in

reeds and foliage that it looks like dry land. The warm morning air whips past us, and its fresh, intoxicating earthiness awakens senses and something spiritual in the process.

We spend the morning joyriding in the airboat, then feast on sundried tomato quiche and thick sandwiches of cheese and roasted capsicum. Food plays a pivotal role at Bamurru, with multi-course dinners and breakfasts as wide as your imagination. Menus can also be rather adventurous: terracotta pot pies filled with camel and water buffalo for lunch, and local scallops and crayfish at dinner on the lodge’s sprawling outdoor deck as the temperature cools. Anglers can test their luck in the many rivers and swamps in search of giant burramundi, which the chef will dutifully grill to perfection.

My guide reaches out to a nearby paperbark tree, pries off thick tufts of its tissue-like bark and places them in a paper bag. “The chef loves to use paperbark to roast barramundi,” he explains. “It really infuses the flavours of the outback into the fish, and we use it in cooking just as the Aboriginals do.”

Along the way, the guides point out the habitats and behavioural patterns of different creatures, as well as flora native to the area. Guests learn how lime ants taste (the more

intrepid among us biting down on their bulbous green behinds to sample the zesty flavour) and are taught to recognise potentially fatal berries, before getting the opportunity to smoke fish in bundles of paperbark.

As the sun begins to set on our last evening in the outback, we grab our cameras and hop on one of the trusty airboats like real adventurers. But this safari happens to include chilled bottles of champagne, and as we sip our drinks we marvel at the simplicity and beauty of the Australian sunset. Our guides point out floating “logs” on the hunt for dinner, so it’s hands inside the boat, and flocks of seabirds fill the skies as they head home for the night. The sun is a huge burning ball of orange that dips quickly across the horizon in an explosion of colour that sets the rippling water aflame.

For a moment the geese settle down in their reed beds, the buffalo stand still with ears twitching, and the world breathes a silent sigh of peace as the evening descends.

My two days at Bamurru drift past far too quickly and as I climb aboard a dusty 4x4 for the road back to Darwin, I leave like so many of Bamurru’s guests: with a better understanding of this stunningly beautiful land, and of the magical diversity of the Top End. **T**

AT THE TOP END

WHERE TO STAY

Each of the beautifully appointed Bamurru cottages boasts a bedroom, living room and spacious outdoor bathroom.

Accommodation includes selected activities and gourmet meals. www.bamurruplains.com

GETTING AROUND

The lodge can organise transfers from the airport or your accommodation in Darwin. Car-hire companies in Darwin include Avis, Europcar and Hertz. Alternatively, helicopter transfers can be arranged from Darwin International Airport direct to the property.

WILD SIDE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

A glowing sunset from the viewing deck; Kakadu National Park from a rise; magpie goose in flight; exploring the flood plains

