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CHRISTIAN FLETCHER

THE GREAT NORTH WEST

ASK ANY AUSTRALIAN ABOUT THE KIMBERLEY AND THEY WILL GET A WISTFUL LOOK IN THEIR EYE AS THEY ARE TRANSPORTED BY THE DREAM OF VISITING ONE OF THE NATION'S MOST ASTONISHING NATURAL WONDERS. **RODERICK EIME** OFFERS A FULL GUIDE TO EXPERIENCING THE LANDSCAPES, WILDLIFE AND LUXURY OF THIS PRISTINE REGION, AND PROVES THERE IS PLENTY MORE THAN JUST THE KIMBERLEY COAST.

SCREEN WORTHY

The majestic Kimberley region was chosen as the landscape for Baz Luhrmann's blockbuster film *Australia* in 2008.

It's no coincidence that Tourism Australia chose Western Australia's vast Kimberley region to showcase the grandeur and spectacle of our magnificent landscapes in the 2008 blockbuster *Australia*. Unlike the Central Australian pair, Uluru and Kata Tjuta, where tourism has been active for over half a century, visitors to the Kimberley have only been arriving in appreciable numbers for barely half that period. Perhaps as a result of near-impossible isolation, harsh climates and the almost complete lack of infrastructure, Australia's North West remained off the tourism radar until adventure cruisers and remote fishing charter operators changed that.

The gobsmacking panoramas of Mitchell Falls, Raft Point and mystical Montgomery Reef could not have been better suited to the big-budget cinematography of Baz Luhrmann's movie. Love it or not, the golden-hued ancient landscapes of the Kimberley were presented spectacularly on screen.

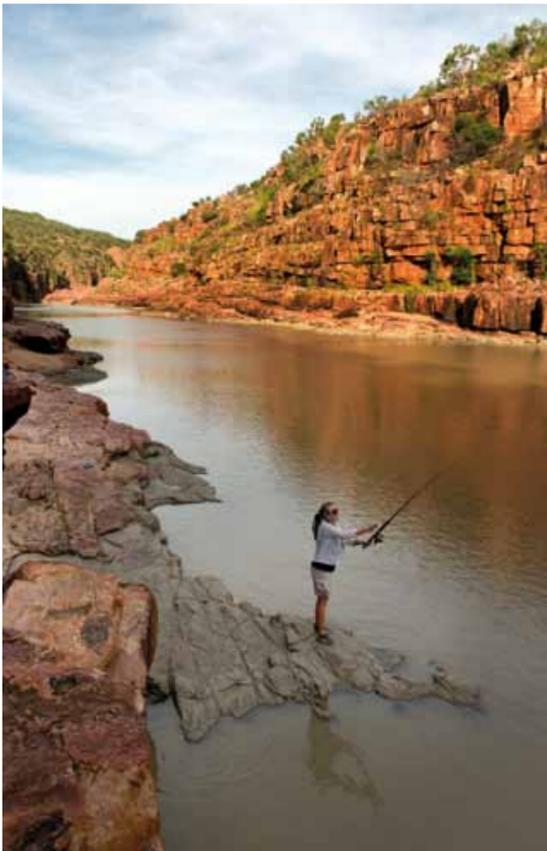
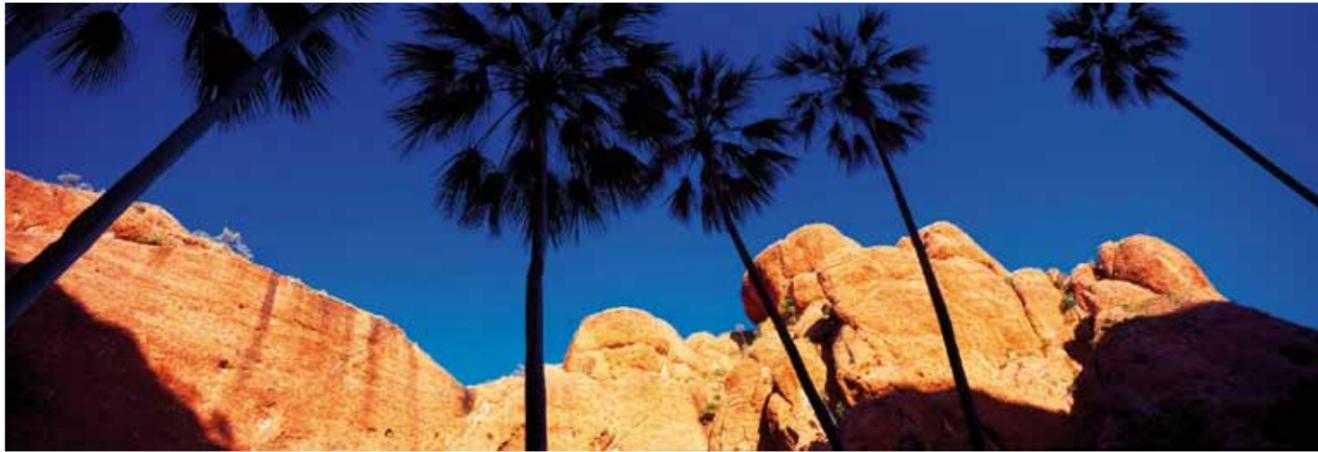
More recently, however, it's been the furor over oil and gas exploration highlighting the region, with local tourism businesses fearful that unfettered development will tarnish the unspoiled quality of the iconic Kimberley.

One of the most experienced adventure cruise operators in the region is North Star Cruises (NSC), launched by local fisherman and pearler, Craig Howson, back in 1987 with a few ad hoc fishing and diving charters for mates. Nowadays Howson operates the vessel many refer to as the benchmark for Kimberley adventure cruising. With just 18 luxury cabins and staterooms, the \$12 million boutique vessel, *True North*, was built by the Fremantle yard, Austal, in 2004. Boutique cruise vessels like the 50-metre *True North* are perfect for exploring these uncharted waters where local knowledge means everything. Of course, exquisite cuisine, sumptuous cabins, dotting crew and expert guides complete the picture. Skipper Brad Benbow even knows a secluded beach where you can go for a swim while the crew keep a watch for any threatening reptilian interlopers.

North Star Cruises' premium offering is their stalwart 13-night Kimberley Ultimate cruise that plies the waters between Broome and Wyndham. "This remains our strongest product," says Howson. "This is where we gained our reputation and it is still number one with many."

Now, with multiple national and state tourism awards under its belt, NSC has expanded as far afield as Papua New Guinea, Sydney's Hawkesbury and South Australia's Gulf St Vincent.

But NSC is not alone in the Kimberley. No fewer than a dozen small vessels



WESTERN WONDERS

Above: The Bungle Bungles, otherwise known as Purnululu National Park; Left: Fishing for the giant barramundi is a staple Kimberley activity. Right: Model Jerry Hall enjoys a spot of refreshment in the Kimberley. Opposite page top: *True North* at King Cascades. Below: The sublime Cable Beach is famous for its camel rides.



operate among the primordial sandstone cliffs, watched over by mute wandjina (Aboriginal rock art) sentinels as their aluminium spawn head upstream along the Roe, Hunter and Prince Regent Rivers in search of giant barramundi or mangrove jack. Smaller craft like *Kimberley Quest* (18-person) and *Great Escape* (14-person) are joined by larger ships such as *Oceanic Discoverer* (72-person), *National Geographic Orion* (106-person) and Silversea's *Silver Discoverer* (120-person), although the rule of thumb is always smaller is better. Prices, however, are anything but small and rates around \$1000 per person per day are common for this premium destination.

"Back in the late 1990s when my wife Terri and I were operating a regular travel agency in Broome, we started getting more and more enquiries about cruising," recalls Bruce Connell of the Kimberley Cruise Centre. "There were only about three or four decent boats operating at the time. Now 15 years later, we have hand-picked the best dozen operators – ranging from 10 to 120 berths – which we sell all year round, including internationally."

Supermodel Jerry Hall is just one international visitor to rave about cruising the Kimberley Coast.

"I adore Broome," Ms Hall said. "We've had a lovely stay at McAlpine House – a beautifully restored pearler's home – and

BROOME

You could easily call Broome the de facto capital of the North West. Once a ramshackle outpost for pearlsharers and itinerant fishermen, wealth from pearls, mining and tourism has elevated the town beyond its rough beginnings. Broome is also the major port for adventure and expedition cruisers heading out to the Kimberley coast, so almost all passengers will spend some time in this remote community. Apart from pearls and the mandatory Cable Beach camel rides, there are some excellent Aboriginal art galleries and the hovercraft rides out onto Roebuck Bay are one of the last commercial hovercraft rides available in the world. Getting around is easy and cheap on a hired scooter.

DID YOU KNOW?

The volume of water in Lake Argyle exceeds 10 million cubic metres – nine times that of Sydney Harbour. Warragamba, by comparison, holds less than half the water of Lake Argyle when full.

MARK STOTHARD / CHRISTIAN FLETCHER

we've enjoyed the relaxing atmosphere of the town itself.

"I also love Cable Beach – the colours of the water and coastline are just glorious. We also took a trip to the Mowanjumb Art Centre where I bought some beautiful Aboriginal paintings, and I am most excited about our cruise through the Kimberley Coast, onboard *True North*."

Others include Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, Miranda Kerr and Orlando Bloom, Missy Higgins, James Packer, Barry Humphries, Alex Lloyd, Kylie Minogue, and Rove McManus and Tasma Walton, who married in Broome.

Following 12,000 nominations judged by a panel of 20 travel experts, cruising the Kimberley was named as number one in Australia's 100 Greatest Holidays Of All Time.

With treacherous ten-metre tides and shallow deltas, the gigantic liners from P&O and Royal Caribbean will never operate here. Local skippers and guides with a lifetime's knowledge are the key, leading excursion boats through narrow gorges, secluded waterways or even, as with *True North*, via Bell Jetranger helicopter to your own private, spring-fed freshwater pool for a cool dip.

Besides pulling in the monstrous barramundi, highlights include the always-thrilling tender boat ride through the horizontal falls of Talbot Bay where the tide runs so strong and the water gushes out like the famous climactic scene from *The Dambusters*.

With marketers frothing at the mouth about 'transformational and experiential' travel, the mesmerising and humbling Kimberley Coast is no longer Australia's secret.



A CRUISE IS JUST THE BEGINNING IN AUSTRALIA'S NORTH WEST

It's the world's worst kept secret. Australia's Kimberley and North West was recently voted as the top adventure cruise destination for Australians, and is ranking high on the global chart for 'must do' expedition cruising.

But now you've done your cruise, pulled out a thrashing barramundi from the Hunter River, gazed in awe at the dizzying precipices of the Mitchell Falls and shot the wild waters of the horizontal waterfalls, what next?

The mesmerising ancient landscapes of the Kimberley extend way past the coast, inland to the eye-boggling Bungle Bungles (now more correctly known as the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Purnululu National Park) along the infamous Gibb River Road through some of the wildest,

oldest and fascinating territory imaginable.

Kununurra and its man-made mini-ocean, Lake Argyle, is full of its own outback adventure and those keen to follow cinematic themes can experience Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman's *Australia* or venture to that place of nightmares, Wolfe Creek Crater.

There are tours you can join, or the more independent-minded can set off on their own self-drive adventure checking into any of the several homestead 'resorts' or international-standard luxury retreats like El Questro. *Ocean* readers might consider flying their own Pilatus into one of the blissfully secluded resorts like Berkeley River Lodge.

Take your pick from any of these destinations and ideas, then extend your adventure in one of Australia's newest remote destinations.

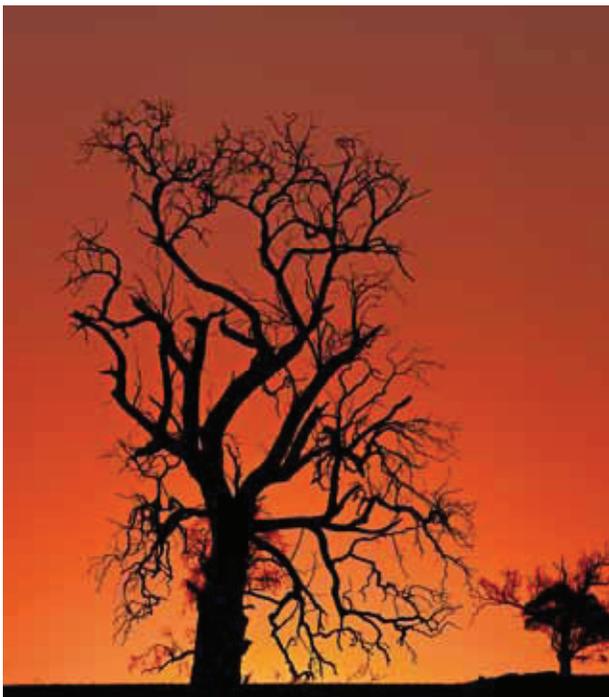


KUNUNURRA

Situated in the East Kimberley, the outback town of Kununurra is the logical end of the Gibb River Road near the Northern Territory border and the ideal location to start or finish a Gibb River Road drive. It's also the location of the famous Argyle Downs Homestead Museum, site of the original pioneering Durack family property, most of which is now submerged by the equally famous man-made Lake Argyle. If you haven't fully satisfied your cruising urge, day cruises are available on the lake.

DERBY

Pronounced DERR-bee, this town is actually the first European settlement in the area and was the site of a jetty built in 1885 to service the growing pastoral industry. The streets are lined with massive boab trees and history buffs will enjoy following the Derby Pastoral Trail, which leads to the wharf and takes in the Wharfinger House Museum, Pioneer Cemetery and the Old Derby Gaol. The visitor centre is at 30 Loch Street.



THE WANDJINA ARE WATCHING

The Wandjina are the spirit gods of the Kimberley who control the weather, and their images abound throughout the caves and craggy overhangs of Australia's rugged North West.

For countless thousands of years the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley, with such evocative names as the Ngarinyin, Umida, Wunambul and Unggarangi, kept watch over the Wandjina figures, just as their spirits kept watch over them. Today, privileged visitors can still see these images in all their mysterious glory gazing imperiously down from their cave ceiling frescos.

Distinct from their distant cave relatives, the mysterious Gwion Gwion (or Bradshaws), the Wandjina have a more modern connection with the indigenous Mowanjam people of the region. Typically mouthless and full length, the Wandjina spirits are believed to possess great power over the natural elements all around them, and are held in the highest respect.

The landscape of the Kimberley is among the oldest formations in the world, dating back some 1.8 billion years. For those used to wandering the bleak landscapes further south along the Nullarbor, you'll notice the complete lack of fossils.

"There are no fossils," comes the matter-of-fact statement from Carly, a naturalist guide at the El Questro Wilderness Park, "these rocks were formed before there was any life to fossilise."

Let that sink in before you return your gaze to the deep orange hues of the ultra-hard sandstone cliffs along Chamberlain Gorge. The namesake river, replete with fresh, crystal-clear water, is home to a seemingly endless supply of mighty barramundi, guarded by a permanent squad of freshwater crocodiles.

Just over 100 years ago, white Europeans brought cattle to the Kimberley from the east in search of new pastures, a heritage recalled in Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia*. Pioneering drover, the Irish-born Patrick Durack, established Argyle Station in 1886 after bringing 7000 head from Queensland and arriving with about half of them left. If ever a harsh and unforgiving land epitomised the bush spirit of early European settlement, it is the Kimberley. Blessed with clean, permanent water, but cursed with oppressive heat and humidity, the Kimberley tolerates man's presence, but offers no comfort.

The vast 400,000-hectare El Questro Wilderness Park is still a working cattle station and provides a range of accommodation options for intrepid visitors. From humble, riverside camping plots to the ultra-exclusive El Questro Homestead, visitors can indulge their outback passion no matter their budget.

For several months in mid-2007, the area was swarming with cast and crew filming key scenes for Luhrmann's epic, and cinema buffs can visit many of the locations and share a yarn with the locals who took part.

A few kilometres south of Wyndham along the King River is the unassuming Diggers Rest, a knockabout homestead that was home to 90 crew during two months of filming. Back to its regular persona of quaint fishing camp and

simple lodge, the tiny bar and games room still bears the evidence with dozens of autographs scrawled on the wall above the flatscreen TV.

"We had some pretty wild nights here," confesses Alida Woodland, who runs the property with husband Roderick. "We put almost 100 tents out the back and built that new ablution block. It looked like an army camp here for about two months!"

Follow the track a few kilometres down the Karunjie Road and you'll see the wide mudflats used to film some of the stock mustering scenes. With the ample Pentecost River to the west and the vast Cockburn Ranges to the east, this scene epitomises the harsh territory and stark beauty of the Kimberley.

Continue along the rough track to Home Valley Station, another site frequented by the cast and crew both on and off duty.

"Baz just loved the view across the [Pentecost] river toward the Cockburn Ranges," says Nicolle Fenech who manages the station with husband Chris, "so he spent a lot of time filming the vistas and sunset panoramas in the movie."

Home Valley Station is a recently refurbished destination property offering visitors quality accommodation, food and even conference facilities. Owned by the Indigenous Land Council (ILC) on behalf of the Balangarra people of the East Kimberley, Home Valley is an accredited TAFE training college where locals learn about the art of hospitality as well as pastoral skills.

Meanwhile, the Wandjina cast their hollow eyes down impassively on those below, their task long pre-defined in the Dreamtime, their destiny beyond our reach and comprehension. ○



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NATURAL ORDER

Above: The Kimberley landscape is among the oldest formations in the world, dating back some 1.8 billion years.