

VANITY FAIR

ON TRAVEL

MARCH 2013

PANAMA
IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

By STEVE KING

KASHMIR
BEAUTIFUL BEYOND DISPUTE

By TREVOR FISLOCK

Plus

Tom Parker Bowles *HITS THE ROAD* in Search of *STREET FOOD*
Nigel Tisdall *GOES OFF THE RAILS* in *STATION HOTELS*

There's the great outdoors. And then there's the great, great, great big outdoors.
Such as the sheer staggering near-infinity of outback that is the Kimberley,
a wilderness larger than Japan, occupying the far northwestern tip of Australia.
Strewth, mate, gimme the remote, says PETER HUGHES



Space: The

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAIRE MARTIN

LOOK OUT

Dawn at the Berkeley River Lodge, on the Kimberley coast of Western Australia.



Final Frontier

D

awn, and nature is playing with her chemistry set. It is one of her more theatrical experiments: the reaction of light on rock. The trick is one she performs daily all over the world, but in the Australian tropics she's perfected it.

Here the dry winter light is fierce and clear and the rock is three million years old. It looks it. Derelict sandstone the colour of ogen-melon flesh rises sheer in dilapidated bluffs, fissured and contorted, forgotten rockfaces left to crumble and rot. It's like a scrapyards of clapped-out geology. But when it's touched by the smelting light of sunrise, the alchemy begins. Auburn cliffs turn incandescent, converting copper into gold, then, as the sun floats free of the horizon, rose becomes orangey mango. I have

nearly 24 years, trace how the area has gradually been prised open. In 1989 pretty well the only way in to the interior was on dirt roads that demanded four-wheel drive, low gear and a strong stomach to survive the bucking, squirming ride. We slept under the stars in cocoon-like swags, and one night were disturbed by a herd of inquisitive brumbies, feral horses.

By the time of my next visit tourism had begun flirting with the Kimberley coast, finding places inaccessible even to 4x4s. I took one of the regular 10-night cruises made by the 106-passenger expedition ship *Orion* from Darwin to Broome. There were natural phenomena caused by tides of up to 12 metres, the third-biggest in the world. When the tide fell at Montgomery Reef, a vast plateau of tawny coral, water cascaded off its flat back as if it were a monster surfacing. And at Talbot Bay even a ship the size of *Orion* does not have the power to pass through the narrows when the tide is running. The ebb races through the gap with such force it has been called the Horizontal Falls. Even as the tide was turning, the ship's Zodiac inflatables struggled against the churning current, just managing to get through.

There were man-made phenomena too. "Bradshaw art" is a style of rock painting that is believed to be the most ancient in Australia. Joseph Bradshaw was the first white man to see it, in 1891. The examples I saw were on Jar Island, southwest of Darwin, though there are others throughout the Kimberley. They are the rock-art equivalent of L.S. Lowry, spindly little prancing figures unlike any other aboriginal paintings.

In shallow caves on Bigge Island are some remarkable illustrations of much later "contact art", the aboriginals' record of

Auburn cliffs turn incandescent, CONVERTING COPPER INTO GOLD

witnessed Australians weep at the beauty of it. No one who is unmoved by landscape should bother with these parts, or isolation come to that, let alone the infinity of the outback.

The north of Australia is so remote and little-travelled that the land has topography yet unnamed. Its most totemic feature, the knobbly sandstone massif of the Bungle Bungles, had never been seen by white Australians until 30 years ago, when a film crew scouting locations flew over it. The first overland track was blazed by following a trail of flour bags dropped from the air. The kiln-shaped hillocks, striped as precisely as Italian Renaissance cathedrals some 250 metres high, were quickly declared a national park and named Purnululu. It was only added to UNESCO's World Heritage list 10 years ago.

The Bungle Bungles bubble out of a scrubby savannah in the Kimberley, a vast wasteland at the northern tip of Western Australia, the left-hand corner of the continent's Top End. It is spread between Broome in the west and Kununurra some 800 kilometres to the northeast. Nearly twice the size of the United Kingdom, the Kimberley has the population of Monaco. If it were a country, it would be the world's 60th biggest, only slightly smaller than Iraq. A single cattle station occupies almost two million acres, larger than Hampshire and Somerset combined.

They call it the continent's last frontier, which means it is the last of Australia's empty quarters to be made accessible to travellers. My own journeys to the Kimberley, which go back

their first sight of Europeans. A schooner, sketched in blue, is believed to be Abel Tasman's ship from which he mapped the coast in 1644. In another scene three men appear in a dinghy. The boat has rowlocks, introduced at the beginning of the 19th century, and the seamen, in wide-brimmed hats, are puffing on huge pipes.

Orion is a five-star ship. Now the tentacles of high-end tourism are reaching inland. The Bungle Bungles has two new bush camps. One, Bungle Bungle Wilderness Lodge, has lavish safari-style tents with en-suite washrooms. The other, Bungle Bungles Safari Camp, opened last June inside the national park. Simpler than the lodge, it is the only one with views of the sandstone domes. It can only be reached by four-wheel drive.

For my latest foray, I stepped onto the Kimberley Aerial Highway. This is the marketeers' name for the air services that fly to otherwise inaccessible outback lodges. Some have their own airstrips, a few boast helipads, many can only be reached by seaplane. Somewhere as isolated as the Kimberley is one of the last places in which you might expect to find a selection of Australia's most comfortable accommodations. But it is their remoteness that makes them extraordinary. These are places imbued more with the quality of retreats than resorts.

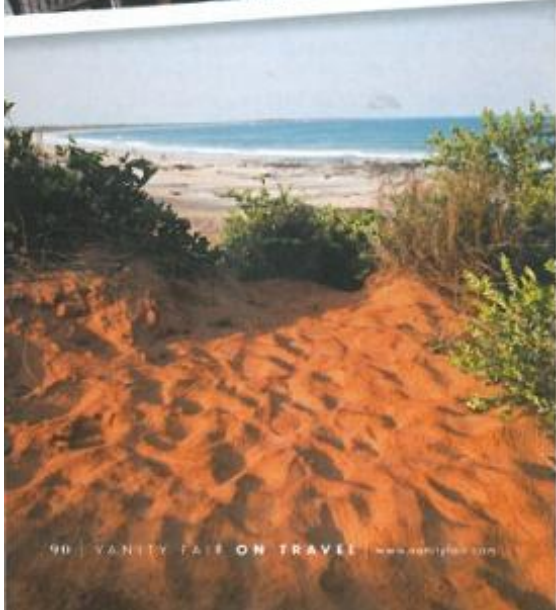
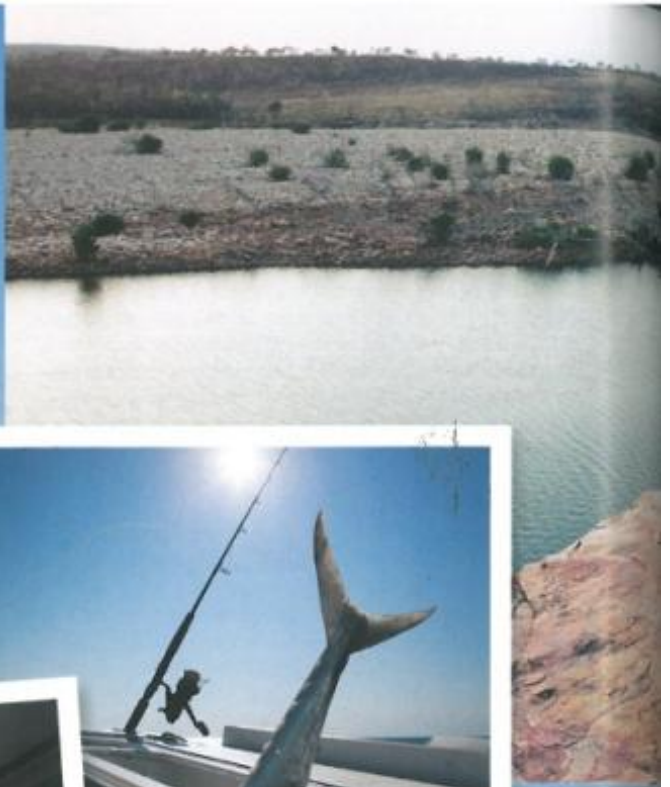
In the lodges in which I stayed, none had mobile-phone



WILD WEST

Above: a camel tour on Cable Beach, Broome. Below: one of the 800 unnamed islands of the Buccaneer Archipelago.

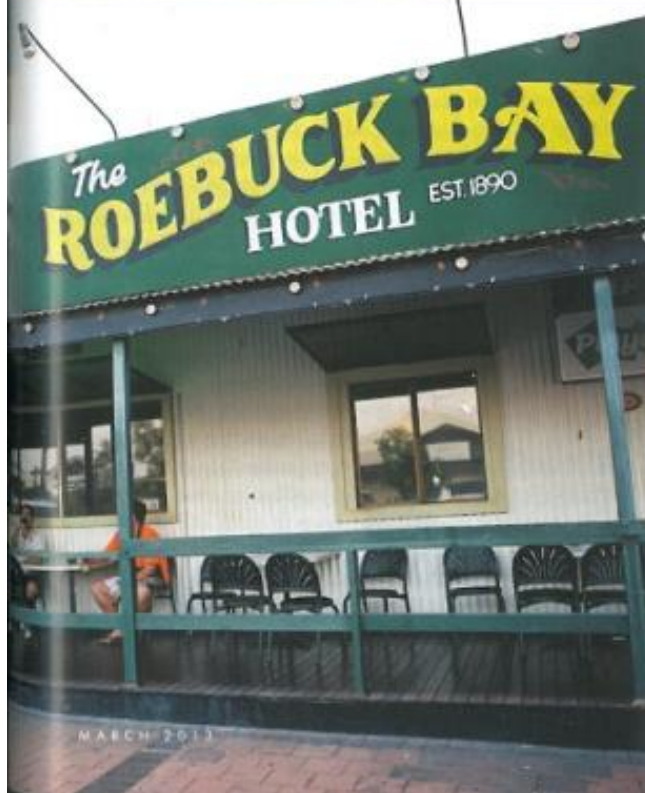






THE BIGGER PICTURE

Clockwise from top left: signage marking the entrance to El Questro; a charter boat with its catch of Spanish mackerel, in Camden Sound, near Kalumburu; a table set for dinner at El Questro, on the banks of the Chamberlain River gorge; a delivery car from Matso's Broome Brewery; the historic Roebuck Bay Hotel, Broome; a local artist sells hand-carved boab tree nuts on the streets of Broome; red dunes meet white sand at Cable Beach; the lounge area on the verandah at El Questro. Centre: a seaplane on the Berkeley River.



connection or television; WiFi was unusual. None had a spa. Hurrah! Yet what I was being sold was "luxury". It's a concept difficult to define even by those who supply it. "Exclusivity," offered one lodge manager. "Not having to share with too many people. It's not luxury in a Versace Palace sense, but more in the things we haven't got: television in the rooms, telephones, WiFi and so on." So *not* having things is the new luxury? Another lodge owner, more conventionally, claimed it was a superior level of service and, he added vaguely, "the experience".

I am in the bath, a white ellipse of alabaster-hard plastic, outdoors, on the veranda of my villa. My only companion is a bird on a dead tree beside the river below me. It could join me if it had a mind to: there is no glass or screen between us. The evening air is almost as warm as the bathwater but sensuously cool on wet skin. As the sun sets over my toes, the land—river, stony banks, distant hills—withdraws into its shadows and closes down for the night.

I am at El Questro, one of the pioneers of the whole idea of "smoothing it" rather than roughing it in the outback. Will Burrell, then a 23-year-old Englishman, and his Australian wife Celia bought the million-acre cattle station for a dollar an acre and created a languid country house they named The Homestead. That was 22 years ago, and although the Burrells sold up in 2005, El Questro still has the feel of a distinctly English patch of Australia, all green trees and clean-shaven lawns daubed upon a rubble of paprika-coloured stone. It's Downton Abbey with wallabies. It also conforms to Coco Chanel's take on luxury. "Some people think luxury is the opposite of poverty," she said. "It is not. It is the opposite of vulgarity."

The Homestead sleeps 12. Now another six can be accommodated in greater seclusion in three new cliffside retreats ranged along the top of an escarpment above the Chamberlain River. Fronted by long verandas, with the baths at one end, they have indoor and outdoor showers, big glass frontages and interiors immaculately carpentered in jarrah, silky oak and spotted gum.

Beyond the river, bluffs and scarps rise sheer from a plane of prickly spinifex and pallid gum trees. It's some of the most ancient rock in the world, 1.8 billion years old, older than life itself. Fossils came later; dinosaurs were not yet a twinkle in the Creator's eye.

I climbed a short valley to Zebedee Springs, thermal pools named after the *Magic Roundabout* character. There's the British bit again. Sunlight filtered through livingstonia palm fronds. I picked my way between billion-year-old boulders, following the course of a noisy little stream splashing down flights of small waterfalls. At the top there was room to stretch out on the sandy river bed in warm pools and watch another fractured rock face turn tangerine in the afternoon light.

Dinner that night was seared scallops with roast confit of pork belly and filet of Margaret River beef in a porcini and Armagnac sauce. I joined a long communal table, but I could have been served romantically *à deux* by candlelight on a natural rock shelf at the riverside. It's easy to forget, amid the refreshing cold flannels, evening canapés and sophisticated plumbing, just how hostile this landscape is. The climate and terrain are exactly those that took their toll on early settlers.

One of the most bizarre things about sybaritic lodges like El Questro is that they should be found in one of the bastions of red-necked Australia. It's a style of holiday that came late to Oz. When I first camped in the Kimberley 20-odd years ago, I visited

the men's washroom in the morning. A long line of basins extended down one wall, occupied by red faced blokes in singlets. Never having been exposed to the sun, the tops of their heads were lily white, much whiter than their vests. I took the one free basin at the far end of the line and, after shaving, found my aerosol deodorant. I sprayed under my arms: fssst, fssst. The blokes froze, razors half way to their faces and, in synchrony, like Guardsmen dressing by the right, swivelled their attention to me. I was suddenly a character in an H.M. Bateman cartoon: *The Man Who Used Deodorant in the Kimberley*.

You still come across traces of the old, ocker Oz. I spent one night in the Kimberley Grande, a motel in Kununurra, an hour and a half from El Questro. It gives a good idea of what hotel grandeur in the Kimberley has traditionally been. The room was huge but the first thing I saw were the skins of two dead cows spread across the stone floor. They were the sort of rugs upon which mewling infants once had their photographs taken. Here they could have been placed to cover some of the cracks in the stone. Still, there was a whirlpool bath and widescreen television, so the essentials were in place.



This was the yabba-dabba-do GEOLOGY OF *THE FLINTSTONES*

I met someone who had watched a football match on the big screen in the Grande's bar. At halftime they showed a video of pole dancers. My friend expressed his surprise to the manager: "There are families here." The manager thought for a moment. "Local families," he said.

In Broome, outside the Oasis Bar of the Roebuck Bay Hotel (est. 1890), a sign warns it is "subject to an immodest licence". That's Australian legalese to explain the "skimpies", bargirls wearing bustiers, suspender belts and fishnet stockings. "You're allowed to look," assured a local. "That's why they're wearing them." Thursday night is Wet T-shirt Night, a "Broome institution"; \$500 "to the winner".

Actually the Roey is a bit of a throwback. Broome, the eternal boom town, feels less like a transit camp these days, with acres of

new housing projects. The streets are shaded by trees and the houses, clad in light-coloured corrugated iron, have covered verandas with eaves as wide as cattlemen's hats. The whole place seems to be taking shelter, from the sun in the Dry and cyclones in the Wet.

Broome's first fortune came from oyster shell and its lustrous lining of mother-of-pearl, which was valuable chiefly for making buttons. In 1910 Broome had 85 percent of the world's supply, worth £33 million a year. Not bad for a town with 4,000 inhabitants. Those were the days when master pearlers wore white from the soles of their doeskin Oxfords to the tips of their pith helmets and changed up to a dozen times a day in the sticky heat. Once a fortnight they sent their clothes to be laundered... in Singapore.

But pearling has a baleful history, graphically explained at the Pearl Luggers museum on Dampier Terrace. At first aboriginals were enslaved as skin divers. When the diving suit was introduced, Asians took over, in particular Japanese. More than 900 are buried in a cemetery beneath tall shards of stone bearing, in

vertical Japanese script, names and two dates: when they arrived and when they died. Often there was no more than a day between them. Scores died from the bends—145 in seven years—before a decompression chamber was imported in 1917.

Two world wars and the introduction of the plastic button killed the mother-of-pearl business. But then came the cultured pearl and Broome became richer than ever. Now more good times are anticipated thanks to the discovery of natural gas offshore. In the meantime the town's main business is tourism, of which one of the architects was Lord (Alistair) McAlpine, former treasurer of the Conservative Party and lately wronged in the BBC uproar, who opened the Cable Beach Club Resort in the 1980s.

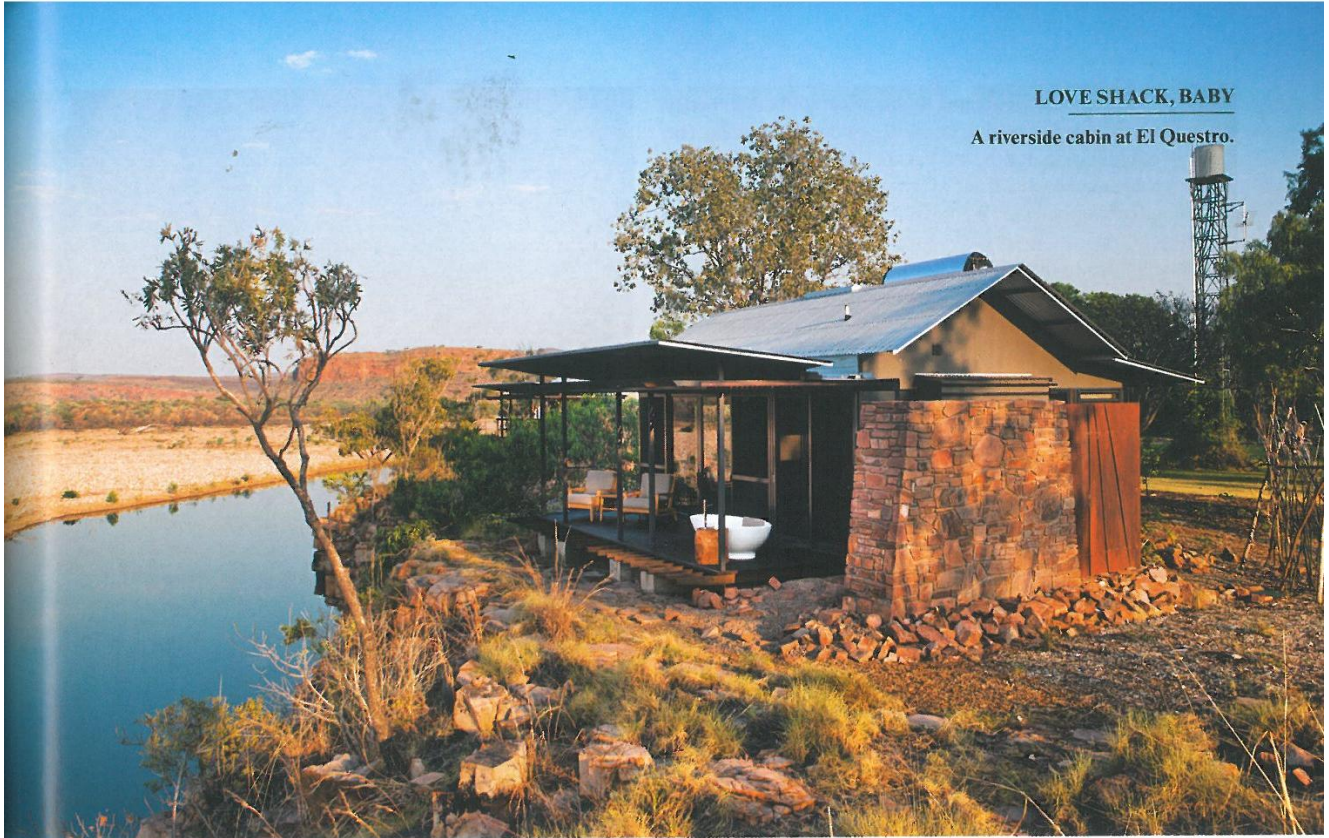
Cable Beach itself, more than 22 kilometres of white sand, is among the few along the coast where, for most of the year, it is safe to swim. It is not affected by predatory sharks or saltwater crocodiles although in summer (November to March) it does get the deadly box jellyfish. There is a nudist section in the gloriously named Willie Creek.

Amid the countless pearl shops, Broome has a couple of excellent galleries specialising in serious aboriginal art. There are some good restaurants too—Matso's and the Aarli Bar are both worth finding. And with Sun Pictures, the town boasts "the world's oldest operating picture gardens". In other words, an outdoor cinema. There is a lawn in front of the screen, hedges on either side and the audience reclines in ranks of striped canvas deck chairs. Half sit in the open air and half in a big, corrugated-iron shed beneath spinning ceiling

HOME, SWEET HOMESTEAD

Signage on the Great Northern Highway. Inset, below: a saltwater crocodile, Kurl Bay.





LOVE SHACK, BABY

A riverside cabin at El Questro.

fans. The picture gardens opened in 1916, and were prone to tidal flooding in the spring. They still show two films a night. In the old days the seating was segregated, with white fellas one side and black fellas the other. Now there is no discrimination: everyone sits directly beneath the flight path to the town-centre airport.

The sheltered waters along the coast northeast of Broome are an important breeding ground for humpback whales. As many as 30,000 arrive between June and September. Four years ago scientists discovered what they are pleased to call one of the world's largest "whale maternity wards" in Camden Sound, where 380 pods were found schooling their calves to feed, ride the tides and breach. But now I am in another bathroom, on the loo, wondering if I have applied enough sunscreen to my knees. This bathroom is open to the sky, contained in a brush-fence stockade. The Berkeley River Lodge is Kimberley's newest and feels the most isolated. Three years ago there was nothing here except sand dunes, the river and a five-kilometre beach of 22-carat sand. Then a Broome businessman, Martin Peirson-Jones, decided to build the lodge. Everything was shipped in by barge. It took two years and one week: Martin and his wife, Kim, were counting because for months they camped on-site, first in swags, then tents. They opened last April.

I arrived by seaplane after an hour's flight from Kununurra, bouncing in on the morning thermals and landing on the green waters of the river estuary. The pilot tossed an anchor onto the sand, and I was driven to my room in a squat ATV (all-terrain vehicle).

Twenty silvery villas, clad in galvanised, corrugated iron, are strung along a ridge of huge dunes, the Timor Sea on one side, Berkeley River the other. Their design is entirely contemporary. From the air they look like triangular slices of pie, each slung between two spiky A-frames. With roofs tipped at the angle of caps worn on the back of the head, their big louvred front

windows seem to gape at the view. Light interiors—pressed bamboo floors, limed-wood furniture—are so minimalist that most of the drawers were already occupied with extra bedding, hairdryers, anti-mozzie coils and milk for the coffee-maker.

In the main building, overlooking the swimming pool, Jodie Mott, the manager, gave the usual cautionary spiel: no swimming in the river or sea. In fact, keep about two metres from the water's edge and "If you see what looks like a log on the beach, don't approach it, just in case it isn't." It's not an idle warning. Godzilla, a seven-metre crocodile, lives just up the river.

It would be tantalising to have the out-of-bounds beach if there wasn't the river to compensate. And what compensation. They keep a helicopter on site for heli-fishing tours, but I took a day-long trip in the lodge's 20-seat boat to cruise through a derelict, *Lost World* landscape, defiant of description, but so stupendous only a wide-angled imagination could take it in. As the river narrowed and twisted, the walls on either side rose vertical and high, layered in great blocks of broken and rusting sandstone the colour of old apple cores, and roughly stacked like the decrepit masonry of ancient ruins. Scrawny little trees sprang from the cliff face; turkey bush ruffled the skyline. This was the cartoon rock of theme parks, the yabba-dabba-doo geology of *The Flintstones*.

Anywhere else they would have called it a canyon, but anywhere else they would have been running tours here for years. As it is, few have ever set eyes, let alone foot, on it. The boat nosed into a gap in the mangroves beneath a cliff so black with algae left from the rainy season it could have been charred. I climbed ashore and traversed the rock face to stand on a narrow ledge, probably the first human to do so.

Is anywhere more weird than Australia? Its nature has little in common with the rest of the world: whole catalogues of species,

birds, plants, animals, are unique to the place. In the Kimberley alone botanists are discovering up to 10 new species a week. The same peculiarity goes for the travel experience. Here are safaris without big game, beaches from which you can't swim and lodges in the outback of beyond. Weird. But at the same time utterly wonderful.

I rate my trips to the Kimberley among my most exhilarating. The excitements of seaplanes and the prehistoric scenery have a lot to do with it. But even more telling is the discovery of what hermits and mystics have known for centuries: that there is nothing as liberating as isolation, or as invigorating as a colossal landscape. What massage does for the body, wilderness does for the soul. For years we have needed a successor to spas: the Aussies may have it. Australia's outback lodges have advanced the therapies of tourism from essential oils and whalesong to treatments for the mind. The ultimate luxury is space. □

Vanity Fair TRAVELS TO...

THE KIMBERLEY

WAY to GO

WEXAS Travel (wexas.com) can tailor-make trips to the Kimberley. Nine nights, including return flights to Broome from London, transfers by light aircraft and full board at **El Questro** (elquestro.com.au) and **Berkeley River Lodge** (berkeleyriver.com.au), plus two nights in Broome at the **Pinctada Cable Beach Resort** (pinctadacablebeach.com.au), with transfers, cost from £4,904 per person. Activities and guides at all the lodges, except the helicopter at Berkeley River, are included. **BA** (britishairways.com), **Qantas** (qantas.com.au), **Emirates** (emirates.com) and **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com) fly regularly from the UK to Perth; Qantas have onward flights to Broome. Two websites that contain much useful general information are: **Australia's North West** (australiasnorthwest.com) and the state tourist office, **Tourism Western Australia** (westernaustralia.com).

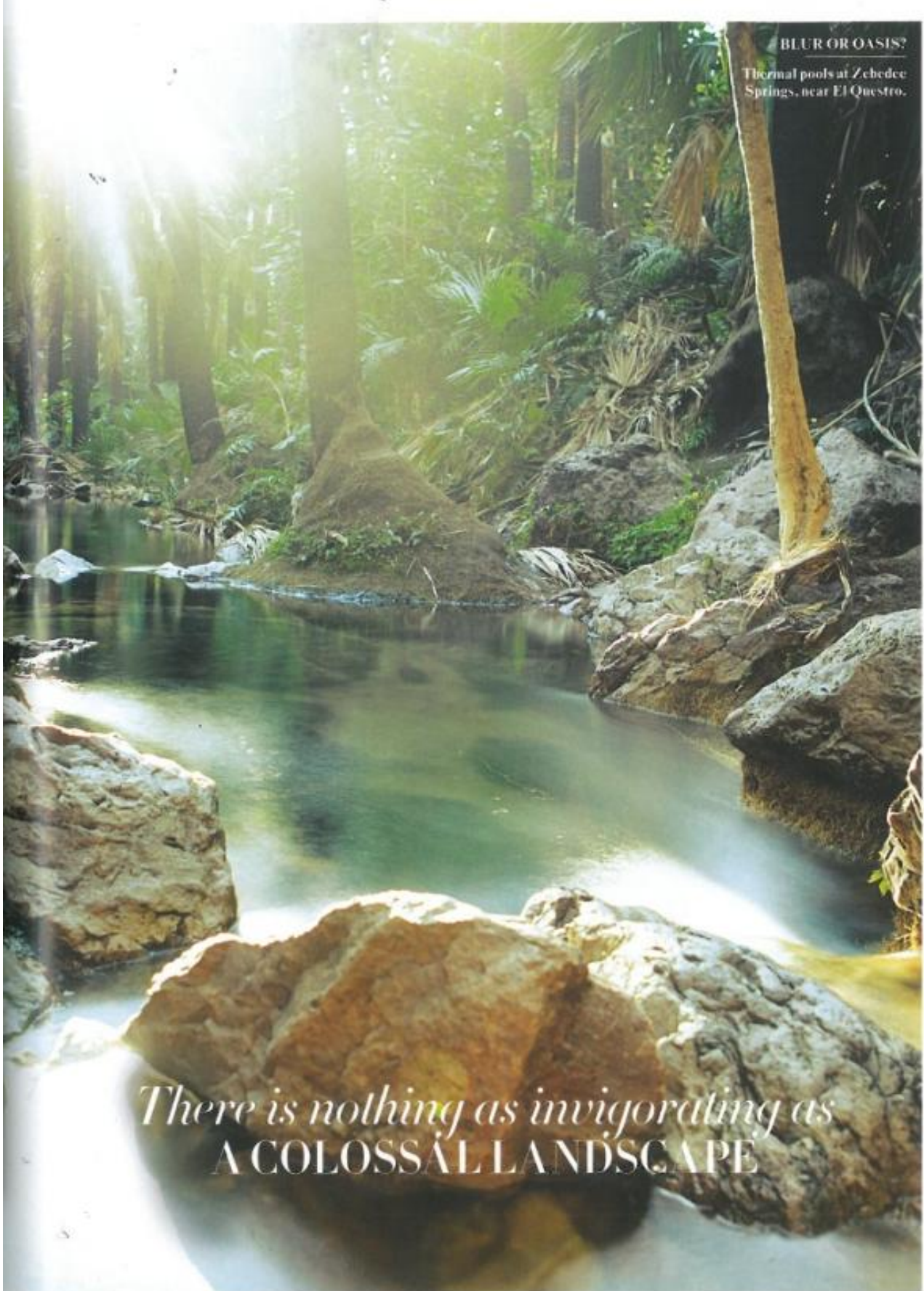
NEED to KNOW

DO check the baggage-weight allowance for any flight of a light aircraft and take small soft bags to pack separately.
DON'T drive at sunset, when there could be kangaroos on the road. They can cause huge damage if you hit one.
DO drink lots of water. Dry season (May to October) temperatures average between 20 and 30 degrees Celsius, but sometimes reach 40 degrees.
DON'T mention the Olympics or the Ashes. Australians are sensitive souls.

P S

Channel your inner Hugh Jackman and/or Nicole Kidman: much of Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* was filmed at El Questro.





BLUR OR OASIS?

Thermal pools at Zcheidde Springs, near El Questro.

There is nothing as invigorating as
A COLOSSAL LANDSCAPE