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how to spend it

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OUT(BACK) OF THE ORDINARY

Frontier aficionados are seeking out exclusive new retreats in wild Western Australia's Kimberley. James Henderson goes flyabout

Main picture: Kelly's Knob, Kununurra, in the Kimberley, Western Australia. Inset: a Cliffside Retreat at El Questro



The Kimberley. Even Australians think it's remote. Lost somewhere on the north coast between Broome and Darwin, it is an area of million-plus-acre cattle stations, sea crocodiles swimming in 12m tides, bush fires that burn for weeks and "road trains" – multi-trailer trucks with cattle for live export and ore for China. In truth, Kimberley is so rough that the main road just avoids it, looping 200 miles south into the desert.

But if most, the Aussies included, still consider it a final frontier, many also have a hankering to go there. And this year, with the increasing interest in bush luxury, these travellers have a new focus: two smart hotels have opened up on the Kimberley coastline, pioneers of serious comfort in this spectacular wilderness.

Generally the entry point for the area, which on a map comprises the very top right-hand corner of Western Australia, is Kununurra. Where? Precisely,

A small town 800km southwest of Darwin. Reaching a hotel somewhere beyond there, on the 1,000km of meandering Kimberley coastline, is something of an adventure in itself. The Berkeley River hotel has no airstrip; you arrive by seaplane. Which is novel. At check-in, a waterfront picnic area on Lake Kununurra, there's more novelty – portable scales appear, and you are obliged to declare your weight. Once aboard, the pilot pushes off (literally), hops in, starts up and you thrum across the water and climb away into the sky, tracking along the estuaries and coastline of the Timor Sea.

Despite the unorthodox arrival, The Berkeley River offers recognisable luxury and comfort, if in off-beat Aussie style. It sits on a run of dunes behind 5km of sand, 20 chalets looking out to sea and inland, where rich red scarps of Australian sandstone vie with the river blue. A single table-mountain rises in the scrub, way off to one side.

The hotel strikes a distinctly modern note. The villas' silvery, gantry-like frames emerge from the dune like the prow of a trawler, its wheelhouse, clad in corrugated iron,

containing the bedroom. Interiors are not designer chichi, but rather tastefully unfussy and light, and louvered to encourage the breeze. Floors are pressed bamboo; the whitewashed timber walls offset dark, faux-crocodile-skin headboards. There's the natural here too – woodwork is mainly Australian merbu and the bathrooms, all open-air, are shrouded in "brush fencing".

"We wanted something contemporary, distinct from colonial Australiana," says owner Martin Peirson-Jones who, along with his wife Kim, has been on site for most of the past two years, involved with the construction.

I settle in on the veranda – wire balustrades continuing the nautical theme – which is perfect for those moments spent quietly contemplating the horizon. As the evening sun gilds the sandstone scarps, I wonder about creating a hotel in a place as harsh as this – on compacted sand, in a cyclone area. Title was first negotiated with Aboriginal landowners. Then the practical stuff began, material delivered weekly by barge, 10-tonne excavator and all.

There's a surprisingly light touch, though – solar power, composted sewage and a near complete absence



Left: riding near Cockburn Range, at Home Valley Station. Below left: the main house of The Berkeley River with villas behind



of concrete. But imagine getting fresh supplies in... on which thought, I am called to dinner in the main house. The approach, along a slightly rustic walkway of Oregon wood planks and columns, opens into the dining room and bar, where sleek chrome tables sit among steel and wooden columns. Ahead, the view to the Timor is through full-height glass doors. Inside it is the open kitchen.

This is the domain of chef James Ward, who came from Bedarra Island (and spent a couple of years at Rick Stein's Seafood Restaurant in Cornwall's Padstow). He offers a degustation menu, five courses presented with minute care – a lychee and lemongrass cocktail as a cleanser between Hokkaido scallops and an Asian spiced slow-cooked pork belly. If the scale and refinement prove too ambitious for some appetites, he is on hand to create your own menu – including knocking up a burger.

As you'd expect from the name, the Berkeley River itself is also right there. By day we cruise through sandstone gorges 200ft high, pausing at waterfalls along the way. No swimming here, I'm told firmly. Saltwater crocodiles, occasionally visible on the banks, are one of the most fearsome creatures alive and would happily make a meal of us. Salties don't climb well, however, and in a creek nearby we arrive at some small cascades tumbling over sandstone ledges. Lush and partially protected from the sun, these pools are

We cruise through sandstone gorges 200ft high. No swimming here – saltwater crocs would happily make a meal of us

incredibly beautiful – a peculiarly Australian form of perfection – and ideal for swimming.

There's a pleasing informality about The Berkeley River, of the sort that defines the best wilderness camps. Service is attentive but not prissy, never fussy. They're polite – when you fly out it's taken as read that you weigh the same as on arrival, although after the chef's fine efforts, I suspect this is often untrue.

A good part of the lure of the Kimberley for Aussies is the Gibb River Road, 650km of largely dirt track running through the heart of the region. It becomes passable in April, as the wet drains from the creeks and gullies. Three hours out of Kununurra we arrive at Home Valley Station, which is a more thoroughgoing outback experience, with stables, fishing, camp grounds and rooms, all gathered around a vast boab tree and the Dusty Bar, their dining room and bar set in a former helicopter workshop.

There are constant comings and goings – horses, land cruisers, farm machinery – so it is nice to retreat to one

of Home Valley's large new Grass Castle suites. These are tucked away to the rear of the homestead, with a view over Bindoola Creek, where the eyes of freshwater crocodiles (not so fearsome) glow in torchlight at night. Here, the ubiquitous corrugated iron has become something more elegant: "mini-orb", with about a third of the amplitude of the original wriggly tin, covers the interior walls. Cowhide rugs are scattered on the burnished wood floors and the walls simply whitewashed.

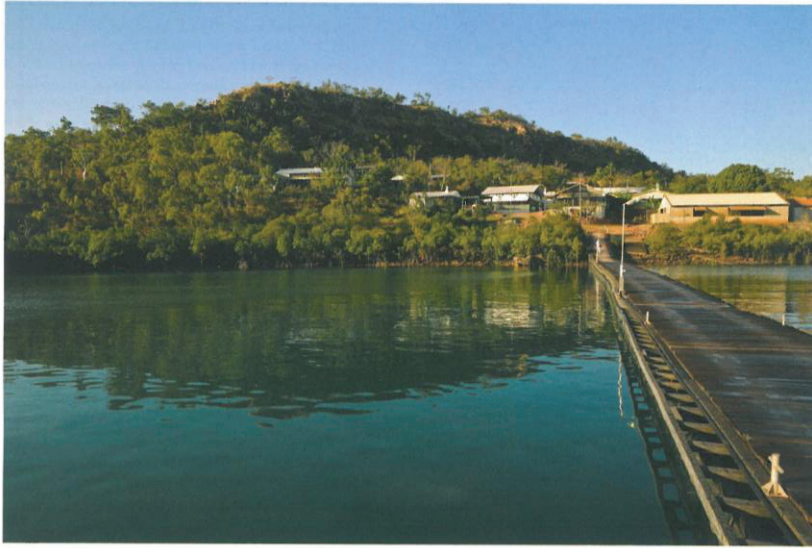
Home Valley is a working cattle station with 615,000 acres and around 10,000 head of cattle. Not a lot, but enough to work with, as I discover next day as eight of us set off on a morning's muster. This is something I haven't done for 30 years, since a stint as a jackeroo after leaving school. But it is good to see the country from the saddle again – chest-high spear grass, the peeling trunks of eucalyptus and flocks of lorikeets screeching through the treetops. The pleasure of working on horseback is available to all guests who qualify as capable riders. My mount, Smokey, was spritely and nimble as we rounded up the cattle, and then, as we were herding them back to the yards, he turned on a sixpence to corral a couple of errant steers making a run for it. In the afternoon we set out to ride a further 10km through the grassland, eventually to spend the night out camping in a "swag".

It was something of a relief to return the next day to rest my weary thighs momentarily in the Grass Castle; but I was soon off again – to the Bungle Bungles, 150km to the south. This extraordinary-looking massif is unique enough to be listed by Unesco as a World Heritage Site, but Australia is so vast that amazingly nobody really

knew about it until the 1980s. Our Cessna wheels out of the sky and lands on the dusty strip. We take off over the limitless expanse of wan scrub, broken by runs of sedimentary rock and the chaotic meandering of the creeks.

Momentarily a patch of luxuriant green stands out alluringly beneath us, on the sandstone banks of a river bend. It is the Homestead at El Questro, which has been purveying boutique luxury for 20 years now; this year it has added three stunning cliff-front suites, set slightly apart from the main house and separated each from the other by walls of local stone, and built in wood and glass to get the best of the view across the gorge – from your bed, which floats in the muted, low-lit interior, from the bathroom, and from the veranda. While activity is still centred on El Questro's main house – a restored homestead set in tropical trees, its veranda looking proudly out across the lawn to the gorge – the new suites give you the chance to retreat completely from guests, staff and the world in general.

The pilots of the small planes, such as the one I'm in, have turned themselves into tourist guides: as a vast earthworks slides beneath us, I hear the story of the Argyle Diamond Mine – gems were discovered lying on the river sand and it became one of the most lucrative



Left: the jetty at Wild Bush Luxury's Kuri Bay

diamond "pipes" the world has seen. A 42-carat (non-gem-quality) diamond had been found recently, wedged into the tread of a heavy-vehicle tyre. Argyle is currently talking up its blue diamonds.

The Bungle Bungles are dramatic, there's no doubt. This is partly due to dual stratification – a curious effect of sedimentation, whose ringed black and red bands look a bit like Dennis the Menace's jersey – and the fact that they've been eroded as much by wind as by rain. Water has carved gorges (now walking paths) into

the heart of the massif and the scouring winds come from the south. At the meeting point of this erosion stands a convection of conical "beehives" 200ft high.

The other big news of 2012 is diametrically opposite the Bungle Bungles on the map, some 500km to the northwest, on the western coast of the Kimberley, at the heart of a marine sanctuary. Kuri Bay, another recent opening, has, courtesy of Wild Bush Luxury (which already operates several extremely comfortable camps around Australia), been turned into something entirely

more comfortable than the Paspaley South Sea-pearl farm it was 60-odd years ago.

One can almost imagine the echoes of the activity of the pearlers who once lived and worked there. The mess and bar have been converted and now serve classy canapés at sunset – often with oysters, natch – and the original rustic wood is now buffed up and walls decorated with old images of pearl divers. The five rooms of the guest house have highly polished floors, offset by a medley of authentic browns and tans and deeply comfortable beds. Wild Bush Luxury is here going for something distinctly low-key, the whole reflecting the knowledge that right outside life is spectacular – but on the limits of survival.

Around the bar it's said they often still tell the story of the settlement of nearby Camden Harbour, in which 70 settlers from Melbourne invested their dreams in 1864. It was a disaster and within the year all their sheep, and many of them, were dead. Existence was tentative in the Kimberley for so long; now, it seems, this exceptionally remote and alluring part of the world – truly a final frontier – is poised to take on a new life. ♦

SPLENDID ISOLATION

James Henderson travelled as a guest of **Wexas** (020-7589 3315; www.wexas.com), which offers a nine-night itinerary to the Kimberley, including three nights at The Berkeley River, three nights at Home Valley Station, and all internal flights and transfers, from £4,395 per person. **The Berkeley River**, +618-9169 1330; www.berkeleyriver.com, from A\$1,350 (about £678). **El Questro**, www.elquestro.com.au, from £1,028, including activities. **Home Valley Station**, +612-8296 8010; www.hvstation.co.au, from £125. **Kuri Bay**, +612-9571 6399; www.kuribay.com.au, from £1,028, with activities. **British Airways** (www.ba.com) and **Qantas** (www.qantas.com.au) fly from Heathrow to Darwin via Singapore, from £2,482.