

## NORTHERN TERRITORY



# Where the buffalo roam

The first thing everyone tells me when I arrive at Bamurru Plains, one of Australia's most unusual luxury lodges, is not to be afraid of the buffalo. "These aren't like African buffalo – they're very calm animals," I'm told several times in my first hour in camp. That's encouraging, given the amount of buffalo roaming freely between the lodge's safari-style tents.

The second thing everyone tells me is that the wetlands are rarely as lush as they are now. "I've never seen it this green," said guide Anna Teneggi. "This was the best wet season we've had for years."

That is not just good news for us, but for visitors planning to visit Bamurru Plains – perched on the edge of a vast Top End floodplain, north-east of Darwin – this year.

"We've had an amazing year for water, and that's what drives the whole annual cycle," said Charlie Carlow of Wild Bush Luxury, which runs the lodge. "Whether it's the barramundi, the magpie geese, the whistling ducks – we'll see extraordinary numbers of animals all year."

It's not just animal numbers that are soaring. Although international travellers usually make up at least half of the lodge's clientele, with borders closed Australians are signing up for this safari-style Outback experience in record numbers.

"Bookings are booming – interest from leisure travellers is higher than we've ever seen it," said Mr Carlow. "These are people who might otherwise have gone on safari in Africa or gone on a trip to Europe, and they are looking for something just as memorable to do in Australia."

Memorable just about sums up the Bamurru Plains experience. There are 10 safari-style tents grouped around the main

How a bumper rainy season has dialled up the adventure at this Top End lodge, writes *Ute Junker*.



Clockwise from top: Bamurru Plains' airboat ride, food safari tour and water buffalo.

lodge, but these inviting accommodations barely qualify as tents, given their front doors, their hardwood floors, ensuite bathrooms and comfy beds. What sets them apart – beyond the outback chic decor, with the decorative corrugated iron and a shower mounted on an old tree trunk – is the mesh walls, cleverly designed to allow you to look out but stop anyone else seeing in.

From my bed I can see kites soaring overhead, egrets stalking along the grass, and plenty of buffalo – the lodge is set on a

working buffalo farm. It's not just watching the wildlife that is so thrilling – as a small agile wallaby hops past, I realise that I can hear the soft thump of its footfalls on the grass. In this tranquil wilderness, nothing drowns out the sounds of nature. It's a multi-sensory immersion that more than makes up for the fact that there is no internet, phone reception or TV in the tents.

If the in-bed wildlife viewing is good, the morning and afternoon excursions take things to the next level. Part of the thrill of these adventures is that you never know what you will spot. Our first trip is a drive in one of the safari vehicles, heading out to a place the guides call The Nursery. On this grass plain, studded with huge



termite mounds, buffalo mothers nurse their young offspring.

It isn't just the buffalo that capture our attention. As we drive along, we see all sorts of birds. Some are hard to miss, like the noisy corellas or the sea eagle sitting on the skeletal trunk of a dead tree to survey the plain for prey. For others, you need to sharpen your seeing skills. Our guide Anna has to point out the first forest kingfisher – a flash of midnight blue wings which, when it comes to rest, resolves into a small bird with a white breast and a blue head. Soon we spot a second one, then a third, then a whole clutch of them in another tree. Our safari-spotting skills are coming online.

The Nursery is also where we have our first encounter with the brumbies. These elegant wild horses cover a lot of territory – over the next few days we encounter them often, including once in the bush close by the camp. They quickly become some of our favourite sightings, along with a rare glimpse of a dingo that scurries off when we come into view.

It's not all about game drives at Bamurru. Guests can also head out on fishing trips, quad-bike excursions or – my personal favourite – a ride on one of the lodge's three airboats. It's my first experience of an airboat and I am intrigued by their unusual

NORTHERN TERRITORY

“  
We’ve had  
an amazing  
year for water  
... we’ll see  
extraordinary  
numbers of  
animals all  
year.”



design – the shallow draft vessel has its motor perched at the back above the water, looking something like a giant fan. These airboats skim over the water at speed and are the perfect vehicle for exploring the floodplain.

Being out on the floodplain is an extraordinary experience. From the shore, the lush green looks like a rolling pasture. Once we are out, however, I realise that these long reeds and grasses – wild rice and spike rush – are all anchored in the water that has spread out over the floodplain after the wet.

An even bigger surprise, however, is what’s hidden in these rushes. Our visit coincides with magpie goose breeding season and as we cruise through the reeds, we pass one nest after another, made of trampled-down rushes. Each nest has a clutch of eggs in it, usually guarded by a single goose. Our guides explain that the geese live happily in threesomes, two females to a male, and each take turn guarding the eggs.

My favourite spot out on the floodplain is a place the guides refer to cheekily as “KFC”



– the Kingfisher Cafe. The moment we glide into this tranquil stretch of melaleuca forest, we know we are somewhere special. The bottom of the melaleucas’ trunks disappear beneath the water but their canopies soar into the sky where they screen out the glare of the sun, casting a magical green glow over the whole area. Waterlilies float just above the water’s surface, dragonflies dart past. It’s one of the most serene spots I’ve ever been.

Although the lodge’s airboats are usually only in use for the first months of the season until the water dries up, Mr Carlow tells me that this year, the sheer amount of water in the landscape means they’ll be using the boats right through the season.

And this is the beauty of Bamurru Plains – whenever you come, there is plenty to see. As the new generation of magpie geese leaves the nest, guests will get to see huge flocks of geese. They are not the only birds that will multiply in numbers. The first whistling ducks arrive during my stay; they will also breed prolifically.

“The numbers of birds we see later in



the year is just extraordinary,” said Mr Carlow. “And as the water dries up, you get these phenomenal concentrations of birds around waterholes – including spoonbills, jabiru and other birds.”

I leave Bamurru Plains with a slideshow of remarkable memories in my brain: the sensation of swimming in the lodge’s pool, watching buffalos wallow in a mudhole; the gentle joy of savouring a sundowner as a violently coloured sunset stains the big sky around us.

Perhaps my favourite moment, however, comes when I wake early one morning and, in the pre-dawn darkness, spot a full moon hanging low in the sky. As I gaze on, it heads slowly towards the horizon and then sinks from view. It’s hard to beat. 🌕



Take me there

 **Drive:** Bamurru Plains is three hours’ drive from Darwin.

 **Fly:** Transfers from Darwin via 30-minute private charter aircraft are priced from \$650 each way for up to four guests.

 **Packages:** Bamurru Plains’ Ultimate Wilderness Experience package includes Safari Bungalow accommodation, all meals, bottomless beverages and twice-daily guided safaris. Rates from \$2280 per person for a two-night twin-share package until October 2021 (from \$2510 in July and August). Save 25 per cent on three night stays in September and October.

 **Explore more:** [bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com)



Clockwise from top: Bamurru Plains fishing; aerial of waterfall; flooded melaleuca forest photo tour; Indigenous connections tour; Safari Bungalow; a Jabiru stork.

