



## IN THE KNOW

Mt Mulligan Lodge is 35 minutes by helicopter, or three hours' drive by 4WD, from Cairns. From \$1600 a night for two guests in an Outback Retreat; includes three meals daily, a selection of Australian beer, wine, spirits and soft drinks, minibar containing treats such as locally produced chocolate and dried fruit, and daily activities. An expanding range of bespoke experiences can be arranged at additional cost. These include the degustation dinner at \$240 a person (limited to one table of two to four guests a night), helicopter flights from \$200 a person for 15 minutes (minimum two guests) and guided sunrise and sunset hikes.

[mountmulligan.com](http://mountmulligan.com)

## MUSTER CLASS

Expect a warm, country welcome at a lodge with next-level pampering

DENISE CULLEN

I am sipping a flute of sparkling wine inside the main pavilion at Mt Mulligan Lodge when I hear a crackle of concern over a staff member's CB radio. "What? Where?" he says. Half a dozen Brahman cattle have breached a fence, wandered on to the resort grounds, and were last seen heading in the direction of the rustic Sunset Bar, where guests swap stories of the day's adventures over drinks and canapes.

The incident requires staff to engage in an impromptu muster for the second day in a row. The previous afternoon, a dozen-strong drift of cows was found grazing near the solar shed that powers the property.

It's all just part of the fun of being on a 28,000ha working cattle station, says Mt Mulligan Lodge manager Tegan Stanley, who first spotted that day's miscreants on her rounds. "This one looked at me and then went back and started to eat, and I thought, 'I can see you. You're on the wrong side of the fence,'" says Stanley.

Located 100km inland from Cairns in North Queensland, the luxury lodge is hunkered at the base of Mt Mulligan, technically a monolith, which stretches for more than 18km and is 10 times the size of Uluru. I've flown in aboard one of Nautilus Aviation's signature red helicopters for a bird's eye view of this dramatic outback rock and its namesake lodge. Although the latter is architecturally spectacular, from the air it appears insignificant, a small clutch of metal-roofed buildings that follow the curve of a teardrop-shaped weir. That's because Mt Mulligan, known to its traditional owners as Ngarrabullgan, dominates the landscape. It's a spiritually significant site that takes on a shapeshifting quality, depending on the interplay of light and the vantage point from which it's observed.

I'm told it is most beautiful at dawn, so the next morning, when I stumble out of bed in the dark to join the lodge's new Sunrise Geraldine Loop tour, I'm hoping to see Ngarrabullgan at its best. It's clear and crisp, with stars still visible in the sky and Venus a low-hanging bauble. "Did you bring your binoculars?" asks Caius Pritchard, our guide.



Accommodation at Mt Mulligan Lodge, main; swimming pool and weir, top right; guest quarters, left; Brahman cattle on the property, below



## ENTER TO WIN

The Australian Plus members have the chance to win a 10-night luxury Reef, Rainforest, Outback escape for two in Far North Queensland with the Northern Escape Collection valued at more than \$25,000. Find out more at [theaustralianplus.com.au](http://theaustralianplus.com.au). ACT Permit TP 21/02294. NSW Permit TP/00232. SA Permit T21/2061. T&Cs apply.

More than 126 species of bird inhabit the area, and while it's still too early to hear the screech of a red-tailed black cockatoo, or the call of the pied currawong, Pritchard promises a spot of birdwatching at Lake Geraldine later. "If you're not already a twitcher, I'll turn you into one," he says.

We set out, rumbling along rough dirt tracks in an all-terrain vehicle towards Djunggan lookout, arriving just in time to see the sun rise over the surrounding Hodgkinson

Valley. As the first rays hit Ngarrabullgan, the mountain becomes draped in a dramatic palette of ochre, flame and russet, sandstone cliffs seemingly glowing from within like a giant rock-salt lamp.

We return to the lodge for a two-course breakfast served overlooking the infinity pool. A couple are already taking a dip; the pool's black tiles retain the sun's heat, making it an appealing spot to swim, even in winter.

Beyond that is the 20m-deep eucalypt-fringed weir, which resembles a billabong. Guests come here to while away an afternoon on a kayak or stand-up paddleboard, or to cast out a line in the hope of catching barramundi, the biggest of which hooked has been more than half a metre. There's also a self-guided walk around its banks. On the day I venture out on the water, I drag a kayak down to the shore and paddle to the far reaches of the weir. Freed from tasks, time pressures and the incessant ping of notifications, I let the breeze slowly carry me back to my starting point, all the while watching dragonflies hover over lily pads and azure kingfishers dart from low hanging branches into the water in search of prey.

Mt Mulligan Lodge is built on the site of a former campground and, along with Orpheus Island Lodge and Daintree Ecological, belongs to the Morris Group's Northern Escape Collection. The sunrise jaunt is one of a swag of new experiences being developed, as the mysterious landscape, under gentle interrogation by lodge staff, yields its secrets. Among the new offerings are guided sunrise and sunset hikes to Mt Mulligan Gorge and a full-day hike to the mountain's southern end. They complement existing ATV-led tours of the old

township, coal mine and gold mine. Also in the works is a Celestial Dreams experience which will take guests on a tour of the stars, constellations and planets, as seen through the eyes of Indigenous astronomers.

Then there's the new degustation dinner crafted by head chef Jeremy Fenech, which is how I come to be picking my way across the grass to an elegant table set at the edge of the weir. The starlit canopy, flickering tealights and the low flames of a nearby fire pit are our only sources of light, but our eyes quickly adjust as the first of seven courses with matched wines arrives – a sweet corn veloute served with an onsen egg, corn salsa and smoked cheddar.

We dine accompanied by nature's soundtrack, featuring the hum of cicadas and the occasional snap of a turtle or the slap of a fish on the surface of the water.

When the third course, pan-roasted barramundi, arrives, Stanley notes that while this particular fish was wild caught, guests have previously enlisted the kitchen staff's help to prepare and cook what they've reeled in.

Several hours later, sated, I head back to my Outback Suite. Though it contains a spacious bedroom, lounge and bathroom, my favourite spot is on the back deck overlooking the weir, where there's a nap-worthy day bed and a deep outdoor bathtub made from repurposed corrugated iron water tanks.

Since opening in 2019 with 16-guest capacity, Mt Mulligan Lodge has reconfigured two of its rooms to create Outback Retreats, which are smaller rooms, sans bathtub, now offered at a lower price point. In addition, two Outback Tents positioned on the other side of the weir will soon bring the resort's capacity to 28 guests. Rooms at the lodge are in high demand during cattle musters – scheduled ones, that is – which occur every three months.

Torrential rains washed out the last one for everyone except the indefatigable station master and his ringers, but typically it's an exhilarating, action-packed spectacle, Stanley explains.

"For health and safety reasons, we can't get (guests) involved in it as such, but they're definitely able to watch ... it is really exciting," she adds.

I hardly need another reason to return to this destination, but suddenly, there it is.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Mt Mulligan Lodge.