

OLD TIMES, NEW BEGINNINGS

An outback icon has been refreshed

LOUISE GOLDSBURY

The charred orange sandstone gorge has barely aged a day in an eon. The birdsong is similar to the melodies of millions of years ago, and the still water of the snaking river reflects the same full moon. As I survey this ancient scene from the balcony of my suite at the El Questro Homestead, its new owners are the last thing on my mind.

East Kimberley's legendary luxury lodge was bought in April 2021 by a company better known for caravan parks and with the unglamorous name G'Day Group. But for anyone concerned about its intentions, chief executive Grant Wilckens is quick to reassure: "El Questro is famous for good reason, and we don't want to do anything to change what makes the property so special."

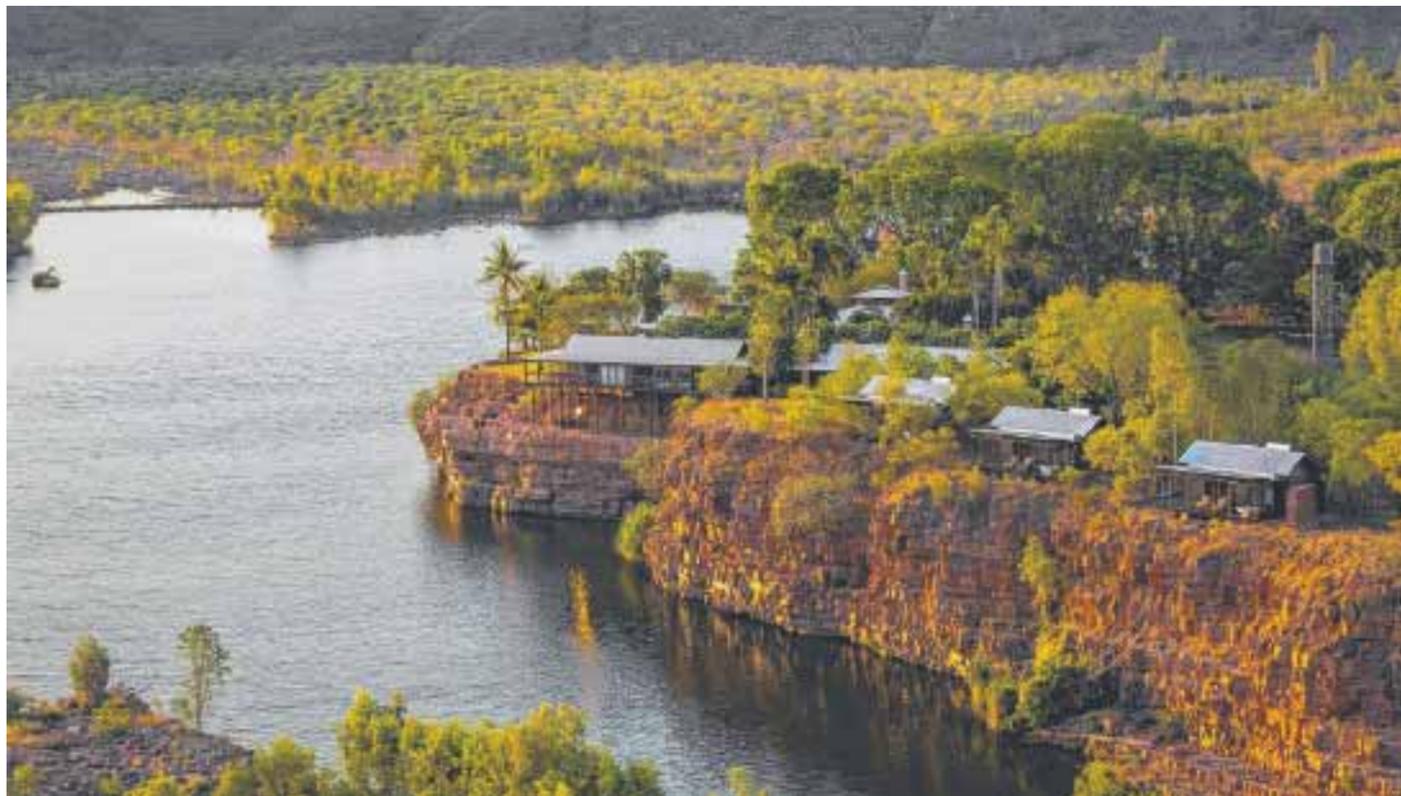
The purchase brings the outback icon back into Australian hands – "a proud moment", he says. "It's an honour to preside over El Questro; it truly is a magical place. As custodians of this precious land, we will be committed to its preservation, educating others about its cultural importance, and proudly sharing its beauty with our guests."

Before the acquisition, this 283,000ha wonderland was closed for almost two years. The previous owners "had not spent money on it for quite some time", Wilckens says, so the first step to reopening was a range of critical upgrades. The Homestead, El Questro's premium accommodation, several kilometres from its busy campgrounds, has been repainted and refreshed. Every suite has new bed linen and additional in-room amenities including high-speed wi-fi, coffee machines, yoga mats and ceiling fans to complement the airconditioning. An accessible room has been added to the inventory.

Across the landscaped lawn and riverbank, new lighting enhances the ambience, illuminating the boab, palm and mahogany trees. The outdoor dining settings have been replaced with handmade crockery, bespoke cutlery and elegant crystalware, while versatile tables provide more seating options for couples and groups. Foundations for a helipad have been installed (choppers can land at The Station), and there's rumour of a day spa on the way.

Beyond the hardware, it's the service that counts. Staff, in new uniforms, provide a welcome as warm as the Kimberley sunshine. French Champagne appears immediately, served with a smile and encouragement to help yourself to the bar at any time. The general manager sits down with each guest to confirm a personalised itinerary of activities: a choice of hikes, boating, bird-watching, exclusive use of the thermal pools at Zebedee Springs, a nature and wildlife safari by 4WD, or sunset drinks at the clifftop Buddy's Point. In addition to these complimentary experiences are horse-riding, fishing and helicopter flights to waterholes under waterfalls, hidden caves and private picnic spots.

I start my stay cooling off in the pool, swimming to the edge to gaze at the Chamberlain River below. After a bath with gorge views, I join the dozen other guests for lunch. As a solo traveller, I appreciate the



El Questro Homestead, main; guest living room, left; view from the pool, below left; Zebedee Springs, below centre

MORE TO THE STORY

Guided hike operator Walk into Luxury is launching a four-day itinerary at El Questro that explores the Kimberley landscape on foot and by air. Guests will enjoy a heli-hike experience to Mitchell Falls, guided walks to Emma and El Questro gorges, Indigenous art viewing and bird-watching, staying three nights at the Homestead. All food and wine, and ground transfers from Kununurra, are also in the package; from \$8995 a person, twin-share. walkintoluxury.com

communal table, especially at the nightly dinner parties hosted under the stars. Ranging in age from mid-20s to 60s, the clientele is a mix of couples, another single woman, and a local mechanic and his wife celebrating their anniversary. It's a highlight to mingle with these friendly travellers, while the waitresses deliver gourmet meals and refill wine glasses.

The chef changes the set menu every day, presenting exquisite dishes of seasonal pro-

duce. The wine list is dominated by Australian drops, with pairings selected by the in-house sommelier. A walk-in cellar and tasting room are among the new owner's plans.

There's a big advantage to the group's extensive portfolio of 300 holiday parks and resorts, particularly at a time when tourism operators are struggling to find workers. Experienced staff can be moved between its other properties in Western Australia, such as Discovery Rottnest Island, which has the opposite peak season to El Questro.

"Being able to share staff across properties has layers of benefits. It makes the job opportunity more attractive, enabling us to attract better staff, and it means we share knowledge and skills across our teams," says Wilckens.

El Questro's other precincts, Emma Gorge and The Station, have also seen some improvements, such as new touring vehicles and free wi-fi for all guests. At the Emma Gorge glamping site, the dining venue received a new hardwood deck and introduced an Asian-fusion menu, while an artist-in-residence and a photographer are based onsite for the season. At the social hub of The Station, the beer garden has been extended and

new shade sails and misting fans installed to keep campers cool; the larger service area will reduce wait times at the bar. The steakhouse is back in business and a new outlet, The Cantina, recently opened.

Demand for all of El Questro's accommodation is strong for the 2022 season, attracting 25 per cent more bookings at the Homestead compared with 2021; up 67 per cent for Emma Gorge. Almost three-quarters of the reservations have come from eastern seaboarders, who are making up for time lost while the state border was so firmly shut. There's nothing quite like absence to make the heart grow fonder.

Louise Goldsbury was a guest of El Questro.

IN THE KNOW

El Questro Wilderness Park is at 1 Gibb River Rd, Durack, WA. The property is closed during the wet season, from November to April. The Homestead has 10 suites with double king bedrooms, including three freestanding cliffside retreats and the Chamberlain Suite, cantilevered over the edge of Chamberlain Gorge. Rooms from \$2490 a night, which covers tours and activities, wi-fi, minibar, gourmet meals, wine, beer, cocktails, spirits, juice, water and soft drinks. Additional charges apply for helicopter flights, private touring and transfers from Kununurra. Breakfast is served at separate tables on a veranda overlooking Chamberlain Gorge. A two-course lunch is offered at a communal table, and a three-course dinner is held under the stars. Guests can dine at a private location as an optional extra. elquestro.com.au

