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Call of the floodplains

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TRAVEL NORTHERN TERRITORY

Call of the floodplains

Tony Boyd brushes up on his buffalo and birdcalls at a new private retreat at Bamurru Plains safari lodge.

It's 32 degrees and the infinity-edged plunge pool at the newly opened retreat at Bamurru Plains safari lodge in the Northern Territory is the ideal place to cool off with a glass of bubbles.

We are luxuriating in complete privacy about 100 metres from a freshwater floodplain overflowing with bird species under a clear blue sky. On the edge of the floodplain are water buffalo lounging in the mud and agile wallabies nibbling grass.

The fact a crocodile was seen not far from here a couple of days ago is not a problem. After all, we are about a metre above the ground, and it's only a short sprint up the wooden decking to our eco-retreat.

Later one of our guides reassures me we are safe from crocs, but he does admit to seeing more than a hundred out on the floodplain over the past 18 months.

We are the first media guests to stay at Jabiru Retreat – two eco-bungalows linked by walkway to the pool, set into a large timber deck. Opened this month, the camp within a camp is set slightly apart from the main lodge and can sleep up to six guests. It is the first accommodation offering to open at Bamurru Plains safari lodge since its 10th bungalow opened back in 2015.

The lodge, just west of Kakadu National Park, is an hour's journey from Darwin, first by air and then by four-wheel drive.

Opened in 2006 with just three tents, it is set in 300 square kilometres of floodplains

and savanna woodland on the Mary River, a bush wilderness widely regarded as having the most significant concentration of accessible birdlife in Australia.

There are more than 230 species of birds including magpie geese, whistling ducks, kites, egrets, parrots, kingfishers, sulphur-crested cockatoos, corellas, kookaburras, herons and the elusive jabiru – the tall, black-necked stork after whom the new retreat is named.

You can keep your own tally because each guest is given a species checklist on arrival, including the names of more than 100 birds, mammals, reptiles, frogs and trees in the

area.

During our first bush safari, led by a knowledgeable guide named Bailey, I tick off 14 species from 12 bird families. My highlights are the forest kingfisher and the blue-winged kookaburra.

We are only here for two nights and three days, but the plunge pool quickly becomes a welcome refuge from the heat throughout the day, in between the scheduled morning and early evening safaris.

Jabiru is the biggest addition to Bamurru Plains since it was opened by the dapper and urbane Charlie Carlow, founder of Wild Bush Luxury.

In 2021, the ASX-listed adventure tourism company Experience Co bought Wild Bush Luxury for more than \$5.3 million, with Carlow joining the executive team.

Carlow took his inspiration for Bamurru from the game lodges in Botswana's Okavango Delta, where guests are happy to forgo five-star amenities like 24-hour laundry services for proximity to wild animals in beautiful settings.

At Bamurru, guests have ceiling fans and walls of mesh rather than air-conditioning and concrete (although two bungalows have been air-conditioned for those who simply cannot cope without it). But when it comes to necessities, like eating and sleeping well, there is no skimping on luxury.

Jabiru Retreat ticks the "sleep well" box. Our mattresses, two singles pushed together to make a king-size double, are really comfortable. They're deliberately close to the floor and the mesh means there's the thinnest of barriers between you and the wildlife.

This means some amazing surprises

during the night. On the second night my wife, Clare, is woken by buffalo walking right past the end of our bed in front of the mesh wall. She wakes me and, at first, it seems we are watching crescent-shaped pools of light floating by. In fact, these are the reflections of the half moon on the creatures' backs.

Other noises that can interrupt your slumber include barking owls conversing in the wee hours.

Life at Bamurru starts just before dawn with an unforgettable aural extravaganza. First there is the incessant whistling by hundreds of ducks and kites. They are like the wash on a watercolour, always present and providing the foundation for others to show their true colours. Laid across the top are bright and often raucous sounds – a flock of ducks flying over with the odd quack, black crows screeching to the left

and two owls echoing each other's call.

Just when you think the painting is complete, something disturbs the ducks, and they soar into the sky in two separate flocks, head toward each other and then merge in a dark cloud with a crescendo of noise.

Then, as the rising sun turns the clouds on the northern horizon pink, a whipbird calls from the nearby bush, closely followed by shrieks from a bird we cannot identify.

The day at Bamurru involves safari tours or an air-boat ride across the floodplain. The

guides – John, Bailey and Adrian – are extra cautious when reaching out of the vessels. The crocs are there even though they cannot be seen.

The guides have an uncanny ability to spot birds no one else has seen. They are also adept at weaving in tales of the deep connections between the land and its traditional owners, the Limilngan people, be it showing you how to eat the stalks of lotus flowers or explaining the medicinal

properties of the leaves of the sandpaper fig tree.

New to Bamurru is head chef Matthias Beer, who previously cooked at the top Australian resorts El Questro and Longitude 131. His butterfly snapper, tender kangaroo, and ricotta tart with wattle seed and vanilla ice cream are impossible to fault.

Beer moved to Bamurru earlier this year with his wife, whom he met while working



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in the Cook Islands. The kitchen is right next to the long dining table, so his warmth and humour become part of the experience.

Mealtimes are perfect for trading stories and getting to know fellow guests. Ours are a pretty social bunch – especially when we stop at a makeshift bar set up mid-safari.

As we sip Green Ant Gin and tonic, it's interesting to hear how many of the American visitors are slowly ticking off the luxury bush resorts of Australia – which also helps explain why 2022 was a record year of occupancy for Bamurru.

One guest from Arizona (with the longest camera lens I've ever seen), is here to check off his thousandth bird sighting after years of bird-watching around the world. He achieved the goal on his first day.

Even the aficionados can be surprised by Bamurru. **L&L**

The writer stayed as a guest of Bamurru Plains and Tourism NT.



My wife, Clare, is woken by buffalo walking right past the end of our bed.

Above from left: one of the two new eco-bungalows, the private plunge pool, and an air-boat ride on the floodplain. Below: Mary River barramundi with a Bamurru house salad.



Need to know

Bamurru Jabiru Retreat has two bungalows and a private pool. The main camp has 10 "rustic-chic" bungalows with spacious bathrooms, a 12-metre pool, restaurant and bar.

Rates Jabiru Retreat from \$6160 a night for up to four adults, all-inclusive. Children aged 8-16 can be accommodated for an extra \$645 per child. Main camp's bungalows from \$1290 a night. Two nights minimum.

Getting there The lodge will arrange charter flights from Darwin, \$1480 return.

To book Go to bamurruplains.com or call 1300 997 194

