



18 AUG, 2023

## NEXT FRONTIER

Australian Financial Review, Australia



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The settlement of one of the largest land claims in the Kimberley spells a new chapter for this already historic lodge.

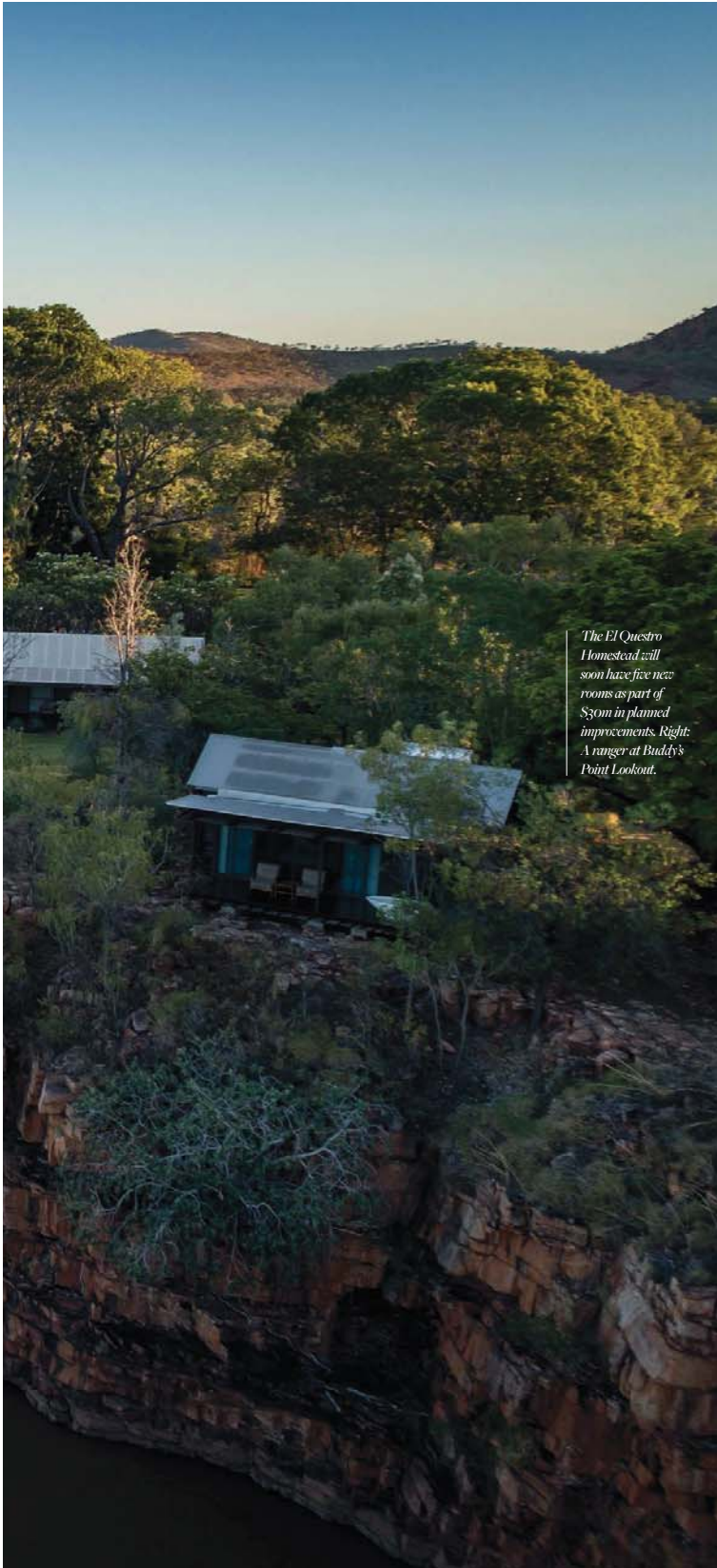
*Story by* FIONA CARRUTHERS *Photography by* WOLTER PEETERS



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*The El Questro Homestead will soon have five new rooms as part of \$30m in planned improvements. Right: A ranger at Buddy's Point Lookout.*

travel



**S**POILER ALERT: Three hours spent with Tremane "Buster" Baxter-Edwards and Vincent "Vinnie" Antony on El Questro in the East Kimberley is not your run-of-the-mill, skim-the-surface "welcome to Country" type tour. Surrounded by boab trees believed to be up to 5000 years old (they're notoriously hard to date), standing on a rocky plateau that's roughly 1.8 billion years old, Baxter-Edwards is explaining the versatility of bush produce over the centuries.

Take the poisonous but decorative hard red gidgee-gidgee seeds, which nuns stationed on remote missions once used as make-do rosary beads when supplies of the real thing were low. Another handy tip (for those looking to shift a few kilos) is to forget Ozempic: try living off bright yellow kapok petals and fibrous boab roots for a few days instead. "The weight falls off you," Baxter-Edwards says, adding, "the petals don't taste too good, so you won't be tempted to eat many. Most of us eat too much these days anyway."

Minutes later, the Ngarinyin Walmajarri 16-year-old, who spends most of his year boarding at Perth's posh Aquinas College, starts a fire from scratch in under 60 seconds using only two sticks, long grass and wallaby dung. As the flames grow, Antony, originally from rural Victoria, recounts the tale of an old station hand nicknamed Tetley who used to wring out his teabag and dry it on the washing line. His record was one teabag used 23 times over as many days.

Soon we're eating tasty bush figs plucked straight from the tree and admiring legless lizards and rock wallabies lazing in the sun. To wrap up, there's a hands-on lesson in harvesting spinifex resin, an adhesive, malleable substance that can be used for all sorts of things, such as affixing spear tips to poles. Says Antony: "There's nothing in Bunnings that's as effective as pure bush resin."

Having wondered earlier how I'd make it through a three-hour, 8am-start bush culture and history tour, I'm now sad it's ending.

THE MOOD ON this sunny mid-July morning is especially upbeat given our small tour group of six is part of history in the making. Since its inception in 1991 as a major tourism venture, El Questro Wilderness Park has not offered tours led by First Nations people, owing to the



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strained relations between local Indigenous communities and a number of the property's earlier operators. But after the land claim that had hung over El Questro for almost 25 years – one of the biggest and longest-running in the Kimberley – was settled in November, the venture is entering a new era. The settlement is the work of the new owner: Australia's largest holiday park operator, G'Day Group, which paid American-headquartered Delaware North \$38 million in 2021 for a suite of properties that included El Questro. Just 21 months later, the landmark Indigenous Land Use Agreement was finally signed.

The three main parties involved – the West Australian government, G'Day Group and the local Wiltinggin Aboriginal Corporation (WAC) – signed off in WA's parliament in December to return about 165,900 hectares – about half of the property – to the traditional owners, or TOs as they're called, the Ngarinyin people. A celebratory ceremony will be held at El Questro on September 9. Under the terms of the agreement, the lease classification has been changed from pastoral land (which it had been since 1903, owned by the WA government) – to a freehold reserve now owned by the Ngarinyin, who have, in turn, granted the G'Day Group a 99-year commercial lease to continue to operate the tourism enterprises on El Questro, ranging from top-shelf luxury villas to cheap-as-chips campsites. The financials of the arrangement between G'Day and the TOs are understood to be still in play.

Both G'Day and the traditional owners are on the same page that the future will be walked in tandem, despite the inevitable teething problems. "Our landlords are now the TOs, not the state government," says G'Day's CEO and founder, Adelaide-based Grant Wilckens. "Everyone is

excited, if realistic that a lot of hard work lies ahead. The feeling is 'let's not stuff this up.'"

From the TOs' perspective, they want the handback to generate jobs and economic opportunities, and recognise they need G'Day's expertise for that. "Many aspects of the past have been horrific, there's no other word for it," says Baxter-Edwards' nanna, Jean O'Reeri, a Wiltinggin woman from Karunjie Station on the Gibb River Road. She was schooled by Irish nuns in the 1960s at St Joseph's Convent in Wyndham, an hour or so from Kununurra, the gateway to the East Kimberley. (O'Reeri briefly veers off topic to clarify that she "adored" the nuns, she still attends church and is trying to save their derelict convent from being demolished.) "Now, we want to move forward, to come together; Grant and his G'Day Group have treated us with respect. You can't stay stuck in the past if you want to take hold of the future," she says, grabbing a fistful of air, pulling it towards her heart.

Importantly, the TOs are finally back in charge of rock art and other sacred sites. They will decide what tourists see, and will help train tour guides from the surrounding Indigenous communities. As the lessee of a settled land claim, G'Day is happy it has sufficient security to develop the property, which has had little reinvestment during the past 32 years.

Wilckens plans to spend more than \$30 million on El Questro, having just splashed the same amount developing another new acquisition, Kings Canyon (also known as Watarrka), 300 kilometres north-east of Uluru in the Northern Territory. The El Questro money will be spent on everything from new infrastructure to extensive soft refurbishments and buying carbon-neutral electric boats for the river and gorge tours; more sophisticated recycling facilities will also be put in.

At the property's high-end Homestead, future guests can anticipate five new self-contained villas for up to 10 people, taking the total guest headcount on site to 30. A lavish day spa will also be set up to the right of the property's swimming pool, perched on a cliff overlooking the Chamberlain River. Construction is pegged to begin

Clockwise from above:  
 Chamberlain River  
 Gorge; ranger Tremaine  
 "Buster" Baxter-  
 Edwards starts a fire;  
 traditional owners  
 Kathy O'Reeri, Janet  
 Gallagher and Jean  
 O'Reeri at the gorge.





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From top: Hidden Trails by Horseback's Christian Hayes; El Questro's thermal Zebedee Springs; the Homestead's communal lounge area.



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of the long list of dreamers who made El Questro what it is today. It was the Eton-educated British aristocrat Will Burrell and his Australian wife, Celia Shelmerdine, who created the Homestead concept. The young couple used part of Burrell's inheritance from his grandmother – once described as the “doyenne of the Penguin publishing empire” – to purchase the land and start building. The Burrells envisioned secluded luxury accommodation where, having spent a long day filled with adventure and contemplation, guests could congregate in a large open lounging area for sundowners, surrounded by linen napkins, potted palms and dotting staff.

Burrell purchased a million acres for \$1 million in 1991, and built the Homestead virtually from scratch with a mix of adjoining rooms and separate villas along the clifftop for a total of 20 guests. The Burrells (now understood to have separated) sold El Questro in 2005 to General Property Trust for \$17.4 million, before GPT sold it to Delaware North in 2010 as part of a package of properties.

The luxury outback pad – which had been improbably named El Questro in 1958 by a cattle grazer – quickly became a celebrity hideout. Kylie Minogue has used it a number of times over the years, while the Crown Prince of Denmark, Frederik, and his Australian princess-to-be, Mary Donaldson, visited in late 2002. Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban have swung by too. If you want to feel like a speck in the universe, this is the place to do it.

“El Questro is basically about isolation,” says Trewin between bites of freshly baked still-warm sourdough bread and eggs benedict, adding that each week, he trucks in about \$100,000 of food from Perth to feed guests and staff. With a lead-in all-inclusive (food, beverages and tours) nightly rate of \$2600 per room – the river-facing cliff rooms start from \$4500 a night, rising to \$5500 for the Chamberlain Suite – the Homestead is pricey. Nevertheless, it's quickly recovered its pre-COVID occupancy rate of 98 per cent.

Part of the attraction (aside from the quality of the food) is there's simply so much to do, from chopper tours of the waterfalls and gorges, to horse riding, fishing, hiking, gourmet picnics, river cruises, plus spectacular sunset viewings from the likes of Buddy's Point Lookout. And there's a price point for everyone – from the \$60-a-night camp spots to bungalow-style River Rooms at The Station, a 10-minute bumpy dirt-road drive from the Homestead.

The number of River Rooms will be soon expanded from 10 to 35, and accommodation at nearby Emma Gorge Resort will also be overhauled. Located a 35-minute drive from The Station on dirt and sealed roads, Emma Gorge is part of the El Questro holdings, and presently has 65 safari-style tented cabins with ensuites. The decision is currently being made on whether to take Emma Gorge ultra-premium, or keep it at glamping for around \$350 a night.

But the much bigger job is leaning into the land use agreement and the many responsibilities that come with it. “We're now joint custodians of the land with the traditional owners,” says Wilckens. “We'll be doing everything we can to respect their connection to Country as we all enter a significant new era for El Questro. Our landlords have history of more than 65,000 years on this land, so we're in pretty good hands.” \*

THE WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER WERE GUESTS OF G'DAY GROUP.

“Now, we want to move forward, to come together ... take hold of the future.”

JEAN O'REERI, TRADITIONAL OWNER

this wet season. “The best views at the Homestead have always been to the right of the pool area, despite the fact the existing accommodation is all to the left,” says Wilckens. “Now we finally have the certainty of a 99-year lease, we can take our time to get it right and operate with a long-term view.”

EL QUESTRO SITS in the eastern part of the Kimberley, fed by four rivers: the Pentecost, Chamberlain, Salmond and King. The ragged Wyndham grey shale and sandstone Cockburn Ranges dominate this landscape, stretching for around 50 kilometres, corralled by the saltwater-crocodile-filled Pentecost Rivers.

The landscape might be hypnotic, but El Questro's rocky plateaus and escarpments render it unsuitable for large-scale cattle grazing. When the pioneering Durack family passed through in the 1880s, they carved a “D” in trees (a faint D remains on a trunk just near the Homestead), then kept moving in search of the alluvial plains they found closer to the border with the Northern Territory, where they established Argyle Downs.

El Questro remains a dreamer's paradise of soft colours, ancient forms, crystal-clear swimming holes and deep gorges nourished by waterfalls. During the dry, the boab trees drop their leaves to preserve water, stored in their rotund trunks. Spectacular scarlet gums, the distinctive yellow kapok, and the red rosella plant, (which makes for great jam) colour the scrub.

Sitting on the Homestead's wooden deck above the Chamberlain for an al fresco 6.30am three-course breakfast with the Homestead's general manager Geoff Trewin (before the cultural tour), he catalogues just a few

