



Jabiru Retreat accommodation, pool and raised walkway; Bamurru Plains airboat safari, below



## A TIMELESS LAND

Leave modern worries behind at a private retreat in the Northern Territory

GRAHAM ERBACHER

Of place I am certain, but of time, that's an entirely different matter. I'm staying in a new Jabiru Retreat bungalow at Bamurru Plains Wild Bush Luxury lodge, which is about as Top End of the Northern Territory as it gets, half an hour in a Cessna east of Darwin across serpentine waterways flowing into the Arafura Sea.

The lodge is set on the 300sq km Swim Creek Station at the edge of the Mary River wetlands and it is breathtaking in its wildlife and beauty. It's a world apart. But precisely what day of the week it is, I have to think hard and count. This place is intentionally off the digital dial (though not in cases of emergency, I am told with a reassuring nod) to allow guests – 26 at any one time – to appreciate untamed wonders away from contemporary concerns. Time is punctuated in other ways than 9 to 5, weekday-weekend. There's the arrival of dawn, heralded by what sounds like a dog, but is in fact a barking owl. Note that it's a bird; they're going to play a big part in the Bamurru Plains experience.

I am in my comfortable bed, just a cool tingle in the air despite the tropical location, with mesh-screen walls on three sides, when the other sounds pick up: whistling ducks and magpie geese, a rush of buffaloes (the station's commercial herd, or "obstinacy" to use the correct group name) from their night resting place to water's edge and agile wallabies doing the same. Daylight is strengthening and shapes are emerging; termite mounds at first, pandanus trees and then the animals and a sweep of those ducks, sounding like a wave surge. There are hundreds of them and they make sharp and sudden turns. How on earth don't they crash into each other? With apologies to Antonin Dvorak, this is a New World Symphony, composed and performed, and it's still nowhere near breakfast time.

Jabiru Retreat joins, but is a little removed from, Bamurru Plains' 10 safari bungalows and Kingfisher Suite. The retreat's two stilted dwellings are connected by a raised walkway and share an exclusive plunge pool and outdoor lounge and dining furniture, perfect perhaps for travelling couples or a family group with older children. The lodge takes its cue from Africa's great safari camps and a colleague with knowledge of such destinations says it measures up admirably.

My bungalow has an Aussie rustic touch of a corrugated iron ensuite, with some panels painted to evoke a hint of rust. I love the shower that snakes up an old tree trunk, but there's no bush slumming; hot water is in-



stant. Along with the digital detox, these eco-dwellings sit easily in their environment without airconditioning (mostly) but with effective ceiling fans and airflow through the mesh walls. (If that is beyond the pale, three bungalows do have a/c.)

At the heart of the Bamurru experience are twice-daily safaris, by airboat across the floodplains or by 4WD open-top vehicle in the savanna woodlands. The first trip is usually of two to three hours' duration early morning and the second leaves about 4pm and can include a stop for champers and canapes. Guided walks are offered but free-range wanderings are not permitted. There be buffaloes, snakes and, yes, crocodiles out there. The quality of our adventures is enhanced by the knowledge, enthusiasm and humour of our guides. John has met us at the station's private airstrip and conducts several of the outings (these are assigned the night before and

give all guests a spread of opportunities). He is keen-eyed at identifying plants such as cocky and red bush apple trees, the quinine tree and kapok bush and knows about their medicinal and cuisine capabilities, but we're advised to stay away from the strychnine tree.

The most exhilarating mode of transport is the airboat, which slices through the grasses and lilies of the wetlands. This is where the bird life comes into its own. There are more than 230 species to be spotted and guests are issued with a checklist to tick them off if they so desire. I'm not a twitcher but am enchanted by the majesty and diversity of the flocks. What's not to like about a pair of radjah shelducks, a red-tailed black cockatoo, great egret, white-bellied sea eagle or a comb-crested jacana, also known as the Jesus bird for its seeming ability to walk on water?

We pull up at locations such as KFC, or Kingfisher Cafe, where the paperbarks encircle us in our own floating world. And we spot crocodiles going about their business, which thankfully doesn't include us.

A couple from Maryland in the US is over the moon. These fellow guests are committed birders and their trip to Australia completes a clean sweep of continents. Starting at Kangaroo Island in South Australia, they have mapped out sites through the red centre and down the east coast, avoiding cities the way they shun nearby Baltimore and Washington DC back home. At Bamurru Plains they have spotted more than 50 bird species in short order and it gets a huge tick. An outing that

### MORE TO THE STORY

With no check-in, an open bar and meals served around a communal table, Wild Bush Luxury founder Charlie Carlow wanted a lodge experience that felt like staying with friends rather than a formal hotel. The service of meals in this style carries its risks, and the answer to how comfortable it is will always depend on fellow guests, of course. But there is no set seating and I find that easy encounters are based on our shared experiences of the day. This spills over to after-dinner conversations around the bar, but this is not a late-night place. Experience Co now owns Wild Bush Luxury, and other properties in the collection are Arkaba Homestead in the Flinders Ranges and Maria Island Walk in Tasmania.  
[wildbushluxury.com](http://wildbushluxury.com)

melts my heart is to the "nursery", a grassed area where buffalo mothers and their calves congregate, some to mind the young while others head off to the water. No news on how that's rostered or rates of pay.

These experiences are fodder, so to speak, for conversation around the long table of the central pavilion, where head executive chef Matthias Beer oversees three meals a day at set times. With 24 years' experience in hospitality, Matthias has runs on the board at El Questro Homestead in the Kimberley, Longitude 131 at Uluru and Pacific Resort Aitutaki in the Cook Islands. He aims for a menu that combines classic and bush inspirations. That could include kangaroo fillet or succulent smoked barramundi served with a desert lime compote. Dishes are paired with excellent wines. This common area includes comfortable seating with open bar and fans out to a shaded deck with infinity pool, perfect for sundowners. One quibble: the books to be borrowed could do with a refresh.

So here I am on my final evening and there is no tick on my checklist alongside the retreat's namesake, the black-necked stork or jabiru. But as we gather around the safari vehicle while John doles out fizz and finger food, one of the strong-beaked beauties soars overhead just as the sun glows intensely before sinking behind pandanus on the horizon. Don't you know it's magic.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of Bamurru Plains Wild Bush Luxury.

### IN THE KNOW

Bamurru Plains is open from March to October and closed during the monsoon period. All-inclusive nightly rate for up to four people at Jabiru Retreat, minimum two-night stay, from about \$6160; safari bungalow nightly rate for two from about \$2900, minimum two nights.  
[bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com)  
[tourismnt.com.au](http://tourismnt.com.au)