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A Sun Burnt COUNTRY CALLS

An untamed landscape shaped by the elements, a visit to the remote stations of the **Australian Top End** is a chance to delve into a country of legacies, mythology and awe-inspiring vistas, discovers **Nick Walton**.



There’s nothing quite like watching the passage of time, especially in a place as achingly ancient as the Australian Outback. The honey-hued light, like the drawing of a theatre curtain, slips across the broad valley below us, through which passes the meandering Chamberlain River like a shimmering serpent navigating a sunburnt landscape towards inky darkness. As guide and station ranger Adam pours me a glass of chilled Chardonnay, he points down the valley at a series of twinkling lights. “There’s the homestead. It’ll be dinner time soon.”

As reluctant as I am to leave this remarkable viewpoint, known as Branco’s Lookout, the idea of dinner under the stars at El Questro Homestead is all the motivation I need, and minutes later, we’re rambling our way down a steep, rock-strewn path in a station Land Cruiser, crossing the Chamberlain - the waters high after steady rains the week before - at a steeping-stone ford as darkness swallows up the world around us.

If you revel at the chance to delve into nature blessed with spectacular beauty and unique wildlife, the Australian Top End, which stretches from the



clockwise from top left:
Catching the golden hour at Bullo River Station; early morning mist over Bullo's preserved billabong; tranquil waters bely the presence of crocodiles in the Chamberlain River.



Indian Ocean in Western Australia to the Coral Sea in Queensland, just might be the destination you never knew you needed to visit. An incredibly varied landscape shaped by tumultuous seasons that alternate between a fiery furnace and a monsoon’s deluge, the Top End offers a chance to commune with flora and fauna found nowhere else on Earth, and to delve into a place that has broken hearts and backs, tested sanity and inspired poets and dreamers.

However, you can explore this challenging country in comfort, thanks to a clutch of historic, indulgent lodges and stations, the first of which, El Questro, a member of Luxury Lodges of Australia, we arrived at earlier in the day after a 90-minute drive through a rocky, undulating moonscape from the tiny airport at Kununurra.

Located in Western Australia’s East Kimberley region, El Questro is arguably the most famous of the tourism-forward stations of the Top End. This sprawling 405,000-hectare property (that’s two and a half times the size of Hong Kong), with

its deep gorges, thermal springs, tumbling waterfalls and lush rainforest, was established in 1903 as a working cattle station but has evolved since then into an unrivalled tourism destination, thanks to its rugged beauty and its position on the Gibb River Road.

On our way back to the Homestead — El Questro’s luxurious, all-inclusive lodge, which has welcomed everyone from Elton John and Kylie Minogue to Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban — we pass through the Station, a hub for the rugged 4x4s and caravans that ply the seasonal, mostly unpaved Gib River Road route between Wyndham and Derby. In the last light of dusk, I spy families barbecuing and kids playing touch football before we wind past the El Questro landing strip and arrive at the Homestead, where it’s cocktail hour in the elegant, homely lounge with its broad fireplace and rich leather armchairs.

Our room, Paperbark, is one of just 10 luxurious suites cantilevered over the Chamberlain and features a deep soak tub and a balcony with panoramic river views. After settling in, we join our fellow guests for cocktails followed by citrus barramundi ceviche and

slow-cooked water buffalo infused with wild thyme, served at a communal table set under the stars.

The next morning, during the Injiid Marlabu Calls Us experience, Nelson, Mary and their daughter Chanel — members of the Ngarinyin people, the Traditional Owners of El Questro or *Marlabu* — guide guests through their ancestral heritage and tell the story of Nelson’s mother (for whom the Injiid Marlabu cultural group is named), a *Mananbara* or cultural leader who lived a traditional nomadic life before being sent to a reserve outside Wyndham, where she was instrumental in establishing St Joseph’s school — at which Nelson and later Chanel studied.

We learn how animal totems found in nature define the personalities of newborns, and about the role rivers like the Chamberlain play in the lives and storytelling of the Traditional Owners.

“This is sweet water, healing water,” says Mary, looking to the river below. “The river is sacred, living water that gives life, and we need to protect it.”

Nelson also explains the challenges Aboriginal communities face, including high suicide rates, while



clockwise from top left: Dinner with the ringers at Bullo River; Nelson, Mary & Chanel of Injiid Marlabu Calls Us; the Outback offers a myriad landscapes; cooling off at Zebedee; chef Travis Martin.



strumming a guitar and singing a moving song he wrote about the two brothers he lost, before discussing the recent landmark land deal that saw El Questro’s owners, the G’Day Group, return the station’s 165,000 hectare pastoral leases to the Ngarinyin. The group will now lease the land back for tourism purposes in a significant step towards reconciliation.

The cultural exchange finishes with a smoke ceremony, with Mary whispering a personalised blessing into each guest’s ear as purifying smoke billows from a campfire, a black and white portrait of Injiid looking on.

By late afternoon, we’re on the Chamberlain River with ranger Ian, in search of the property’s lurking crocodiles. Under a cloudless sky the vivid blue of a child’s crayon, we cruise mirror-calm waters flowing between 1.3 million-year-old terracotta-hued cliffs.

Passing a magnificent native Kimberley rose tree, its first blossoms vibrant pink against the reddish rock, we discover a statuesque rock wallaby, the size of a well-loved housecat, bathed in late afternoon amber sunshine. Ian tells us these shy little wallabies navigate tiny paths and cracks in the aeons-old stone, hidden by the abundant spinifex grass (the little marsupial’s favourite snack), to reach this all-important water source, risking predators in both the water and air in the process.

As a mating pair of whistling kites soar and swoop overhead (one of more than 100 endemic bird species), I keep a keen eye out for the station’s two crocodile species – freshwater and the larger saltwater. It’s thought there are approximately five crocodiles per kilometre in the Chamberlain and nearby Hunter River systems, but today they’re proving even shier than the rock wallabies.

What’s not shy are the river’s archer fish, which have turned their natural adaptation of spitting water in a powerful jet, which they use to dislodge insects from low-hanging vegetation, into a command for snacks, and as we stop to feed them, their aim proves to be impressive. By the time we head for home, each of us has been zapped in the face with river water at least once.

Our final day at El Questro Homestead starts with a bracing hike up Emma Gorge, which begins at Emma Gorge Resort (part of the El Questro collective), an hour’s drive from the Homestead. In the resort’s car park, where the morning air is perfumed with eucalyptus, we watch a young dingo, an indigenous wild dog, play fight with a lawn sprinkler before bounding into the bush.

We follow Georgia, a young guide from Sydney, onto the trail, climbing up a boulder-strewn riverbed, leaping across the occasional bog, clambering over ancient slabs of weathered stone and gingerly stepping across slick river stones in the last remaining pools. However, our sweaty efforts are rewarded at the top of the gorge, where we dive into a shaded pool that’s supplemented by a 65-metre-high waterfall and a natural hot spring hidden in a rocky alcove. The water is crisp, clean and utterly invigorating.

We take another dip that afternoon, this time much closer to the Homestead. Zebedee Springs, another El Questro drawcard, is hidden in a thick corpse of Livistona palms through which treacle-hued sunlight peeks, and gingerly, we slip into the still, mirror-clear waters, canned cocktails in hand, taking a perch on pillow-soft palm roots, to soak.

The serenity continues that night during a private dining experience set on the cliffs overlooking the Chamberlain, where we feast on slow-cooked lamb shoulder paired with a superb Tasmanian pinot noir. With the Southern Cross soaring above like



diamonds cast on navy blue silk, it’s a magical last moment before our journey continues east, back into the Northern Territories.

In Kununurra once again, we’re met by Emily from Bullo River Station, another member of Luxury Lodges of Australia, who takes us east, deep into the Outback, passing great rust-coloured peaks with veins of blood red ochre. It’s a three-and-a-half-hour drive (although many guests fly directly to the station’s landing strip), much of which is spent on the station’s “driveway”, which, at 79 kilometres, is one of the longest in the Territory.

Passing a trio of Road Trains – articulated stock trucks with three trailers a piece – that have arrived to take recently mustered cattle to the port in Darwin, we climb over an escarpment before delving into glades of gum trees punctuated by child-high termite mounds and, despite recent controlled fire operations conducted by helicopter, emerald-green shoots, the result of a recent unseasonal rainstorm. Nature, even here in the Outback, has a way of rebalancing itself with surprising agility.

After settling into one of a dozen cosy guest rooms (the station is currently renovating both its accommodation wing and its historic homestead, built by Yugoslav stone masons from locally quarried rock, in time for its 2026 season), we join our fellow guests, a couple from Sydney, around the fire pit for cocktails and a delicious alfresco meal of Bullo River beef in a rosella reduction, cooked by talented kiwi visiting chef Travis Martin.

If El Questro is where Crocodile Dundee would go on holiday



clockwise from top left:
A trip through the Outback is a great alternative to the African safari; Sandi welcomes guests to an alfresco dinner experience; the Chamberlain River at El Questro; the region's unique wildlife includes this golden orb spider and plenty of fresh and salt water crocodiles.



in search of creature comforts, then Bullo River is where he'd call home. Unlike El Questro, Bullo River, with its alluvial floodplains, rocky sandstone gorges and sweeping eucalypt woodlands, retains 2,500 head of cattle, a relatively tiny number for a property that, at over 161,000 hectares, is more than double the size of Singapore.

In fact, cattle grazing takes up only 15% of the property, and that's all part of a plan, enacted by station owners Julian and Alexandra Burt, in partnership with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), to revert the land back to its original state while protecting the Bullo River. A significant swath of the property has been dedicated as a conservation zone in which AWC scientists monitor endemic wildlife populations, advise on fire and weed management and help reduce pests, including feral cats.

We take to the Bullo River in a little flat-bottomed electric boat, our eyes peeled for crocodiles as well as resident Red goshawks and Wedge-tailed eagles. My wife Angela tries her hand at trawling (the station is a popular fishing spot with a strict catch and release policy) and almost immediately nabs a fat Barramundi that, unfortunately, manages to wriggle its way free before it can be drawn from the water.

It's the epitome of tranquillity on the river, as vibrant Rainbow bee-eaters and pink galahs swoop overhead, wallabies rustle among the weeping paperbarks and a dazzling Blue-winged kookaburra pauses on an overhanging mangrove branch to examine us before continuing on its way. While we do spy one juvenile croc sunbathing, his mouth set at a maniacal



grin, George, the dominant 'salty' that calls this stretch of the river home, remains elusive.

Despite its cowboy persona, Bullo River has been welcoming guests since the early 1990s, deciding to maintain the allure of the Outback cattle station, combined with contemporary conservation practices, rather than dedicate itself entirely to tourism, as El Questro did. This includes investment in banks of state-of-the-art batteries and arrays of solar panels, rainwater collection tanks and an extensive garden, all essentials for a station that operates completely off the grid.

During a captivating dinner served beneath a towering baobab tree (many of the property's baobabs feature carved inscriptions left by explorers and ringers past, some dating from over a century), I hear more about one of the station's former owners, Sara Henderson, a tough and controversial figure (at least locally), who wrote books about her time on the Bullo River and about the challenges and beauty of this remarkable corner of Australia, one that is completely cut off from the outside world during the rainy season.

"People say to us how brave we are, fighting the wilderness, braving the isolation of the Outback," said

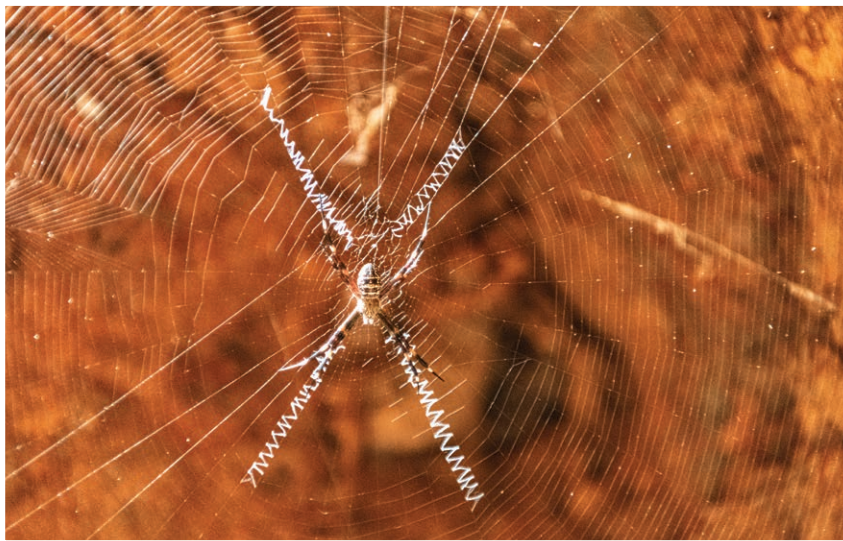


Sara in one of her many novels. "But these are easy opponents, compared with drought. To watch your land shrivel and die, year in and year out, to see beautiful fields turn to dust bowls, to watch your animals starve and die. To suffer all this, only to be then washed away in a flood, your home and your family treasures lost and destroyed. And then to pick up the pieces and start again. The farmers of the South are brave!"

Dining on a moreish beef stew and exquisitely dense onion dampers cooked by Travis over an open fire, curious wallabies watching on from the edge of the fairy lights, I can empathise with Sara; while the station is a unforgettably beautiful place, I'm sure it could also be a lonely one, so far from others, and at the mercy of the elements.

Water plays such an important role in the Top End - too little or too much and you go out of business (or worse), and early the next morning, I follow Emily through knee-high grass bejewelled with dew to a peaceful billabong that resembles a Monet painting and which has been revitalised by the AWC. From a bird hide, we watch chubby magpie geese, azure kingfishers, infinitely elegant egrets and proud sea eagles swoop and dart through a layer of mist that lingers just above frisbee-sized lily pads.

Our last stop is at the aptly named Crocodile Point, where, after only a few minutes waiting, we witness two 'salties' battling it out in the brown river water while another, at almost twice the size, takes an unsuspecting wallaby, pausing, as if for effect, halfway through devouring it only metres away. It's said that for every



crocodile you can see, there are 12 you can't, so I keep clear of the river's edge.

On the winding red dirt road back to the homestead, we pause to watch a dingo that Emily has not seen before. The youthful canine is stalking a wallaby and doesn't acknowledge our presence until the dust from our progress washes over the 4x4, allowing the cute marsupial to make a bounding escape. Only then does the dingo look to us, a grin on his face, as if to say, "there's plenty more where that came from".

Thanks to tourism initiatives like El Questro and Bullo River Station, this remarkable land is being preserved, not just for its Traditional Owners and its current residents, but for generations to come, and while it might be a landscape fraught with dangers and beset by challenges, it's still one of the most awe-inspiring destinations I've ever visited.

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