



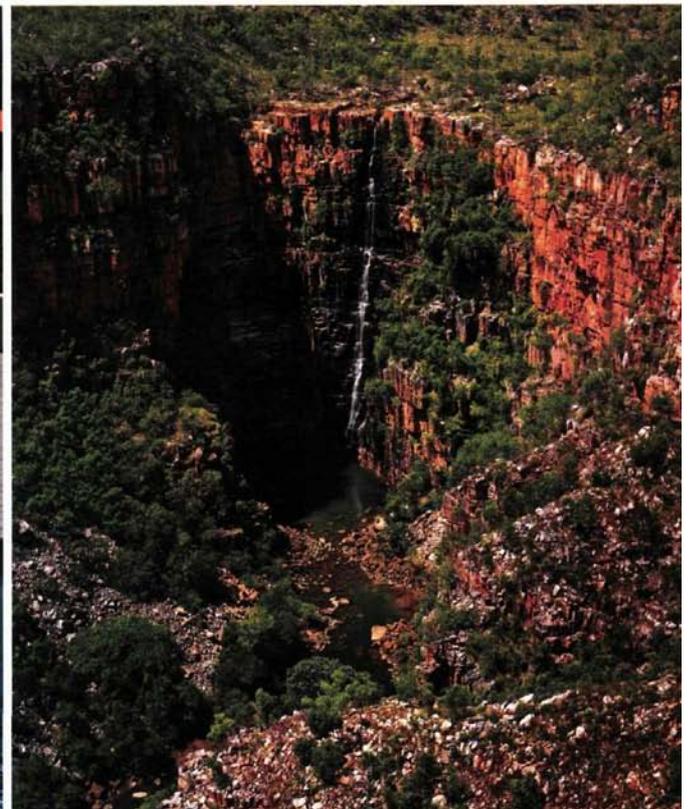
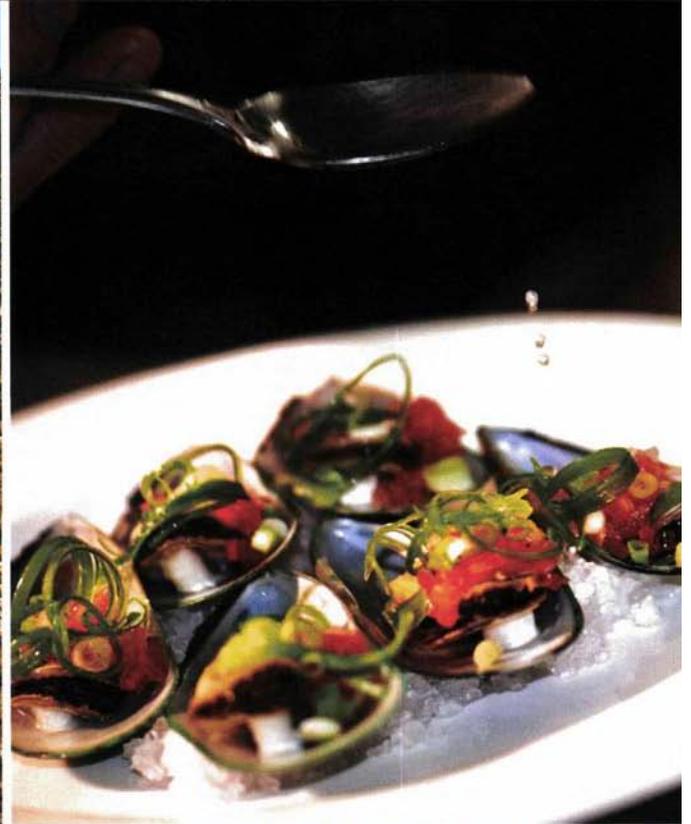
Luxury Travel
Friday 1/01/2016

Page: 158
Section: Summer
Region: National, AU
Circulation: 24856
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 2,546.00 sq.cms.



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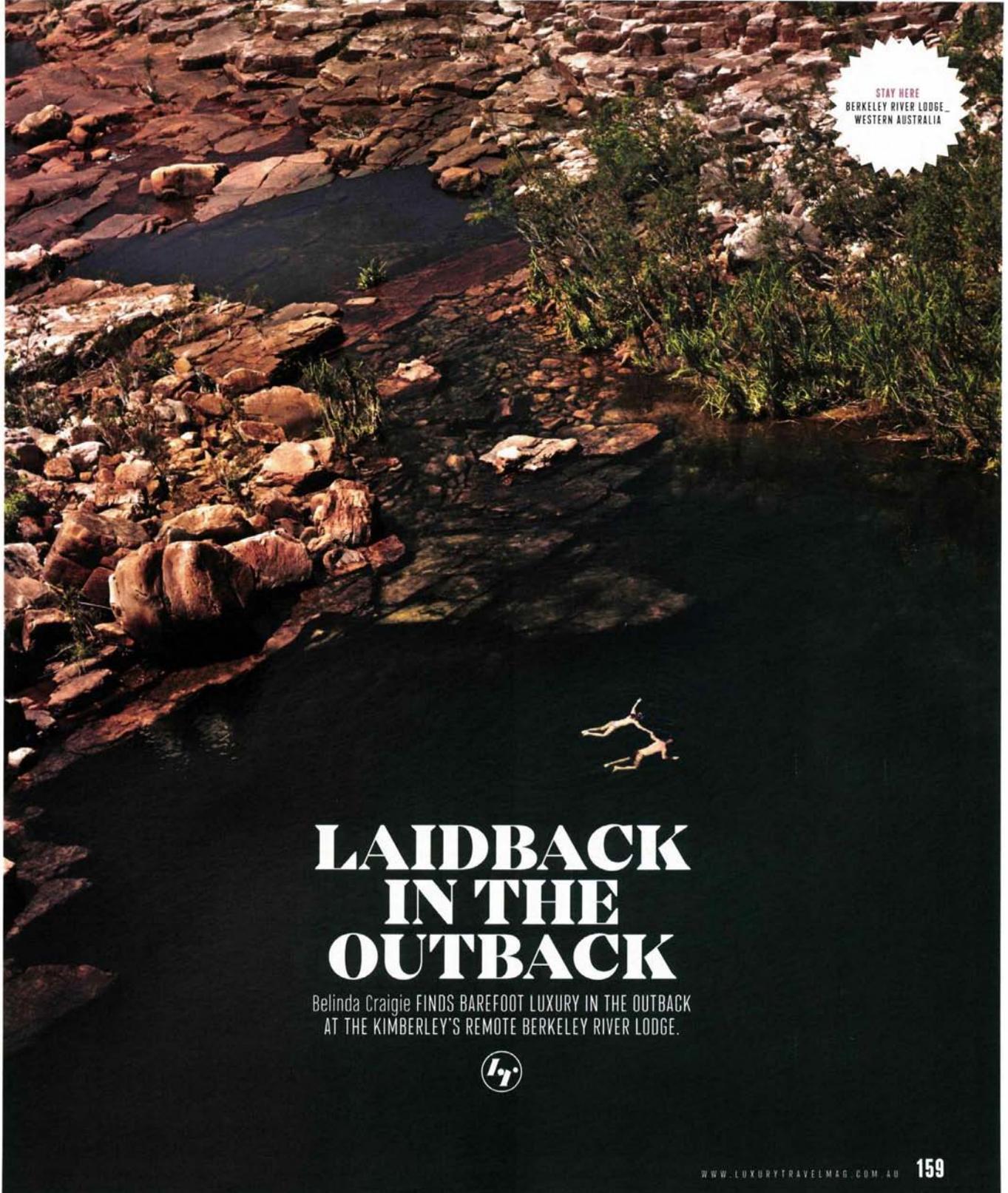
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STAY HERE
BERKELEY RIVER LODGE
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

LAIDBACK IN THE OUTBACK

Belinda Craigie FINDS BAREFOOT LUXURY IN THE OUTBACK
AT THE KIMBERLEY'S REMOTE BERKELEY RIVER LODGE.



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I'M FLYING OVER WHAT appears to be an endless stretch of outback. The intense late-afternoon sun streams through the windows of the eight-seater plane en route from Kununurra to Berkeley River Lodge, a luxury property on Western Australia's Kimberley coast that can only be accessed by air or sea.

The earth below is brownish-red, dotted by the gullies and trees that are markers for areas that can be completely submerged during the wet season. I take in the sights of the outback as my pilot gives a running commentary on the landmarks of the region, which include vast cattle properties such as Carlton Hill Station, one of the sites used in the Baz Luhrmann movie *Australia*; and the nearby Argyle Diamond Mine, which has a history reminiscent of a blockbuster movie plot. It is one of the world's largest sources of diamonds by volume (or carats). Annual production averages about 35 million carats and the mine is also a major production hub for the rare pink diamond – the largest found in Australia weighed in at an impressive 12.76ct.

Diamonds aren't the only luxury manufacturing coming out of the Kimberley. Indian sandalwood is also proving to be a major export for Kununurra, with the trees – the heartwood worth up to \$80,000 a tonne – producing base oils for fragrances such as Chanel No. 5.



“I’m already wishing for more time on what feels like the edge of the Earth, for now I decide to make the most of the silence and star-filled sky with a final soak in my outdoor outback bathtub.”

Circling over the coast, we glimpse the Berkeley River Lodge's 20 villas perched on a cliff, half of them overlooking the Timor Sea and Reveley Island, the others with views of the Berkeley River.

We are greeted on the airstrip by general managers Ross and Jennifer Penegar, who joined the property in February 2015 after working at resorts Lizard Island and One&Only Hayman Island in Queensland. A quick drive along a red dirt road in a safari-style 4WD sees us at the property's main building where we're given a glass of sparkling wine to go with the panoramic ocean and outback views. The sunset is spectacular.

During a five-course meal on the poolside deck at the lodge's

Dunes Restaurant, I try enormous New Zealand oysters topped with roe and garnished with edible flowers. Nursing an extremely full stomach, I'm shown to my villa. It's unassuming in design, with an outdoor bathroom being the most interesting feature, indicative of the property's barefoot-luxury style. A deep soak in the tub turns into a relaxing pre-bed ritual under the stars, which blanket the sky in this utterly remote part of the country (cell phone service is unavailable and WiFi limited).

Despite not being blessed with a tolerance for early morning wake-up calls, I don't mind nature's way of waking me the following morning, the sun pouring through my window and birds chirping.

The lodge provides outdoor activities such as river cruises, as well as fishing trips by boat or helicopter. Most keen fishermen and women come here to catch the elusive barramundi, but many other species thrive in the Kimberley and I – a novice – manage to hook four during my morning fishing excursion. Resident executive chef Troy Mathews catches many of the fish eventually served to guests as canapés. His tempura queenfish soon becomes a firm favourite.

Not all catches are welcome, though. One guest nonchalantly tells me about her accidental hook (and speedy release) of a three-foot saltwater crocodile, a prospect I find more terrifying than she apparently does. Saltwater crocs are ubiquitous



BELINDA CRAIGIE

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and sightings are all but guaranteed on a cruise down the Berkeley River. Other wildlife I encounter include rock wallabies along the orange rock faces and a small pod of dolphins, which swim alongside the boat as we approach the river mouth on our return that afternoon.

The hot sun on the sparkling river tempts me to indulge in a refreshing dip, but swimming in the river and the ocean is discouraged due to the amount of crocodiles (not to mention several species of shark) that call these waters home. Keeping my limbs seems the sensible choice!

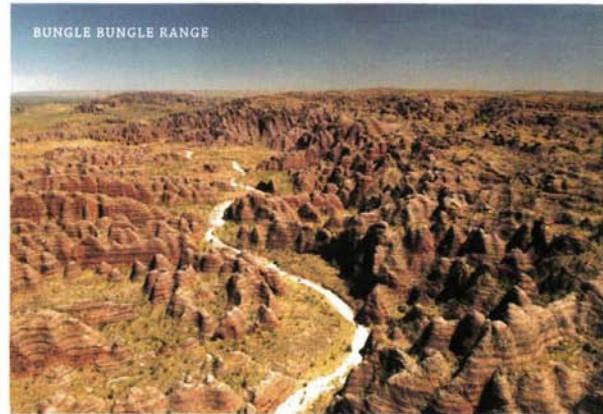
However, weather conditions permitting, the Berkeley River Lodge team can organise excursions to waterholes that are safe for swimming. Other options include 4WD drives along the beach, with a gourmet picnic or guided walks on the tracks along the river.

If a day of lounging about is preferred, guests can flop and drop at the resort pool, which looks out over the ocean to nearby Reveley Island. After a late-afternoon swim on my last day at the lodge, I enjoy sunset drinks with the other guests. The mood is jovial and relaxed after a busy day in the sunshine. Even though I'm already wishing for more time on what feels like the edge of the Earth, for now I decide to make the most of the silence and star-filled sky with a final soak in my outdoor outback bathtub.

Rates start from A\$1,650 per night twin-share, including meals, selected beverages and selected excursions. Transfers to Berkeley River Lodge are available from Kununurra and Darwin airports, with prices from A\$900 return ex-Kununurra, A\$2,300 return ex-Darwin. There is no road access to the lodge. berkeleyriver.com.au



See more on this story at luxurytravelmag.com.au/65



TOMAS SYKORA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

For Australian and international travellers, accessing this remote part of the country can be a lengthy and costly exercise, so breaking up the trip is an appealing option. Scenic and cultural highlights accessible from Kununurra include Lake Argyle and the Ord River, with its vast dam and irrigation system; a scenic flight over the Bungle Bungle Range in the World Heritage-listed Purnululu National Park; a tour of local Indigenous art galleries; and Mitchell Falls. Broome is a one-hour flight from Kununurra, providing access to beautiful Cable Beach and the region's pearl farms. Berkeley River Lodge offers transfers to and from Kununurra and Darwin, which then have connecting flights to major Australian hubs. For more information see australiasnorthwest.com