

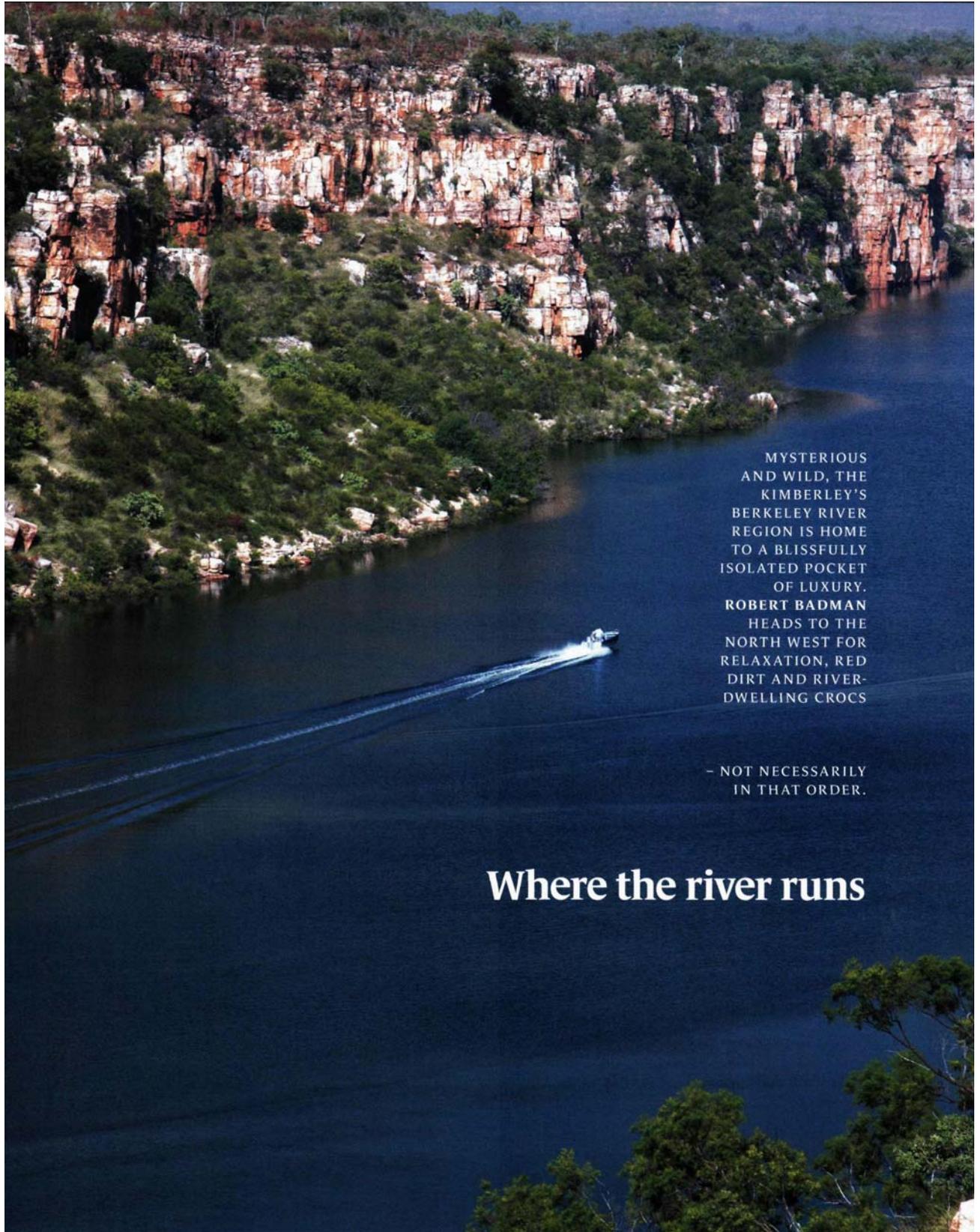
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CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

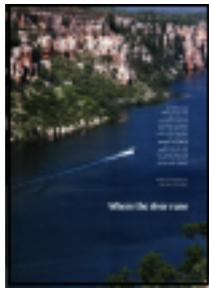
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MYSTERIOUS
AND WILD, THE
KIMBERLEY'S
BERKELEY RIVER
REGION IS HOME
TO A BLISSFULLY
ISOLATED POCKET
OF LUXURY.
ROBERT BADMAN
HEADS TO THE
NORTH WEST FOR
RELAXATION, RED
DIRT AND RIVER-
DWELLING CROCS

- NOT NECESSARILY
IN THAT ORDER.

Where the river runs



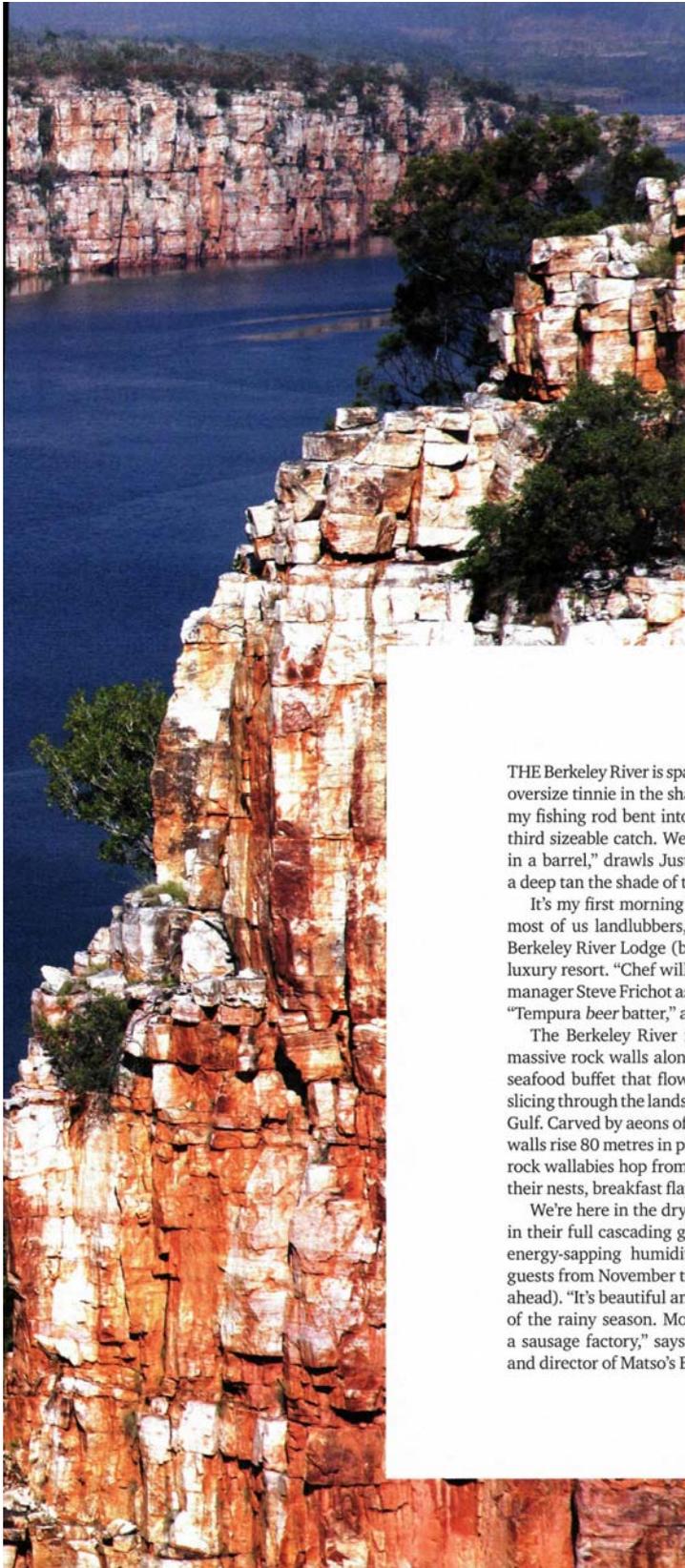
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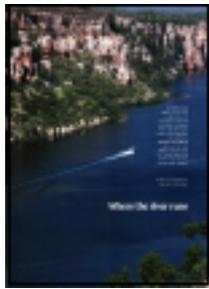


THE Berkeley River is sparkling like an Argyle diamond. I'm sitting in an oversize tinnie in the shadow of towering, rust-coloured escarpments, my fishing rod bent into a tight arc as I reel in a golden snapper, my third sizeable catch. We've been here 10 minutes. "Like shooting fish in a barrel," draws Justin Wiebrecht, a weather-beaten brewer with a deep tan the shade of the surrounding rock faces.

It's my first morning in the Kimberley and I'm with a small party, most of us landlubbers, casting baitfish from a boat owned by The Berkeley River Lodge (berkeleyriver.com.au), Australia's most remote luxury resort. "Chef will fry this up in a tempura batter," says general manager Steve Frichot as my catch attempts to jerk free from his hands. "Tempura beer batter," adds Wiebrecht.

The Berkeley River is framed by dense mangroves in parts and massive rock walls along much of its length. It's a seductive, sinuous seafood buffet that flows 180 kilometres north-east from its source, slicing through the landscape as it heads into the vast Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. Carved by aeons of erosion in the plateau known as Karunjie, the walls rise 80 metres in places. It's difficult to take your eyes off them as rock wallabies hop from ledge to ledge and wedge-tailed eagles fly to their nests, breakfast flapping hopelessly in their beaks.

We're here in the dry season so while we miss the many waterfalls in their full cascading glory, we also dodge the monsoonal rains and energy-sapping humidity that hang around like unwanted house guests from November to April (this is, however, the best time to book ahead). "It's beautiful any time but you can go a bit troppo in the thick of the rainy season. Move an inch and you're sweating like a pig in a sausage factory," says Wiebrecht, son-in-law of the lodge's owners and director of Matso's Broome Brewery.



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Guests can tour the remote coastline in a four-wheel drive (left); Berkeley River Lodge has a shared deck and pool area, plus 20 eco villas



A frisson of activity disturbs the water's surface and Frichot tells us that fish have been known to jump right into the boat. Maybe it's for kicks, maybe it's an attempt to flee the saltwater crocs. Either way, if you opt for a fishing trip and don't come away with something scaly and edible, you simply can't be trying – a bit like our brewer friend, who, to be fair, is focused on keeping us lubricated.

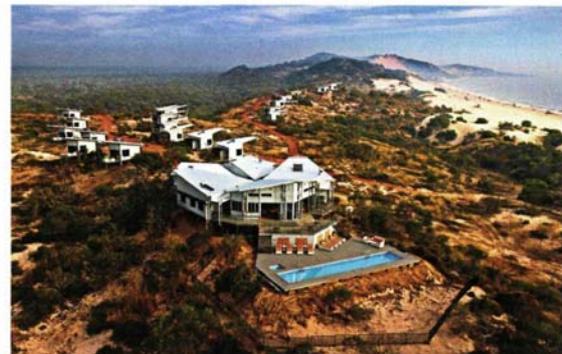
"We throw back most fish," assures Frichot, "though the river is hardly low on stock." Anecdotal reports from the state's Department of Fisheries confirm he's right: the Berkeley teems with about as many different species as a *Star Wars* film, including golden snapper (fingermark), queenfish, mangrove jack, threadfin salmon, black jewfish and barramundi. Then, along the coast, there are the bigger beasts: several species of shark, manta rays, dugongs, flatback sea turtles and dolphins.

A pod of Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins breaches in single-file formation as the boat trundles back towards the river mouth. The teal-coloured water in which they frolic looks inviting given the morning's mid-thirties heat. Perhaps sensing my momentary urge to submerge, Wiebrecht taps me on the shoulder and points to the other side of the tinnie as a large saltie drifts by with quiet menace.

A safe swim is possible up here, though. Depending on conditions, the resort can arrange a helicopter trip to one of the plateau's elevated waterholes, where you can have a private dip out of reach of apex predators. But today we'll happily settle for the lodge's 20-metre lap pool.

We disembark on a large sandy bank and compare catches with another group of guests. Our four golden snapper and two queenfish trump their haul of four threadfins. But one of our rivals, an excitable Brit, steals our thunder by relating how he managed to hook a three-metre croc on a handline before wisely letting it go.

After a Dakar Rally-style beach drive in a LandCruiser, we're back at the resort, which comprises 20 eco-friendly villas dotted among the dunes. As you lounge on the deck



with a drink or sink into your outdoor bathtub, it's nature that really spoils you with a high-definition view of the Milky Way. In my case, there are also views of the ocean to the east, Reveley Island to the south-east and, to the south-west, the river and 221-metre-high Mount Casuarina.

The only way to get to the lodge is by plane (it has its own red-dirt airstrip), boat (there are no moorings) or in your dreams. There's a feeling you're on the edge of the world – enhanced by the hour-long flight from Kununurra as you fly over rugged coastline, gleaming river systems, arid outback and Carlton Hill Station, which is larger than a small country (it appeared in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*).

With an a cappella soundtrack of the region's rich birdlife functioning as a near-dawn alarm clock, days tend to begin and finish early. This, like the limited wi-fi access and absence of screens, is a welcome change from urban life. Still, going cold turkey is easier said than done. Two spry grey nomads – an ex-United States Navy officer and

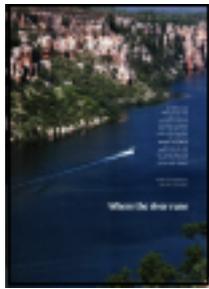


Flight path

KNX

Qantas flies to Broome from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, with connections to Kununurra via partner airlines. qantas.com

John Berthwick (previous page), Tony Hewitt



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his wife – catch me attempting to find reception for my phone. “Don’t need it here, pal,” he says. “He threw his in the river; maybe you should do the same!” his wife laughs.

Without the distraction of devices, it’s surprising how much – or how little – you can achieve. Fishing is the main drawcard, including helicopter drop-offs upstream where it changes from saltwater to freshwater. You can also take a chopper or a river cruise and a hike to see the Bradshaw rock paintings: well-preserved ancient Indigenous art discovered by pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw in 1891.

If food is your thing, there’s plenty to get excited about. Chef William McLenachan and his sous-chef use whatever they or guests can catch and forage to bolster shipped-in produce. “We can’t simply pop down to the local shop to pick up supplies,” he says. “Considerable planning goes into each menu.” Tonight, at the Dunes restaurant, we’re in for a five-course *dégustation* including oysters, grilled barramundi and chocolate fondant with peanut butter ice-cream. The vast room fills and Wiebrecht hands me another “cleanser”. “I’ve got a special breakfast beer to take the edge off tomorrow morning,” he promises.

As a deep-red sunset paints the room and convivial chatter turns into raucous banter, I zone out from a reprise of the *croc-on-a-handline* yarn and lose myself in the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. I’ve become so intent on isolation, I can find it in a crowded, buzzing space – momentarily, at least. When the view fades to black, I rejoin the throng. There’s a tempura beer-battered snapper with my name on it. ●

Your guide to Broome: the gateway to the Kimberley

Stay

The five-star Kimberley Sands Resort & Spa (kimberleysands.com.au) is a short stroll from Broome’s Cable Beach. Its prime position is matched by elegant villas and suites, Japanese-inspired interiors, award-winning dining options, meditative gardens designed by prolific landscaper Jamie Durie, a first-class day spa and a beautiful central pool area.

Breakfast

The town still has a frontier, anything-goes spirit. So you might see patrons at the ocean-facing Matso’s Broome Brewery (matsos.com.au) enjoying breakfast with a mango-flavoured beer. The Pearlers dish – eggs, chipolatas, bacon, spinach, tomato,

mushrooms, hash browns and toast – will break your fast. Maybe your belt buckle, too.

Lunch

There’s no shortage of places to eat that are influenced by the town’s pearling history and immigration. Cable Beach Club (cablebeachclub.com) has Japanese restaurant Zensai and South-East Asian poolside diner Rambutan. But for a sumptuous cultural meld, head to Azuki Japanese Fusion (08 9193 7211) and try the raw scorched salmon on sushi rice with mayo, barbecue sauce, crisp onions and pickled ginger.

Dinner

An intimate little spot with a large drinks list and a great view of Roebuck Bay, 18 Degrees (08 9192 7915) brings a dash of small-bar cool to Broome. Enjoy the ocean breeze while

you tuck into share dishes such as scallop ceviche and herb-crusted barramundi with watermelon, peach and fetta salad and salsa verde.

Do

A sunset camel ride on Cable Beach is always popular but Kimberley Dreamtime Adventure Tours (kdatjarlmadangah.wordpress.com) will take you deeper into the country. Starting at Mount Anderson Station, a three-hour trip from Broome, tours range from a 2.5-hour camel trek to multi-day journeys.



Discover what’s inside the country’s most luxurious lodges at travelinsider.qantas.com.au.