



Signature Travel & Style

Friday 1/04/2016

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KIMBERLEY DIAMOND

Sarah Nicholson makes a journey to the very edge of Australia's scorched north-west corner and discovers the colours of the Kimberley are amplified by isolation.

The sunset has stunned this typically talkative group into breathless silence.

We try making conversation – brief statements about the weather just to be polite – but we are so distracted by the show Mother Nature is currently staging that it's hard to think about anything other than the vibrant western horizon before us.

The sky is turning blazing shades of orange, fiery colours that remind me of lava creeping down the side of an angry volcano, with the sinking sun throwing a golden light across the scorched landscape that gives this harsh and unforgiving place an ethereal quality.

There are no man-made sounds to be heard, other than whispered observations from my travelling companions about the beauty of the moment, with the mournful call of a lonely bird breaking the silence as if to remind wildlife sheltering in the Kimberley coast's dunes that another hot day is drawing to a close.

It's not unusual for holidaymakers to notice a sunset, but here at The Berkeley River Lodge the last slow minutes of daylight become the centre of attention with guests gathering for sunset drinks where the Berkeley River meets the Timor Sea to savour a display amplified without the distractions of settlement.

The seasonal Kimberley address – the lodge is open during the dry season

from early March to late October, and boasts 20 tranquil hilltop villas offering river or ocean views – is 150 kilometres from Wyndham and so secluded that air and sea are the only routes in with no tracks to arrive by land.

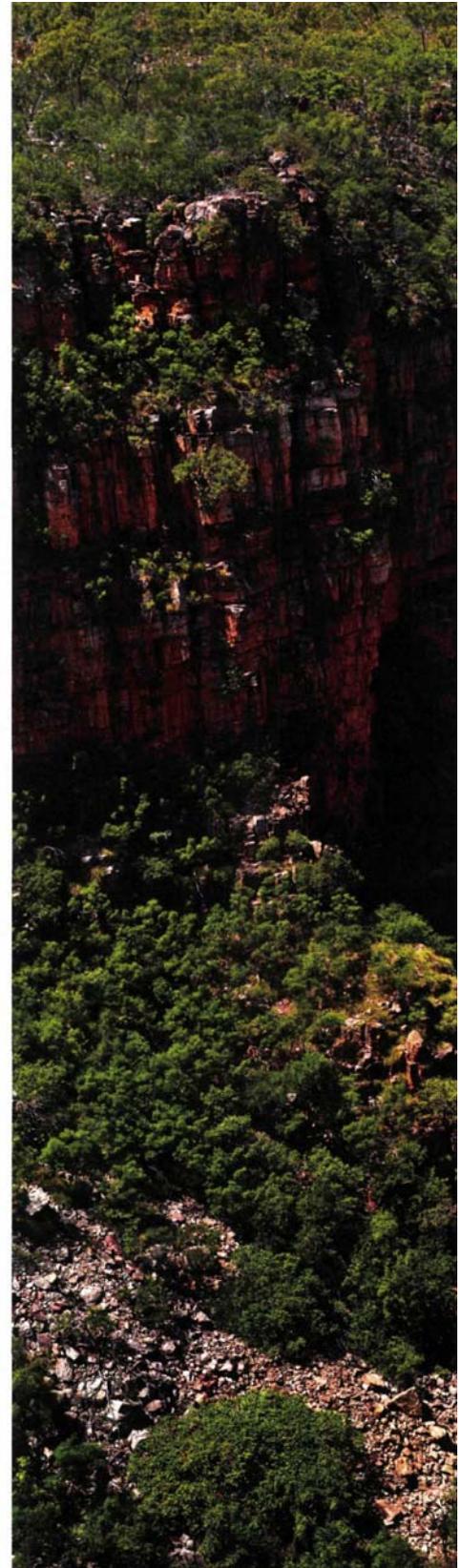
Most guests come via Kununurra, with a 60-minute hop in a light plane completing the expedition. The flight crosses cattle stations the size of European countries to emphasise the scale of the region and sheer distance to the destination.

But it's this remote location that guarantees sunrise and sunset is awesome, promises mobile phones won't chortle and emails only update in one corner of the main building near Dunes restaurant, and ensures guests encounter a corner of Australia's sun-baked north that's out of reach to all but the heartiest explorers.

Out of bounds

"Only a few people have walked where our guests go," says Berkeley River Lodge manager Jennifer Fitzmaurice.

"Exploring hidden rock-art caves is always moving, seeing the incredible wildlife that lives in this part of the Kimberley is something that will stay with me, catching everything from big barramundi and golden snapper to threadfin snapper to mud crabs is a highlight, and I love photographing the scenery and waterfalls.



104



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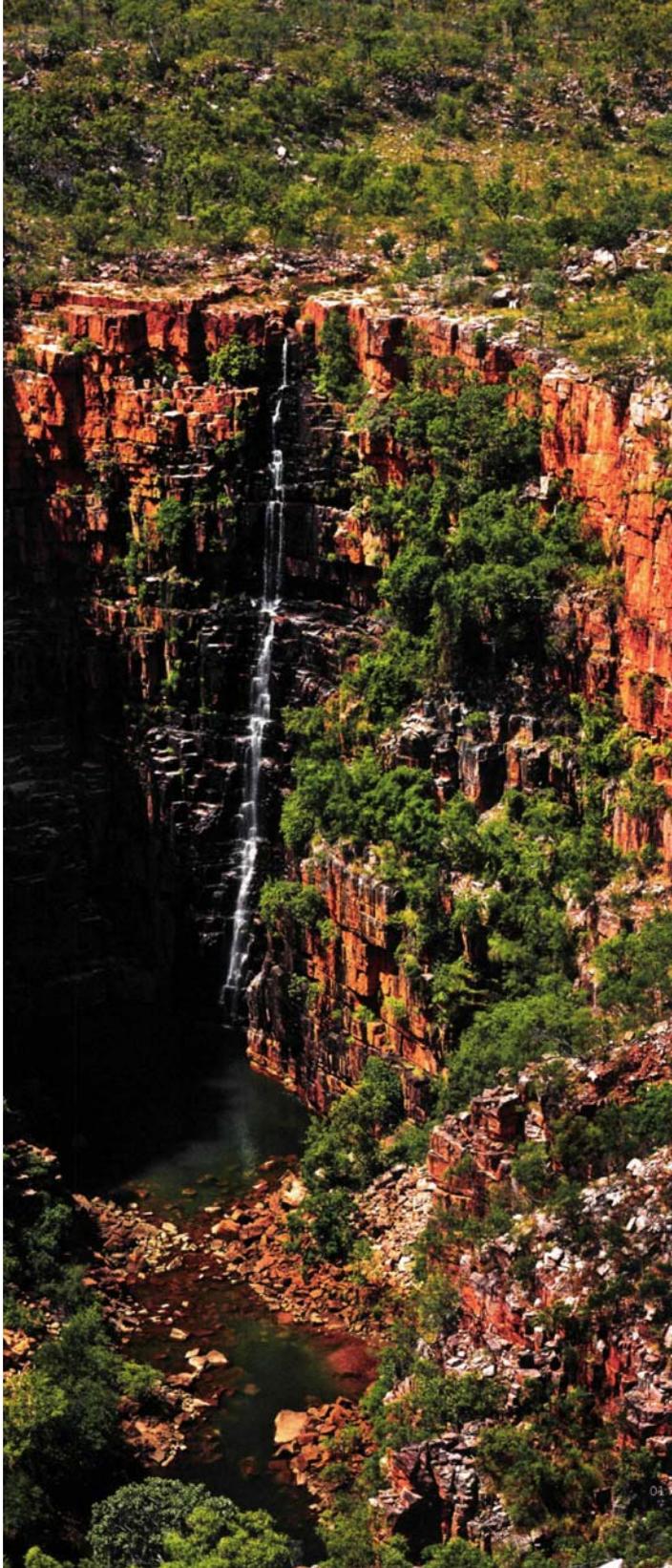
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"But best of all," she continues, "I get to take our guests to do these activities – seeing their excitement is a wonderful thing – and taking guests who don't think they're capable of hiking up to a secluded waterfall with swimming holes is so special."

With night comes a temperature that's perfect for dinner on the Dunes verandah, when the arid heat of the flawless dry-season day is blunted by a breeze gliding in from Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, and while darkness hides the vista around us it delivers a sky packed with twinkling stars not diluted by light pollution.

Chef Troy Mathews is in charge of the menu and uses the freshest ingredients in his larder – fish pulled from the deep, veggies harvested from his garden, bread warm from the oven – to present a degustation menu matched with a selection of wine and craft beer.

Taste the outback

Mealtime is a joy at Berkeley River Lodge and while breakfast and dinner is served at Dunes, lunch is a picnic and, during my stay, there's a buffet-style meal on the ledge of a rocky amphitheatre that becomes a roaring waterfall during the wet and an alfresco feast on an isolated stretch of beach with gourmet goodies arriving in bento boxes.

Between meals, guests can overload on activity or do nothing more than shuffle from a scenic spot on their villa's private verandah to the deck beside the swimming pool. It's perched to provide a panorama from the sparkling blue surrounding Reveley Island to the parched ochre of the escarpment.

*"THE SINKING SUN
GIVES THIS HARSH AND
UNFORGIVING PLACE AN
ETHEREAL QUALITY"*

11 Waterfall in a river landscape
12 The Berkeley River winds to the sea
13 Remote villa, with a view
14 A close-up encounter with ancient rock art. All images © Tony Hewitt

105



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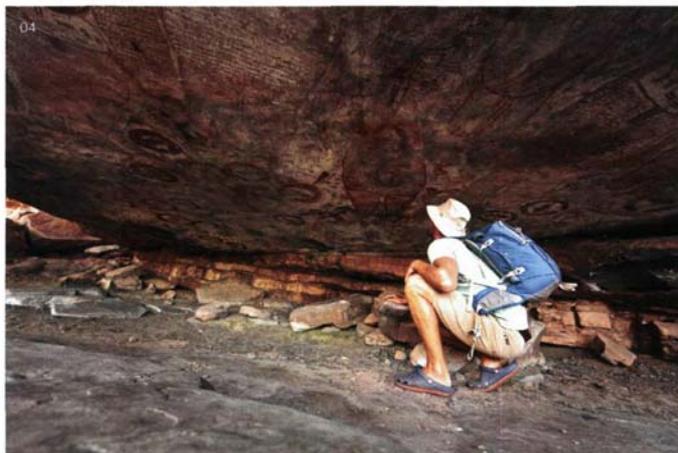
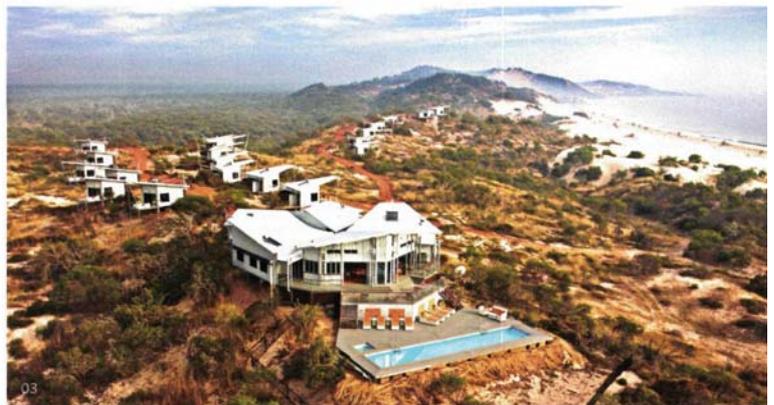
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I do a bit of both and spend one morning cruising the Berkeley River with Jennifer and her partner Ross Penegar – there’s crocodile spotting, bird watching, a close look at a tributary’s rumbling waterfall, a wander around elevated rock ponds – and the afternoon beside the pool with a tall gin and tonic.

Another morning starts at dawn as I sit on my verandah to gaze at night gently turning to day, there’s a fishing excursion with the catch becoming delicious sashimi at dinner, and a beach safari with lodge guide Gary showing us an aboriginal midden before leading an amble through a freshwater stream emerging from the scrub.

And while I treasure every minute of outback activity it’s the moments of silence and solitude I appreciate most, rare seconds when I can marvel at the beauty of a place where inaccessibility guarantees perfection. ♦



Travel file

Accommodation
www.berkeleyriver.com.au

Getting there
Qantas and Virgin Australia offer direct flights to Darwin from all Australia’s mainland state capital with Airmorh continuing the journey to Kununurra where guests board a light aircraft for the final hop to Berkeley River Lodge.
www.qantas.com.au
www.virginaustralia.com
www.airmorh.com.au