

KIMBERLEY CONNECTION

The Kimberley is a land of crocs, vast gorges and colours so saturated they beggar belief. **Briar Jensen** travels to a place where ancient earth abuts the sea and adventure courses through creeks and valleys.

Photography by **Briar Jensen**

Mesmerising colours
of the Kimberley.



A 4WD safari, Kimberley-style.

Swerving in from the Timor Sea, our frothy wake billows behind us like a wedding veil caught in the wind. Leaving the ocean behind, our steel runabout breaches the coastline, plunging inland up an unnamed creek. We slalom through its curves as the surrounding rocks grow in stature and mangroves encroach from either side, funnelling us into the ever-narrowing gorge. When we can go no further, our guide, Bruce Maycock, throttles back. We drift – embraced by the Kimberley.

Ochre sandstone pillars pierce the cerulean sky; green mangroves crowd the tinnie; saltwater crocodiles skulk in the translucent jade water. It's enveloping, powerful, primordial. Bruce watches our reactions, a grin lighting up his sun-weathered face as we soak up the grandeur of this prehistoric landscape. He admits this unnamed creek is one of his favourites, dubbing it Jungle Creek.

Like a mate showing off his hometown, Bruce is in his element. This is his backyard, literally, as when he's not guiding for luxury Berkeley River Lodge, Bruce retreats to his open-air camp up a similar creek, in the north-east Kimberley wilderness. He's been camping out here since long before the lodge was built, between seasons working for a diamond exploration company. It's a hermitic-bushman image that's hard to reconcile with his friendly, personable demeanor.

Berkeley River Lodge makes the most of its remote location in Western Australia's Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, offering guests a range of excursions from comfortable river cruises and helicopter jaunts to fishing trips and guided hikes. We've struck it lucky – wind and tide have enabled a full-day coastal excursion west of the lodge, about a once-a-month occurrence.

From Jungle Creek we head to Osprey Bay. Multiple tracks between beach and lagoon warn of saltwater crocodiles as we clamber over boulders to a rock overhang adorned with indigenous art. Discovered by Bruce in 2001, the well-preserved images include hand stencils, Gwion Gwion-like stick figures, a Wanjina-style spirit being, a detailed dilly bag



and an enormous dugong. It's both thrilling and humbling to be one of so few people to see these still-vibrant paintings (no cruise ships stop here), but sad to hear the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley now rarely visit this isolated region.

Bruce recounts watching a crocodile emerge from the sea with a dugong in its mouth before devouring it in a bloody mess on the beach. We look furtively around and dash back to the boat.

Wallabies, camouflaged on the rock ledges, watch as we tie up to mangroves for a spot of fishing while crocs float like logs behind us. In quick succession we catch and release a couple of cod and mangrove jack, lose some bait to a reef shark and mourn the loss of a legal-sized barramundi.

Resembling an arty driftwood sculpture, an osprey nest balances precariously atop a rock at Atlantis Bay. Snake-necked darters air outstretched wings like feathered statues and a white-bellied sea eagle drifts overhead. We pull up to a rock ledge for lunch before a hot and sweaty hike up the creek bed to a series of spectacular waterholes.

Pandanus sprouts between rocks the colour of molten gold. Water lilies garnish the gin-clear water. Rainbow bee-eaters dart between us snatching water beetles as we swim cocooned by the ancient escarpment in a croc-free pool. Even losing my waterproof camera can't dampen my spirits. Miraculously, fellow guests who helicopter to the rock pool 48 hours later find it underwater – undamaged and still working.



AUSTRALIA

Guide Bruce Maycock takes a break at a waterhole.

Bouncing back to Berkeley River over the late afternoon chop gives a seaward perspective of the lodge's remoteness. Perched on the red dirt behind expansive sand dunes, it commands views of both the Berkeley River and the Timor Sea, yet its footprint is insignificant in the vastness of East Kimberley.

It's a similar feeling arriving by air. The one-hour flight from Kununurra travels over a rumpled quilt of jutting ridges and shadowed valleys, snaking rivers and fanning flood plains that abut the sea. The colours – auburn, khaki, cobalt and turquoise – are as intense as an over-saturated digital image. The orange, dirt airstrip, like a child's sugary fruit-strap, is the only hint of the resort.

Built in 2012 on indigenous-owned land, the lodge is unpretentious, barefoot beach house chic. It lets the landscape take centre stage. Service is efficient and personable: the philosophy of down-to-earth owners, the Peirson-Jones family, founders of Matso's Broome Brewery, who camped here during construction. Villas are designed with practicality and the environment in mind. Bamboo floors accommodate dusty feet, louvered windows capture gossamer breezes, open-air bathrooms enable showering with birdsong or bathing under the stars. The neutral decor focuses attention on nature's colours, best viewed from daybeds atop decks that point toward the ocean or river.

It's a theme echoed in the main lodge, where glass doors are thrown open to the deck. An infinity pool offers a refreshing dip before pre-dinner drinks, when excursion options for the following day are discussed. Degustation dinners feature the likes of barramundi paperbark parcels, Sichuan peppered kangaroo fillet, and slow-roast, herb-crust lamb.

Resident croc at the Berkeley River mouth.





Ocean view villa at Berkeley River Lodge.

While it’s enticing to just chill, revel in the isolation and listen to the birds, this is my first trip to the Kimberley so I grab every opportunity to explore. Within an hour of arriving Bruce has us on a beach drive in a safari-style 4WD, stopping to point out a jabiru, fresh flatback turtle tracks, dingo prints and a selection of Aboriginal tools.

An army of blue soldier crabs scurries across the sand like scattered cat’s-eye marbles and pied oystercatchers prance at the water’s edge as we wade through Second Creek with fishing rods, keeping a wary eye out for crocs. Warned on arrival to stay five metres from the water at all times, we hope our trust in Bruce is not misplaced.

Two deft throws of a net and Bruce catches enough flapping mullet for bait. I reel in an estuary cod and mangrove jack, while others pluck bream and trevally from the water, though a barramundi for the chef proves elusive. Back on the beach we picnic under the shade

name, though it looks impressive to us. Behind is a rock garden of trickling water, grasses and shady eucalypts that would make Jamie Durie jealous. We cool off in a pond of lily pads sprouting tiny white-frilled flowers.

A natural amphitheatre of 80 metre-high cliffs proves a dramatic backdrop for lunch, the scraps of which are eagerly devoured by waiting fish. The waterfall may not be flowing but a recently collapsed rock face is testament to the unpredictability of this harsh terrain, as noted by Charles Price Conigrave, who named the Berkeley on an expedition in 1911, saying of all the gorge-like ravines in the area, “The Berkeley is infinitely the wildest and most stupendous.”

His expedition from Wyndham also circumnavigated and climbed Mount Casuarina, a flat-topped monolith seen in the distance from the lodge. He left notes on the journey under a rock cairn at the summit, and, thanks to a

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of pandanus trees, eating from beautifully presented bento boxes. On the return drive we spot shovelnose sharks in the shallows and meet Boots, the 2.5 metre-long saltwater croc that resides at the river mouth.

A relaxing cruise on the Berkeley River passes through a rugged gorge of sienna sandstone, its mosaic of fractured crags reflected in the still waters. A boab tree stretches its branches above the scrub in a bay where moon jellyfish congregate to breed. Inky stains dribbling down towering rock faces mark wet season waterfalls. As it’s the end of the dry, the only fall flowing is spring-fed and so insignificant compared to its counterparts that it doesn’t have a

Truenorth Helicopter tour, I’m standing next to that cairn at sunset, sipping champagne as the Berkeley River gorge below glows shades of orange in the lowering sun.

Conigrave later wrote of the Berkeley, “...in the fading light of early evening, we fellows sat at the cliff-top, fascinated by the sight of the silent river away down below. We thought that in far distant days, when we vagabond wanderers will have been completely forgotten, tourists will see the Berkeley Gorge, but the most enthusiastic and impressionable among them will not have, I am sure, quite the delight we had in viewing it for the first time.”

With respect, Mr Conigrave, I beg to disagree. ☹

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

The Berkeley River Lodge is located 150 kilometres from Wyndham in the north-east of Western Australia and is only accessible by sea and air. Return flights from Melbourne to Darwin with Virgin Australia start from \$500. The lodge operates a daily charter flight from Darwin for \$1150 per person each way.

virginaustralia.com



STAY THERE

The Berkeley River Lodge is open during the dry season from March to November. A package of three nights or more costs \$1488 per couple per night and includes all meals and activities including guided treks, fishing, river cruising and 4WD bush and beach tours.

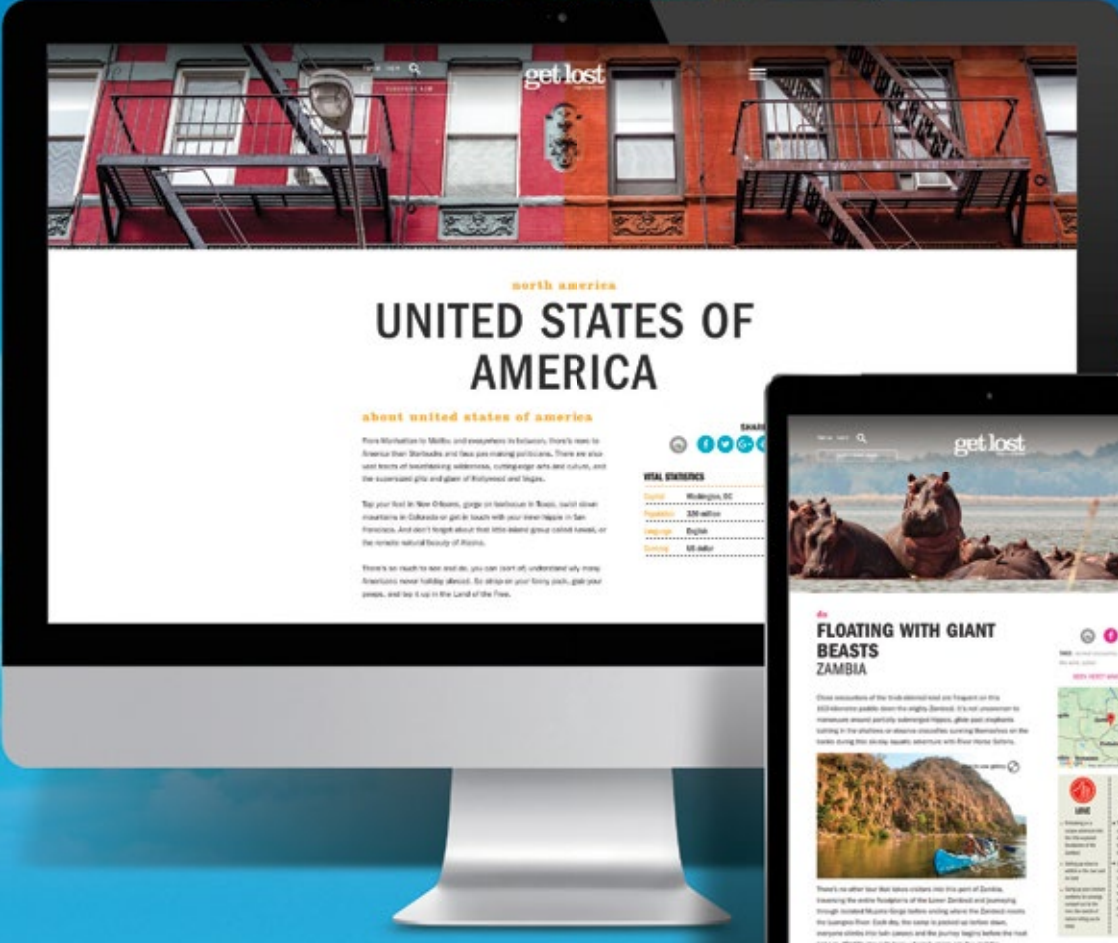
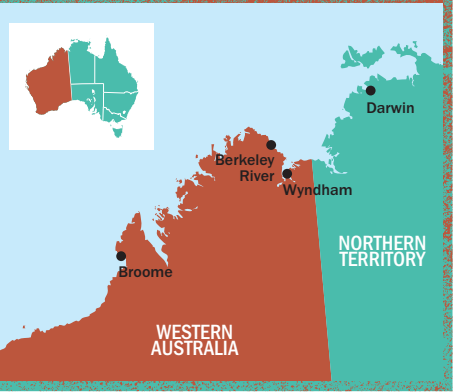
berkeleyriverlodge.com.au



TOUR THERE

Truenorth Helicopters offers a variety of excursions from the resort. The Mount Casuarina adventure and Kimberley sunset flights cost \$1100 for up to three people or \$350 per person for four or more passengers.

truenorthhelicopters.com.au



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