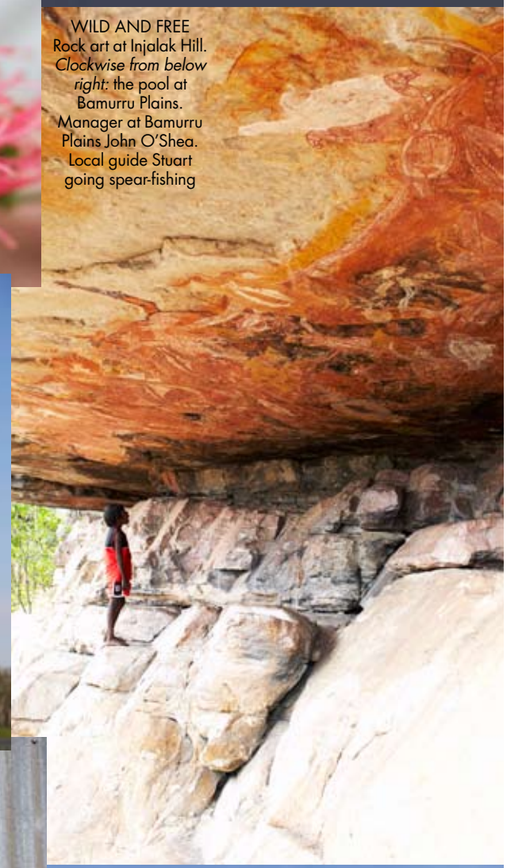
Northern soul

Deep in the Outback, Arnhem Land is the spiritual heart of the Northern Territory: an exquisite wilderness of prehistoric landscapes, ancient rock art and a vigorously preserved Aboriginal culture, where wildlife and the elements rule.

BY LYDIA BELL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANSON SMART



WILD AND FREE
Rock art at Injalak Hill. *Clockwise from below right:* the pool at Bamurru Plains. Manager at Bamurru Plains John O'Shea. Local guide Stuart going spear-fishing

WATER WORLD
Dusk at Barramundi Dreaming. *From far left:* a Lord's Safaris jeep on a floodplain. An Aboriginal bark painting

The Top End is a hot, humid land of water. To the east, the floodplains are filled with bird-life; to the west is a painterly, monochrome place of plunging gorges and giant boulders

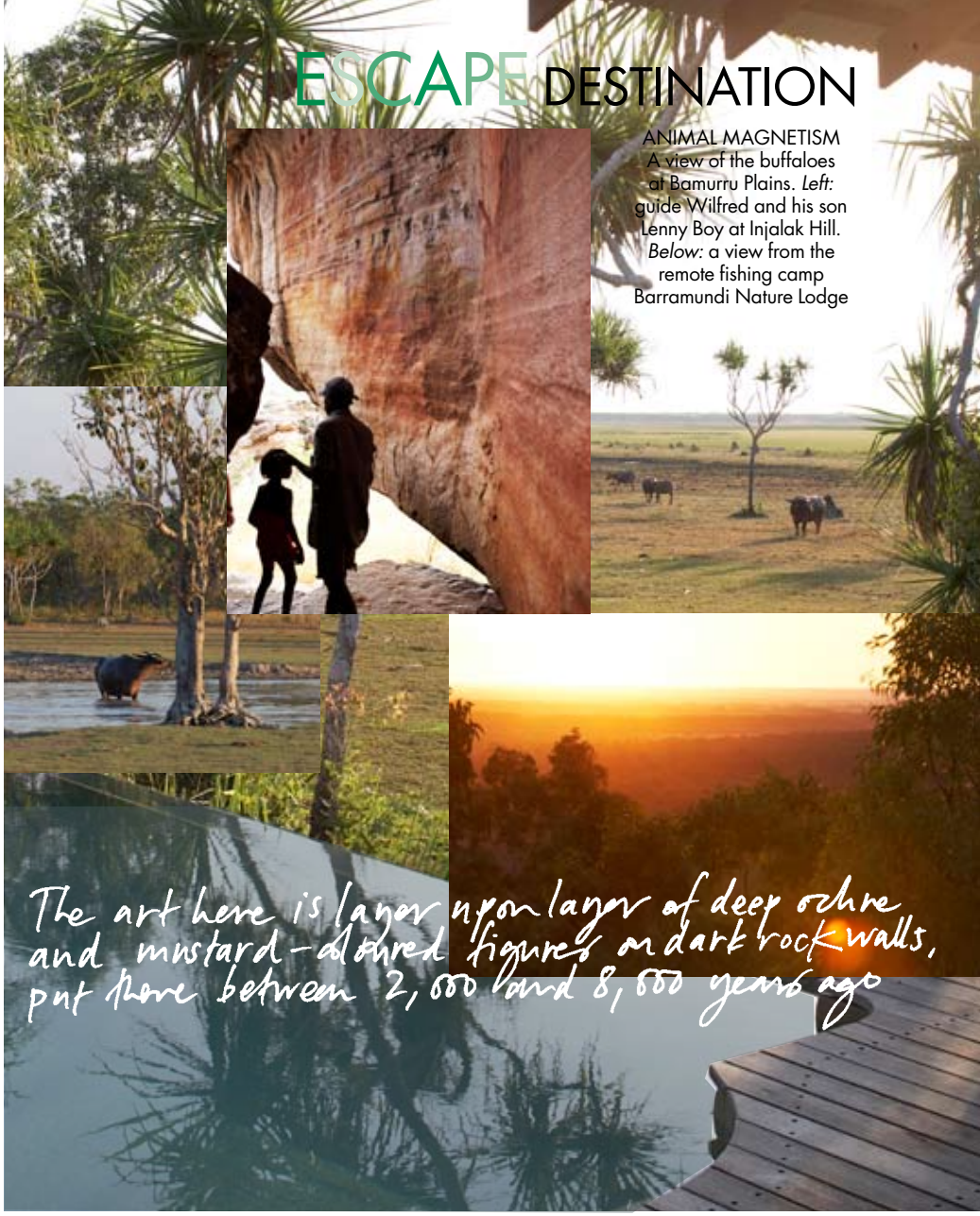
Sunset at Barramundi Dreaming. You stand on the escarpment, overlooking the immense billabong, alone in this deserted, water-drenched world as the floodplains darken to blackness. Nothing has changed here since the beginning, since before the white man came, when the Aboriginal people of this place didn't know what lay beyond the Stone Country and the floodplains, and didn't care.

Declared an Aboriginal reserve in 1931, the pristine wilderness of Arnhem Land is an area about the size of Portugal in the north-east corner of Australia's Northern Territory. It's a place of vigorous indigenous rock art and culture; the spiritual heart of the state. Access is by permit only, so you leave the tourist trail behind the moment you cross over the East Alligator River from Kakadu National Park. There are no tarmacked roads, no clearings, no hotels.

I am here with Sab Lord, guide and son of a local buffalo farmer. 'I discovered some astonishing rock art near here, a year or so ago,' he says, 'in caves that looked like the black fella had walked out of there yesterday. Grinding bowls, spears, bits of tin, and plates that looked like they'd been traded with whites in the 19th century. I haven't told anyone about it.'

Dry-humoured, politically incorrect Lord can take you deep into the bush, to sleep in earshot of the dingoes; to fishing camps where fanatics discuss tactics for catching huge barramundis; or to Outback retreats as chic as the best African safari lodges. But to take a tour with Lord's Safaris is to see the Top End through his experienced eyes, filtered by his humour (you will laugh, a lot) and his passions. No white man in Arnhem Land can know more about Aboriginal ways.

Arnhem Land doesn't have the classic Outback topography of the Australian ad campaigns – the vermillion earth and epic terrain traversed by bouncing big reds, cattle and jackaroos. Rather, the Top End is a hot, humid land of water. To the east, the floodplains are filled with bird-life; to the west, the Stone Country is a painterly, monochrome place of plunging gorges, giant boulders and cantilevered rock platforms. It looks as though God threw rocks down from the sky to keep the outsiders from coming in.



ANIMAL MAGNETISM
A view of the buffaloes at Bamurru Plains. *Left:* guide Wilfred and his son Lenny Boy at Injalak Hill. *Below:* a view from the remote fishing camp Barramundi Nature Lodge

This is an Aboriginal place. Give or take a few explorers, missionaries and buffalo hunters, Arnhem Land – in fact, the Top End in general – has never been settled. Lord was born on a buffalo station – 500 square miles of vastness in what is now Kakadu National Park, where *Crocodile Dundee* was made before the tourists came flocking. His father threw up a shack in 1959, and built a house over the years. Baby Sab slept in a rusty cot in the shade of a coolabah tree, which his mother surrounded with buffalo dung, set alight to keep away the mosquitoes. If she heard dingoes, she kept watch with a sawn-off shotgun. After a childhood with only his brother and the local Aboriginal children for company, at 13 Lord was sent to school in Sydney, speaking pidgin English mixed with Aboriginal words.

Lord uses local guides who show you the rock art and bush in their own way. Our first stop is Gunbalanya, in the west of Arnhem Land. Here we meet taciturn, dignified Wilfred from the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association. He is one of the unassuming local artists whose pieces are snapped up by dealers and gallerists from London, Sydney and New York who pop up several times a year and export art for high-profile exhibitions – even the Venice Biennale. There are about seven art centres in Arnhem Land, selling paper and bark paintings, dilly bags, didgeridoos and many other pieces. The older artists have stayed true to the local cross-hatched *rarrk* style that's distinct from the 'dot' paintings of the red centre of Australia.

Wilfred takes us up Injalak Hill, an outcrop of caves rich in Aboriginal art overlooking the floodplains. He has his son Lenny Boy with him, who looks about 10 and is as quiet as a mouse, with eyes like chocolate billabongs. I ask Wilfred how old Lenny is; he's not sure. The art here is layer upon layer of deep ochre and mustard-coloured figures – marsupials, fish, spirits – on dark rock walls, put there between 2,000 and 8,000 years ago. Wilfred tells us about the Mimi spirits, the Lightning Man and the Creation Mother. He shows us a burial cave, where human remains are wedged behind the rocks.

From here, Gunbalanya looks like a few flimsy houses in the dust. The emptiness of the floodplains provides a pause in the tangled jungle of Arnhem Land's verdant bush. Cane grasses and spike rushes create a sea of emerald green ringed by melaleucas, bloodwoods and stringy barks. During the wet season, the land will be transformed, creeks and billabongs swallowing everything – the only way you will get in is to fly in. Later, we drive east with the sunset. The palette of red roads, green forests and blue skies darkens to pink and glows as we arrive at the remote fishing camp to sleep.

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The next day, local Aboriginal owners Stuart and Elva arrive to show us their bush. They are wary and diffident, but as the day unfolds, so does their generosity and humour. We head off into the bush, stopping in places where there's no sound but the twigs breaking as a wallaby flees, and the screeching of the lorikeets, blue-winged kookaburras and red-tailed cockatoos overhead. They tell us that each tree has a use: toxic ironwood is used for spears; fan palms are weaved into dilly bags; the aerial roots of the banyan are good for ropes; and kapok-trees are used to make dugout canoes. They show us how to cut a stringy bark and prepare it for a painting, and how to eat the bottom of an immunity-boosting green ant ('You bite them before they bite you,' says Stuart, shoving them in his mouth).

Later, we drive to Maningrida ('the place where the Dreaming changed shape'), a one-horse town where food arrives weekly by barge. There's a sophisticated art centre, 12 indigenous languages spoken and white workers everywhere – the tentacles of government policy reach every remote community. Aboriginality in Australia is a complex portrait of ill health, trauma and marginalisation, tainted by the damaging policies of yesteryear. Maningrida is intriguing, but I am happy to sleep tonight in the bush, where we eat barbecued kangaroo.

The next morning, we stop at Yellow Water, on the South Alligator River – a feast for the senses. The waters are banked by lime-green buffalo grass, water-chestnut reeds and stringy barks, which are reflected on the surface. Everywhere you look, you see bird-life: nests built by white-bellied

SHADOW PLAY
A disused airstrip at the fishing camp. *Left:* bird-life at Bamurru Plains. *Below:* guide Stuart, with a relative, in Arnhem Land

The palette of red roads, green forests and blue skies darkens to pink and glows as the sun sets

sea eagles and kingfishers; egrets in flight. There are also crocodiles. They rest on the riverbed, passing the time till the next kill. It is just after sunrise, and lilies are in bloom, drinking in the first warmth of the day.

On our last night in the Top End, we stay at Bamurru Plains, on the border of Kakadu, reached by air or a long drive from Darwin. In your canvas-covered room on stilts, with its sheep-shearer-chic bathroom, wildlife can't see in, but you can see out. At dawn, you wake up to a chorus of birdsong, and wallabies rustling beneath you.

If it's civilisation you are after, Bamurru Plains has it in spades, with world-class Australian cuisine and service – but its real joy is that animals rule, and there's a diversity of plant-life that doesn't get hammered by the controlled burning of Kakadu and Arnhem Land (to guard against more devastating bushfires).

The most magical place at Bamurru is the vast paperbark swamp, some way from the settlement. Explorable by boat, it's fantastical in its beauty; lily-filled and dappled with shade, frequented by electric-blue kingfishers and pale-blue damselflies, a lonely Australian Monet of reflections and birdsong. They call it the Kingfisher Café.

At dusk, as the buffaloes wallow in the waterholes, surrounded by haloes of flies, with egrets balancing on their backs, we have sundowners and sushi, and reflect on these different versions of Arnhem Land. Bamurru is amazing – the future of tourism in the Australian Outback – but what stays with you is the remoteness of the bush and the otherness of the gentle Aboriginal locals. On our day with Stuart, we drove through a floodplain and he announced it was time for fishing with spears in a large, shallow billabong. 'So,' I asked him, my feet sinking into the billabong's sticky bed as I tried to follow him, 'are there crocodiles in *this* actual billabong?' Stuart paused, looked around, then nodded. 'And… if we see them, what will we do?' He pondered for a moment, then said: 'We will go around them,' making a vague arm movement before disappearing into the undergrowth. It felt like a metaphor for the Aboriginal mentality. Stuart's ancestors have been in this private place for about 40,000 years, and weathered the white man's storm. They go at their own pace. And to begin to understand them, we have to slow right down, and listen, as hard as we can. They are people of few words – but their words, like their ways, and their landscape, are on a different scale. □

A seven-night trip to Australia, including a four-night tour with Lord's Safaris to Litchfield, Kakadu and Arnhem Land, and two nights at Bamurru Plains, costs from £5,230 a person full board, including internal flights into Arnhem Land and out of Bamurru Plains and one night in Darwin (room only), with Bridge & Wickers (020 7483 6555; www.bridgeandwickers.com). International flights to Darwin cost from £850 return.