

Adventure

Welcome to Australia's giant rock garden



The Bungle Bungles were 'discovered' just 30 years ago, and a new camp allows visitors to explore their beauty, says **Lydia Bell**

The Cessna plane wafts over bone-dry cattle stations, their homesteads pinpricks in the vastness. Soon, a mass of fat orangey domes start pockmarking the horizon: the Bungle Bungles, or Purnululu National Park. They loom 250 metres above the arid, spinifex-studded grasslands, a dissected range of karst sandstone eroded over 20 million years into beehive shapes marked by bands of cyanobacterial crust.

It is a special year, being only the 30th anniversary of their "discovery" by a Perth documentary team, who, flown over the area by a local cattle station on their day off, couldn't believe that the locals were so nonchalant about the natural

phenomenon in their midst. It's a slightly absurd story. Yet the lateness of their discovery is a testament to the sheer size and inaccessibility of Western Australia. Their 1983 documentary, *Wonders of WA*, brought this buried treasure to the world's attention; Purnululu National Park was established in 1987, and in 2003 was named a World Heritage Area.

The Bungles remain inexplicably far down most visitors' lists, receiving 53,000 visitors per year against Uluru's 400,000. Yet this knobbly 450km square rock garden is vaster by far than Uluru's single, towering, red behemoth, which is less than four kilometres square. More visitors are coming to Western Australia, however, with the Bungles alone experiencing a 23 per cent hike in 2011, after access and trails were much improved.

The pilots lunge low to give me a better look. Almost half of the visitors who "see" the Bungles do it like this: simply from the air. I am glad instead to bump down on to the dusty airstrip.

This season, a new camp joins the fold, for those who choose to land. The Bungle Bungles Safari Camp has opened under the state government's Naturebank programme, which is rolling out sustainable projects in the wild. You can only stay if you join Kimberley Wild Expedition's overland five-day schlep from Broome, and it's not the most fancy camp in the Bungles, but it is the only one with views of the massif. With only ten tents, it's also an

option for those who disdain crowds (the other camps have 30 tents apiece).

In April, they launch a new tour all the way to Darwin, which starts on the Gibb River Road, that unsealed ribbon of dust that cuts through the blood red heart of the Kimberley. The bush tucker and crocodiles of Windjana Gorge, swimming in remote waterfalls, swagging it under the stars, cascading falls at Bell Gorge, camping by a billabong on Mt Barnett Station, the deathless horizons of Lake Argyle, the largest man-made lake in the Southern Hemisphere, and vivid Outback towns are episodes in this adventure.

If you don't have time for an overland odyssey, you can hit the ground running at one of two Bungles drop-in camps, run by Australian Pacific Touring (APT) and East Kimberley Tours (EKT). I stay with the former in a princely tent with a vast bathroom, consuming three-course meals nightly, walking back to my tent serenaded by blue-winged kookaburras under a giant apricot moon. Paul and Fran's EKT camp is next door, and offers smart little cabins.

Their guide Bruce takes me out, and points out the details of the landscape: the 13 types of spinifex that give soft texture to the horizon; the bloodwoods, acacia, snappy gums, cabbage gums and Bauhinia of the treescape; the Jasper-imbued red rocks and bulky termite hills. We walk into Echidna Chasm, a water-eroded slither that runs a mile into the range with 650ft-high vertical walls. Tiny palms like

The painted hills of the enormous Bungle Bungles range

matchsticks wave down from the roof. By late afternoon, we reach Cathedral Gorge, a vast natural amphitheatre with a glistening pool at its sandy base. A deep rock overhang creates the fine acoustics.

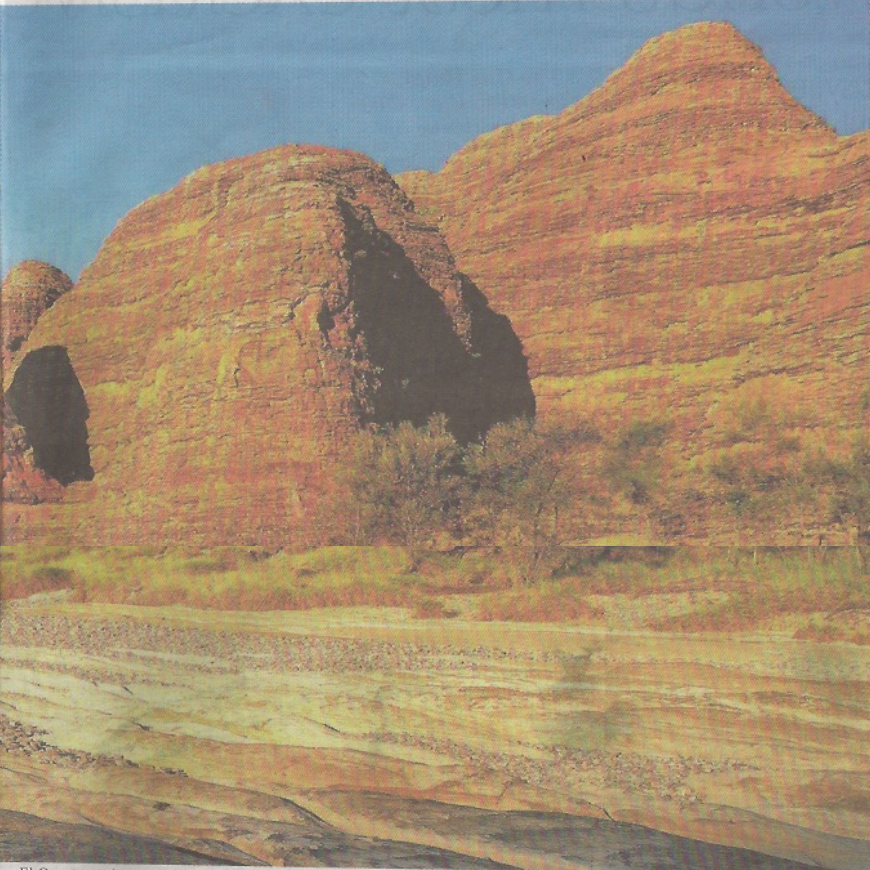
Anglo-Australians call this season "The Dry". Otherwise, there is "The Wet". Aborigines see nuance. They think in five seasons, according to the wind and rain, the ripening of fruits and the presence, behaviour and fatness of certain animals. When the kapok bush flowers, the crocodiles and the turtles are mating. When it fruits, they have mated. When it dies, their babies are hatching. When the bats-wing coral tree flowers, it's time to go to the coast to catch mud crabs. The local Djaru and Kija people, who have walked the Bungles for 200,000 years, prefer them in The Wet, when life is abundant.

Camp owners wish they could get Aboriginal guides to talk about their land. Although they are recognised as the "traditional owners", they are absent. A long-standing ambition to establish Aborigine-led tourism has never come to fruition: this is a fractured, traumatised community with a younger generation that has lost touch with the land.

You can't go all that way without visiting the rest of the Kimberley, one of the last great wildernesses. The size of Germany, it has fewer people per square kilometre than almost any other place on Earth. I am spirited in another Cessna to the airstrip of the famous El Questro property,

“ Crocodiles disappear into the still waters and tangerine cliffs glow like lava lamps ”

PETER WALTON/GETTY



Where to stay to see the Australian Outback

Arkaba Station, Flinders Ranges, South Australia

Arkaba is a working sheep station with 60,000 acres of typical Outback scenery: craggy sandstone bluffs and dry creek beds lined with gum trees; a place of vast landscapes and big skies. At the Homestead, which was built in 1851, there are four bedrooms plus one in a neighbouring cottage. They have no phone, TV or minibar – the focus is getting out and enjoying the environment – but there is a pool, an open bar and a chef providing classic dishes.

Details Doubles are from £960 per night (0061 2 9571 6399, arkabastation.com)

Sal Salls, Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia

In the remote corner of WA, you'll find this safari camp in dunes just 50m from the beaches of the Cape Range National Park. This is posh camping, with soft beds and cotton sheets. There's a bar, open lounge and lots of activities. Sea-kayaking and guided walks are included, and for an extra cost you can go whale-shark spotting at nearby Ningaloo Reef.

Details Doubles are from £852 per night, all-inclusive, or you can pay £430 per night for off-peak stays with no activities included (0061 2 9571 6399, salsalls.com.au)

Longitude 131, Uluru, Northern Territories

Uluru is the ultimate symbol of the Aussie Outback, and this luxury, tented camp allows you private views of the sun rising and setting over what was once known as Ayers Rock. There are only 15 tents onsite, so the unique experience of a stay is not spoiled by hundreds of other guests. At night, you can dine under the stars.

Details Doubles are from £1,288 per night (00 61 8 8957 7131, longitude131.com.au)

Desert Cave Hotel, Coober Pedy, South Australia

In the opal-mining town of Coober Pedy, where summer temperatures soar way over 40C, many residents dig down to escape the heat. The Desert Cave has 50 rooms, of which 19 are underground and are surprisingly spacious. All rooms have TV with free movies, there's a pool and what the hotel claims to be the world's only underground bar.

Details Doubles are from £147 per night, room only (00 61 8 8672 5688, desertcave.com.au)

Paperbark Camp, Woollamia, New South Wales

The owners of this tented accommodation, two hours' drive south of Sydney, say it is "camping for grown-ups", and you can see why; tents are surrounded by paperbark and eucalyptus trees, each has a verandah, solar-powered lighting and attached loo and shower – and some have a bath with a view. The Gunyah eating area serves some innovative kangaroo dishes.

Details Doubles are from £232 per night, B&B (00 61 2 441 6066, paperbark-camp.com.au)



Home Valley Station, East Kimberley, Western Australia

This remote part of WA is where much of the movie *Australia* was filmed. There

are dozens of traditional Outback activities on offer, from cattle mustering to swimming in the billabong. Stay in the air-conditioned "Grass Castles" on the banks of Bindaloo Creek, or in eco-tents.

Details Grass Castles doubles from £175 per night, B&B; eco-tents from £82 per night, B&B and camping pitches from £15 per night (00 61 8 9161 4322, hvstation.com.au)

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of Scott Dunn (020-8682 5060, scottdunn.com), who can make a custom luxury flying safari in Western Australia from £4,850pp for 10 nights, with international and internal flights and accommodation in Perth and El Questro.

The new Bungles Camp, Kimberley Wild Expeditions (bunglesafaricamp.com.au), has a five-day tour through the Kimberley staying two nights at the camp from \$1,595 including guides, accommodation, transport and most meals. APT's Bungle Bungle Wilderness Lodge (kimberleywilderness.com.au) costs from \$265pp per night, half board.

More information
westernaustalia.com

El Questro enjoys exquisite isolation, but you quickly realise what a hive of activity its "township" is, home to about 200 workers, a steakhouse, a café-bar and shop, a camping ground and a croc-safe swimming hole. A short drive away is the Homestead, a boutique hotel. Half an hour further on, there's the Emma Gorge Resort, a camp in the Cockburn Ranges.

El Questro is the sine qua non of Kimberley tourism, a million-acre cattle station with rugged ranges, tidal flats, rainforests and four mighty gorges to satiate the wilderness-thirsty.

You return having imbibed the spirit of the Outback: brushing with crocodiles, the exhilarating wind of a doors-off helicopter ride in your hair, and with a "Kimberley tan" – a thick coating of clinging dust. El Questro's success is also driven by the democratic range of accommodation, from AUD\$20 (£11.75) camping spots.

A breathtaking medley of tours showcases the beauty of this landscape. On one trip, we undertake a thrilling 4x4 ride across boulder-strewn rivers. Crawling into a gorge in a little boat, the guide cuts out the motor and asks us to listen to the silence. The cicadas, the distant tweet of birds and the swish of water on sandstone remain. At sunset, we drink at Branco's Lookout, gazing across the most vast and beautiful landscape I've seen in many trips in Australia. The river's gravel bed was gouged of trees by an angry flood two years ago. Gliding down the

Chamberlain River, we watch the eyes of crocodiles disappear into the still waters. Tangerine cliffs glow like lava lamps as the sun lowers, prehistoric layer cakes that tell a story so ancient that it humbles and heals. These sedimentary rocks are 1.8 billion years old, and go back to the super-continent landmass. When Australia broke off, the Kimberley was a little floater. It joined Australia by way of a violent 1,000-year-long collision that created the Cockburn Ranges 900 million years ago. And stayed.

Not much has changed. This is the most stable ancient landscape on earth, unchanged by glaciers or volcanoes.

The Chamberlain is not the only spot on the property where you feel close to your creator. At Zebedee Springs, to float in the warmth of thermal water spilling from the cliffs and watch the sunbursts through the canopy of *livistona* palms is to live.

I spend one night in a giant tent nestled between palms and pandanus at Emma Gorge, which combines the sleekness of a resort (pool, bar, great food) with a quintessence of wilderness. The rush of water in the creek is my lullaby. I wake up and walk from the base of the gorge, past butterfly-filled trees and vines, clambering over giant boulders of ripple rock, to its end. It's hot and dry, but at the end of the track an emerald water hole glistens invitingly.

On a bush culture and history tour, the guide shows us the old cattle yard where the beasts were lassooed, laid down,

branded and castrated. These days, cattle are mustered by helicopter, quad bike and 4x4, and the *Man From Snowy River*-style stockmen are returning to the dust from whence they came. Our guide shows us the nest of the bowerbird, which collects grey and white things to impress the ladies: dingo poo, a five-cent piece, and the jawbone of a rock wallaby.

We see the poisonous berry of the crab's eye vine, or gidgee gidgee berry, which Aboriginal women used to terminate a pregnancy, and the "bushman's deodorant" – rub the green leaves of turkey bush in your pits and it'll mask a multitude. And then there is the caustic bush, used for body scarring. You cut the skin to make the scar, and rub in caustic sap to raise it. "It would've hurt like Billy-o, but the bigger the scar, the bigger the man."

On the last night, I sleep in one of the glass-fronted Cliff Side Retreats at The Homestead, their verandas with half-egg baths. Before drifting over primed lawns for a communal dinner under the stars, and to watch the crocs and turtles surface for a late-night feed, I observe the landscape change and darken after the sun goes down. A bunch of noisy rosellas takes off into the sunset. The ancient baobab tree on the horizon stretches its arms out in the last light. The sky is a dull peach, the ancient ridges charcoal black, the river still, its crocodiles limbering up for the evening ahead. Everything is quiet and alive. This is the place to be.