

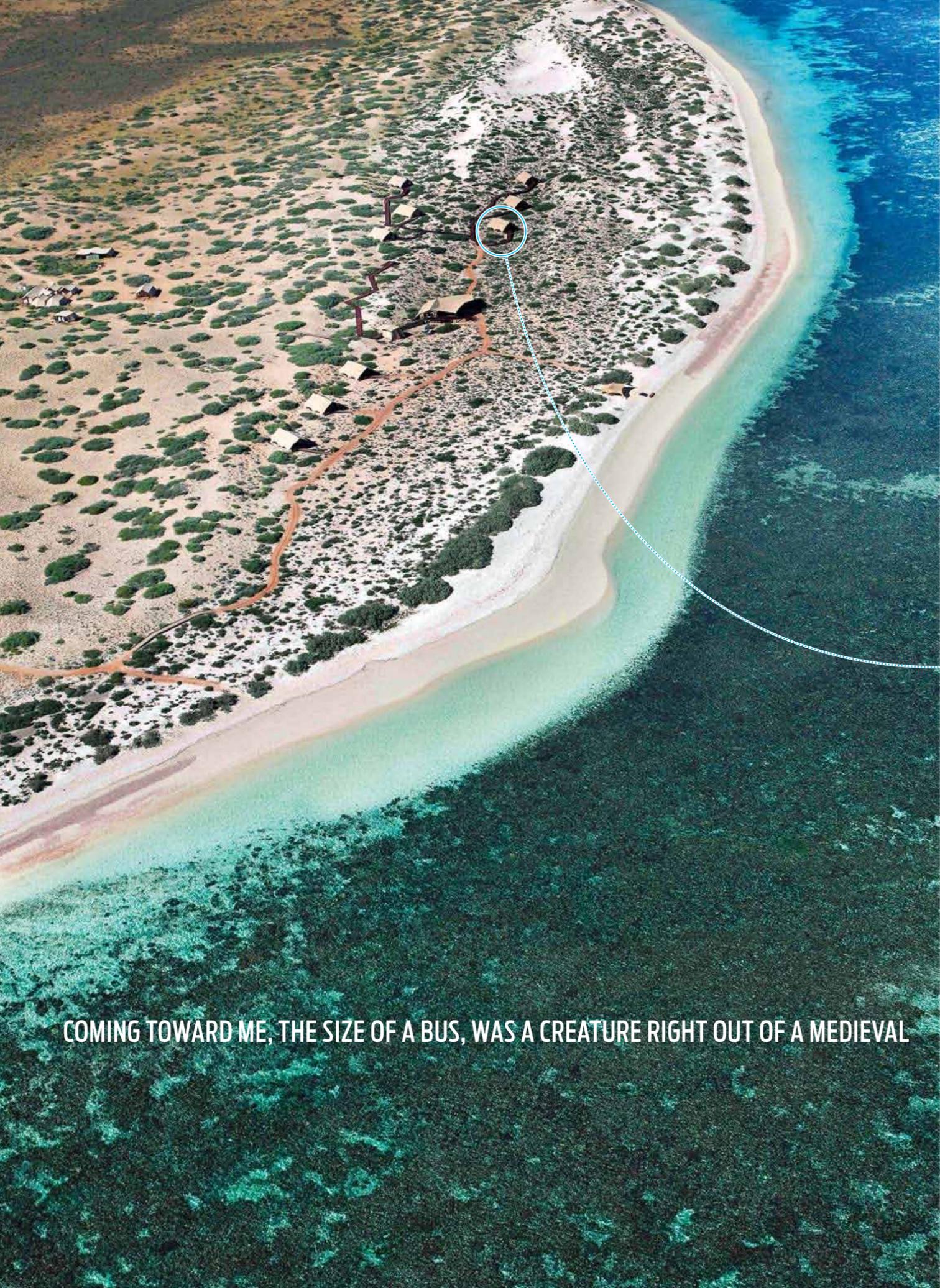
A SPACE ODYSSEY

AUSTRALIA'S REMOTEST REACHES ARE NOTHING IF NOT OTHERWORLDLY, AND TRAVEL THERE—AN AUSSIE TRADITION—THE EARTHLY EQUIVALENT OF A MOON LANDING. BUT THERE'S SOMETHING NEW AFOOT—A CROP OF FANTASTICALLY SITUATED, FAULTLESSLY ECO-CORRECT CAMPS STARRING BOTH CREATURES AND COMFORTS. **TONY PERROTTET** TOUCHES DOWN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **OBIE OBERHOLZER**



The high-end base camps in Australia's rugged northwest are styled on African safari camps. The view from this perch near Bamurru Plains camp encompasses Arnhem Land, an Aboriginal reserve, and Kakadu National Park, famed for its wetlands.



SKIMMING VIA LIGHT AIRCRAFT over the crocodile-infested Arafura Sea, I began to suspect that I'd taken the concept of "getting away from it all" a step too far. From the cockpit of a single-engine Cessna, I watched the northern fringe of Australia unfurl like lush abstract art, the wild green expanse of mangroves delicately laced with the sensual coils of tropical rivers. All this primeval nature had begun to prey on my imagination: What exactly would happen, I wondered, if we, well, crash-landed out here?

In Africa you might see cattle tracks, villages, fires. But in this lost universe, there was nobody, nothing. Every now and again, I glimpsed a tiny dirt track etched through the greenery, but it was invariably empty, as mysterious as the Nazca Lines.

Air is the only way to explore many parts of the Top End, as Aussies call their vast northern frontier. "People use planes like taxis up here," the bush pilot Lance had told me jauntily outside the hangar of AV8 Aviation in Darwin, where tiny aircraft were indeed lined up like yellow cabs at JFK. "They buzz out like bloody mosquitoes." Families in remote Aboriginal communities even hire them for shopping trips to Darwin, returning laden with axes and spades for their hunting-and-gathering trips. Lance had helpfully shown me our plane's emergency kit, which contained little more than water, a knife, and a compass. In my case, it would be more symbolic than useful, I reflected once we were airborne, if I really did end up lost in this unforgiving landscape. How would I even cross those rivers shimmering in the afternoon sun? Since hunting saltwater crocs had been banned in 1971, their numbers had bounced back, an environmental success story, I supposed—unless you were caught in one of their death rolls. . . .

Of course, as Aussies know, a few respectful meditations on nature have always been an essential part of the Outback experience. But I reminded myself that my flimsy survival skills were unlikely to be tested. I was heading toward Bamurru Plains, a new safari camp run by a group called Wild Bush Luxury, which provides high-end base camps for excursions into Australia's remotest areas. Even so, I had a sneaking sus-

casually against a four-wheel drive, like Calamity Jane on vacation, Lauren was wearing the regulation khaki shorts and shirt of the north, along with nylon ankle guards for the area's spiky spinifex and needlelike "spear bushes," not to mention accidental nips from the deadly king brown snake, or mulga. For the next half hour, we rattled across the outskirts of Swim Creek Station, a working buffalo ranch owned by fifth-generation Outback settlers, the Fisher family, passing fields of termite mounds that rose like giant shark fins from the red earth. Soon, we glimpsed the camp of Bamurru Plains, which leases a prime spot at the edge of the floodplains. I was about to pass from the uncompromising heat and dust into an altogether more civilized dimension of the Outback. Another staff member, also in practical shorts and hiking boots, received us with cool towels and a chilled glass of Aussie sparkling wine. The airy timber structure had a vaguely Balinese feel, with a thirty-five-foot pool and gazebos where guests were unwinding with canapés, enjoying the view of the plains through spidery pandanus trees. At dusk, a pageant of wildlife appeared: Dozens of wallabies, pint-sized relatives of kangaroos, were hopping idly in the golden light, while buffalo wallowed in the mud. (These were introduced by the British from Indonesia in the 1820s; the ranch has about 4,500 of them, which are exported back to Asia.) The only sound track, beyond the chortling of guests, was the cackling laugh of the blue-winged kookaburra.

I was starting to get nostalgic.

THE FIRST TIME I VISITED THE Outback, I had hitchhiked the three-thousand-odd miles from Sydney along dusty roads first blazed by mad Victorian explorers and Afghan camel traders. This was more than twenty years ago, in my Jack Kerouac phase: I was carrying a fifteen-dollar tent from Woolworth's but invariably slept outside beneath the stars after a satisfying meal of instant Chinese noodles boiled on the open fire and the odd Vegemite sandwich, toasted for variety. There was not a lot of elegance in Australia's far territories back then. The most popular social institu-



Sal Salis camp (just nine tents on the beach) is the first and only place to stay directly on the 160-mile Ningaloo Reef, Australia's largest fringing reef and a place of riotous marine fertility. You can swim with 40-foot whale sharks here (they eat only plankton). The entertainment at night is counting shooting stars.

COMING TOWARD ME, THE SIZE OF A BUS, WAS A CREATURE RIGHT OUT OF A MEDIEVAL

MONSTER COMPENDIUM. IT WAS HARD TO IMAGINE BEING MORE IMMERSSED IN NATURE

picion that, out here on the frontier, the definition of "luxury" would hardly be conventional.

About half an hour later, Lance tapped his GPS system and nose-dived our plane toward a red-dirt runway that appeared out of nowhere.

"Welcome to Bamurru International Airport," said the single-person welcoming committee, a dust-covered guide named Lauren, with a grin. Leaning

tion in Darwin was a place called The Cage, which was literally a wire-mesh box where locals would brawl like Tasmanian devils and which could be conveniently hosed out each morning. After a month on the lonely Outback highways, I looked like an escaped convict myself, but I was free to camp by the billabongs, or water holes, in Kakadu National Park, watching the red eyes of reptiles reflected in the dark-

ness and waking up early to see the sun consume the earth like a nuclear blast.

Australia has changed a lot since those days—and so, frankly, have I. Living in New York, I found my old enthusiasm for noodles and Vegemite somehow—inexplicably—waning. But I still had periodic cravings to get out into the wildest corners of the Outback, in the hope that space and freedom still lurked there.

Luckily for me, a new wave of tented bush camps, styled loosely on African safari lodges, recently sprang

JOHN STUART MADE IT BACK TO ADELAIDE ON A STRETCHER—SCURVY-RIDDEN, UNABLE TO SPEAK, HIS SPIRIT BROKEN. WHAT COULD I SAY? I REFILLED MY CHARDONNAY GLASS. “HERE’S TO THE RIGORS OF FRONTIER LIFE”

up in pristine areas that, even growing up in Sydney, I’d only vaguely heard about. The sheer logistics of operating in such far-flung locations means that these resorts are very much at the high end of the travel market. They provide soft beds and gourmet meals with fine ingredients brought in almost daily, use all the latest eco-technology (solar power, low-watt bulbs, state-of-the-art waste disposal and water management), and put a premium on educating guests about urgent conservation issues. Australia is on the front lines of world climate change and has suffered from homespun ecological disasters. Today, environmentalists are encouraging select travelers to get out into these fragile

frontiers, to see firsthand what is at stake. Many Aussies have only the vaguest notion of what lies in the recesses of their continent: It’s the most urbanized country on earth, and more have been to Bali and Paris than the Top End.

“Australia is a biological treasure chest,” an American ecologist, Tom Lovejoy, told me when I met him on the journey. “But it’s a lot more environmentally

sensitive than other places. The combination of introduced species, land clearing, and vulnerability to fire has wreaked havoc.” The biodiversity chair at the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment in Washington, D.C., Lovejoy argues that sensitive travel to remote ecosystems can only have a positive effect. “We need global solutions to the world’s problems,” he said. “In the greater scheme of things, if people are unaware of the reality, we won’t be able to move the global agenda along.”

And so my own heroic and selfless project was to zigzag by lightplane across the northwest of the continent, visiting three of the remotest and, yes, most luxurious of the safari camps, encompassing the iconic Australian landscapes of coral reefs, tropical

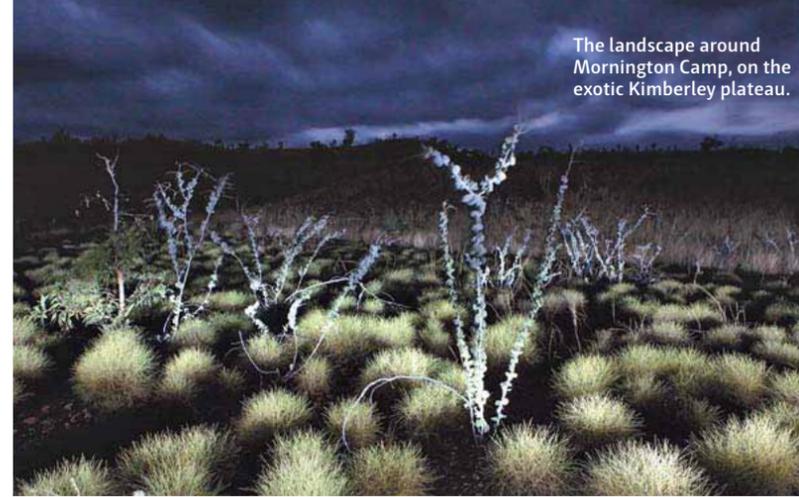
wetlands, and bloodred desert—and Bamurru Plains was my first stop.

I was right in guessing that it wasn’t a conventional view of luxury. “Just getting this place built was a monstrous job,” recalled John O’Shea, a manager at the camp. “Transporting the materials here was brutal. The wet season closed the only road for weeks.” There are no armies of liveried staff as in African and Asian lodges. Instead, Bamurru is run by a few footloose young Aussies with an easygoing, democratic style. Each of the nine “Safari Suites” is raised on a platform and built from corrugated iron and timber to survive the monsoon, with insect screens for walls. In fact, from the outside they can look a bit like bunkers, but they are magical from within. When I switched off the lights after dark, the space was filled with moonlight, giving the sense of sleeping in the open air, with the only sound the meanderings of marsupials

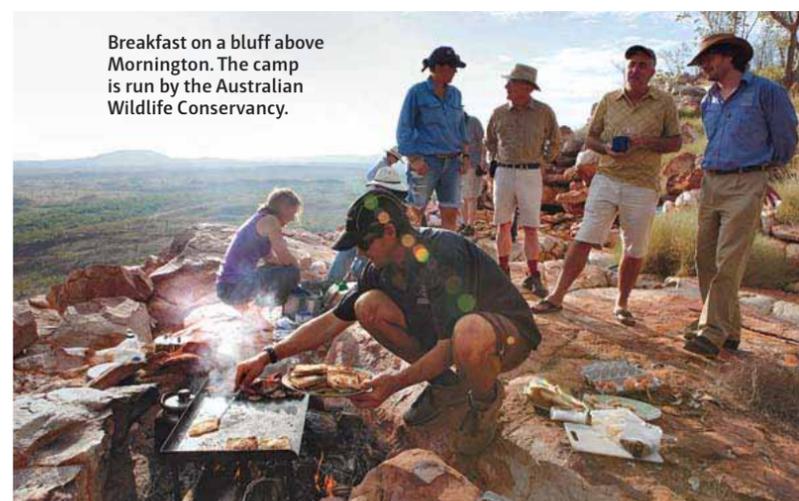
in the foliage. You don’t need an alarm clock at Bamurru—the chorus of birdsong gets going before dawn. But there are also vivid glimpses of the bush’s vulnerability: At night, the paths are dotted with cane toads, a non-indigenous species whose venom has wreaked havoc with local wildlife, and one also sees the flashing eyes of feral cats, another devastating introduction.

The location is the real luxury. On the first morning, I set off before dawn to explore the wetlands by airboat, following twelve-foot crocodiles across eighteen inches of water into eerily quiet inlets, where the peeling trunks of paperbark trees, a type of melaleuca, were mirrored in the inky, mirror-smooth waters. (Aboriginals sometimes joke that the trees are like English tourists, peeling in the sun.) The next day, I hopped another lightplane to the Aboriginal reserve of Arnhem Land, where a young Bininj guide named Ezariah Kelly took me clambering up a hill to see rock galleries of tribal art suffused with reflected light from the honey-colored sandstone. By sunset, I was back at Bamurru Plains for dinner, choosing between Australian Angus filet mignon au jus or barramundi in lemongrass, washed down with a cheeky Margaret River chardonnay.

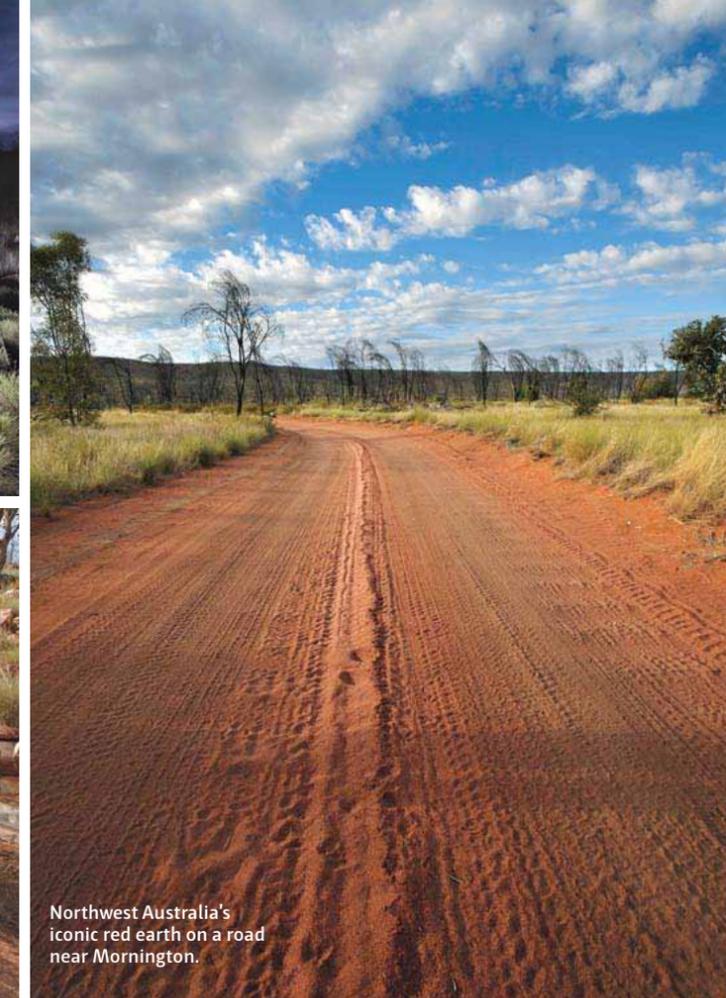
In the warm light of kerosene lamps, I noticed a wall map illustrating the local journeys of John McDouall Stuart, who qualifies as the maddest of the mad Victorian explorers. This hard-drinking Scot with the flowing beard of an Old Testament prophet passed near here in 1862, when he made the first European crossing of Australia from south to north. He and his men spent months wandering the pitiless terrain, being torn by bushes, palms, and creepers and living on a wretched diet of dried meat, flour, and black tea. The half-delirious explorers finally burst through the mangroves to the sea a few miles from Bamurru, at a spot now called Point Stuart. They nailed the Union Jack to a tree, gave three cheers for the Queen, and then started trudging home. Stuart made it back to Adelaide on a stretcher—scurvy-ridden, unable to speak, his spirit broken. What could I



The landscape around Mornington Camp, on the exotic Kimberley plateau.



Breakfast on a bluff above Mornington. The camp is run by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.



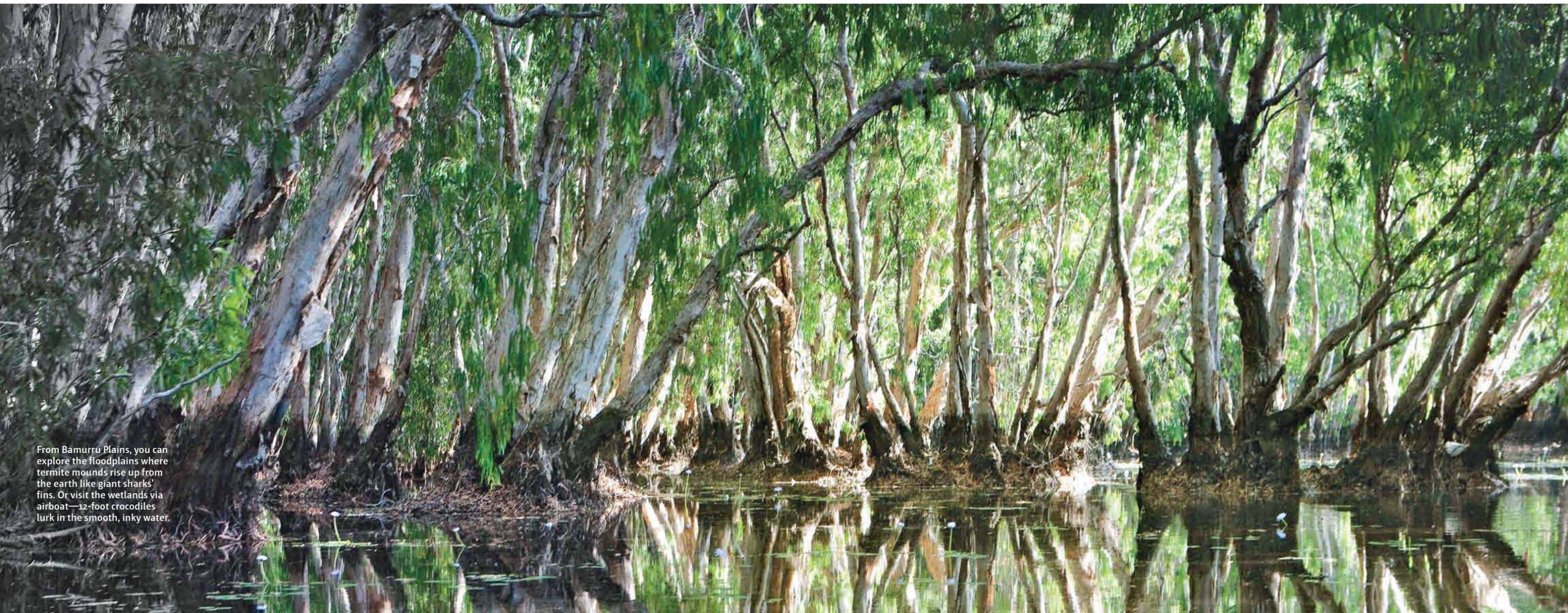
Northwest Australia’s iconic red earth on a road near Mornington.



Planes are the only way to explore many parts of the vast northern frontier (a.k.a. the Top End). This view is of the Bonaparte Gulf between Darwin and Kununurra.

Map by Joyce Rendala

“AUSTRALIA HAS THE WORLD'S HIGHEST RATE OF MAMMAL EXTINCTION. IF WE DON'T TAKE CARE OF THINGS IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS, IT'S GOING TO BE A BLOODY DISASTER”



From Bamurru Plains, you can explore the floodplains where termite mounds rise up from the earth like giant sharks' fins. Or visit the wetlands via airboat—12-foot crocodiles lurk in the smooth, inky water.

"Bush brekky" at Mornington—the fuel you'll need for days spent on the river and lakes. The staff leave canoes about so you can paddle as far as you like.



I HOPPED A RIDE WITH TWO RESEARCH SCIENTISTS TO A FRESHWATER BILLABONG. DENSE FOLIAGE HUNG IN CURTAINS AROUND THE BANKS, AND DIVING LIKE A PLATYPUS INTO THE WARM, TEA-COLORED WATER BEAT ANY FIVE-STAR RESORT



ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARE ENCOURAGING SELECT TRAVELERS TO GET OUT INTO THESE FRAGILE FRONTIERS, TO SEE FIRSTHAND WHAT IS AT STAKE. “AUSTRALIA IS A BIOLOGICAL TREASURE CHEST”

say? I refilled my chardonnay glass and raised a toast to Mr. Stuart: “Here’s to the rigors of frontier life.”

MY NEXT STOP, MORNINGTON Wilderness Camp, deep in the exotic plateau known as the Kimberley, is arguably Australia’s purest ecolodge. It is operated by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), a nonprofit organization that purchases strategic chunks of land in the most biologically diverse corners of the Outback and turns them into private sanctuaries. Funded only by donations, AWC now has twenty-one reserves covering 6.2 million acres, and Mornington is their showcase. A former cattle station sprawling over nearly 1.5 million acres, it was snapped up in 2001 for less than two million dollars—which is like buying the state of Delaware for a dollar per acre. All profits from Mornington go straight into conservation, but its real purpose is to give travelers a privileged view of AWC activities, and hopefully to inspire support.

Of course, you have to get there first. One way is to drive for nine grueling hours across northwestern Australia, along a bone-rattling dirt road from the nearest

At Bamurru Plains, the nine Safari Suites are raised on platforms. Mosquito-screening walls make it feel as though you’re sleeping in the open air, and the only sounds are the marsupials rustling in the foliage at night and the chorus of birdsong at dawn.

town, Broome. Or you can, like me, arrive via a ninety-minute Cessna flight, feeling refreshed and ready for a dip. And a most scenic journey it is from an aerial vantage, as the savanna grasslands break into rugged bluffs and stark gorges. Everything is more extreme in the Kimberley, including the exuberant verdure of its oases: Mornington’s ten fixed tents are scattered along a fertile creek (a sign in the bathroom reads

“Please shut the toilet lid to keep out the frogs”—and a pair of rubber gloves are provided in case one gets in). The camp lacks designer flourishes and has no man-made swimming pool. Instead, I hopped a four-wheel-drive ride with two research scientists to a freshwater billabong where the dense foliage hung in curtains around the banks, and where diving like a platypus into the warm, tea-colored water beats any five-star resort.

I was given a dramatic demonstration of the scale of the operation at dawn the next morning, when I was whisked via four-seat helicopter to a mesa top for breakfast. By happy coincidence, my stay at Mornington overlapped with a “donor event,” where the top contributors to AWC fly in (*Continued on page 158*)

PLACES & PRICES

OUTBACK POSH

Think of planes as taxis in this part of Australia. To organize your trip to the back of beyond in grand style, see [page 158](#).