

The prodigious Kimberley region is reduced to the enchanting sum of its parts (including a grand outback stay) on an immersive walking adventure.

Story by Alexis Buxton-Collins  
Photography by Damian Bennett

**WEST**

**WAY OUT**



128



129

“Be careful near the water,” a voice cautions as we approach Zebedee Springs. I’m used to being on croc watch in northern Australia but these springs gush from the ground into clear pools that are 100 per cent predator-free. Seeing my puzzled face, ranger Gabby explains, “The water here is so clear that it’s hard to tell how deep it is; some people have misjudged their step and fallen in face first.”

Duly warned, I gently ease myself into crystalline water that sits at 32°C. Around me, prehistoric *Livistona* palms rise on slender trunks before bursting out in fan-shaped fronds. The burnt-orange cliffs that tower above are reflected in the water and as the afternoon progresses, the colour intensifies until the surface is flecked with gold.

I’m here with Walk Into Luxury ([walkintoluxury.com](http://walkintoluxury.com)) on the four-night Kimberley Walk, which uses the El Questro

Homestead as a base camp to explore this obscenely beautiful region. It’s clear that the six other guests are equally impressed. “If someone was to design the perfect garden, they’d base it on this exact scene,” says Michaela, the director of a social enterprise in Melbourne. “The moss is so delicate, the red rocks stand out against the blue sky, palm trees exactly where you’d plant them... it’s like paradise.”

The same can be said of the sprawling homestead, which has the feel of an upscale safari lodge and sits on a rocky outcrop above the broad Chamberlain River. Out front, a swathe of lush green grass leads to the escarpment and the suites are flanked by avenues of frangipanis and ghost gums. Several cantilevered rooms filled with timber, brick-coloured tiles and white linen sit directly above the water and boast private river views from the bathroom and open-air deck. (When the manager informs



me that I might see a saltwater crocodile cruising the river from my shower, the property's swimming pool instantly becomes more inviting.)

Located near the eastern terminus of the 660-kilometre Gibb River Road, which connects Derby and Kununurra, El Questro Wilderness Park encompasses more than 283,000 hectares. It's an area so vast that it's shared between two Traditional Custodian groups, the Ngarinyin and the Balangarra peoples. The southern section where the homestead and most of the walks are situated was handed back to the Ngarinyin last year and is now operated under a lease agreement that will allow them to play a larger role in the property's management.

Seen from afar, the Kimberley appears unimaginably gigantic and formidable, a savannah punctuated by islands of almost two-billion-year-old rock. But up close it harbours a glorious cacophony of life, a point rammed home when I find a bright-green tree frog lurking in my suite's toilet bowl.

While the region's scale is hard to wrap your head around, our guide, Phil Clucas, does a pretty good job of it. He has a deep tan, a neatly cropped white beard and the confident mien of a man completely at home in his environment. Pointing out a distended boab surrounded by a cluster of green shoots at the start of one walk (it tastes like "a cross between water chestnut and sweet potato"), he tells me that the size of the property creates different climatic zones so the same plant species will bloom at different times throughout the park. The highway to Kununurra is lined with kapok trees sporting garlands of canary-yellow flowers but elsewhere we see turkey bushes dusted with pink blooms and passages of silver-leaved grevillea covered in curls of yellow and red blooms.

After waking to the sound of the river flowing beneath my room, I step outside to watch the dormant rock face on the opposite bank come to life as the sun hits. A set of natural steps leads down to a broad sandstone platform where Michaela greets each morning with a meditation session.

We all meet for breakfast on the terrace before piling into a 4WD and heading out to scout a different part of the park each day. The trails are mostly flat but creek crossings and broken ground keep us on our toes and the canyons trap the heat so that beads of sweat prick my brow within minutes of setting out. Fortunately, every adventure includes at least one opportunity to go for a dip and my swimmers get almost as much use as my walking shoes over the five days.



One 3.4-kilometre track leads from a dusty savannah of spear grass and spinifex into Amalia Gorge, where sheer rock walls gradually close in on either side until we reach a 32-metre waterfall thundering into a jade-coloured waterhole. It's large enough to comfortably accommodate several Olympic-size swimming pools and I dive in to escape the tropical heat. On the way back, beside a rock that makes a natural diving board



## YAWU BREW

Your new coffee with an impact.



  @yawubrew  
yawubrew.com



Guide Phil Clucas

into another pool, Clucas points out a milkwood tree where green ants are patiently sewing leaves together into a nest. Grabbing one between my fingers, I carefully bite its backside, a burst of formic acid providing a sharp citrusy tang. When he stops again, I follow his gaze up to a shaded overhang where hundreds of honeycombed nests are surrounded by clouds of vivid orange native wasps.

By the afternoon some guests are chilling out at the homestead, while others check out places like Zebedee before making their way to one of the clifftop lookouts in the region. "There's not a bad spot to watch the sunset in the Kimberley," says Clucas, "but this property has some of the best." And every stop is accompanied by popping corks (the champagne flows so freely I begin to suspect Louis Roederer is a sponsor).

When we return for dinner, the warm air is perfumed with frangipani and the kitchen staff are busy prepping a five-course feast that might kick off with pan-seared scallops served on the half shell or tender slivers of pearl meat soaked in coconut cream and topped with crisp curry leaves, finger lime caviar and butterfly pea flowers. We sit around a long table on the outdoor terrace and while each successive wine pairing increases the temptation to stay out all night under the star-studded sky, the lure of the coming sunrise proves even stronger and we drift off to our rooms after dessert.

Picking my way over the broken slabs of ripple rock in Emma Gorge the next day, I'm grateful for the early night. The sun waits for no-one in the Kimberley and even at eight in the morning I can feel a fierce heat radiating off the rock. We stop for regular drink breaks but it's a relief to reach a small waterhole that flashes turquoise in the harsh light.

At the end of the canyon, there's a larger pool fed by a gushing waterfall. The sun slowly moves across the water until a sunburst appears over the escarpment and makes the cascade sparkle like a disco ball. "This is transcendental," says Michaela, her words just carrying over the gentle white noise of falling water that echoes in the natural cathedral. Where Zebedee was an earthly paradise, this is like another world. ✨

