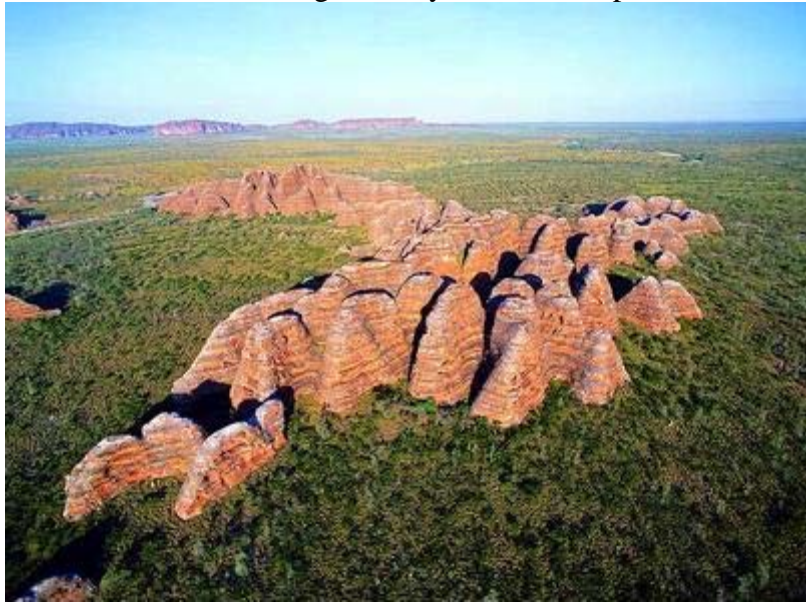


Australia gets ready for a close-up



Phoenix Arrien photos

**Just the facts** Northern Australia is best visited during the cooler winter months, between May and September [Home Valley Station](#) offers sightseeing, recreation, stock and station life, different levels of accommodation and a rustic dining area complete an appealing Outback experience.

**Information** For the Kimberley region contact [Kimberley Tourism](#).

Phoenix Arrien SPECIAL TO THE STAR

**BOWEN, Australia—Some things are just meant to be.** Like feisty 72-year-old Merle Jochheim one day noticing two tourists outside her bakery in the small tropical town of Bowen on the east coast of Australia. Apart from Merle's great-great-grandfather founding this town in the 1850s, her decision to greet these two visitors was probably the most fateful event in this sleepy town's history.

Merle took director Baz Luhrmann, (of *Moulin Rouge* fame) and his wife, Oscar-winning designer Catherine Martin, inside her bakery, Jochheim's Pies, for a history lesson on Bowen. Here the couple were amazed to see local pictures of World War II flying boats, an integral part of their next movie's story. "I told him about our beaches and where to go fishing and I told him to go up to Flagstaff Hill (a local lookout) to see beautiful views of Bowen and the Whitsundays," Merle remembers.

"I didn't have a clue who they were until a couple of days later I read in the paper that Baz Luhrmann had been in town and I'd sold him (on) Bowen." The high-profile couple realized that Bowen's tropical "undeveloped" ambience was perfect to depict pre-war Darwin for their *Australia* movie epic, starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman.

The 1940s-era story of an English aristocrat travelling to Australia and saving a cattle station, with the support of a rough but good-hearted drover, required months of searching for the right locations. Bowen was chosen and a "small town" was built. All that is left of the main film site is a large sign. However, walking along the waterfront, it's easy to transplant the movie scenes on to the permanent buildings: a rustic police station, prominent hotel, customs house and jetty, all strikingly reminiscent of pre-World War II Australia.

The rest of the town saw action when cattle were driven through the streets and no one was happier than Merle watching them thunder past her bakery. With the cast and crew regularly eating at Jochheim's Pies, Merle named three items the "Hunky Hugh Meat Pie," "Baz Baguette" and "Kidman Mango Cheesecake."

Previously known for growing mangoes, the movie's legacy may mean this town's hidden attributes, including eight palm-fringed beaches and excellent diving, sailing, swimming and fishing, are finally discovered. Bowen is near the Whitsundays, a stunningly beautiful group of 74 mostly uninhabited tropical islands in the Great Barrier Reef.

The eight “developed” islands offer everything from luxury resorts to bush camping, while hiring a yacht to explore the calm Coral Sea, spot marine life and sink toes into sugar-white sand, doesn’t call for much sailing experience. The other major locale used in the film is the Kimberley region, in the remote north of Western Australia. The Kimberley is an ancient seabed that echoes with the tread of aboriginal tribes, layered by colourful escarpments, dramatically cut by towering gorges and blanketed by forests. The size of some European countries, light planes are used to visit the neighbours – hundreds of kilometres away.

You can stand along the Gibb River Rd. at one of the renamed spots, “Lurhmann’s Lookout,” and understand why Baz became inspired to film here. Vast green, red and yellow floodplains sweep towards the strangely compelling 1.9-billion-year-old Cockburn Range. Far off to the right are more mountains, to the left winds the mighty Pentecost River, one of several waterways feeding the region.

Eagles soar on the thermals and the unfettered wind whispers of uncivilized lands and rugged wilderness, tapping into a primal sense of freedom. A startlingly suitable environment then, for Nicole Kidman’s character to shake off her old life, for an English aristocrat’s reality would be completely tilted and transformed in this place.

Film scenes were shot at Home Valley Station, a 283,279-hectare indigenous-owned cattle station and wilderness resort and “next door” at El Questro Station. The mythical homestead, Faraway Downs, was filmed at Carlton Hill Station (not open to the public). The second local movie landmark, “Jackman’s Jump up” is part of the “Australia The Movie Tour” at Home Valley Station. But don’t miss the even better view of the Kimberley from their private lookout as part of Home Valley’s four-day “Bindaloo Experience.”

From high on a lonely hill, glorious vistas of mountains, floodplains, woodlands and desert reflect fiery golds and reds as the orange orb of sun sinks on such a far horizon. Long serpent-like rivers turn a glassy pale blue and stars appear, twinkling in their billions. The best way to enjoy all this, of course, is sitting comfortably at a table with bottles of champagne and cheese platters.

Other Bindaloo activities include fishing, swimming in water holes, birdwatching and flying over the striped bee hive-shaped formations of the Bungle Bungles and the 100-kilometre Lake Argyle. Or try cattle mustering on horseback before retiring to the rustic bar for a few campfire yarns while the haunting sounds of a didgeridoo weaves through the darkness.

While Carlton Hill Station (the mythical Faraway Downs) is not open to the public, you can visit El Questro Station for film locations including the romantic scene at Emma Gorge waterfall.

Between the cattle stations is the third movie location, Kidman’s Crossing, where Kidman, Jackman and Jack Thompson crossed the Pentecost River in a World War II truck and vintage Chevrolet. The scene is pure cinema: blue rocky river, dusty mountains, green vegetation showing through dirt the colour of rust and all almost lost under the enormous dome of sky.

Other places resonated to the sound of filmmaking, however Bowen and the Kimberley undoubtedly shaped the *Australia* epic. Travelling there reveals some Australia’s true “characters,” unique experiences and hauntingly beautiful landscapes. *Phoenix Arrien is a Melbourne-based freelance writer. His trip was subsidized by the Indigenous Land Corporation.*