

Flyaway Faraway Kimberley Style



DAY ONE: ESSENDON, MELBOURNE - MULOORINA - ALICE SPRINGS

Depart on a crisp Melbourne morning bound for the outback and beyond... Touch down outback-style at Muloorina Station in South Australia located close by Lake Eyre, all AAA guests are greeted as new friends for a barbeque lunch. Following lunch guests depart for Alice Springs. Time to rest; accommodation is at the Voyages Alice Springs Resort.

DAY TWO: ALICE SPRINGS

After breakfast AAA guests set off on a tour of the Royal Flying Doctor Service base and Standley Chasm before lunch, then after a short scenic drive guests will discover just how alive the Red Centre really is with a visit to the Desert Park. Desert Park is home to an array of Australian reptiles and mammals which thrive in the arid environment of the Red Centre. Amongst many highlights of this visit is the free flying raptor display. Time to rest; accommodation is at Voyages Alice Springs Resort.

DAY THREE: ALICE SPRINGS - TINDAL - POINT STUART

Departing Alice Springs tracking north, we fly you within Arnhem Land over-flying the majestic Twin Falls. Destination is Wildman River for overnight accommodation at Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge. Rod Dyer and his team of AAA Tour Leaders recently decided to access this region for its unbounded beauty and isolation offering all the wildlife and wetlands of the popular Kakadu National Park with far less holiday frenzy. With the right tide, an afternoon of barramundi fishing is arranged for all who wish to participate. It's mostly fun really as the challenge is set and the chef is on stand-by to prepare your own gourmet barramundi delight. Time to rest, in dreamtime; accommodation is at Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge.

DAY FOUR: POINT STUART

Today, as a privileged few, AAA guests will experience some special parts of Point Stuart cruising the Mary River Wetlands abundant with large wader birdlife and man's least-best friend, the saltwater crocodile. Spot slightly friendlier freshwater crocodiles in the spring amidst the ancient banyan trees.

DAY FIVE: POINT STUART - BATHURST ISLAND - DARWIN

Leaving Point Stuart after breakfast we fly guests onto Bathurst Island where you are met by your Tiwi guide. Traditional owners welcome and escort guests throughout this fascinating island before departing for lunch in Darwin. Darwin city: take an afternoon tour of this thriving garden city that is now becoming an important port with the advent of the new rail link. Visit picturesque Cullen Bay, The Esplanade and the State Darwin Museum. Time to rest; accommodation is at the Novotel Atrium.

DAY SIX: DARWIN - FARAWAY BAY

Depart Darwin crossing the Territory's border into Western Australia on a particularly scenic flight. One of the friendly Faraway Bay staff awaits your arrival at the airstrip before an inimitable 4WD transfer. The Bush Camp oasis has direct access to the beach, nearby freshwater pools and trails. After settling in, options available include a rewarding trek up to some of the famed Bradshaw rock art sites. The abundance of wild life in the area is glorious and your Faraway Bay guide will inform you of the area's ecology as well as traditional foods and bush tucker. Prior to dinner, your afternoon allows time to relax into the pool. Time to rest; accommodation is at the Bush Camp at Faraway Bay.

DAY SEVEN: FARAWAY BAY

Following breakfast you are welcomed aboard Faraway Bay's own Diamond Lass for a private cruise along the stunning Kimberley coastline to the King George River. From this vantage point marvel at how the river abruptly ends forming an 80m twin waterfall, shower under the gentle dry season flow and enjoy lunch shaded by the towering escarpment. The cruise home involves dangling a line, often resulting in the freshest fish for dinner! Another afternoon at your private Kimberley retreat, a regular comment from past AAA guests 'I have never been so relaxed in all my life'. Enjoy Faraway Bay, its beauty and its friendly and attentive hospitality for one more night.

DAY EIGHT: FARAWAY BAY - KUNUNURRA - BUNGLE BUNGLES - HOME VALLEY STATION

After breakfast your flight tracks easterly across the massive estuarine waters to the rich agricultural town of Kununurra. On arrival guests are met at the airport and taken on tour of the Ord Valley led by an expert local guide. Following lunch AAA guests continue their air safari of the

Kimberley country with a low-level scenic flight over the Bungle Bungle Range. Touching down at Home Valley Station right next to the stunning Cockburn Range you are welcomed and checked in to your room to refresh before being driven down to the private Home Valley lookout by the Pentecost River. Time to rest by the tranquil Bindoola Creek; accommodation in Home Valley's Grass Castles.

DAY NINE: HOME VALLEY STATION - PENTECOST RIVER - COCKBURN RANGE

Today a million acres of Kimberley wilderness is yours to explore, with the assistance, care and expertise of your local Aboriginal guides. Activities on Home Valley are many and varied; walking trails, swimming at the croc-free Bindoola Falls, canoeing in the homestead billabong, fishing for Barramundi or visiting the Kimberley version of Bondi Beach where Osprey are on patrol. As well as a great place to visit, Home Valley is also an operational cattle station. Sunsets are a real event in this part of the World; with a cool drink in hand bear witness to the dramatic colour changes of the landscape as the sun rapidly sinks below the horizon.

DAY TEN: HOME VALLEY STATION - PRINCE REGENT RIVER - BROOME

Departing Home Valley Station your pilot tracks west above the arduous Gibb River Road and over Rod Dyer's former property Ellenbrae Station. AAA guests are informed of the colourful history behind Rod Dyer's pursuits in the unrelenting Kimberley outback. Yet another breathtaking scenic moment awaits as guests soar over the awesome Prince Regent River, Walcott Inlet, Kings Cascades and Kimberley coastal fjords prior to arriving into Broome. AAA guests will be transported to the stylish Cable Beach Club Resort. Afternoon activities are varied between the pristine Cable Beach right on your doorstep and beautiful private grounds and gallery of Cable Beach Club Resort, displaying their collection of Sidney Nolan works. Accommodation is at Cable Beach Club Resort or similar.

DAY ELEVEN: BROOME

Today guests tour Broome's many points of interest on board private transport. The long Broome jetty is a great spot to land a big fish and Chinatown comprises some very quaint buildings, as attractive today as they were when built. Broome truly offers all guests a very pretty town experience, with lots to do. Diamonds, pearls and crafted pieces can be purchased from places like Linneys. This evening we will take you to join in an AAA tradition. Watch the sun sink into the sea whilst sipping on champagne and, if the moon is full, watch the staircase gently appear before you, simply perfect.

DAY TWELVE: BROOME - YULARA (AYERS ROCK)

After breakfast AAA guests depart skyward from Broome's colourful waters tracking south east to Australia's Red Centre. From Broome the first sector is a short flight to the Kimberley town of Halls Creek, enjoy a lunch onboard as you view Wolfe Creek meteor crater, arriving at Yulara in time to view sunset over the Rock. Dinner and wine served in style, relax within the resort's marvellous facilities before retiring. Time to rest, accommodation is at Voyages Desert Gardens.

DAY THIRTEEN: YULARA - ULURU - KATA TJUTA - COOBER PEDY

After a gentle start to the day guests make a circumnavigation of Ayers Rock by private vehicle. This tour includes the mysterious Olgas range. Return for lunch and an opportunity to visit the well-appointed interpretive centre 'Ininti'. Depart the Red Centre for big opal country, soaring over the Musgrave Ranges to Coober Pedy. AAA pilots approach Coober Pedy at an altitude creating the sensation of flying over the face of the moon. This effect is in fact due to the countless mine shafts below. AAA guests dine together celebrating their adventure and farewell new friends at a reserved dinner at the underground Desert Cave Motel.

DAY FOURTEEN: COOBER PEDY - ESSENDON, MELBOURNE

Today's time in this incredible mining town allows AAA guests to take a guided tour of the opal fields - learn how to use a diving rod, visit an underground house and an underground church, inspect a working mine and see how opals are cut and polished. Opportunities to spoil someone are pleasingly at 'mineshaff' prices. The homeward flight tracks over the spectacular Flinders Ranges before refuelling in Mildura then continuing on to Melbourne.



THE AGE Traveller

May 10, 2008

'A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it.' George Moore

Outback epic

Fly back in time across Central Australia. Page 12



Wings over a timeless land

Bruce Elder buckles up for an air adventure over the outback.

We fly out from Alice Springs in a low-flying plane heading north, rarely higher than 1200 metres, like some watchful predatory bird. Soon we are gasping at the vast and ancient beauty of the MacDonnell Ranges.

I am on a 14-day tour of Central Australia, an area that all Australians are familiar with but few really know. These seemingly endless lands have an astonishing beauty and diversity. You see tropical rivers, where exotic birds strut on shorelines watched by beady-eyed crocs. After summer rains, the rivers spread across the floodplains, turning them into lush grasslands and covering the fences, so that only hints of human organisation can be seen under vast, low-lying lakes. You rarely see a road or any sign of human existence, let alone human habitation.

Flying low over the expanses of Central Australia, northern Australia and the Kimberley, it is impossible not to feel the isolation, the peacefulness and the vastness.

These are lands worn smooth by millions of years of erosion and the low ridges of mountains look like the dried bones of the Earth. The landscape is so flat that, from our aircraft, the deserts, dunes, the clay and salt pans seem to stretch to infinity, like some huge blood-red table upon which an Aboriginal artist had painted waterholes, meandering tracks and the occasional grey-blue patches of scrub.

At this time of year, as the wet ends and the winter sharpness cuts through the warm blanket of summer humidity, the southern hordes are heading north. The air-conditioned coaches are chugging up the sealed Highway 1 and the elaborate 4WD buses are bumping out to the Bungle Bungles and across the Gibb River Road.

The trip I am on is very different. It is an experience of the outback organised by people who live and work in the outback.

Back in 1977, long before travelling through the area was fashionable, Rod Dyer, a farmer from Hamilton in western Victoria, started

taking friends to Ellenbrae, his property in the Kimberley.

In 1965 Dyer leased the 400,000-hectare Ellenbrae, or Station F as it was then known, from the Western Australian Department of Agriculture for the implausible sum of \$1500 a year. There were, of course, catches. The lease insisted that the lessee improve the property and spend at least \$1500 a year on improvements. When Dyer signed the agreement there were no roads. There was no accommodation. The country, apart from indigenous use, had never been occupied or developed.

After bashing out an airstrip, Dyer started to stock and develop the property. Always a keen flyer, he took interested friends and showed them the countryside. The result was the establishment of Air Adventure Australia, which now runs authentic outback (as in off-the-beaten-track) tours from Melbourne to the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Before the season started, John Dyer (son of Rod) took his new tour guide, Chris Roycroft

Flying at low altitude, it is impossible not to feel the isolation, the peacefulness and the vastness.

(nephew of Bill Roycroft, the Olympic equestrian gold medalist), to all the destinations to introduce Chris to the locals and familiarise him with the terrain, attractions, fauna and flora. I tagged along.

Whereas the 14-day Flyaway Faraway Kimberley Style Australian adventure tour is restricted to nine people who all travel in a small aeroplane with large viewing windows, there were only five of us and we were travelling with Ross Smith (no relation to the famous aviator), an old friend of Rod Dyer, in his very noisy 1937 Lockheed 12a Electra Junior.

Called the "Silver City", this plane was once the equivalent of an executive jet for BHP. Its for-

mer passengers have included the great BHP boss Essington Lewis, as well as Sir Robert Menzies, governors-general, cabinet ministers, state governors and defence chiefs.

Point Stuart

We fly from the Alice north to the wonderfully named Opium Creek Station on the Mary River. Opium Creek is owned by the Sultan of Brunei, once the richest man in the world.

We chug across the Central Australian desert until we reach Tennant Creek, where we refuel. A three-year-old local Aboriginal kid comes out to admire the plane as we soak up the tropical warmth. Then it's on to Katherine for another fuel stop before landing at Opium Creek.

Our destination is the Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge which, as John Dyer quite correctly points out, has all the attractions of Kakadu without the mobs of tourists. It is, I later come to realise, a symbol of the uniqueness of Flyaway Faraway. This is an opportunity to board a small fishing

boat, to catch barramundi (we catch four, throw three back and feed one to a lazy crocodile); to marvel at the impossibly rich bird life that includes everything from jabiru to sea eagles and broilags; to gasp in wonder at the waterlilies growing in such profusion that they turn the wetlands into white fields; and to idly mooch along the muddy shorelines watching the crocs sun themselves.

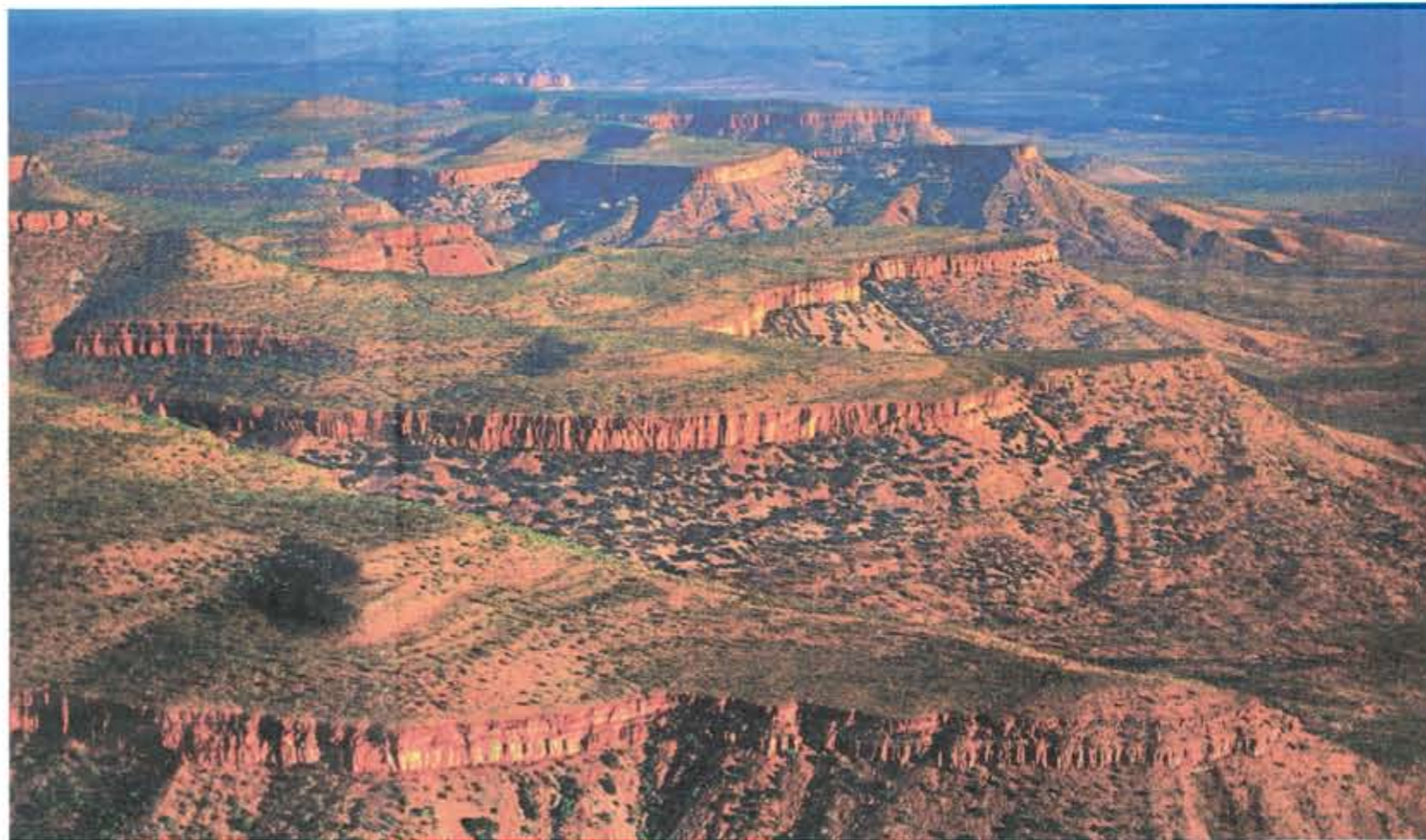
Faraway Bay

In recent years El Questro, on the Kimberley Coast, has become part of the Voyages group, so it is now part of a daisy chain of upmarket tropical resorts that includes Lizard Island, Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree and the infamous "unlimited free booze" Bedarra Island in Great Barrier Reef.

It is no accident that, as El Questro has become more tourist-orientated, Flyaway Faraway has moved to the more outback, more isolated Faraway Bay. This is one of those resorts that can be reached only by aeroplane. The drive from the airstrip to the camp is rugged and uncompromising. But the view - across the churchily named Gumboot Bay - is about as close to paradise as any place can be. There's a swimming pool on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the bay. There's even a set of golf clubs and unlimited golf balls and you can hit off towards a pin sitting far below on the edge of the bay.

The highlight of any visit here is a trip to King George Falls, two dramatic falls that drop hundreds of metres into a fjord-like narrow bay.

We come across a group of Perth doctors who visit every year to fish for barramundi. They eat



Air apparent ... (clockwise from above) the dramatic Cockburn Range; Jo Kooeyers at Drysdale River Station; a jabiru at the Mary River; the King River.
Photos: Willight, Bruce Elder



overseas to backpack around Europe and spend six months in Portugal.

When we arrive, Jo, accompanied by only a few dogs, is looking after the station by herself. She organises our avgas, rolls the drums across to the plane and gets the hand pump working, then returns to the station where she makes us sandwiches. Ever so gently, she complains about the parade of grey nomads who, in the next few weeks, will break her silence, and proudly shows off the station's "fridge phone" - a public telephone in a fridge.

Then we head off towards the coast north of Broome, where great rivers cut across the broad mudflats, where we travel over the remarkable tidal phenomenon known as the Horizontal Falls, where the mudflats stretch forever down the coast and where, finally, we make our way down the long and beautiful arc that is Cable Beach.

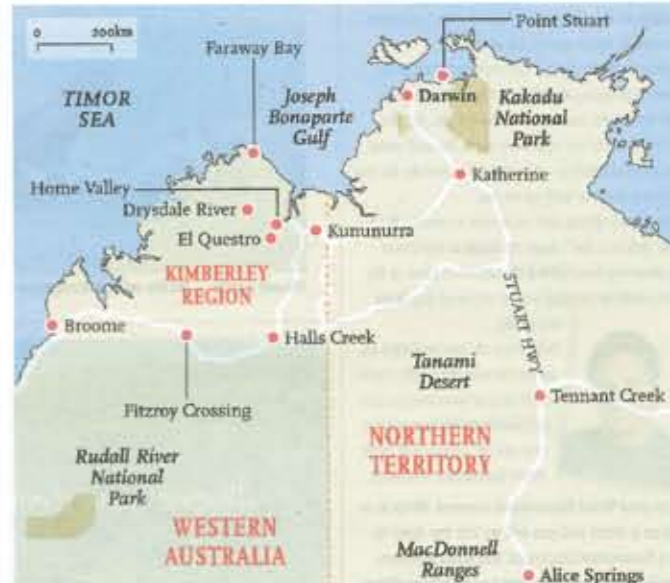
Alice Springs

It seems appropriate that the 14-day journey ends with the most dramatic of all the flights. This is the journey from Broome across the desert to Halls Creek, where we refuel, and then on across the harsh and dramatically barren Tanami Desert, following the Tanami Track.

As we approach Alice Springs my mind goes back (as it always does when I see the MacDonnell Ranges) to the sign at Ellery Creek Big Hole. Above the waterhole is a remnant of the range, a cliff face that has been twisted into improbable shapes. A noticeboard near the car park explains: "All around you there is evidence of a great mountain building episode in the formation of Central Australia. You can see tortured folds of rock which formed deep in the earth and when great heat and pressure pushed up 10,000-metre mountains but 350 million years of erosion have almost worn them away, exposing the deeper folded rocks."

To see those bones of the earth from the air is to marvel at the antiquity of the land we live on. It is an experience that left me with a deeper, more passionate appreciation of this remarkable continent.

Bruce Elder travelled courtesy of Air Adventure Australia.



FAST FACTS

Getting there

The 14-day Flyaway Faraway Kimberley Style air safari operates from June to early September. It departs from Essendon airport. Interstate transfer packages are available for \$450 (air fares, accommodation, airport transfers). Cost is a fully inclusive \$12,495 a person, twin share. For more information and a free brochure, phone Air Adventure Australia on 1800 033 160 (toll free, seven days).

AAA has been in business since 1977. It has an unblemished safety record.

Staying there

The Top End has little genuine five-star accommodation. The best we experienced was Home Valley Station, a superb,

very modern resort with five-star accommodation beside the river. It has recently undergone a state-of-the-art refurbishment.

See www.homevalley.com.au. **Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge** has good accommodation that would be about 3½ stars and the Wetlands Bistro, really a charming outback pub that has excellent, impossibly fresh barramundi, as well as anything you might have caught during the day.

See www.pointstuart.com.au. **Faraway Bay** has accommodation that's the outback equivalent of the five-star tent experience common on African safaris. The showers are under the stars. The front windows of the individual cabins have no curtains, meaning waking at dawn is mandatory. Most significantly, the food and the wines (all included in the cost) are sensational. See www.farawaybay.com.au.



Taking flight ... the 1937 "Silver City" used by Air Adventure Australia. Photo: Bruce Elder