

Baz Luhrmann's film, *Australia*, was shot in some of the Top End's most spectacular landscapes. **Mike Dolan** journeys north to experience them first-hand.

AS A LUMINOUS KIMBERLEY sunset is turning the pink sandstone ridges of the Cockburn Range crimson, film-maker Baz Luhrmann is beaming. He has just sealed the deal to use the million-acre cattle station, El Questro, as a pivotal location for his film, *Australia*.

It's May 2006 and the director is chatting to station owner William Burrell, next to a roaring log fire at The Swinging Arm Bar in a remote corner of Western Australia.

Outside, the Pentecost River that roars along its course during the summer Wet has been humbled by the winter Dry. Silently, it trickles past the rustic bar into another chilly Kimberley dusk as the blazing stars of the Milky Way begin to light up the sky.

Suddenly, Baz jumps up and makes a call. "Russ [Russell Crowe]!" he shouts down the phone. "I've found it [the location]. The film's on."

Three years and \$130million later, *Australia*, a sweeping adventure set in some of our most iconic landscapes, is in the can. Nicole Kidman plays the intrepid English aristocrat, Lady Sarah Ashley, who arrives on our shores after inheriting a cattle station, while Hugh Jackman plays The Drover, the part originally given to Russell Crowe. At the heart of the film, there's romance and a perilous cattle drive.

Nicole's role is where film fiction and real life overlap. In 1991, William Westray Burrell, whose family can trace its ancestors back to William the Conqueror, arrived in Australia and bought El Questro cattle station for a dollar an acre. As the ink was drying on the contract, the new Kimberley cattle baron set out to fulfil his dream of



Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman in a scene from the film *Australia*. Right: The Homestead at El Questro, WA.

creating a holiday destination on the frontier, where Australians "on all budgets" could enjoy the outback.

Since those early pioneering days 17 years ago, William and his Australian-born wife, Celia Shelmerdine, have proved what many said was impossible – establish a resort in a region known not only for its haunting beauty but its harsh conditions. A resort that has now hosted hundreds of thousands of Australians during the Dry, while being buffeted by cyclones, floods and landslides during the Wet.

It's Father's Day, September 2007, and Hugh Jackman has a day off filming. He arrives at El Questro's Emma Gorge Resort with wife Deborra-lee Furness, son Oscar and daughter Ava. As they sit at a table in the open restaurant, next to a lawn >>>



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE DOLAN. FILM STILL COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX.

AUSTRALIA MADE



Left: A hot soak at Zebedee Springs, El Questro. Top: The Dusty Bar and Grill at Home Valley Station, WA, a new resort on a Kimberley cattle station. Above: A cattle muster in the NT, Australia's most popular destination for outback holidays.

with boab trees, Hugh spots a group of physically disabled children playing. In an instant, he joins them, organising games of tag and soccer that last an hour.

“You could see Hugh was enjoying himself,” says resort manager Ross Boobyer. “The kids didn’t have a clue who he was, but they adored him.”

As a waitress lays the tables for lunch, a bower bird swoops in and steals a spoon. “These birds love anything that glitters,” says the waitress. “Since the season started, they’ve stolen a third of our cutlery. That made Hugh laugh. ‘Somewhere in the bush,’ he told me, ‘those birds must have some magnificent bowers.’ ”

After lunch, Hugh and family take a walk up the gorge to the 30-metre waterfall, where they swim in a pool of crystal clear water enclosed by sandstone cliffs. According to the rangers at El Questro, this pool and nearby Zebedee Springs are the only two places Nicole and the six other women who became pregnant during the Kimberley shoot could have visited.

On their days off, cast and crew flock to El Questro Wilderness Park. Located just off the Gibb River Road, it has eight crocodile-free gorges and waterfalls, two

springs, five major rivers teeming with barramundi and saltwater crocodiles, and walking trails of such rugged beauty they take the breath away.

At Zebedee Springs water bubbles out of the rock at 32°C into palm-shaded pools. Also popular are boat trips along the majestic Chamberlain Gorge and helicopter flights over the Cockburn Range.

Nearby is the frontier town of Kununurra, as famous for its pink diamonds as Broome is for its pearls. Take the two-hour scenic flight over the Bungle Bungles and the Argyle diamond mine, and you’ll see the creek, where, in the early ’70s, a geologist found a large alluvial diamond embedded in the side of a termite mound. When she followed the creek back to its source, she discovered a massive pipe of diamond-bearing ore that has produced 20 million carats a year and 95 per cent of the world’s rare pink diamonds.

It’s 11am on a hot October day and staff at Kimberley Fine Diamonds in Kununurra are sipping coffee when Nicole Kidman and husband Keith Urban stroll in, hand in hand.

“Nicole just walked up to the counter and said, ‘Hello’. She was so natural and

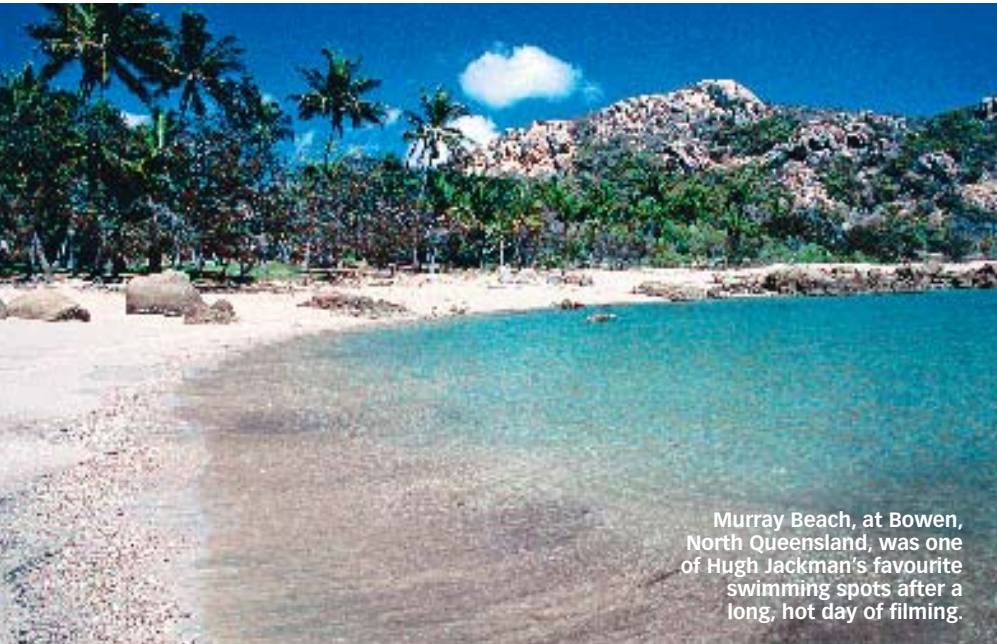
charming,” says Maria Bolten-Magnay, the daughter of the owner. “She said she was hoping to buy some gifts, not for herself, but for others.”

According to film colleagues, Nicole bought several gifts for her personal assistants on the film, her mother, Janelle, and sister Antonia. A fine 0.54 carat pink diamond the size of a small pea will set you back around \$500,000 – \$55,000 more than the median price of a house in Sydney. A white diamond of equivalent size and quality will cost around \$16,000. However, there is jewellery for all budgets at Kimberley Fine Diamonds and anyone after a free gem should take a Slingair Argyle Mine Tour, where you’re given a champagne diamond of 0.005 carat. As tiny as this gift is, it does sparkle.

In making *Australia*, Baz Luhrmann had to solve a problem. “Cattle stations today raise Brahmin livestock and not the traditional English shorthorns common during the 1940s when the film is set,” says Chilli (aka David Charles Chilcott IV), a rodeo rider and El Questro ranger.

Shorthorns came to the Kimberley when Patrick “Patsy” Durack made the 2000km-plus drive from Western Queensland, >>>

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE DOLAN. CATTLE MUSTER: STEPH MIECHEL/TOURISM NT.



Murray Beach, at Bowen, North Queensland, was one of Hugh Jackman's favourite swimming spots after a long, hot day of filming.

across the Northern Territory to Western Australia in the mid-1880s.

“A stickler for detail, Baz had to have the right cattle,” says Chilli. “Luckily, there were 1000 feral shorthorns on El Questro, so we rounded them up.”

To create the drought and stampede scenes, Baz moved to El Questro’s bone-dry salt pan close to the Pentecost River, where the Cockburn Range provides a spectacular backdrop. “Giant fans and generators kept the crew from fainting in the 44°C heat,” says Chilli. “During the cooler months, we run a tour there, where rangers set up tables and serve a white linen lunch.”

A 45-minute drive west along the Gibb River Road from El Questro is the croc-infested Pentecost River. It’s mid-morning and Nicole, as Lady Sarah, is attempting to ford the river in a vintage Chevrolet on her way to Faraway Downs, her home in the film, a homestead built from scratch on nearby Carlton Hill, a station owned by billionaire James Packer. It takes all morning to complete one scene and Nicole has lost count of the times she has climbed in and out of the jalopy.

Just up the road is Home Valley Station, one of the few places in Australia, along with Bullo River Station in the Northern Territory, where visitors can experience a cattle muster on horseback. Like El Questro, it’s a cattle station and resort with accommodation for all budgets.

Besides its muster, which includes rounding up livestock and driving them through country covered in two metre high yellow spear grass, it organises barramundi fishing tours, hikes to billabongs the size of Olympic pools and bird-watching tours.

In May, the film moves to Bowen, an undiscovered gem of a seaside town in North Queensland. It’s June 20, 2007, and

Nicole is being lured to the town’s historic cinema, unaware that the private screening is a ruse to get her out of the way. Today, Nicole is turning 40 and husband Keith is holding a surprise birthday bash at the 360 On The Hill restaurant on Flagstaff Hill. After the screening, Nicole is whisked away to 360, with its incredible views, where she finds Keith, family and friends.

Bowen has charisma. With its seven award-winning beaches and offshore islands, it’s marked to become another iconic resort of the ilk of Port Douglas, Broome and Byron Bay. As soon as Baz Luhrmann slips into town, he knows it’s the perfect location to recreate Darwin as it was in the 1940s. The bay has an old jetty and the roads are wide enough for a mob of 700 cattle.

It takes less than a week for the film crew to build a six-hectare set of Darwin’s Chinatown, circa 1942, complete with a pub called The Territorian, a police station, a Chinese laundry and much more, on a plot of land next to the town jetty.

This replica Darwin is the destination of the film’s momentous cattle drive and Baz has brought his precious shorthorns in a fleet of road trains 2500km from El Questro. Nicole arrives in her private jet.

A month before the film crew arrives, Paddy and Jayne O’Regan, owners of Bowen’s local bakery, Jochheim’s Pies, are producing Baz Baguettes and Chunky Jackman Beef Pies.

“Then,” says Paddy, “I get this call from a man who says he is Nicole Kidman’s personal assistant. ‘You can’t offend Nicole by not baking something in her honour,’ he says. ‘She arrives next week, so get cracking – and no funny business, like a Nicole Carrot-top Cake. She’s sensitive about her hair colour.’

“As you can imagine, I was taken aback, but then he bursts out laughing and says he’s Hamish Blake [from hit drive-time radio show *Hamish & Andy*] and our conversation is being broadcast live!”

In the end, Paddy baked a shortcake biscuit with a drop of jam called a Petite Nicole. “The problem was there were three Nicoles in town – Nicole Kidman and two stunt doubles, but I made sure only the real Nicole got the biscuit.”

It’s the morning after Baz filmed Lady Sarah’s cattle drive arriving in town and two local boys on bicycles are rounding up several stray shorthorns on Herbert Street.

The film set is in ruins, destroyed by the crew, as today they are filming the bombing of Darwin, circa February 19, 1942. About 500 locals are working as extras, many playing soldiers, as the sirens, explosions and gunfire fill the streets.

Later that day, Hugh Jackman escapes to Horseshoe Bay, one of his favourite swimming spots, after dropping Oscar and Ava at Jochheim’s Pies, where they are learning to bake Petite Nicoles. Baz spends his evenings at the Art Deco Summergarden Theatre looking over the rushes, where he often stays all night.

One evening, shortly before the filming finishes, Keith Urban plays a concert at the Grandview Hotel for Nicole, cast and crew, and some of the local extras.

“The film crew was here for eight weeks and all of them loved Bowen, its beaches and laid-back lifestyle,” says Paddy O’Regan. “Once, it was our secret. Now, the film has put us on the map and the town is known as Bowenwood.”

And sure enough, on a concrete water tank on one of the town’s highest hills the council has painted “Bowenwood” in huge white letters for all the world to see. ■

To relive the film Australia on an outback holiday in the Northern Territory and for places to stay at all three destinations, visit www.awww.ninemsn.com.au/travel.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

FLY: Qantas (13 13 13; qantas.com) has flights to Broome and Kununurra, WA; Darwin and North Queensland.
CONTACT: Kimberley, WA – El Questro (www.elquestro.com.au); Home Valley Station (www.homevalley.com.au); Kimberley Fine Diamonds (www.kimberleydiamonds.com.au).
NT – Northern Territory Tourism (www.tourismnt.com.au); Bullo River Station (www.bulloriver.com).
Bowen, Queensland (www.tourismbowen.com.au)

LINDSAY BROWN/LONELY PLANET IMAGES