

Australia: Me, Nic and the perfect pic

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North Australia's weather is not for the faint-hearted - temperatures top 40 degrees in October. Photo / Australian Tourism

I'm trailing, er, a movie star's bottom at a distance of just 1m, but I'm not bothering to photograph him. For a start Ned, who is wearing a rather unflattering pooper-catcher, is a camel; and besides, there are more photogenic sights to point my lens at. The sunset, for one, which in Western Australia can be so eye-poppingly vivid that it deserves a fanfare of trumpets, and a string of camels providing an exotic foreground to Cable Beach near Broome.

I feel a little like a movie star myself as I sway along the beach high up on Connor's hump, while people from the wobbly line of 4WDs parked along the sand crouch and zoom and click away in quest of the iconic ships-of-the-desert silhouette shot. It's almost enough to distract me from the blaze of red and gold over my right shoulder as the sun slips away after another 41-degree day. October in the Top End has even the locals complaining and looking forward to the wet season.

But all through the Kimberley this year, they are fizzing with impatience for something else. On November 26 (but not until Boxing Day here in NZ), Baz Luhrmann's much-anticipated epic romance *Australia* is released - and although it doesn't get top billing, the Kimberley's stunning scenery plays as big a role in the movie as its high-wattage stars, Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman.

Telling the story of Lady Sarah, an English aristocrat who comes reluctantly to Australia and finds herself inheriting a remote cattle station, the movie includes some spectacular - and expensive - set-pieces, such as a cattle drive through the Outback and the 1942 bombing of Darwin. Much of the action was shot on location throughout the Kimberley with the assistance of many locals, Ned the camel amongst them, and they have great expectations that a post-release flood of visitors will come, wanting to experience the place for real.

Broome, the gateway to the Kimberley (and home to Brandon Walters, the 11-year-old Aboriginal boy who stars in the movie), is a technicolour town with an equally colourful

history and plentiful attractions. It has crocodiles, dinosaur footprints, a deckchair cinema, famous moon-rises and blood-red king tides that sweep into town several times a year. Deep red pindan dust stains the white-painted corrugated iron walls of the buildings along the wide streets and cakes the macho trucks parked beneath the palms.

It's a surprising setting for 15 jewellery shops, their window displays artfully draped with strings of lustrous pearls from the turquoise sea beyond the mangroves. There's a similar incongruity a 90-minute flight away in little Kununurra: facing each other across the quiet main street, where Aborigines sit in circles under the trees playing cards and a half-metre lizard bakes on a wall in the sun, are two boutiques selling fine pink diamonds from the local Argyle Mine.

The five-figure prices are an odd fit with the baked-bean specials at the supermarket next door, but last year Nicole and Keith Urban were in there fingering the goods, Hugh was queuing at the café in town and Baz was planting a boab tree in the park. Those glory days are gone, but the scenery that brought the movie-makers to town is as magnificent as ever.

An hour away along the Gibb River Road, an old stock route that is much less challenging than expected, is Home Valley Station. On this working cattle station, with a training scheme for indigenous people and a full range of accommodation, the renamed Luhrmann's Lookout faces across the Pentecost River to the Cockburn Range, a glorious orange battlemented mesa that forms the backdrop to the film's fictional Faraway Downs homestead. As it flushes red in the sunset and a silver full moon rises behind it, I sip champagne and watch the flames of a distant bushfire flicker.

"They're always setting fire to themselves over at El Questro," someone laughs, and on my way there next morning I pass long stretches of sooty black trees and stumpy termite mounds. El Questro is an even vaster cattle station of a million acres, with a variety of places to stay. Top of the range is the Homestead: Nicole tried to book but, despite costing around \$2000 a night, there were no vacancies.

Opinion is divided as to which waterhole contains the fertility waters she credits for her pregnancy and those of six other women working on the movie. It could be Zebedee Springs, where warm water splashes down a series of small waterfalls under shady green palms, or maybe the sparkling shower at Emma Gorge that falls 100m into a deep and refreshing pool.

But not peaceful Chamberlain Gorge, where the Pandanus-fringed river reflects the billion-year-old orange rock, saltwater crocodiles lurk in the green water and cheeky archer fish spit into my glass of bubbly as a wallaby bounds up the cliff and cockatiels swoop through the trees. There are not just salties, but sharks and stingers too in Darwin Harbour, where one morning in February 1942, eight ships were sunk by the Japanese and much of the town was reduced to rubble in the first of 64 air raids.

The climax to the movie, these raids are a little-known part of Australian history that is well-documented at the East Point Military Museum, housed in an old bunker. Although Bowen, over in Queensland, was used as Darwin's stand-in, Lady Sarah's arrival on an old pearling lugger was filmed here at Stokes Hill Wharf, where eateries abound and Schnitzel Magic serves a mean emu burger.

Across town at trendy Cullen Bay Marina, I board the self-same lugger, Anniki, for an evening harbour cruise, another kaleidoscopic sunset, another glass of sparkling wine. Life can be so hard up here in the Top End.

Pamela Wade visited Australia as a guest of Tourism Western Australia and Tourism Northern Territory, and flew courtesy of Air NZ.

GETTING THERE:

Air New Zealand flies from Auckland to Perth. See airnewzealand.co.nz. Air North (airnorth.com.au) and Skywest (skywest.com.au) fly Perth to Broome and from there to Kununurra and Darwin.

WHERE TO STAY:

McAlpine House in Broome (mc Alpinehouse.com), Kimberley Grande in Kununurra (thekimberleygrande.com.au), Home Valley Station (homevalley.com.au) and El Questro Wilderness Park (elquestro.com.au)

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Visit westernaustralia.com/nz/ or tourismnt.com.au.