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Landscapes and localities in the new epic movie Australia might inspire a wave of adventure travel in the top of the continent. PAMELA WADE gets on the trail.

Big COUNTRY, Big SCREEN



Everybody knows that Hollywood plays fast and loose with historical accuracy, so it's understandable if the bombing of Darwin raises some cynical eyebrows in the audience at Baz Luhrmann's blockbuster Australia when it opens in New Zealand on Boxing Day. Understandable, but wrong on two counts: this is not a Hollywood movie, and the Japanese really did drop more than twice as many bombs in their February 1942 attack on Darwin as the Japanese did at Pearl Harbour two months earlier.

Fifty years of censorship and a general lack of interest in what lies outside the main cities mean that this climactic scene in the movie will take even many Australians by surprise; but within a minute of stepping outside my hotel on Darwin's Esplanade, I am surrounded by evidence of war-time drama. The path along the cliff top is lined with memorials recording the deaths and injuries sustained during 64 air-raids over two years, and pointing towards the spot where the destroyer USS Peary sank with her guns still blazing is the four-inch gun that was salvaged from the wreck. Eight ships disappeared beneath the turquoise waters of Darwin Harbour that morning, much of the town was reduced to rubble, and 242 people died.

In a tropical frontier town thousands of kilometres from anywhere, death is less of a stranger than in more domesticated cities: to the south lies the beautiful but unforgiving Outback — and to the north, filled with sharks, stingers and salt-water crocodiles, is a warm and luminous sea that incubates vicious cyclones.

No wonder then that Darwin's citizens, average age 29, are keen on seizing the day and have an impressive choice of bars and restaurants, markets and festivals to entertain them. Cullen Marina, tucked behind massive lock gates keeping out eight-metre tides, is full of buzzing over-water restaurants, fancy yachts and even fancier homes; while on the other side of town Stokes Hill Wharf is not only an excellent place to buy a parcel of barramundi and chips or an emu burger while watching the sun sink in a blaze of gold and scarlet, but also a location in the movie, where Nicole Kidman's character (Lady Sarah Ashley) arrives from England in a Catalina flying boat.

More than 800km away over the border in Western Australia lies Kununurra, a town of 5000 souls in an area the size of mainland Britain. Here two expensive diamond boutiques face each other across the quiet main street. The lady selling purses made from kangaroo scrotums



Moonlight picnic: Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) under the boab tree outside her homestead, Faraway Downs.

Above: Kidman in her role on cattle drive. Photos: 20th Century Fox

tells me brightly: "That movie's going to put this town on the map!"

Outside in the heat, Aborigines sit under trees playing cards, and a huge lizard bakes on a wall in the sun, but only last year Keith Urban was looking at pink diamonds from the Argyle Mine, Hugh Jackman was jogging to Kellys Knob and Baz Luhrmann rented a big house all to himself with his family living on the far side of Kidman's place.

Those glory days are over now, but the spectacular scenery that brought the movie-makers to the Kimberley is

as stunning as ever. Along the unsealed Gibb River Rd, which I am disappointed to discover is much more civilised than the rugged Outback route I was expecting, the 400,000ha El Questro Wilderness Park offers a range of accommodation from the luxurious \$2000-plus a night Homestead to more modest cabins at the Station Township, where Brahman cattle graze around the shiny red helicopter.

An owl watches with big round eyes as I tuck into my herb-crusted lamb rack in the open-sided

steakhouse. Across the road is the Cockburn Range, a deep orange mesa rising out of the surrounding eucalypts and upside-down boab trees that form the backdrop to action on the cattle station that Kidman's character inherits.

At nearby Home Valley Station, another working cattle station with up-market accommodation, I go riding with Jonny, a Torres Straits Islander, who is one of the current quota of indigenous people training there in tourism. As our horses pick their way through the rocks and sand, we spot kangaroos and a shy rock wallaby and finish up at Luhrmanns Lookout, where the previous night we had sat with wine and cheese watching the sunset.

It's so quiet, so big, so ancient: there is something about the Outback that is pure magic for the soul, and being on horseback rather than in a car makes the connection tingle.

The Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive in South Australia was what everyone in our party enjoyed most, although it was a tough call choosing between unexpectedly varied and beautiful scenery, mixing with real cowboys while pretending to be one myself, and coming back each night to delicious food, civilised amenities and a comfortable bed in a



always just around the corner in the Outback and instils respect for both the harsh land and the hard people who live and work there.

There is so much more to Australia than Sydney, shopping and surf beaches: beyond the crowded south-east crescent lies a land of stunning scenery, fascinating history and unforgettable experiences. See the movie, then see it for yourself.

❑ The Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive takes place again in 2010: www.cattledrive.com.au
❑ Information about the places mentioned can be found on the state tourism websites: www.tourismnt.com.au, www.westernaustralia.com/nz/and and www.southaustralia.com.nz. See also www.australia.com
❑ Air New Zealand offers daily non-stop flights every week from Auckland to Perth, with connections available from all around New Zealand. See airnewzealand.co.nz
❑ Pamela Wade travelled to Australia as a guest of three state tourism commissions.

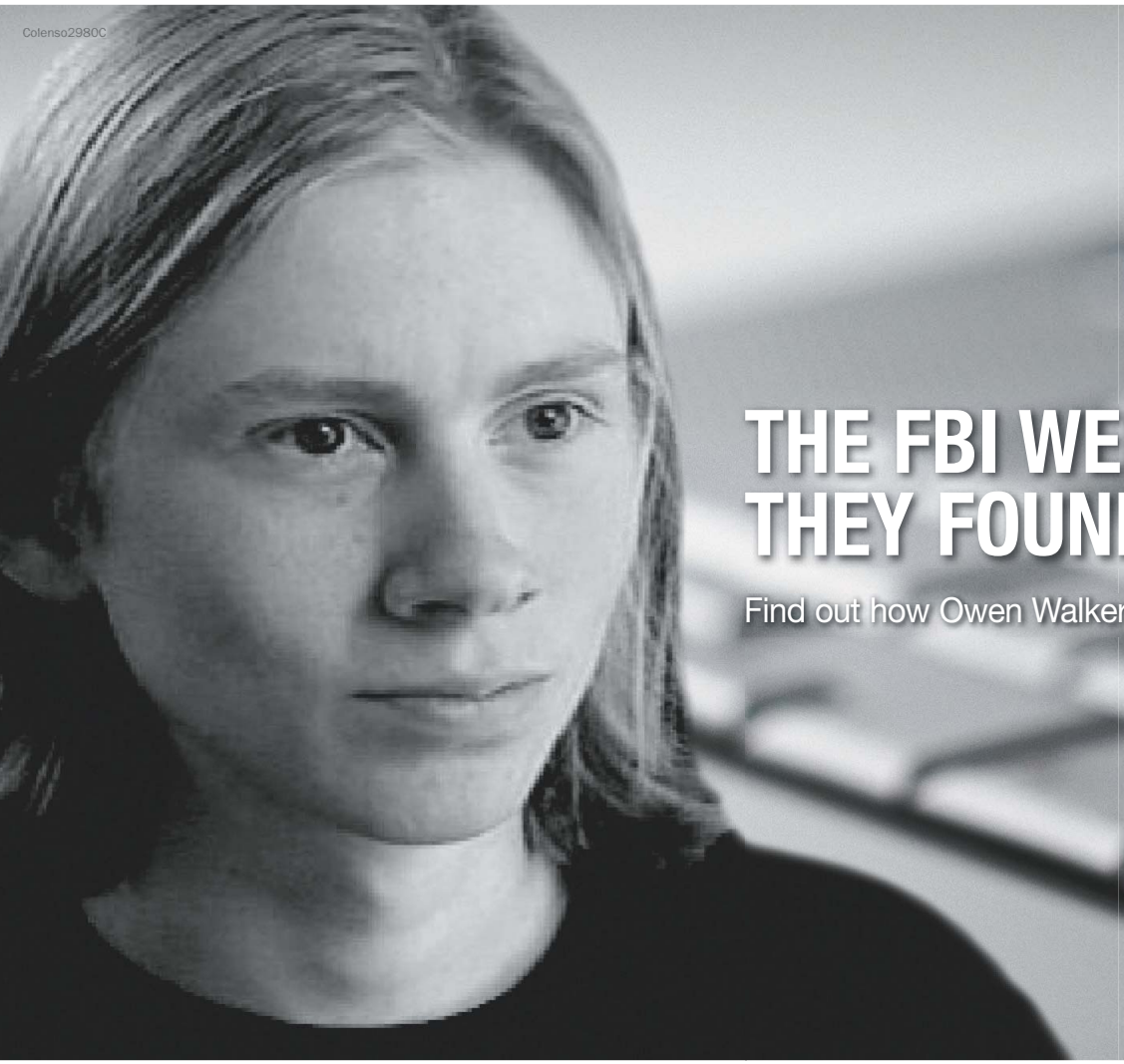
■ The movie Australia opens in New Zealand cinemas on Boxing Day, December 26.

LOCATIONS TOUR SPECIAL

Follow the footsteps of Nicole Kidman in the Kimberley region and the Top End of Australia with a House of Travel package return from Christchurch. Enjoy a tour of the Chamberlain Gorge, then relax in the Zebedee Thermal Springs, or — like Nicole — take a dip in the fertility waters of Emma Gorge.

House of Travel has packages from Christchurch via Perth to Kununurra, returning via Darwin. Included is one night at Travelodge Perth, two nights at Kununurra Country Club, three nights at Emma Gorge Resort (Voyages El Questro Wilderness Park), a Chamberlain Gorge Breakfast Cruise and two nights at Travelodge Mirambeena Resort Darwin, from \$3299 a person, twin share.

Sales until December 20, 2008, for travel May 1-July 1, July 7-29, August 5-31 and October 2009. Phone 0800 838-747 or visit houseoftravel.co.nz/australia-movie



60 MINUTES

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TONIGHT 7:30

