



Chilli tales of the Outback

Don't believe everything you see, or hear, at El Questro, writes **Sally Macmillan**

S Outback yarns go, it's epic. "There Nicole (Kidman) is, just lolling away like, well, like a beautiful water nymph: all pale and fragile-like. Out of the corner of my eye I see this big bugger of a croc getting ready to slither in for the kill. So what's a man to do? Go the hero bit, of course, wrestle him down..."

We gaze into the rock pool with trepidation and the laconic storyteller laughs. "Nah, mate,

Couluka happened somewhere, but it didn't. Hey, but I did meet her riding double on set. And git on in — there's no crocs here!"

Here is the famed El Questro Wilderness Park, one of the location sites for Baz Luhrmann's forthcoming frontier western movie *Australia*.

There are crocs, freshwater and salties, in the rivers and pools of these vast realms — just not right here at the Emma Gorge waterfall and rock pool, where Kidman's character in

Australia has a romantic encounter.

The tall-tale teller is David Charles Chilcott — that's Chilli to you and me — El Questro ranger, guide and jack of all trades. He is but one of the bigger-than-life characters you happen upon in the Kimberley.

Like so many others in this awesome, mystical landscape, Chilli is a been-everywhere-man of the Outback, with a ripper of

a yarn for all occasions, be they tall or true or somewhere in between.

El Questro — location also for several of the cattle-driving sequences and aerial panoramas in the movie — offers accommodation choices that include the exclusive Homestead, the luxury tents of Emma Gorge Resort and the hub of the township's riverbank bungalows, cabins and camping.

El Questro is running a Big

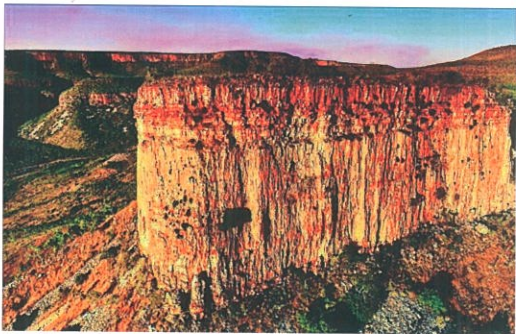
Day Out tour that takes in *Australia* locations such as Emma Gorge, the flats of the cattle stampedes, with the Cockburn Ranges as backdrop, river crossings and drought scenes.

The tour circumnavigates the awesome Cockburns — a never-ending mesa fortress that marches rampant across the landscape — follows the drovers' footsteps on the Karunje track mudflats and heads to Wyndham.

There's a visit to the Boab Prison Tree, wild cattle (cleanskins) and not-so-wild Brahman and shorthorns, a lunch prepared by Homestead chef Alan Groom and a return along the banks of the Pentecost River.

The Kimberley boabs — some more than 1000 years old — are something to be seen, their immense swollen trunks measuring 15m in circumference.

Outback Australia, Pages 20-21



Movie magnet: The awesome Cockburn Range on El Questro is one of the locations featured in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*

OUTBACK IS LOOKING UP

A soon-to-be-released movie is expected to drive a tourist rush to the Kimberley, writes **Sally Macmillan**

On the eve of *Australia's* November 25 release, hopes are running high for a tourism bonanza for the location that inspired the look and feel of the new Baz Luhrmann movie – the vast, sun-scorched Kimberley.

In this entire rock and sandscape you won't hit one traffic light. And you'll bounce along red earth and white dust tracks that rock your ribs into a jungle beat.

The heartbeat of the region is the inland oasis of Kununurra – a lush food bowl that produces big cash crops after decades of being derided as a white elephant.

Ever-evolving since its birth in the 1960s with the Ord River irrigation scheme, this gateway to the East Kimberley – Kununurra means meeting of big waters – now has millionaire rows of mansions along the Upper and Lower Ord River banks.

It was down the lower reaches on Riverfarm Rd that Luhrmann, Nicole Kidman and husband Keith Urban, Hugh Jackman and wife Deborra-Lee Furness and their children rented waterfront mansions as their base while on location for *Australia*.

Kununurra and its far-flung outposts provide many of the panoramic backdrops to the story of British aristocrat Lady Sarah Ashley (Kidman), who travels to meet her philandering husband, only to find him dead.

She teams up with a drover (Jackman) and fights to save her Faraday Downs cattle station from local cattle barons.

Locations used within the Kimberley's 122,000sq km include El Questro Wilderness Park, Home Valley Station, the Cockburn Range,

the Bungle Bungle Range, Carlton Hill Station, Digger's Rest Station and King George Falls near Faraway Bay. More than 400 cast and crew spent a month marinating in searing heat. On occasions they camped at remote locations with Kununurra the base.

They roamed the small town centre and bought up at Kimberley Fine Diamonds and Lovell Gallery, stayed at the Kimberley Grande, drank at the Kununurra Hotel and Kununurra Country Club, hung out at the coffee and hot wireless spot Boab Book Cafe, worked out at the local gym, chatted and mingled with locals. From Kununurra you can take a chopper or light plane to the tiger-striped, beehived Bungle Bungles. Touch down, stay and trek through, or fly back to town; tour the monstrous Argyle Diamond Mine; take a cruise on Lake Argyle, the southern hemisphere's biggest man-made freshwater lake; or cruise/canoe the gorges of the Ord River.

Back on terra firma take a four-wheel-drive foray and drink up the yawning blue skies, rich red rock and rugged bush landscape with its hidden plunging gorges, waterfalls and thermal pools.

Cast and crew were choppered and driven out through red-earth country and boab tree clusters to reach one set at the Packer family's 3675sq km Carlton Hill Station, about 50 minutes drive out of Kununurra and location for the movie's Faraway Downs homestead.

Digger's Rest is a rustic working cattle station on the banks of the King River. It is about 110km from Kununurra and 55km from Wyndham. Cast and crew camped out in 38C heat, but still had the energy for a game of cricket on the claypan flats. Here you

can doss down as the *Australia* mob did, hang out at the homestead, fish and ride out to muster.

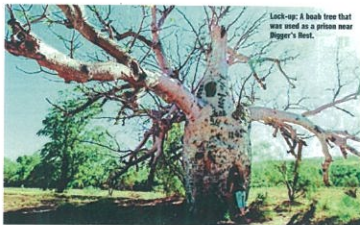
Across the Pentecost River is Home Valley Station – and on the way you pass the exact point where Kidman drove a battered 1957 Chevy bullcatcher. Home Valley still has the vehicle, along with another used in the film.

Home Valley HV8 is a working cattle station and tourism operation. Owned by the Indigenous Land Corporation, it is 120 bone-jarring kilometres west of Kununurra. It was here Luhrmann filmed scenes incorporating the distant Cockburn Range and the Pentacost River.

The top-level stay here are the eight Grass Castles – luxury bungalows on the banks of Bindoola Creek that lead to the Pentecost. There are also 28 stockman-styled guest suites set around one of the station's two resort pools; and four Sandcastle eco-tents. Or you can camp or park a caravan.

A fresh addition is the HV8 Station *Australia* Movie Tour that takes in such locations as Nyarl lagoon, Bindoola Falls and HV's Private Lookout to the Cockburn. Here you can sip bubbly as the range turns pink, blue and purple.

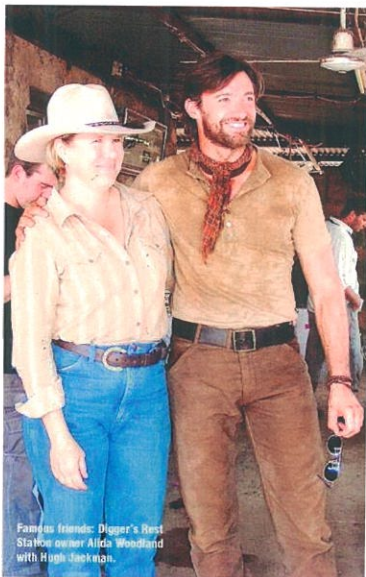
Birdwatch, swim in the lagoons, billabongs and waterfalls and gorges; fish; croc spot (watch out for old Cedric the resident lounge); ride one of the 30 horses down to the river; take part in the weekly cattle muster, or loll around the sprawling homestead. The station's Chris Fenech says they're having a bit of fun renaming some sites – if you visit, don't be surprised if you come across Luhrmann's Leap, Jackman's Jump-up and Kidman's Crossing.



Lock-up: A bush tree that was used as a prison near Biggar's Rest.

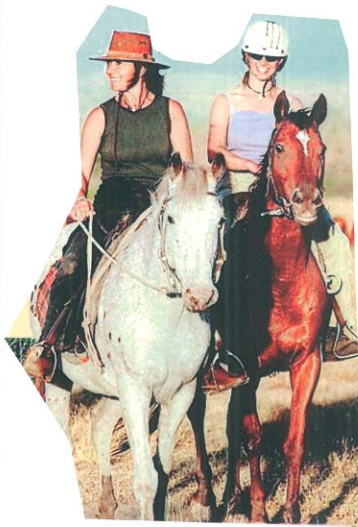
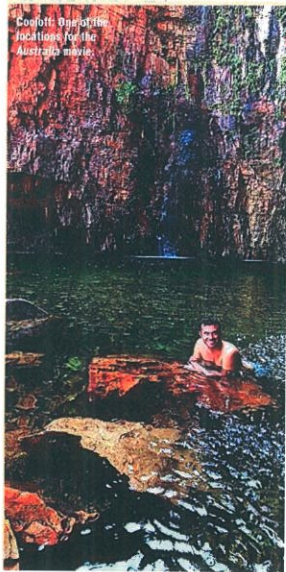


Big Bushes, Biggar's Rest.



Famous friends: Digger's Rest
Station owner Alida Woodland
with Hugh Jackson.

Confort: One of the locations for the Australia movie.



Horsing around:
Australia crew
members at Digger's
Rest Station.

boarding pass

getting there: Qantas flies to Perth with connection to Kununurra via Broome. Go to www.qantas.com.au

stay: El Questro Wilderness Park, 110km west of Kununurra; open April to October. www.elquestro.com.au; (08) 9169 1777

Home Valley Station, 120km west of Kununurra. Open throughout the year. Guests choppered in from Kununurra during the wet. www.homevalley.com.au; (08) 9161 4322

Digger's Rest Station, 124km west of Kununurra, 40km Wyndham. www.diggersreststation.com.au; (08) 9161 1029

The Kimberley Grande, Kununurra. www.thekimberleygrande.com.au; (08) 9166 5600

do: Macka's Barra Camp, www.mackasbarra.com.au; Alligator



Airways, www.alligatorairways.com.au;
Triple J Cruises - Ord River,
www.triplejtrips.net.au

dry: May to October

wet: November to April

more: Tourism WA has a number of self-guide suggestions, www.westernaustralia.com