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OUTBACK LOVE AFFAIR

With stars in her eyes and red dirt in her hair, Fleur Bainger ventures into the remote Kimberley region to experience the personal transformation that's now synonymous with the sweeping Western Australian landscape.

PHOTOGRAPHS Douglas Kirkland, Fleur Bainger, Christian Fletcher, Ben Knapinski, Joel Pront and Tourism WA.





HOME VALLEY STATION

When you visit the Kimberley, you frequently hear chatter about the four c's; the methods used to determine the quality of one of the region's rare pink diamonds.

But aside from carat, clarity, cut and colour, perhaps the Kimberley's greatest allure is its characters.

It's almost as if there's something in the water – larger than life personalities, legendary storytellers and cheeky jokers seem to make up the bulk of the population.

Everyone you meet seems to have lived a thousand lives, and takes great pleasure in regaling you with liberal servings of dramatism.

There's no shortage at Home Valley Station, a cattle station and holiday resort, which doubles as a learning facility for Indigenous Australians.

Owned by the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) and run on behalf of the traditional owners, the Balangarra people, the educational arm provides studies in hospitality, tourism and horticulture to 14 Aboriginal men and women each year.

The students gain practical experience on site, assisting other rangers with tours and activities, and return periodically to the station classroom.

You can generally tell who's green and who's in their third and final year by their willingness to tell you a story.

The Home Valley model, if successful, will be spread to other ILC properties, empowering Indigenous communities as levels of education rise and real future prospects are created.

I join two trainees on a "mini muster", the only cattle mustering experience offered to tourists in the Kimberley.

One of them, Johnny, wants to continue working on cattle stations to grow his knowledge, while another, Cyril, has big dreams of becoming a professional rodeo rider in Queensland.

Both tell me they had never envisioned leaving their home regions before starting the regional TAFE program. Cyril says the workplace camaraderie is a big plus.

"It's good to meet other Indigenous people, we feel comfortable around each other, to help each other to go through what we're going through."

In 2009, the trainees will have even more opportunity to hone their skills, with the station being the first in the region to open its gates during the Wet season.

In doing so, Home Valley hopes to unlock the Kimberley for those yearning to see its spectacular electrical shows, feel water up to their knees as it flows across parched land, hear the pounding of waterfalls and watch the wilderness turn fluorescent green.

Land activities might be significantly reduced, but nature's magical transformation combined

with the region's solitude and peace is sure to attract many. Of equal allure, no doubt, is the station's brush with Hollywood. According to Chris Fenech, Home Valley's marketing manager, Baz Luhrmann was doing a reconnaissance for *Australia* in 2004 and spent time on one of the property's hilltops, looking across the Pentecost River to the Cockburn Ranges that ended up featuring so prominently in the film.

Cleverly, the hill's been renamed Luhrmann's Lookout.

"Look, it's a bit of tongue-in-cheek, having a bit of fun with our station sites tour that includes the locations where Baz decided to film," says Chris with a grin, adding that to get there, you also travel up Jackman's Jump.

The movie references don't end there. As you travel along the Gibb River Road towards Home Valley's boab lined entrance, you'll follow in Nicole Kidman's tyre tracks when you drive across the ever-flowing Pentecost River.

It's been aptly titled Kidman's Crossing. Chris humours me by recreating the scene where Lady Ashley drives her 1937 Chevy, laden with Prada luggage, across the stony waterway.

He gives me some sage, if mischievous advice for traversing in style: "Just dodge the big salt water crocodiles and hold onto the steering wheel... keep it in first or second gear and you'll be right."

It seems the timing of Baz's epic couldn't have been better for Home Valley, which put the finishing touches on its tiered accommodation options in August 2008.

Topping the ladder are the well-appointed Grass Castles, which overlook the Bindoola Creek and contain a comfy king-size bed with all the trimmings.

Each morning, a tray of continental breakfast treats is left on your verandah, so you can eat to the harmony of native birds.

Equally new Homestead guesthouse rooms are smaller and less secluded, but similarly comfortable.

Walls of corrugated iron have replaced the original stockmen's quarters, but somehow charm remains.

More rustic are the sand castles, where you "camp" in a large, raised safari tent in the luxury of a queen-size bed. It almost feels like cheating. And if the lack of air-conditioning becomes oppressive in the tents, two pools sit like oases on the way to the saloon-like Dusty Bar and Grill.

With a perfect mix of Outback adventure and homely surrounds, with a little bit of Hollywood thrown in, Home Valley Station might just have the winning formula.

The facts

Home Valley Station is open year round, except for December.

Accommodation options, such as camping, are restricted during the Wet season. HV8 is its nickname, after the cattle brand used to identify its stock.

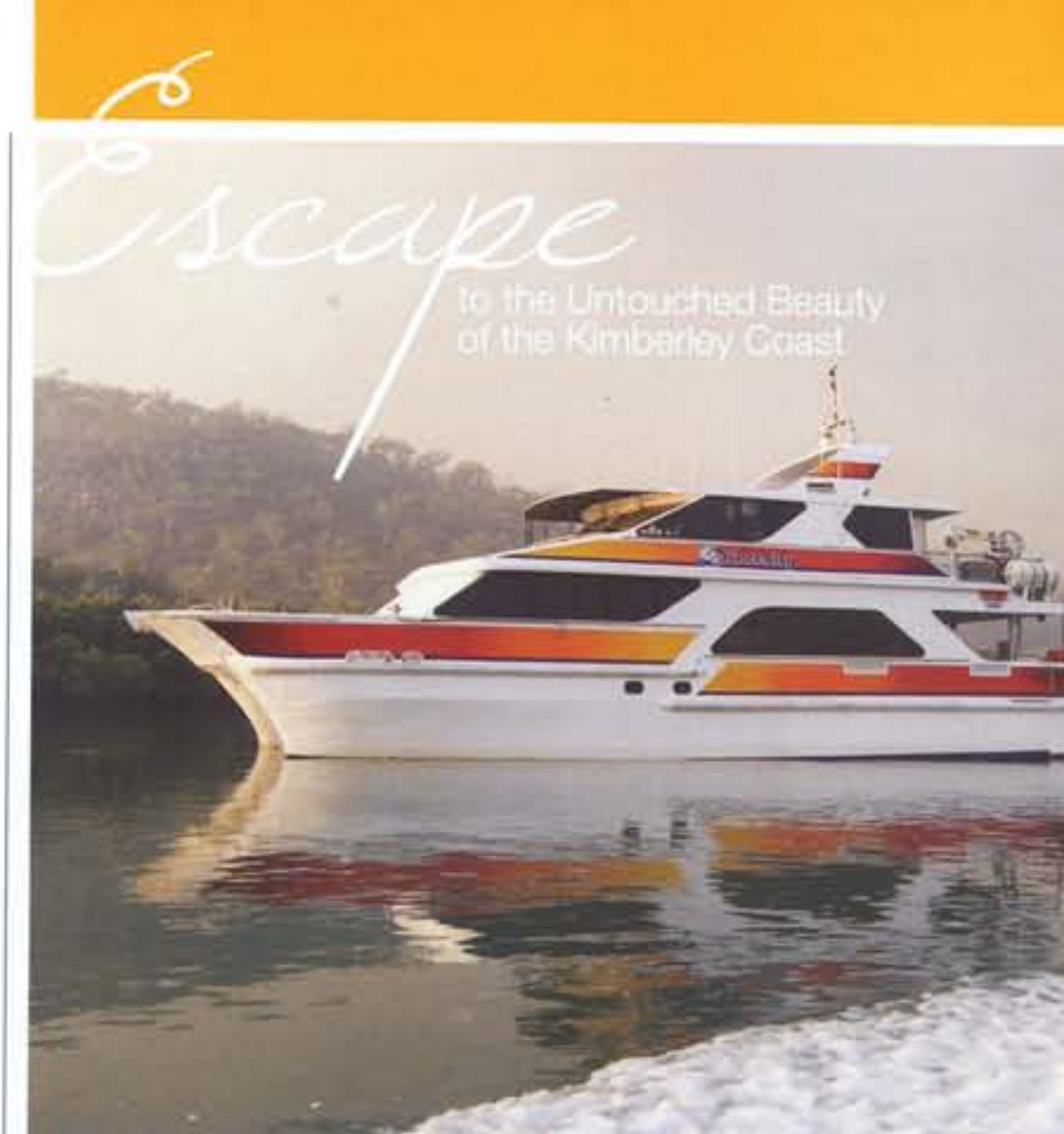
Activities

Gorge treks and swims are on offer, as are fishing trips, champagne sunset tours, bird

watching trips, and even hunting activities, to cull feral animals.

Getting there

HV8 is 120km from Kununurra on the Gibb River Road, and you'll need a 4WD if driving yourself, otherwise the station offers transfers from the airport. It also has an all-weather airstrip for charters or private planes to use. For bookings, contact (08) 9161 4322 or visit homevalley.com.au.



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FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
Dusty Bar & Grill at Home Valley
Station; cattle mustering, courtesy Ben
Knapinski; Grass Castle accommodation;
Bindoola Creek from canoe.