



Perspective: HV8 guests are dwarfed by the formidable Cockburn Ranges as they traverse the Pentecost River by horseback



Gorgeous gorge: Traditional owner Richard "Diesel" Evans at Bindoola Gorge on Home Valley Station

Outback oasis a true jewel of the Kimberley wilds

Sally Macmillan roughs it (well, sort of) on a visit to Home Valley Station.

THE legendary Gibb River Road is a bullroarer of an outback track: red-dusted and bone-shaking in its patchy corrugated ruts.

This is absolute dust-snorkel 4WD country.

But the 922km erstwhile stock route from Kununurra to Derby does take you to magical places in the wide-screen Kimberley wilderness landscape.

Places like the sprawling 250,000ha Home Valley Station (HV8), an indigenous-owned working cattle station that offers top-flight eco-stays.

A host of outback experiences are available at HV8, including barra fishing, horseback riding, gorge and waterfall forays, cattle mustering, 4WD tours, scenic flights and sunset cocktails and dining set against the backdrop of the mighty Cockburn Range.

Owned by the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC), Home Valley — run largely by the traditional owners, the Balangarra people — is an on-site training academy



Salmon enchanted evening: A just-caught mighty threadfin may be the dinner special for HV8 guests

for East Kimberley indigenous folk, as well as a visitor stay.

Along with its adjoining Nyilga people outstations of Karunje and Durack River, the ILC lands here cover some 1.4 million hectares. Big, big country to explore.

It's "hot as" this mid-morning, already nudging 40C.

The sun may not quite be over the yardarm but the station's Chris and Nicole Penneh can see we're hanging out for some col-

ours and oblige as we book into reception at the hub, the Dusty Bar and Grill.

This is a huge open-sided entertainment-dining-bar area, full of outback relics of yesteryear, leading out to bore-watered lush lawns and gardens and the station's main swimming pool.

We keep the swim in mind for

later. Right now it's off to meet the station's noddies: 30 nuggetty work horses who also saddle up for visitors for trail rides down to the Pentecost or, for those more daring, a real cattle muster.

No muster for us, however, and after a slip, stop, slap it's a sedate mounted meander across savanna, plains and rocky ridges to the river.

It's a stunning vista of short-horn and strapping brahman cattle herds, wildlife and vivid-hued bush scrub.

Back at the yards, traditional owner Richard "Diesel" Evans — jack-of-all-trades here — spins some yarns for us greenhorns.

"You wanna go play with Cedric?" he grins.

Cedric, we learn, is a 6m-long saltwater croc down a ways along Bindoola Creek. "Sure he's salty but he's tame, tame, tame. He lets me tickle him."

You do get to meet ol' Ced when boating down the creek and ancient gorges, but you don't get to tickle him alone.

You leave the monster to riverbank sleep and take in the mass of wildlife including hundreds of waterbirds.

Guided river and gorge tours are available or you can make your own way on canoes or boats.



Grass class: The interior of one of the eight Grass Castles at Home Valley

We trek to gorges and waterfalls and swim in waterholes.

After a full day of exploring, it's bliss to slip into our luxury and stylish Grass Castles: eight steel and timber cabins sitting on the banks of Bindoola Creek.

Each of the Grass Castles contains a king-sized bed, polished timber floors, climate-controlled air conditioning, a mini-bar, snacks and cold drinks, fridge, tea and coffee making facilities, flat screen television with Foxtel,

ceiling fans, day bed and separate bar area.

After a welcome cold shower in the huge ensuite bathroom, I slide the floor-to-ceiling glass doors back, plunked down on the private verandah and sipped a cold chardy while flocks of birds chattered from eucalypt-perch and fish — or could that be crocs? — plopped in the creek.

Other visitors doss down in the Sand Castle eco tents (extra large semi-permanent safari-style cabins with private timbered decks



Bliss: A Grass Castle veranda

We sip and snap, as the evening colours bring the mighty Cockburn Range alive, draping the rampant flanks in burning reds, then pinks and purples.

A top notch meal at Dusty's camp fire digne by Michael Tippa and live music by East Kimberley singer-songwriter Peter Brandy top off a sublime day.

At the HV8 Lookout, Nicole and Chris set up tables and chairs, lay out lashings of finger nibbles and splash out the French champagne.

DESTINATION>>



Home Valley Station

Getting there: Fly to Kununurra; 4WD rental (five firms), 120km to Home Valley Station. Or air charter from Kununurra with Alligator Airways or Helicopters WA.

Stay: Grass Castles: \$420 per room a night, maximum two adults, one child; Sand Castles: \$190 per room, maximum four guests; Homestead Guesthouse Rooms: \$230 per room, maximum two. Camping, customised packages and tours are available. (08) 9161 4322, www.homevalley.com.au

More: www.westernaustralia.com

Watch out barras — tomorrow we come hunting for you. ■ The writer was a guest of Tourism WA