

## Ancient land, wild heart

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**FORGET the rest of the world's tourist attractions. We have something to top them all here in Australia.**

THEY call it the last great wilderness, too vast and too volatile to be properly tamed and almost too beautiful for words.

But nothing prepared me for the revelations of the Kimberley.

I have travelled in the rugged grandeur of Alaska, soaked up the culture of Europe and marvelled at the majesty of the Grand Canyon.

The Kimberley left them all behind. It had something more.

As our skin acquired a patina of red dust, sunscreen and sweat we felt a sloughing-off of the concerns of daily life.

Our old selves faded away as we journeyed far off the beaten track, off the red Gibb River Road, and ascended the remote Mitchell Plateau, with its fan palms, brolgas, giant goannas and delicate birds.

Aboriginal art that was painted on rock 17,000 years ago puts European masters in perspective.

It was easy to see why director Baz Luhrmann chose the Kimberley to star in the film *Australia*.

I travelled with APT's Kimberley Wilderness Adventures. Our group of 14 set off in an air-conditioned 4WD from Broome.

Our first day involved some acclimatising. October is the end of the season and the heat can be savage as the wet season draws near.

But the Kimberley's heat is liberating and awe-inspiring.

One of its great survivors is the boab. Legend says these fat-bottomed trees were punished for their vanity by being forced to grow upside down.

We saw a Boab prison tree near Derby, 1000 years old, that in tragic colonial times held Aboriginal prisoners.

Dotted in odd communities are termite nests, overflowing blobs that resemble fertility figures, built by ants that never see the light inside their insulated castles.



NATURE'S MIRROR ... Piccaninny Creek in Western Australia's Kimberley – a region like nowhere else.

At Windjana Gorge, carved into the Napier Range by the Lennard River, we came upon rows of freshwater crocodiles in a pool.

They took no notice of us.

At Tunnel Creek, we waded along a 750m waterway through caves. Here Aboriginal freedom-fighter Jandamarra was said to have taken refuge before being shot.

Near-translucent ghost bats nestled just out of reach.

That afternoon the setting sun and the lightning lit up the sandstone of the King Leopold Ranges.

Iminjti Wilderness Camp provided luxury camping and three-course meals. We went to sleep to the sound of birds and bats devouring the flowers of the cocky-apple tree.

The bird life dazzled.

Red-tailed black cockatoos flew like clockwork toys.

Brolgas danced on the roadside. They bowed and lifted their wings in a courtship reflected in Aboriginal dance for millennia.

Talking us through it all was guide Gaylene. Boasting seven seasons in the Kimberley, she was always ready to stop the truck to show us a rare bird or flower or point out a wedge-tailed eagle or frill-necked lizard.

At Galvans Gorge we crossed paths with a monitor and admired a silver-leafed bloodwood, red sap pooling.

Gaylene performed backflips off the waterfall into the cool pool we floated in.

Crossing the Gibb River she spied a huge yellow-spotted goanna. As we looked on, he finished chewing a long-dead crocodile and moved under a rock, peering at us as we admired his bulk.

At Bell Gorge a water monitor watched as we swam, while on our rocky lunch-spot skinks swallowed ants lured by fallen crumbs.

At Marunbabidi camp, we compared notes on resident geckos and frogs while eating with our hosts.

Aboriginal art sites evoked a sense of spirituality.

Some are in the Wandjina style, with pale faces, saucer eyes and no mouths.

Older are the Gwion, or Bradshaw art, many in mulberry, with head-dresses, tassels and bags.

The 3.5km walk to Mitchell Falls is rich with art, huge animal shapes including a thylacine, extinct on the mainland for 4000 years.

After swimming above the magnificent falls we ate lunch. We felt a light mist as cicadas shrieked. Cicada wee, we were told.

On return many opted for the exhilarating flight across the Mitchell River National Park and to the turquoise sea off Admiralty Gulf.

A pair of huge estuarine, or saltwater, crocodiles, lay in the river below.

We spent two nights at Ungolan, the plateau camp, a stream running near ensuited tents.

Many who visit so remote a place are alarmed at plans to mine bauxite.

After I sadly left my group, flying to Kununurra, they finished their 13-day tour.

A flight from Kununurra, with its lovely Boab Cafe and Bookshop, to Purnululu National Park, took in massive Lake Argyle and vast cattle stations.

Only the humped, silky Brahmins can thrive. They roam free, rounded up by helicopter to be sold for live export.

Argyle Diamond Mine unearths the world's most valuable commodity, pink diamonds. Its planes land on diamonds -- an estimated \$20 million worth under the airstrip.

The Bungle Bungles' sandstone domes, striped by silica and algae, were unknown to the outside world until the 1980s.

We admired them up close as we walked into Cathedral Gorge.

At beautiful Echidna Chasm we edged into dark coolness as splits in the rock narrowed. Bright green palms stood against red rock.

That night, my last in the Kimberley, the birds seemed especially abundant and the night sky even clearer.

**The writer was a guest of APT.**