



FOOD WITH THOUGHT

Wondrous landscapes, immersive Indigenous culture and evocative eating under the stars are just some of the unforgettable experiences *delicious* editor **Samantha Jones** enjoys while staying at one of Australia's most-luxurious lodges.

@thereal_samanthajones

Flying in from Sydney, I'm sure I've never seen anything like it. And it's not what I expected, either. A vast expanse of red soil, yes. But greenery? Lots of it? I had no idea. I'm later told these plentiful plants are semi-dormant, and survive with just the smallest amount of water each year. It's incredible. Hands and face pressed to the plane window like a child in an aquarium, I see Uluru. It's huge. It's imposing. It's almost glowing red in the sun.

But it's not actually Uluru.

I find this out on the short drive from the tiny airport to luxury lodge resort Longitude 131°, part of the Baillie Lodges group. What I was marvelling over is what locals fondly call 'Fool-uru'. Many an unsuspecting traveller before me has made the same mistake, it seems – at least that's something.

The iconic lodge is to be my home for the next two nights. An effective redesign by architects at Max Pritchard Gunner has seen the addition of the Dune Pavilion – a new premium suite with views of both Uluru (the real one) and Kata Tjuta, spacious rooms and a private plunge pool – and an update to the communal dining-and-drinking space, Dune House, where the walls boast a collection of glorious artworks that have been purchased from the Ernabella Arts Community on the APY Lands. There's also Spa Kinara, with outdoor shower and Li'Tya products, to take the indulgence one step further.

Of course, repping *delicious*. I'm immediately on the lookout for the food. In a position where it's impossible to source everything locally, but where you can't very well ignore your surroundings, you have to take a stance and make a decision on what your ethos is going to be. At Longitude 131°, chef Jonathan Bryant explains the focus is a celebration of all things Australian, while bearing in mind the limitations of location: "I have good suppliers, and they will give me a call and let me know what they don't have so I have time to change my mind and plan what I am going to do with a menu," he explains.

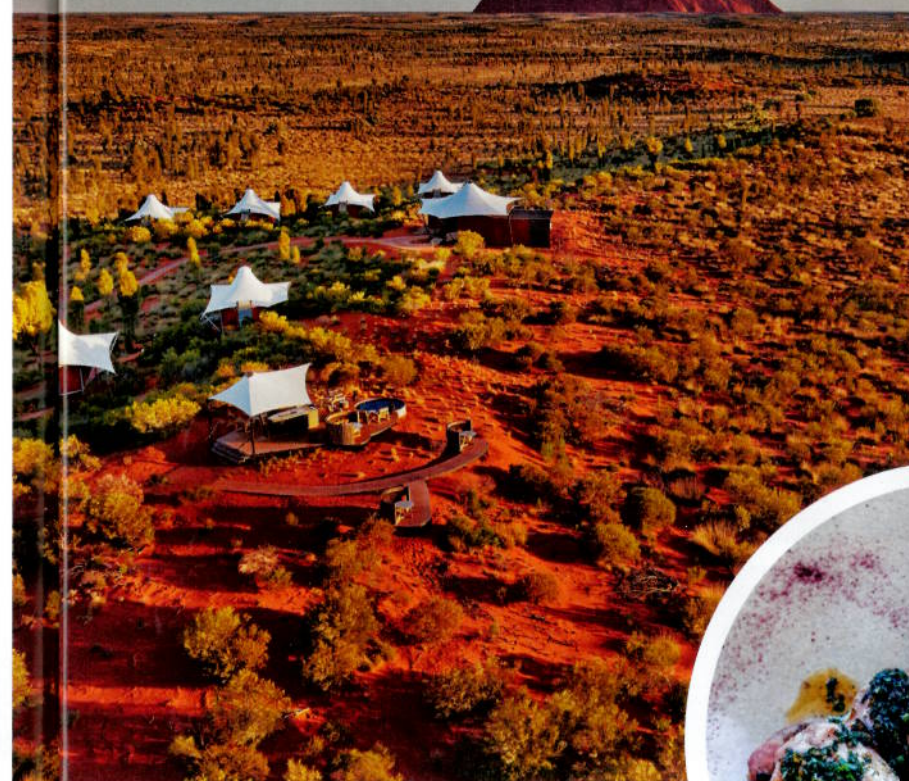
"We essentially have four or five menu templates that we'll rotate. The proteins usually stay the same, but I don't want to serve kangaroo for lunch one day and then for dinner the next. I want the guests to have something different. Then I will play with what we have to pair with it."

Bryant runs through an array of indigenous ingredients he has laid out in front of him. There's quandong ("This does grow around here, but it's next to the police station and I don't want to get in trouble so I haven't foraged any just yet!"), pigface, muntries, ice plant, paperbark and lemon myrtle.

"Lemon myrtle is the new tea tree – it is in absolutely everything now. I used to infuse milk using the leaves, then remove the leaves and make fresh

THE FOOD ETHOS IS A CELEBRATION OF ALL THINGS AUSTRALIAN, WHILE BEARING IN MIND THE LIMITATIONS OF LOCATION.

– LONGITUDE 131° CHEF JONATHAN BRYANT



CLOCKWISE: red desert landscapes; (inset) indigenous ingredients feature at Longitude 131°; the Dune Pavilion; Uluru looms in the distance as the lodge nestles into the land; local birdlife; luxury 'tent' accommodation. OPPOSITE: into the wild.

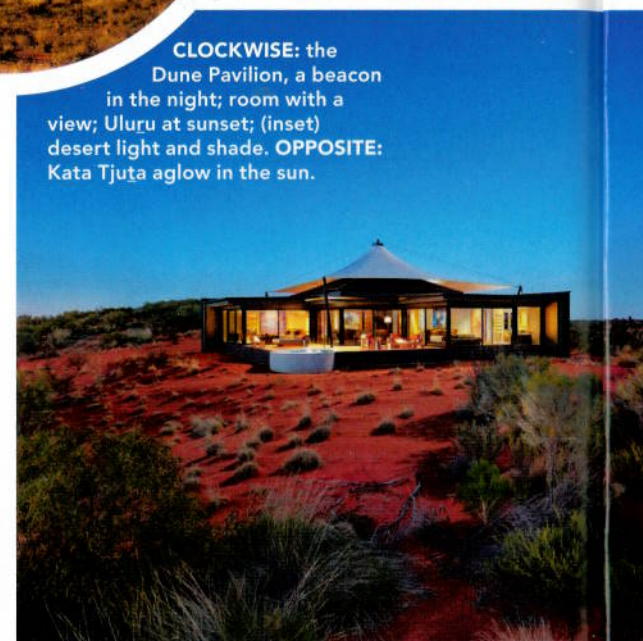
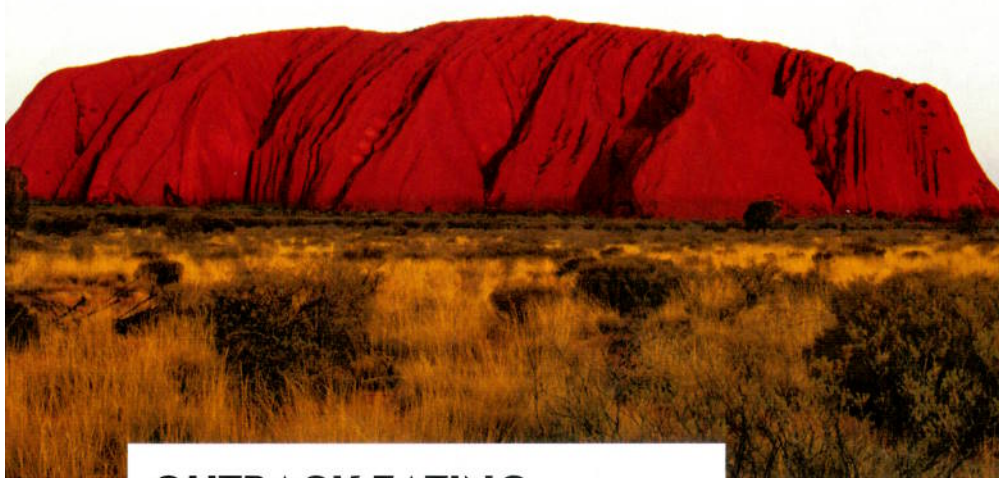


HOTEL PHOTOGRAPHY: BAILLIE LODGES
LOCATION PHOTOGRAPHY: JEREMY SIMONS

IT'S HARD NOT TO
FEEL THAT SENSE OF
SPIRITUALITY SO MANY
PEOPLE DESCRIBE
ON VISITING.



CLOCKWISE: the Dune Pavilion, a beacon in the night; room with a view; Uluru at sunset; (inset) desert light and shade. **OPPOSITE:** Kata Tjuta aglow in the sun.



OUTBACK EATING

• **DUNE TOP** This intimate elevated dining experience is perfect for groups of up to six.

• **KANTJU GORGE** Wander a section of Uluru's base as a knowledgeable guide tells you stories of the monolith. Enjoy canapes and drinks as the sun sets.

• **TABLE 131°** Learn about the sky full of stars hanging above you while enjoying a menu around a campfire. Return to your 'tent' where a luxurious swag is laid out on your day bed in front of an outdoor fireplace. Indulging in the tray of *digestif* treats (sherry, brandy and more) is entirely up to you!

Find out more on the above at longitude131.com.au

• **TALI WIRU** Experience a menu of four courses with each dish using native herbs and spices. Prime dining under the desert sky with fantastic views.

• **SOUNDS OF SILENCE** Sip on sparkling as the sun goes down, then take your pick at the bush tucker-inspired buffet to music from the didgeridoo.

• **KULATA ACADEMY CAFE** Run by trainees from Ayers Rock Resorts National Indigenous Training Academy, choose from 15 dining experiences.

Find out more on the above at ayersrockresort.com.au



ricotta. Now it's in all our bath products in the rooms, too!" There's also saltbush: "Saltbush is being used to tenderise meat in Australia, which is how our lamb is reared. And you can use it as a substitute for spinach," he says.

At Longitude, outdoor dining is usually every other night, so the seasons play a part in a more unusual way here. "I'm working with Indigenous seasons, and there's only three of them: the hot time, the cold time, and the windy time." I'm visiting during the hot time, and tonight I'll be having dinner on the Dune Top – the newly opened intimate dining space high up on the property, with plunge pools and help-yourself-bar during the day. "At the moment, we go with smaller, lighter things. So chilled cucumber consommé, and triple-cured ocean trout with avocado," Bryant describes. "In the cold time we move towards those big, warming winter flavours, and guests get a poncho, blanket and hot water bottle when they're eating outdoors. In the windy time it's more about plating; I basically can't use any garnishes because they just blow away as soon as the waiter picks up the plate!"

Dining on the Dune Top is blissful. Looking across the landscape to ever-present and imposing Uluru while eating a menu of thoughtfully prepared food, it's hard not to feel that sense of spirituality so many people describe on visiting.

An early start on day two to avoid the heat means breakfast is enjoyed before sunrise at the Dune House. This morning we are

taking on the Valley of the Winds trek at Kata Tjuta. This is a more challenging hike than some, and takes a good few hours, but the views along the way make it worth the effort. Beginning early is a must, as the heat in the middle of the day can be oppressive. Incredible rock formations in that famous vibrant rusty red offer plenty of photo opportunities, the unbelievably blue sky painting a spectacular contrasting backdrop.

Arriving back to the lodge in time for lunch, you can indulge with three courses or keep it simple with something smaller. Well-versed at this eating lark, I keep it simple with a grilled king prawn salad in anticipation of the evening's feast.

Tonight I'm headed to Table 131°. After wandering through the glowing, sprawling Field of Light installation (extended a number of times and now set to be in place until December 2020), I'm taken to an arrangement of dining tables around a campfire. The bustling outdoor kitchen is raring to go with dishes including lobster, daikon salad and native finger lime, and red wine pear with wattleseed gingerbread and apricot.

"It's about finding the balance when using techniques and flavours from a lot of different cultures, and incorporating indigenous ingredients where they will really work," Bryant explains. As I eat these outback-inspired dishes while regaled with stories of the canopy of stars glowing so brightly above, I'm overjoyed by the immersive experience. "Any time you can bring emotion into cooking – that's what it's all about." ✕



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