

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN Travel + LUXURY

SEPTEMBER 24-25, 2022

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ABOVE & BEYOND

By private jet to treasured landscapes Page 10

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A fascinating luxury expedition across Australia's north-west frontier exploring the spectacular landscapes, and the flora and fauna of the remote Kimberley. Highlights will include Wyndham, Montgomery Reef, King George River, Mitchell Falls and Lacepede Islands.

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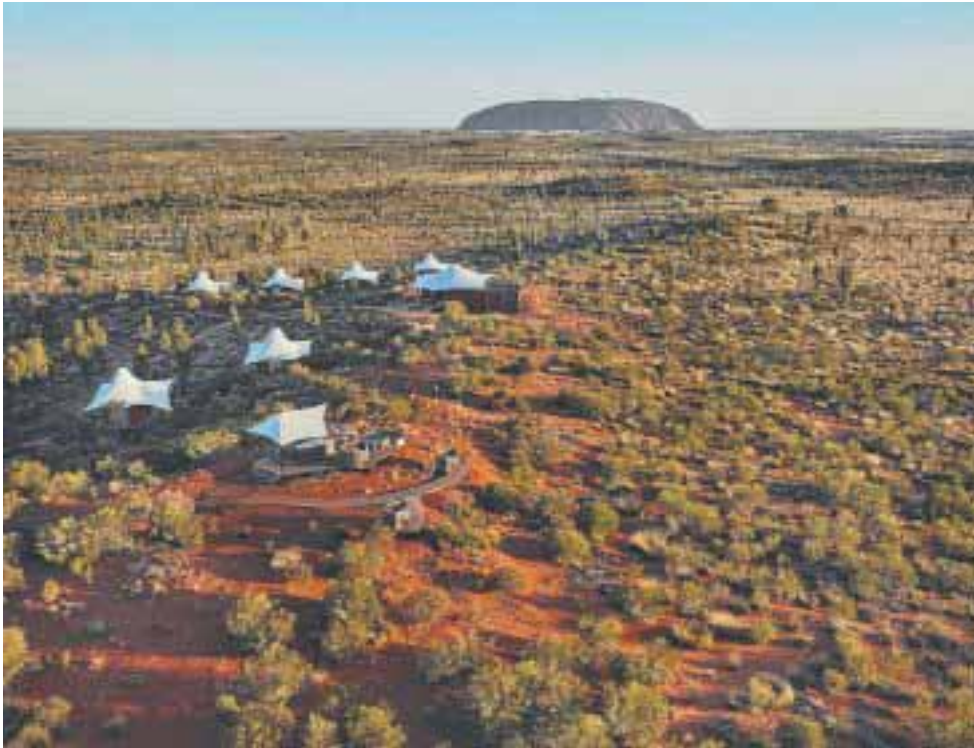
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The wheels of our private jet are not long off the desert soil when it becomes apparent the captain has a surprise in store. Parched plains of spinifex and desert oaks stretch below us as the Fokker banks, one wing dipping before it levels and a new feature appears in view. It's the rust-red sandstone of Uluru rising high above its surrounds. For the next 20 minutes, we circle the ancient monolith and the soaring domes of its Central Australia co-star Kata Tjuta as the captain weaves through powder-blue skies to ensure every passenger has a bird's-eye perspective of the World Heritage-listed treasures.

As unexpected as it is memorable, the fly-over is an exciting addition to our schedule. But as I'm beginning to understand, that's very much a hallmark of a Captain's Choice tour, whereby luxury itineraries are embellished with bespoke touches. Only two days earlier, our posse of 20 travellers sat in Sydney Airport's ExecuJet private terminal, casually sipping Champagne at 7.30am while being greeted by our gregarious Captain's Choice host Jo Taylor and tour doctor Linda Harris. "This is an adventure, not a holiday," Jo declared as she welcomed us to the six-night Rainforest, Reef and Red Centre by Royal Jet tour across Australia aboard a Fokker 70 previously owned by the Dutch government and flown by the Dutch royals.

Some in the group have chosen the itinerary because they're keen to explore its diverse destinations of Central Australia, the Daintree Rainforest in Tropical North Queensland, plus that state's outback realms. But for

others, the drawcard is the prospect of staying at a trio of leading luxury retreats – Longitude 131 at Uluru, Silky Oaks Lodge on the edge of the Daintree, and Mount Mulligan Lodge on a working cattle station three hours inland from Cairns.

The convenience of a private jet has also lured many passengers in an uncertain era when commercial travel is fraught with long delays, lost baggage and cancelled flights. But this is not just any jet. The decision to lease the distinctive orange-tailed Royal Jet has been a first for Captain's Choice and adds extra flair to an already high-end itinerary. Seating 24, the plane features a "first class" cabin that's worthy of a movie set, with six pairs of large retro-looking teal blue leather seats facing across polished wood tables. At the rear, more conventional rows of seating comfortably accommodate 12 guests in an area once the domain of royal minders.

Departing Sydney, we're served Champagne, while the plane's talented chef Stephen Heilbronn whips up a delectable breakfast of smoked salmon, egg timbale and roasted vine tomatoes in a tiny galley. It's a fine prelude to the exquisite food that greets us at our first destination. Baillie Lodges' Longitude 131, perched among dunes with uninterrupted views of Uluru, accommodates guests in 16 indulgent tented pavilions, each superbly appointed and equipped with seemingly everything a visitor to the desert could desire, from shoe brushes and fly nets to bars generously stocked with complimentary drinks.

The accommodation is scattered around the lodge's central Dune House, home to a restaurant serving outstanding meals that belie the remote destination. Menus draw on produce from across Australia, from poached Murray cod and tender Darling Downs wagyu to ice-cream made with NT honey and salt harvested from nearby Lake Amadeus. But the undisputed stars of our stay are the bewitching formations of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, sacred to the traditional owners of the land, the Anangu. As we approach the 36 towering domes of Kata Tjuta for an early morning walk through one of its impressive gorges, guide Wayne Hamilton tells us how the name means "many heads".

Like all guides working in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, he has gained accreditation at Charles Darwin University and is permitted to share the children's version of several creation sto-



All aboard for a private jet odyssey

LIBBY MOFFET



ries that give some insight into Tjukurpa, the force that unites Anangu people with each other and the landscape, and Tjukuritja, the physical evidence of their ancestral beings. As we walk towards the tranquil waters of the Mutitjulu waterhole on the southern side of Uluru, Wayne tells us about the deadly battle between the python woman Kuniya and venomous snake man Liru.

At dusk, we're led on the Mala walk, examining rock drawings and discovering the many uses of native plants that grow near Uluru, as the tale of the Anangu's ancestors, the Mala people, unfolds in the markings of the rock. Our guide directs our gaze to the skies, and we discover the figure of an emu in the darkness that surrounds the Milky Way, its presence a signal to the Anangu of the season to hunt the creatures and their eggs.

Day three of the tour arrives and with a spin of the colour wheel, we leave the ochre hues of Central Australia as our Royal Jet completes a special flyover of Uluru and Kata Tjuta and heads northeast to the lush greenery of Tropical North Queensland. An hour's drive north of Cairns, the newly refurbished Silky Oaks Lodge, also a Baillie Lodges property, sits at the edge of the Daintree Rainforest, its 40 treehouse-style retreats surrounded by dense tropical foliage. Perched



Top row, Longitude 131 at Uluru; the Fokker 70 Royal Jet; seats in the Royal Jet cabin; Mount Mulligan Lodge room; at Silky Oaks Lodge; Brahman cattle at Mount Mulligan Lodge





IN THE KNOW

Captain's Choice nine-day Heart of the Kimberley and Margaret River by Royal Jet tour departs Sydney on May 16, 2023, and offers accommodation at El Questro Homestead and Berkeley River Lodge in the Kimberley, and Cape Lodge at Yallingup.
captainschoice.com.au

horses of successful prospectors were shod with shoes of gold and the local town of Thornborough was home to 1500 people and 22 pubs.

Now Thornborough has just one resident, who we wave to as we head to Tyrconnell to inspect an archaic industrial structure that holds the title of the oldest working stamper in Australia. Gold is not the only resource this land had to offer, and in the afternoon we visit the property's ghost town, the former Mount Mulligan coal mine, where the state's worst coal mining disaster occurred in 1921, killing 75 men and boys. We stand at the mouth of the mine as it expels waves of unsettlingly warm air, before paying our respects at a graveyard where rows of headstones are marked with the fatal date.

While we hanker for another day to explore the lodge, the last morning of our tour arrives and we are whisked by helicopter to Cairns for a surprise scenic flight over the vivid turquoise waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

The experience would be a fine closing act for our tour, but Captain's Choice still has a final hurrah planned. From Cairns, the Royal Jet hops south to Hamilton Island where we sail on a luxury boat, relaxing over a seafood lunch beside the vanilla sands of Whitehaven Beach as we reflect on the highlights of our trip.

It's late afternoon when our jet departs for Sydney. Through the windows I watch as the setting sun sends vivid stripes of red and tangerine across the darkening horizon. It's the perfect finale for such a colourful adventure.

Libby Moffet was a guest of Captain's Choice.



above the Mossman River, my habitat is a wonderful sanctuary, enveloped by rainforest that provides a privacy screen for the balcony's inviting stone bath. The melodious sounds of the waterway fill the air and accompany me on the stroll to the spectacular open-sided Treehouse restaurant, where share plates of delicious Asian-influenced fare create a convivial atmosphere as we all discuss our day.

Silky Oaks is built on the land of the Kuku Yalanji people, and we learn more about their stories and way of life on a morning tour with Walkabout Cultural Adventures guide Juan Walker, who shares his knowledge of country and the harsh realities of Indigenous life in 20th-century Australia. At nearby Cooya Beach, we pick our way across mud flats as Juan shows us how beach hibiscus petals can provide hydration and takes us into the mangroves in search of mud crabs. At Mossman Gorge, he leads us through ancient rainforest, pointing out toxic cassowary plums on the ground and revealing the many uses of endemic plants.

Next morning, we gather around artist Binna Swindley in his studio as he explains the meanings of Indigenous dot paintings, including the way landmarks and species are characterised. It's a busy itinerary but activi-

ties are not obligatory. When Jo rustles up a private transfer to Port Douglas for some of our group one afternoon, I opt for a solitary swim in the soft, clear waters of the billabong below the lodge.

There's a sense of anticipation as we pack our bags for our third destination, the lesser-known Mount Mulligan Lodge, which lies, quite literally, off the beaten track. After a three-hour drive in a coach ill-equipped for the challenges of an unsealed road, which is the only jarring note on this tour, we stand on the deep veranda of the lodge's main pavilion, sipping refreshments and drinking in the beauty before us.

While a straw-coloured savanna landscape covers most of the 28,000ha Brahman cattle station, the architect-designed 13-room lodge is an oasis, nestled amid green gardens beside a large weir and infinity pool, towering gums reflected in their surfaces. The main pavilion, with its airy spaces, soaring ceilings and salvaged timber features, is the setting for delicious meals as well as relaxed drinks in front of a fireplace set within a striking gabion stone wall. The same "rugged outback meets modern design" aesthetic is also at play in the generously sized guest pavilions, with their timber louvres, dark walls, burnished fittings and comfortable furnishings.

Overlooking it all is magnificent Mount Mulligan, a dramatic tabletop formation featuring a terracotta-hued escarpment that stretches for 18km across the horizon. Known as Ngarra-bullgan, the sacred mountain is integral to the creation stories of the local Djungan people. But we hear more recent tales of the area from lodge guide and anthropologist Simone Phillips, who takes us in a 4WD across corrugated roads to the Tyrconnell gold mine, part of the Hodgkinson goldfield discovered by James Mulligan in the 1870s. She recounts stories of the characters who starred in this "wild west period" of Queensland's history, when



Daintree Silky Oaks Lodge; middle row, teal blue leather bottom row, dot painting at Uluru; Treehouse Restaurant lodge