

OUTBACK STORY

# DESTINATION AUSTRALIA

*Rural and remote Australia is reaping the benefits as our tourism industry welcomes record numbers of both domestic and international travellers.*

STORY GRETEL SNEATH

*Boabs by firelight: guests relax with drinks around the fire before dinner in the communal hub at Kimberley Coastal Camp, WA.*





GRETEL SNEATH

*Cameleer Ryan McMillan leads his charges through the Flinders Ranges. OPPOSITE: Tourists discover the South Australian outback with the support of camels.*

**Y**ou won't find a better travel companion than Mona. For starters, she never complains. She isn't a big drinker, she'll happily eat on the run and she will carry your bags. Blinman-based cameleer Ryan McMillan says bushwalkers get quite attached to Mona and the rest of her caravan during the expeditions he leads through South Australia's northern Flinders Ranges.

"The camels are really quiet, so they won't scare off the birds and other wildlife and you can have a really good look around at a gentle pace – it's a great way to see the outback," he says.

The enforced desert slow-down brought about by a week-long winter amble with a train of camels entices adventurers to see a land where wildflowers brighten the shadows of ancient rock formations and stunning gorges.

"We're able to avoid roads and tracks and travel cross-country as we can camp anywhere so long as there is feed available for the camels, so we're exploring land that's largely untouched," Ryan says.

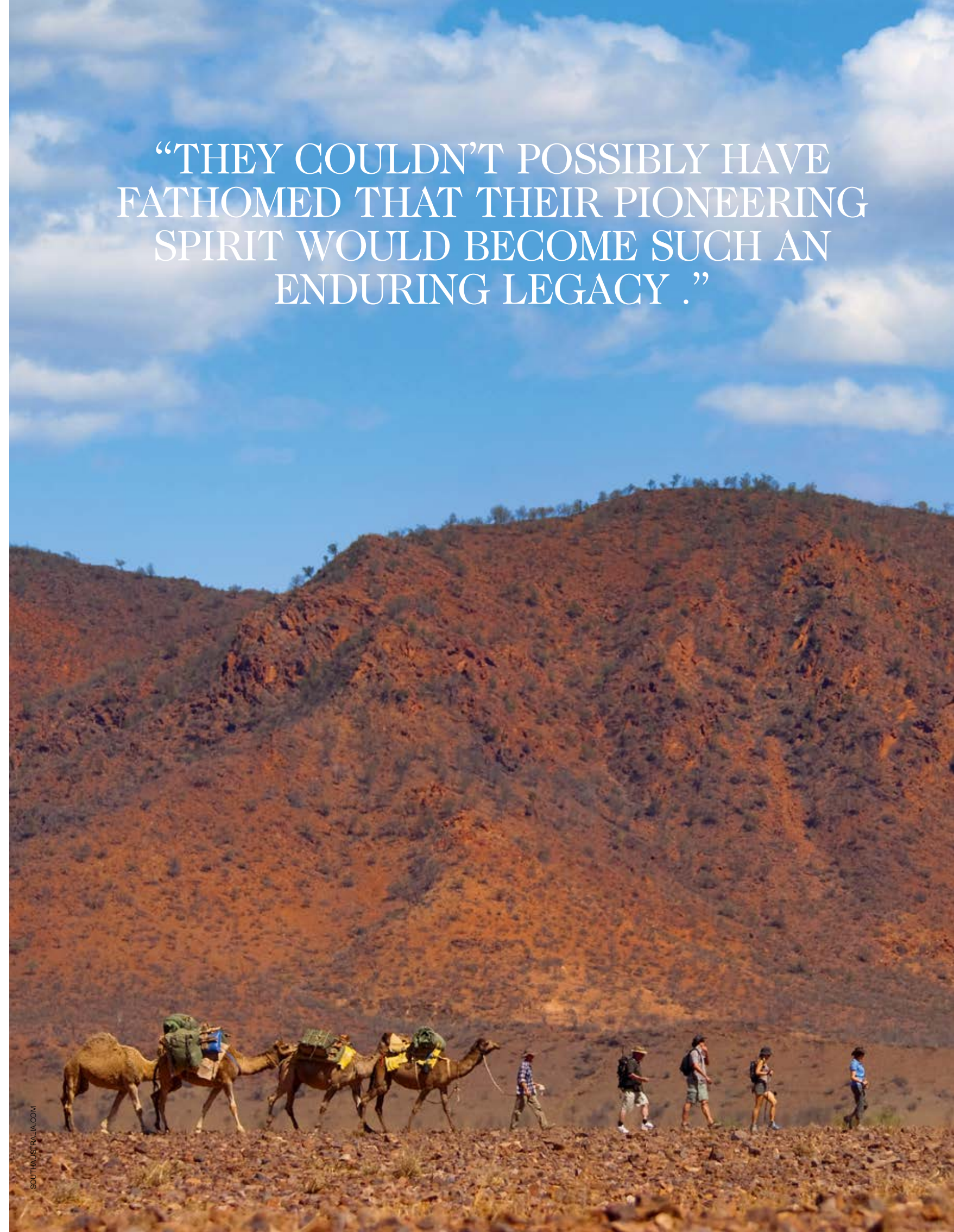
It's grassroots travel at its best, with occasional sightings of Aboriginal artefacts at long-abandoned camp sites highlighting the nation's layered history. Old glass bottles spotted by Ryan and his fellow travellers lying in dry creek beds by the Strzelecki Track continue the story, perhaps dating back to the first white explorers who walked into the

unknown more than a century and a half ago.

Stretching from Innamincka down to Lyndhurst, the Strzelecki Track was forged in 1870 when daring drover Harry Redford managed to rustle 1000 cattle from Queensland into South Australia, reportedly escaping any real punishment because he opened up new country in the process. Famed explorers Robert Burke and William Wills had succumbed to similar harsh terrain a decade earlier during their epic trek with camels in tow from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria, while further inland it was an ambitious party led by surveyor John McDouall Stuart that bridged the seemingly insurmountable void between Port Augusta and Darwin. During their daily battle for survival they couldn't possibly have fathomed that their pioneering spirit and sense of adventure would become such an enduring legacy, for they blazed a trail for generations of intrepid travellers to follow.

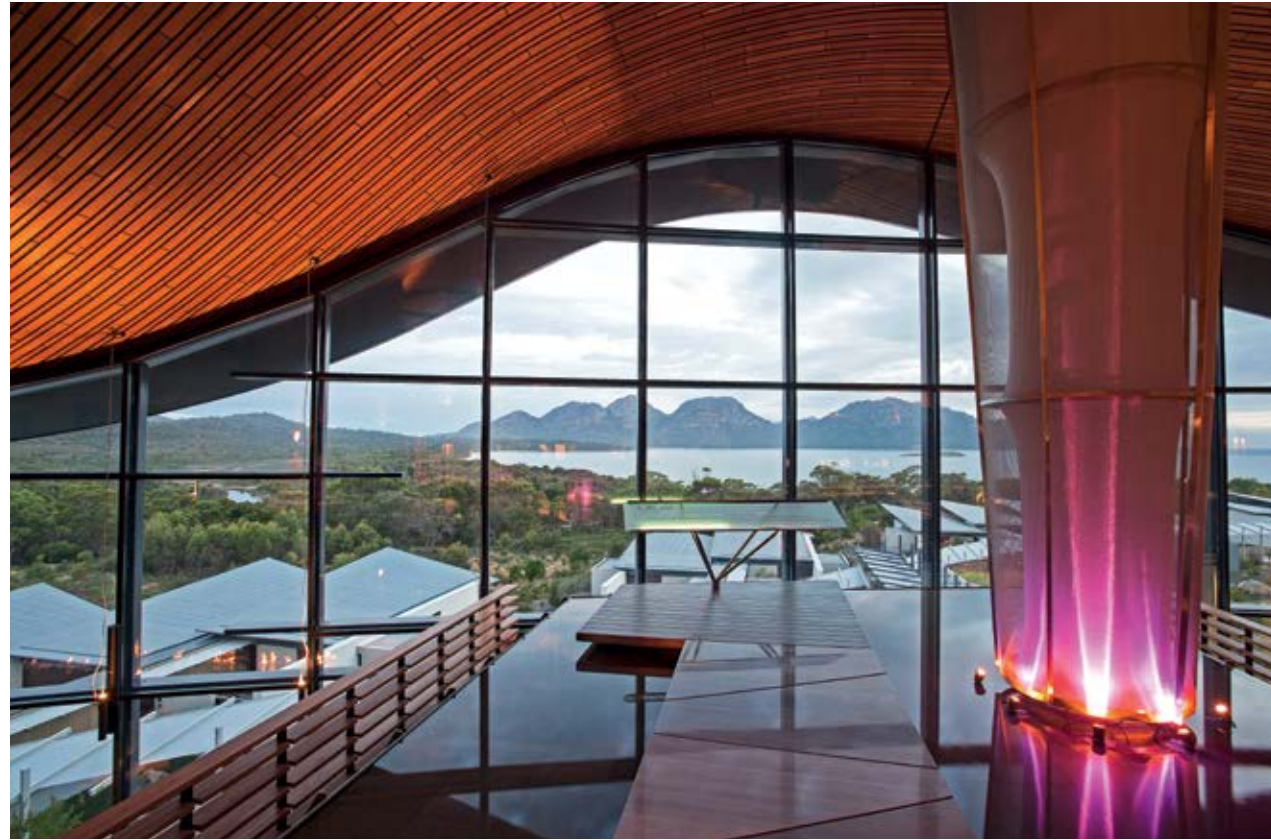
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“THEY COULDN'T POSSIBLY HAVE FATHOMED THAT THEIR PIONEERING SPIRIT WOULD BECOME SUCH AN ENDURING LEGACY .”



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DON FUCHS



PETER EVE



PETER PAP



TOURISM TASMANIA



NEWSPIX

“We’re inquisitive people who like to explore, and our sense of adventure is growing,” says Tourism Australia managing director John O’Sullivan, adding that the rest of the world is also jumping on board. “We’re friendly and welcoming, with some fantastic cosmopolitan experiences – and then there are the unique outback experiences that sit alongside them.”

From station stays to epic walks and iconic watering holes, the freedom to discover far horizons and distant seas is proving to be a major drawcard for overseas visitors; last year’s nearly seven million tourist arrivals marked an 8.2 percent jump on 2014 figures, with an extra 561,000 people heading Down Under. International visitors spent \$36.6 billion on their trips, representing a rise of \$5.5 billion in one year – the largest jump since the Sydney 2000 Olympics. As the economy transitions from the mining boom and the lower Australian dollar makes travel here more affordable, tourism is consistently being named as one of the key sectors contributing to growth, with newly released figures putting the combined value of international visits and domestic travel at a record \$113.5 billion for 2015.

“What we’ve seen over the past number of years is that the economy is now shifting towards the services-based industries, and tourism is a very critical part of that,” John says. “It is our largest services export and it is growing

very healthily because Australia is good at it; we’re good at providing services and products and experiences.”

John is about to board a plane to Germany where he will be helping to man the Australia stand at the world’s leading travel trade show, ITB Berlin. It sounds like our nation is an easy sell. “People rate it as one of the most beautiful countries on the planet, and this is our competitive advantage – the fact that our country is inherently beautiful means that we are playing to a real strength, and the experience that people get will be friendly, quality and affordable,” he says.

After Berlin, John will head to Norway to meet with a major travel partner before stopping off in key markets India and Singapore on the home stretch to Sydney. He takes trips like this almost monthly, and through touting Australia’s tourism wares to world markets he knows what visitors want.

“We’ve seen a real rise in emphasis over the past number of years on the experiential element of travelling, and what we are finding is that international visitors want to immerse themselves in Australia,” he says. “They don’t want to look at the bridge; they want to climb it. They want to go to a winery and meet the winemaker, or go to a restaurant and see the chef. They want to see how locals live and they will try to do the things that the locals are doing; it’s about doing something people back at home haven’t done before.”

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*CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The main lodge at Tasmania’s Saffire Freycinet; El Questro Homestead, WA; feeding a saltwater crocodile at Adelaide River, NT; participants in a Pennicott Wilderness Journeys trip, Tas; Laura Dance Festival, Qld.*





*Tourism innovator Drew Kluska (centre) with (l-r) R.M.Williams Editor in Chief Mark Muller and R.M.Williams CEO Raju Vuppalapati in the Flinders Ranges, SA.*

Increasingly, this means straying from what seasoned travel guide Drew Kluska refers to as the beaten Sydney-Reef-Rock track. “It is a very good product, but it’s formulaic, and people aren’t into formulas any more; they want something that is going to enhance their lives and create memories and bonds that will last a lifetime,” Drew says.

Drew’s travel company, The Tailor, creates customised itineraries packed with one-offs – fly-in dinners with the owners of an outback station, pearl buying in Darwin with the Paspaley directors, a marine biologist-led tour of a private island. There will soon be an R.M.Williams-tailored trip that will see travellers complete a workshop tour in Adelaide and receive a fresh pair of boots before heading bush to where the company’s story began beside a creek in the Gammon Ranges.

“Our customers come to us with their dreams and they make three basic requests: that their time is well-spent, that their travels are authentic and their adventures are exclusive,” Drew says. “Authenticity is the key and people want that deeper, more life-enriching experience with a little more luxury than they are used to, as holidays are few and far between and cannot be wasted.”

So while the Sydney Opera House and the Great Barrier Reef will always deservedly draw the crowds, they are now more likely to compete with the wild allure of places such as South Australia’s Flinders Ranges, or, increasingly, Tasmania’s Freycinet Peninsula.

## THE RISE OF THE LUXURY LODGE

Country hospitality reigns supreme, with regional and remote Australia setting the national benchmark for accommodation utopia. From Kangaroo Island’s Southern Ocean Lodge (pictured) to Wolgan Valley Resort in the Blue Mountains, Queensland’s Lizard Island and the Northern Territory’s Longitude 131 overlooking Uluru, luxury lodges have arrived, offering unprecedented exclusivity by virtue of their remoteness and intimacy.

“Luxury lodges just simply didn’t exist when we started our company nearly two decades ago, but Australia is now one of the powerhouses in luxury worldwide, particularly around our regional and outback areas – we do that very, very well,” says The Tailor managing

director Drew Kluska. “There is a real plethora of great products out there now that are absolutely nailing it; small tourist operations with only a few people working for them who are really taking it to an incredible level.”

Tourism Australia managing director John O’Sullivan says luxury lodges provide significant social and economic advantages for regional areas. “What’s really important about those lodges is that they provide that authenticity of experience engaging with local communities, employing local people, and also working with some of the other local attractions to provide additional experiences,” he says. “And I think that there is more opportunity in the luxury space in different locations – the Pumphouse, which opened at the start of last year (on Tasmania’s Lake St Clair) is a great example of this and it’s sitting at 100% occupancy.”

Coastal sanctuary Saffire Freycinet, with

its breathtaking views over Tasmania’s Great Oyster Bay, is widely considered as the jewel in the nation’s tourism crown. When the \$32 million 20-suite development opened in 2010, it became both a trailblazer and an accommodation benchmark.

“Saffire is one of the key elements for the whole revival of tourism in Australia,” John says. “There wasn’t a lot of hotel development happening outside of the luxury lodges product, and in many ways it was that premium luxury sector and those types of properties that really kick-started the hard investment in the capital cities, because they could see the returns and the demand for the product.”

While the cities can employ the same cutting-edge design and have the advantage of easy accessibility, replicating the wow factor of these distinctly Australian regional experiences may prove difficult.





## THE TASSIE LURE

The Apple Isle isn't the flavour of the month, it is the toast of the nation. The annual 7% increase in tourist numbers to that state is not only unprecedented, but visitors are spending almost \$2 billion after crossing Bass Strait. For a small island state, Tasmania is also punching well above its weight when it comes to certified quality attractions, having scooped the pool at February's Australian Tourism Awards. Premier Will Hodgman described the haul as testament to the small group of operators who bagged more medals than any other state or territory. "Their hard work, originality and talent has created experiences that are now rightly recognised as the best in the nation," he said.

Robert Pennicott is preparing to set off from Hobart on one of his most popular tours, cruising down the Derwent River and into the sheltered waters of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel surrounding Bruny Island. It might as well be heaven, for his Tasmanian Seafood Seduction experience offers groups of up to 12 a full day of feasting on freshly caught oysters, rock lobster, abalone and sea urchins washed down with Tasmania's finest wine, ciders and ale. "It's really a taste of what I like to do on my days off; forget about the rest of the world with fantastic food and a few drinks in a beautiful location," he says.

Robert's company, Pennicott Wilderness Journeys, offers six different nature-based experiences that have won an incredible 12 Australian Tourism Awards between them. In December, he partnered with the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service to launch a 70-minute eco-tour for the state's newest major attraction, located on the peninsula east of Hobart. Described as "an artwork rivalled only by the landscape" the 46-kilometre Three Capes Walking Track within Tasman National Park links the World Heritage-listed Port Arthur Historic Site to Cape Pillar and Cape Hauy, with eventual plans to complete a loop out to Cape Raoul. Eco-cabins have been built for the four-day journey, which is tipped to become as famous as the Overland Track that weaves through Tasmania's Wilderness World Heritage Area from Cradle Mountain to Lake St Clair.

"I think that people are after authenticity and really nice, soft adventure interaction with flora and fauna," Robert says. "Without a doubt, remote is really important; people really want to feel like they're stepping out of their normal comfort zone. Here, you're traversing the highest sea cliff in the Southern Hemisphere and when you're standing on top of Cape Pillar looking over to Tasman Island, you'll get the best selfie that anyone takes all year." >



*A walker breathes in the view from The Blade on the new Three Capes Walking Track, Tasmania.*





TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND

Visitors explore the Undara Lava Tubes in Queensland’s Gulf Country.

Indeed, the rise of the self-portrait (‘selfie’) photograph, often incorporating a scenic backdrop, has added a whole new dimension to sightseeing. Tourism Australia is keen for enthusiasts to snap away, for such photos could be worth more than gold in this social-media age, where free opportunities to spread the word by sharing Australia’s treasures with the world have become big business.

“We have a saying, ‘No-one tells a story better about Australia than the people who live here or travel to our country’,” John says. “We would never get a lot of the content that we see on social-media channels from an ad agency shoot.”

Almost 7 million people follow Tourism Australia’s Facebook page, while more than 2.1 million people soak up the incredible stream of Instagram images on the @australia account. Tourism Australia has surveyed these users, and 69% of them believe that posting their pictures on Instagram would help promote travel to Australia. A whopping 91% of international respondents, meanwhile, have indicated that an awesome picture would inspire them to find out more about Australia, while 87% said it would entice them to visit. “It has a huge influence both domestically and internationally, and it is about inspiring would-be visitors to take that next step,” John says.

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## BIG SPENDERS

Both domestic and international travellers are soaking up all that Australia has to offer, with the nation’s tourism sector reporting record growth in 2015.

### INTERNATIONAL VISITORS 2015

Visitors ('000)	6859	↑8%
Visitor nights ('000)	248,107	↑11%
Total trip expenditure (\$ million)	36,583	↑18%

### DOMESTIC VISITORS

Overnight trips ('000)	87,054	↑7%
Visitor nights ('000)	321,968	↑4%
Expenditure (\$ million)	57,897	↑6%
Daytrips ('000)	179,591	↑9%
Daytrip expenditure (\$ million)	19,004	→0%

Combined value of international visits and domestic travel in 2015: a record \$113.5 billion (9.7% increase). While tourism is a big earner, it’s also a big employer. The industry directly and indirectly employs around 925,000 people (or 8.1% of total employment) in nearly 270,000 businesses that include accommodation, food services, retail trade and transport. Demand for additional tourism workers is estimated to grow by 123,000 – including 60,000 skilled – by 2020.

Source: Tourism Research Australia





KEN EASTWOOD

## UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

When Wooleen Station's David Pollock and Frances Jones (pictured) embarked on a radical destocking program to try to regenerate their land (issue 102), the couple relied on tourism to survive. "For five of the past eight years we have been 100% dependent on it," Frances says.

Without sheep or cattle, the 1530-square-kilometre property located in Western Australia's Murchison has transitioned from a farm-stay tourist model to an eco-haven. "We had to establish a new audience, and while we have largely lost the international market that wanted to see mustering and working dogs, we are getting people that are passionate about the environment," Frances says.

Today visitor numbers are capped to minimise pressure on the land. "We won't accept more than eight people in the homestead at any one time even though we can fit 16, and it's a similar

situation with the camp sites, which people sometimes find difficult to understand considering there are thousands of hectares of land out there," Frances says.

Wooleen Station hopes that planned changes to Western Australia's pastoral leases will unlock further tourism potential in the Rangelands, which cover 87% of the state. The government is considering a Rangelands Lease that would allow pastoralists to diversify into tourism and conservation. The reforms would also allow for automatic renewal of the lease, with improved security of tenure tipped to increase the value of pastoral leases.

"In our area, the older people are walking off pastoral leases as they want to get out but they can't sell them, so the bill could pave the way for a new, younger generation to come in and see greater opportunities and invest with more certainty," Frances says.

## BUSH REVOLUTION

Daly Waters Pub owner Robyne Webster is a remote Northern Territory operator who believes that the internet age is creating a bush pub revolution.

"With customers able to book online, overnight stays have increased substantially, and we have become a destination on the travellers' itinerary rather than a random stop," Robyne says.

During the tourist season, the pub 600 kilometres south of Darwin with its famous bar full of bras, bumper stickers and other traveller calling cards can plate up as many as 300 daily serves of its famous Beef and Barra dish. Customers will line up as early as 9am to secure a good spot in the camping ground before settling back on a bar stool.

"I believe that people come here to experience the warmth and hospitality offered by staff who are delighted to see you and genuinely want you to enjoy the ambience of the pub," Robyne says. "During our busy time, we have nightly entertainment and the place just hums with laughter and strangers talking to each other; that rarely happens in the metropolitan areas because everyone is too focused on themselves."

Robyne says local customer trade has become a thing of the past due to changes within the beef industry, so a lot more outback pubs are recognising the value of the tourist dollar and are choosing to get involved with their local tourism organisations. "Everyone is embracing social media and using it to drive their businesses – we certainly do!" she says.

Looking at the bigger picture, it's global consumers that are the focus of a new media campaign currently being rolled out by Tourism Australia. The promotion addresses the growing demand for nature and adventure-based tourism while capitalising on one of Australia's biggest competitive advantages: its coastal and aquatic experiences. The theory is that they have always been an important part of the destination story, but have never before taken centre stage. It's not surprising that the Three Capes Walking Track is one the key destinations of the 'There's Nothing Like Australia' promotion. The Cascades Waterfalls and Aboriginal rock art within the Northern Territory's Litchfield National Park, kayaking through Katherine Gorge, the Remarkable Rocks of South Australia's Kangaroo Island and sailing off Rottnest Island, WA, are among other regional experiences showcased in a three-minute film narrated by one of Australia's biggest international stars, actor Chris Hemsworth.

"It's different down here. The air just has more ... life in it," Hemsworth says in his deep Aussie drawl. "Australia isn't just a place you see. It's a place you feel."

About \$40 million dollars is being spent in the first half of this year spreading that message, starting in the United States with a joint campaign with Virgin Australia and then across other key international markets, including the United Kingdom, China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Malaysia and New Zealand. It is yet to be seen whether the campaign will eclipse Australia's most memorable tourism promotion that featured actor Paul Hogan.

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MARK MULLER

*Riders experience the Snowy Mountains on horseback with Reynella Rides.*

Three decades on, Kakadu continues to ride the enduring wave of success triggered by ‘Hoges’ offering to put an extra shrimp on the barbie and the *Crocodile Dundee* movies that followed, although visitor numbers have dropped considerably since the mid-1990s, when they peaked at 250,000. Parks Australia says today’s annual figure fluctuates between 180,000 and 200,000; in 2015, there were roughly 181,000 visitors to the park, compared with around 276,000 visitors to Uluru-Kata Tjuta. Tourist criticism over a lack of reliable vehicle access within Kakadu appears to have hampered the World Heritage-listed area’s efforts to return to its halcyon era, but Parks

Australia is making serious inroads, with the Director of National Parks, Sally Barnes, committing \$6 million to upgrade infrastructure and visitor facilities over the next two years. More than \$700,000 worth of roadworks enabled 2 Mile, Maguk and Jim Jim Twin Falls to open 4–6 weeks earlier after the wet season, while the road leading to Gunlom, with its picturesque plunge pool, is now accessible to all cars. Welcome bays, boat ramps, sheltered picnic areas, new toilet facilities and year-round ranger-guided activities have all been slated for this year, while a new walking track manual, vastly improved park signage and even wi-fi is also being rolled out to help enhance the Kakadu experience. >





KEN EASTWOOD

*Sections of Cape York's Peninsula Developmental Road are progressively being sealed.*

## BEHOLD THE BITUMEN

Across the Queensland border beyond the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York is considered one of Australia's final frontiers, but not even the remote Far North can escape progress. A \$200 million state and federal program of works is currently underway to progressively seal sections of the Peninsula Developmental Road, and while the diehard bushwhackers may be overheard muttering exaggerated comparisons to Melbourne's Bourke Street Mall, Cape York's operators aren't complaining.

Bramwell Station's pet brolga is squawking its head off, announcing the arrival of yet another visitor to Australia's most northerly pastoral property. Located 200km from the tip of the mainland, the 132,000ha cattle and tourism operation near Lockhart River is the final fuel and food stop for travellers braving the Cape's Old Telegraph Track from the southern end. The station first opened its gates to tourists in 1983, but it wasn't until the Wenlock River was bridged in the late 1990s and road conditions were vastly improved that the industry showed any real promise.

"The bitumen will eventually come to within 100km south of us, but there's already bits and pieces of sealed sections and we've seen huge improvement already," owner Wendy Kozicka says.

In addition to meals and live entertainment during the May to October dry season, Bramwell Station offers accommodation, fishing, self-guided 4WD tracks and

swimming at Palm Springs. Wendy and her partner, Vince Bowyer, say they would be lost without the thousands of visitors who stop by each year. "If we relied on the cattle prices over the past few years, we would be bankrupt – nowadays it is roadworks and tourism that are our two big industries," Wendy says. "We have wholeheartedly embraced tourism, in particular, and it has reciprocated by allowing us to improve our infrastructure."

A brand new bar and restaurant with seating for up to 100 people opened in May, with station staff also busy gearing up for an expected 5000-strong crowd at the annual Bramwell Cup Bush Carnival from July 1 to July 3. Tourist park manager Ken Godfrey says bookings at Bramwell have never been higher. "It's getting busier all the time and in 2015 we had more caravans and off-road campers here than ever before because of the improvements to the roads; they're just so much better," he says. "And my bookings for this coming season are already triple what they were last year – it's unreal."

At the opposite end of northern Australia in Western Australia's Kimberley region, the road from Kununurra to the world-famous El Questro Wilderness Park is sealed all the way to the turn-off.

"The last 16 kilometres is unsealed roads with river crossings, so four-wheel-drives are still necessary," El Questro assistant general manager Andrew Mackay says. The other option is for owners to leave their cars





Ross and Jane Fargher, owners of the iconic Prairie Hotel.

OUTBACK STORY

at the Emma Gorge carpark and organise a lift to their accommodation, or fly in.

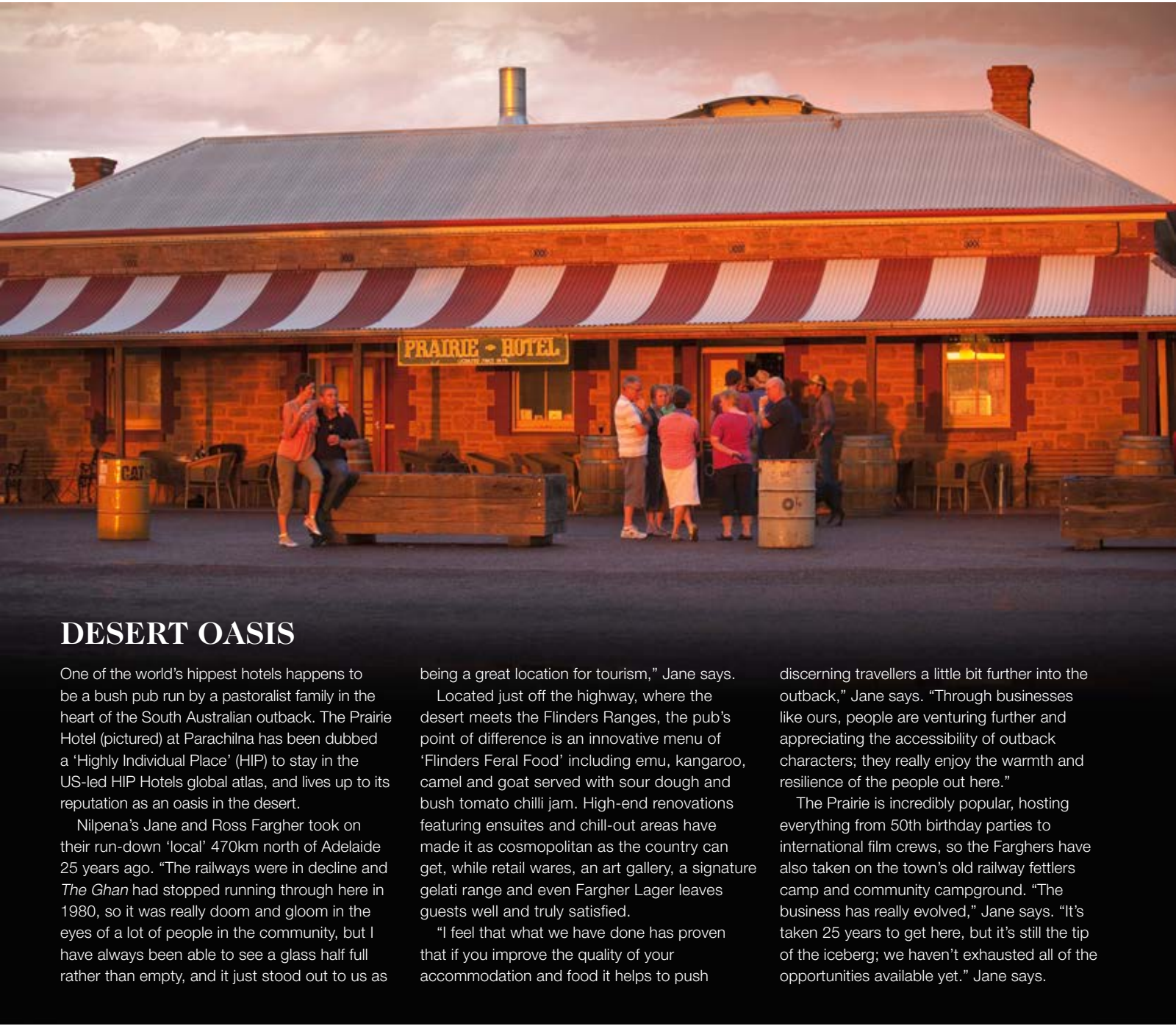
Heavy machinery access largely determines the road conditions along the rest of the Gibb River Road, with grader sightings proving more popular than some of the outback scenery.

Ellenbrae Station Homestead manager Larissa White keeps a scone tally to gauge Gibb River Road tourist traffic levels – last year she baked 9461 serves for travellers who stopped by. Demand has almost doubled since the beginning of the decade and while Larissa would love to ascribe the boom to her baking prowess, she admits that tourist numbers are up across the board. “The improved road conditions have certainly helped,” she says.

Bridges can now be found over some Gibb River Road creek crossings and a number of the steeper ranges have been sealed, so it is nowhere near as rough as it used to be – and nor is it as remote. “I think there has also been some real improvements in cars and caravans. When we first came to the area almost eight years ago we would never see a caravan, but now every second or third vehicle is towing one,” Larissa says.

Caravan Industry Association chief executive Stuart Lamont confirms that the nation is on the move. “Grey nomads make up 25% of the market, but more and more families are taking their kids out of school to do the big lap, and we are also seeing a lot more gramping going on, with grandparents taking their grandkids with them,” Stuart says.

The association says Australians spent \$8.7 billion on caravans and camping last year, with estimates that there are now 600,000 registered owners of caravans, camper trailers, campervans and motor homes. “It’s all based around escapism and that ability to go out and reconnect with nature, childhood memories or social groups,” Stuart says. “It’s just a great way to get away from everyday life; Australia has so many great places to go to and technology is making everyone a lot more aware of them, so why wouldn’t you go out and explore them?” >



DESERT OASIS

One of the world's hippest hotels happens to be a bush pub run by a pastoralist family in the heart of the South Australian outback. The Prairie Hotel (pictured) at Parachilna has been dubbed a 'Highly Individual Place' (HIP) to stay in the US-led HIP Hotels global atlas, and lives up to its reputation as an oasis in the desert.

Nilpena's Jane and Ross Fargher took on their run-down 'local' 470km north of Adelaide 25 years ago. “The railways were in decline and *The Ghan* had stopped running through here in 1980, so it was really doom and gloom in the eyes of a lot of people in the community, but I have always been able to see a glass half full rather than empty, and it just stood out to us as

being a great location for tourism,” Jane says.

Located just off the highway, where the desert meets the Flinders Ranges, the pub's point of difference is an innovative menu of 'Flinders Feral Food' including emu, kangaroo, camel and goat served with sour dough and bush tomato chilli jam. High-end renovations featuring ensuites and chill-out areas have made it as cosmopolitan as the country can get, while retail wares, an art gallery, a signature gelati range and even Fargher Lager leaves guests well and truly satisfied.

“I feel that what we have done has proven that if you improve the quality of your accommodation and food it helps to push

discerning travellers a little bit further into the outback,” Jane says. “Through businesses like ours, people are venturing further and appreciating the accessibility of outback characters; they really enjoy the warmth and resilience of the people out here.”

The Prairie is incredibly popular, hosting everything from 50th birthday parties to international film crews, so the Farghers have also taken on the town's old railway fettlers camp and community campground. “The business has really evolved,” Jane says. “It's taken 25 years to get here, but it's still the tip of the iceberg; we haven't exhausted all of the opportunities available yet.” Jane says.



## THE FINAL FRONTIER

Imagine the nation's network of highways as a giant spider's web stretching across the continent, with smaller threads such as the Tanami and Oodnadatta tracks, the Gibb River Road, the French Line and the Canning Stock Route piecing everything together. Australia's longest operating safari guide, Rex Ellis, says the real outback can now be found in the gaps in between. "You have only got to fly in a jet across Australia and look down and see that the outback is alive and well, even though there are roads all across it," Rex says. "And once you get down there, you could be back 100 years quite easily – apart from your satellite phone."

A former jackaroo and station overseer, Rex has been a modern-day explorer for more than 50 years, traversing some of the continent's most hostile territory and racking up firsts like notches on a boab tree. In 1969 he ran what is believed to be the first commercial 4WD safari to the top of Cape York, backing it up two years later with a similar expedition across the Simpson Desert. Rex has also tackled the same stretch of sand with camels, using only a compass as a guide. "Imagine the Simpson Desert, with no distinct geographical features – after two weeks of travelling you could be 24km off your line, but now with a GPS you can shave days off your trip," he says.

Times have changed, with improved accessibility, machinery and communications making the nation smaller than ever, but Rex says Australia still offers plenty of opportunities to lose yourself – figuratively or quite literally.

"Yes, you can drive a 2WD up to Cape York, even though the corrugations are pretty crook, but you have only got to leave these main roads and head off down

one of the side tracks and you will perish anywhere if you don't do the right thing," he warns.

Rex is relaxing at home by the Murray River, waiting for the next big wet before he can set off towards possibly Australia's last frontier; following the whim of the flooding rivers into Lake Eyre in a flat-bottomed aluminium punt. "There is nowhere else in the world where you can do that and it is really special; the isolation sets it apart," Rex says. "A lot of people say we are mad doing this and it's dangerous as you are following a flooding river for up to 800km, but you can die getting out of bed. Anyhow, getting into trouble is often the adventure; it's never boring and what really matters is knowing how to get out of it and being able to rely on your mates to help you, otherwise you really will be up sh\*\* creek without a paddle."

Rex developed a taste for this unique form of adventuring during the inland floods of 1974, when Lake Eyre was full for the first time in white memory. He says he made the only full north to south crossing after leading an expedition down the Diamantina River, following it up that same year with two boat safaris down the flooding Cooper Creek to the lake. "Since the 1974 flood I have made a specialty of waiting until these desert rivers flood and we follow them in big tinnies," Rex says, adding that his last trip was in 2011. "It almost happened this year – there was a lot of local rain, but you need the Queensland water behind it, running down the Cooper, the Diamantina and Georgina rivers to make it navigable. South Australia is like a big sponge; it only needs a bit of a kick on for that Queensland water to come, but once the monsoon has passed there is no chance, so it looks like I'll have to wait a bit longer." It's all part of the adventure.



*Adventurous travellers  
haul a tinnie along  
Queensland's Bulloo River  
under the guidance of  
tourism pioneer Rex Ellis.*