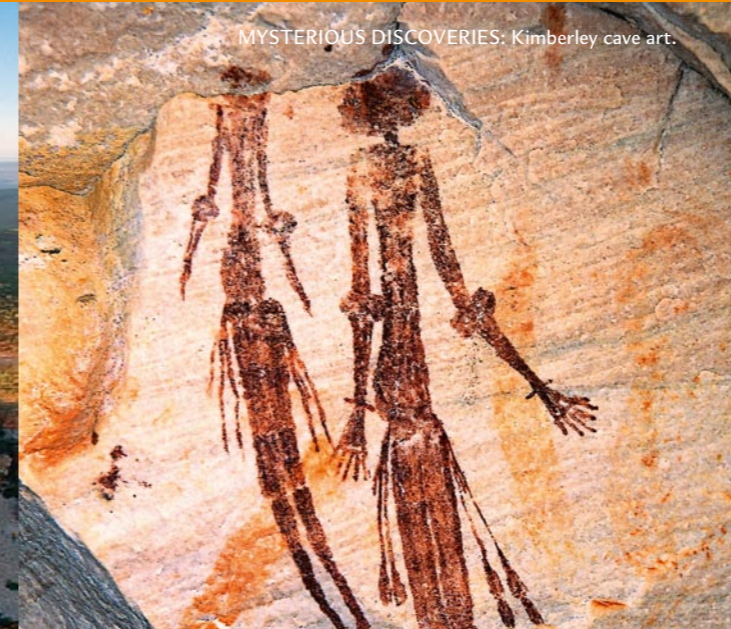


Flight club

David Hogan and his wife Marina spent five days touring the Kimberley by helicopter, covering some of Australia's most spectacular landscapes, unique coastal camps and distinctive rock art of the pre-Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia's North West.

BREATHTAKING: The Cockburn Range.



PRIVATE RETREAT: Amsara.



SIMPLE LUXURY: Kimberley Coastal Camp.

THE KIMBERLEY remains one of the world's most inaccessible and isolated destinations. It is a land of extremes. While difficult to appreciate from the ground, a helicopter is the ideal way to appreciate the sheer scale and stunning beauty of this fascinating region.

If you travel by Squirrel, like we did, you will enjoy air-conditioned comfort and wide, leather seats.

They can safely allow you to fly as low as 500 feet, land anywhere and have an excellent safety record – even if the engine cuts out, they are designed to auto-rotate and land gently.

Best of all, they can provide access to accommodation, attractions and fishing holes that aren't otherwise accessible and provide an experience that is still limited to a privileged few. No trip to the Kimberley should overlook the famed Bradshaw art, discovered in 1891 by explorer Joseph Bradshaw.

This world-renowned and distinctive art often depicts tall slender people with elaborate headdress and adornments. It is thought to be the work of the earliest inhabitants of Northern Australia, even

before the arrival of the Aborigines to this part of the Kimberley approximately 10,000 years ago, but this is still somewhat a mystery. Wonderful examples of Bradshaw art can be viewed at both the Kimberley Coastal Camp and Faraway Bay.

We started our trip in Broome and rather than staying in town, we flew just two minutes north to Coconut Well and spent our first night at the very new **Amsara**.

Arriving that afternoon, we soon found ourselves in the pool, gin in hand, overlooking the magnificent Cable Beach. Despite being just out of town, one of the advantages of this location is its relative isolation.

We took an hour-long morning drive in the Amsara 4WD 10km along Cable Beach and saw no one. Perched up high and 500m back from the beach, Amsara allows you to enjoy the sweeping ocean views from either the pool or shaded garden without fear of mozzies and with a surprising lack of bugs.

Amsara offers complete privacy – there are only two apartments – and is a lovely alternative

to the resort options in town, but its proximity to Broome also means that even a one-night stay (like we enjoyed) is well worth the visit.

The apartments are sleek and open with all the amenities you would expect.

However, what makes this place stand out is the homemade produce and cooking. From breakfast in the garden to a magnificent rack of lamb for dinner, owners Don and Jan Hodgson ensure a stay at their establishment is a culinary delight.

We set off from Amsara at 9am, taking about an hour to run up the coast to Cape Leveque, enjoying the wonderful contrast between white sand beaches and deep red mini (three to four metre-high) cliffs.

From there we headed east across the incredible surging tides of the Buccaneer Archipelago, getting a birds-eye view of the distinctive “Kimberley curtain” – the black indicating the high tide mark.

After refuelling at Koolan Island, we flew several times over the Horizontal Falls in Talbot Bay, probably the region's best-known natural attraction.

This natural wonder sits in a narrow gap in the

rocks between a massive inlet and the rising and falling sea level, creating a natural waterfall.

As we were visiting at the end of the Wet season, we also took in the magical King Cascades on Prince Regent River and flew over a campsite we had landed on two years previously to see our pile of wood still untouched, an indication of how isolated this region is.

Heading north, we took up an invitation for lunch and a quick stopover at the **Kimberley Coastal Camp**, which is only accessible by boat or helicopter, with no road in or nearby airstrip.

This must be one of the most isolated places in Australia and has a real Robinson Crusoe feel, wonderful in its practical combination of simplicity but relative luxury forged out of an unforgiving environment – there would be few places like this in the world and the tranquillity is complete.

It is a fisherman's paradise, and the waters are abundant with everything from the famous barramundi to mangrove jack, finger mark, mullet, threadfin salmon, giant trevally, Spanish mackerel, tuna, queen fish, coral trout, blue bone and numerous other species.

But the ample fishing is just one reason to stay.

The weather is reliable and the waters calm, creating the perfect environment for exploring the coast in the camp's “Barra Boats” or the more comfortable 7.5m *Warabi*.

Pluck succulent oysters off the rocks or pick mud crabs from the mangrove-lined creeks all while visiting beautiful white sand beaches or relaxing on a deserted island while your guide cooks up the day's catch. Interested?

Kimberley Coastal Camp is also a haven for birdwatchers, artists, photographers and naturalists. This part of the Kimberley coast contains an extraordinary diversity of habitats including stunning sandstone outcrops, tranquil billabongs, open woodland, paperbark-lined rivers, huge tidal estuaries, mangrove-lined creeks, remnant patches of rainforest, and idyllic islands and beaches.

Turtles, wallabies, dingoes, sea eagles, crocodiles and even the occasional humpback whale and calf are all inhabitants of this truly pristine environment.

Walking trails have been created to cater for a

quick pre-dinner stroll through to an all-day hike.

The rock art is another fascinating attraction and this part of the Kimberley has one of the richest repositories in the world.

Scattered among the red sandstone and native grasses, the fully netted huts are basic but comfortable, with a mix of king and twin/single beds, ceiling fans and views of the gulf.

The common area, “The Shed”, is the real highlight and straight out of *Gilligan's Island* with a large open-sided pavilion, built using recycled timber, with high raked ceilings.

The huge swinging day bed, (built, like most of the camp, by owner Rocky Terry) is the perfect place to eat, relax or fall asleep.

Renowned for the lovely Bella's cooking, we enjoyed just one extraordinary lunch before going on our way, but I would recommend the Kimberley Coastal Camp for at least a week. It's welcoming, mystical and unique.

Further around the coast, the internationally celebrated **Faraway Bay** provides a similar range of activities and environment but is another level up in luxury.



TOTAL RELAXATION: Faraway Bay.



SPECTACULAR: El Questro Homestead.



Booking a tour

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SPLENDID ISOLATION: Berkeley River.

Arriving late afternoon, we quickly found ourselves sitting in the rock pool watching another glorious Kimberley sunset over the bay, while enjoying the obligatory sunset drink and hors d'oeuvres – this is about as good as it gets.

Two nights were not nearly enough and it is no wonder so many guests are now repeat visitors and often before leaving book the same time for the following year.

Faraway Bay is the product of many years of hard work by Bruce Ellison and his wife Robyn. Bruce lives on site and knows the area intimately having worked previously for many years as a contractor, surveying and setting up isolated work camps for mining companies.

Only after discovering the current location of Faraway Bay did he realise he had found paradise, a rocky outcrop overlooking the bay, a beautiful beach and a permanent spring providing the camp with a never-ending supply of the freshest of water.

Upon this spot, perched on a headland overlooking the tranquil waters of Faraway Bay, Bruce built Eagle Lodge.

Spectacular in its rustic simplicity and built around the natural undulations of the land, this open-air kitchen come dining room is where guests get to eat, relax and enjoy the majesty of the view. It is beautifully finished with a slate floor and enormous jarrah beams recovered from the Wyndham Wharf, with a choice of hammock, slouch chairs or rock pool for chilling out.

A fully stocked cool room and long, open kitchen is put to good use by your personal chef cooking a range of delicacies throughout the day.

This is where you get to feast on freshly caught wild barramundi, mangrove jacks, and reef fish, home-baked bread and exotic, sun-ripened fruit and vegetables picked and flown in from Kununurra's Ord River. Frasers' chef Chris Taylor also runs an applauded cooking school on a seasonal basis.

There are eight cabins, all well appointed in that casual Kimberley way, sleeping a maximum of 16 guests. In typical owner-operator style, Bruce doesn't like to have more than 12 at a time, unless visitors come in one group, as they lose that sense of intimacy and personalised service for which they have become known.

Pride over profit – I love it! Six of the eight cabins have their own indoor bathroom plus an outdoor, solar-heated, spring-water shower surrounded by shoulder-high corrugated iron, which allows you to enjoy the view of the bay and stars while showering in total privacy.

Faraway Bay offers an impressive range of activities to choose from. The awe-inspiring King George Sound Falls is a gentle two-hour boat ride around the coast in the 45-foot *Diamond Lass*, plus there is an endless range of fishing locations nearby.

Arriving early in the season, we also spent a few hours at Monitors.

One of many natural swimming holes, Monitors is some 20 by 30 metres across and created by an awesome waterfall that tends to slow as the season progresses.

We also visited once-popular Aboriginal meeting places where metre-deep mounds of sun-whitened oyster shells have built up over thousands of years.

Like anywhere, your hosts make the difference between an average and extraordinary stay. Now in his ninth season, our guide Steve is probably the most valuable asset at Faraway Bay. A relatively young bloke in his thirties, Steve has a real Crocodile Dundee feel about him.

Lean and with a swarthy look, he is clearly capable of just about any task required from fishing to explaining rock art, boat engine repairs to finding bush tucker.

Our wives were also more than impressed – with Steve as our guide, the girls were suddenly and inordinately passionate about going fishing!

If time permits, ask Steve to take you on one of the several walking trails. Explore the area and view some of the amazing rock art, much of which he has discovered and continues to discover each season. Even if bird watching has not been your thing, you will quickly become enthralled by his knowledge of the vast birdlife in the area.

Although we later flew through the deep and winding water-filled canyons of the King George Sound River, we didn't have a chance to take the

day trip by boat. We chose instead to enjoy some great fishing adventures, catching everything from estuary cod to barra and threadfin salmon while losing a few to small sharks.

This is lazy man's fishing with no skills required and Steve always ready to bait and untangle lines. Get up close and personal with the resident croc or hook an unsuspecting shark. It's all here in this pristine wilderness.

Bruce Ellison says about 10 percent of guests are from flying clubs from all round Australia, flying helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. Clubs such as the quirky Rotor Heads tell stories of rounding up camels and dingoes, and stopping in the middle of nowhere to have a picnic on the way. It's another world up here.

Just over an hour's flight from the Faraway Bay is El Questro.

Landing in a private helicopter on the manicured lawns at the homestead's front door is very cool and when talking to guests my wife and I quite naturally fell into the habit of referring to "our" helicopter on the front lawn.

The Homestead is regarded as the ultimate in Kimberley-style luxury and we spent two, glorious air-conditioned nights there. The rooms are beautifully appointed with gorgeous linen, iPod docking stations and great views.

On the rare occasions it is not booked out, (it is rumoured even Nicole Kidman couldn't get a booking) the famous Chamberlain Suite, with

its bathtub perched over the gorge, is highly recommended.

The communal areas of the homestead are beautiful. The freely accessible open bar and relaxing lounge space are a haven and your hosts pride themselves on creating an environment where guests feel immediately relaxed and at home.

A private dinner on a rocky outcrop overlooking the gorge was a highlight but, but for the less brave, you can choose to eat either with the other guests or in private in other wonderful locations around the homestead.

There is a limitless range of things to do, including Zebedee Springs.

Purported to aid in fertility, they are closed to all but homestead guests every afternoon and should not be missed.

A sunset trip down the Chamberlin Gorge on a tinnie with a 2hp silent electric motor is a wonderful experience.

The landscape is spectacular, the atmosphere rather spiritual. Knowing us a little too well by this stage, our hosts packed a mini esky with gin, tonic, ice and lemon and set us on our way.

There is some incredible rock art at the end of the gorge but we were unable to view it on this visit.

Heli-fishing doesn't guarantee results and depends somewhat on the experience of your guide, but it does mean you can go places you would not normally visit.

Although not highly successful, we did hook some barra and some massive catfish up to one-metre long. Fishing on a bend in the river with a 300 foot red cliff opposite you is wonderful even if you don't catch any "keepers".

And the look on the face of your guide when he mistakes your cries of "big fish hooked" joy for squawks of "ankle in a crock's mouth" terror is priceless. Horse riding, bush walks, swimming in hot springs, gorges and heli-flights... the list goes on.

Next morning we awoke early for the four-hour run back to Broome (via Derby for some jet fuel), just in time for our commercial flight to Perth.

Again, the inland landscape is breathtaking. Lightly wooded flatland cut by deep gullies end abruptly in sheer cliffs as though sheared with a knife. Vaulting columns of rock, tidal flats, winding rivers, boab and all sorts of animals from kangaroos to donkeys, camels and cattle keep the trip interesting. 📍

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