

IMAGE COURTESY OF TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

A TALE OF MANY MOMENTS



Far left: The Bungle Bungles, Purnululu National Park, WA.

Left: Horse riding with JR at Home Valley Station.

Michelle Hesse visits Kununurra, and finds herself at the heart of an incredible region whose people make sure the many attractions on offer are never forgotten.

There are some experiences that you know, while you're right in the moment, will always stay with you. Ones that give you that goose-pimple-inducing rush of adrenaline and a stream of exhilarated thoughts – 'I'm so alive'... 'What a world'... 'Magic'. During the two weeks of the Ord Valley Muster, a music festival in the far northern West Australian town of Kununurra, I had too many of those moments to fit into one tale, but a taste of the people, places and experiences on offer in this extraordinary ancient region might be enough to capture that rush, and that feeling of being a part of something bigger than just the lives we lead.

Poetry of the land

I'm not really one for horses. But ambling along at Home Valley Station with JR – a former rodeo rider – talking about life as the sky stretches in endless spans of blue around us, with the majestic Cockburn Range before us, and the pressed red dirt below, it occurs to me that I'm not going anywhere for a particular reason. There is no one thing at the end of my horse ride. It is about the ride itself – the journey across a tiny portion of the 1.5 million hectares that make up this extraordinary station at the jagged southern tip of Western Australia. It is about the slow plod of the horse hooves and my body gradually falling into the comforting rhythm of the animal's movements. A black cockatoo calls out from the branches

of a boab, a kangaroo bounds through the scrub, cows meander along in the hot sun rays, and I look out at the ranges that have stood here in the Kimberley for millions of years – witness to tiny human beings, like ants, busy building lives in the rocky folds of her plains.

That afternoon, Home Valley Station Indigenous guide Alfie, takes a group of us into his traditional country to swim at a billabong. We splash in the cool water and dive in behind the waterfall that cascades from the red sandstone cliffs. An agile freshwater crocodile slips through the water to find a quiet corner away from our noisy excitement. We're told not to worry about the 'freshies' as they don't consider us to be a meal and are apparently scared of us. I do my best to believe this as we dry off in the sun.

Alfie then takes us to the banks of a river where he points out various bush tucker that he and his clan eat when they're out on the land. The day comes to an end at the station's private lookout where we sip on a glass of champagne as we take in the expansive views across the country where Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* was filmed. The sun sets over the Cockburns, as the moon rises over Erskine Ranges, and in the last of the day's light, Chris Fenech, one of the Home Valley Station mentors, recites a poem he wrote after being inspired by the land and Diesel, a traditional land owner. One of the lines captures something we're all feeling. "An ancient place with mysterious ways, here for me and you." ▶

Walking in the wetlands

Parry Creek Farm is a retreat based on 48 hectares owned and run by Terry White and his partner Anne Jongedyk. It's a beautifully natural estate on the edge of picturesque wetlands outside a small town called Wyndham. Here the land is generously peppered with old weathered boabs, some inscribed with the names of the drovers who walked and worked the land many years before.

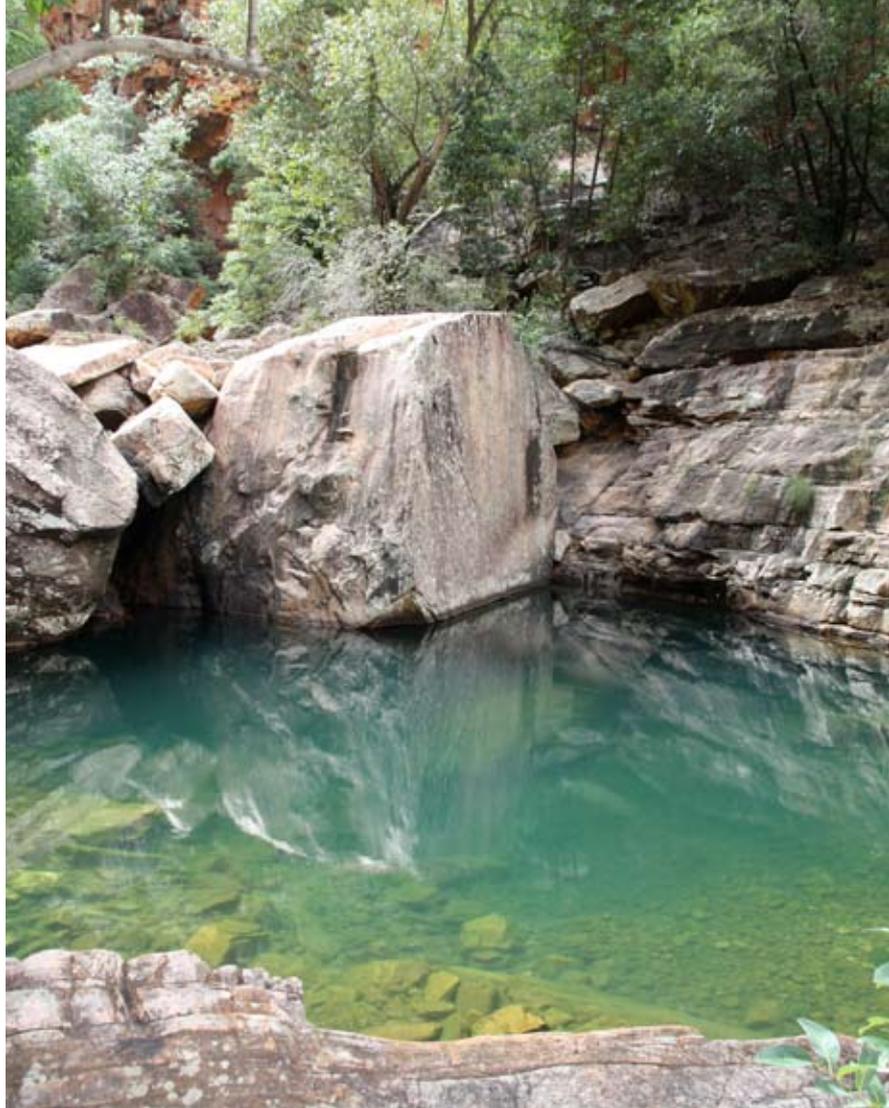
Anne's son Kurt takes guests keen enough to rise before 6am on an early morning walk around the property, which is dissected by the local lagoon system. The water, which rises to form a massive inland lake during the wet season, keeps the land lush, and its surface is haphazardly sprinkled with lily pads and a soft green moss intermittently disturbed by the insects, fish and birds such as magpie geese, brolgas, whistling ducks and cattle egrets, that all nest and thrive here.

Kurt tells us about a former caretaker who lost his dog to a saltwater crocodile that they've since had removed from the river. He was hanging the washing out to dry when the beast came hurtling out of the water at breakneck speed, and had rolled the poor dog and slammed it on to the riverbank before he knew what was happening. It gets us all thinking. As we return to the homestead and move along the elevated walkways that join the main guesthouse and restaurant to the three more secluded cabins, we start to fully grasp a sense of the raw danger present in the country here. It's beautiful, but it's pulsing with the reality of true Kimberley nature, and the obvious, ever-changing temperament and affects of the weather.

Back at the homestead, I swim in the inground pool surrounded by clusters of tropical plants and a variety of palms and mango trees. Rain begins to steadily fall but the pool's water is warm and comforting. I lie on my back and listen to the downfall on the palm fronds. My other world, where busy streets, schedules and deadlines dominate, slips further from my mind with each plop of heavy rain.

Art, by mother nature

I can clearly see the shadow of our helicopter, like a little fly on a backdrop of beehives, marked upon the ancient orange and black stripes of the Bungle Bungles. I can't believe what I'm seeing. No photo can do justice to this kind of spectacle. We hover for a few moments and then dip back down towards another jaw-dropping, steeply-cut gorge that presented Bear Grylls a challenge



when he tried to clambour up the side of it recently. Our pilot points out a mass of Bungles the size of Uluru, and comments that even if that landmark was the only sight to see here, people would still cross the world just to marvel at its bizarre beauty. And to think, the entire area of the Bungle Bungles is more than 300 times the size of Uluru, so the sheer enormity of the sight is enough to have your head spinning. We dip and cavort, go up and down and ▶

Top: A natural pool on the walk to Emma Gorge, El Questro Wilderness Park.

Above: A menacing saltwater crocodile at Wyndham Crocodile Farm.



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Clockwise from top left: Country track at Parry Creek Farm; Yellow flower of the Kapok tree; Emma Gorge Waterfall at El Questro Wilderness Park; Pool and bar area at the Kununurra Country Club.

through the iconic Australian landmark, and as the strong wind from the chopper blades whips the hair back from my face, I'm grinning like a mad woman as the biggest sculpture by mother nature that I've ever seen spreads out below us. It's magic.

Full-moon fiesta

The main event of the annual two-week long Ord Valley Muster – that 5,000 people have been waiting for – is finally here. The Airnorth Kimberley Moon Experience attracts people from all over Australia and is a celebration of impressive Kimberley talent.

The tuxedos and fancy frocks merge to become a vibrant stream of fabrics on the red carpet that snakes into the cocktail area, set up metres from the Ord River. Clever lighting has the myriad of succulents and other stunning Kimberley flora along the riverbank lit up in alternating blues, purples and greens, all against a sky that is going from the bright blue of day towards an inky black canvas alight with stars and a full moon. It's been raining on and off for days, so everyone is smiling up at the heavens and thanking their lucky stars that the party of the year event wasn't cancelled. More and more revellers pour onto the banks of the Ord as local Indigenous band, Roadworx, hits the stage. Families gathered with their dinner and drinks crammed into eskies start to dance on the grass, the little kids crazed with excitement.

In the corporate area, dinner is served on tables draped with white cotton. It's a surreal experience, being seated on a lawn beneath the open night sky. Every now and



then a diamond necklace sparkles like a happy wink from those in the know – Kimberley Fine Diamonds, as a loyal sponsor of the night, has generously lent out most of its treasured dazzlers. I repeatedly touch my neck to make sure I haven't somehow dropped mine into the grass.

Suddenly there is an anticipation in the air that ripples through the crowd like a Chinese whisper. Farnham is on his way, on a boat heading down the Ord River. When Farnham hits the stage and belts out his famous tunes, everyone becomes 16 again, hitting the dance floor and busting out 80s moves like there's no tomorrow.

Boat ride to remember

Penny I believe her name was, told me to 'Go jump on the boat with them!' and fuelled by the music (and the

FACT FILE

Home Valley Station

08 9161 4322

www.homevalley.com.au**Parry Creek Farm**

08 9161 1139

www.parrycreekfarm.com.au**Slingair Heliwork**

Slingair operate aeroplanes out of Kununurra and helicopter rides from a base in the stunning Bungle Bungles.

08 9169 1300

www.slingair.com.au**Kimberley Fine Diamonds**

For an incredible selection of jewellery, with gems mined from the local area, this store in the heart of Kununurra is a must-do while you're in town.

08 9169 1133

www.kimberleydiamonds.com.au**Kimberley Moon Experience**

The main event of the two-week long Ord Valley Muster.

www.ordvalleymuster.com.au**Triple J Tours**

This boat tour company offer the longest daily river cruise in Australia, travelling 55kms from Kununurra to the Ord Dam while passing through a variety of different landscapes

from the wide expanse of Lake Kununurra, the magnificent Carlton Gorge and into the true Ord River. Thanks Jeff and Cam, for the impromptu midnight boat tour with the locals and inhouse entertainment!

08 9168 2682

www.triplejtours.net.au**Kununurra Country Club Resort**

This resort, which is a part of the Aspen Group, is an oasis in the middle of Kununurra, and the perfect place to base yourself while exploring the Kimberley. The restaurant has a fantastic choice of meals, the rooms are stylish and have all amenities. There is a bar area where bands perform around the pool, which is surrounded by palms and tropical plants.

Shuttle buses regularly take guests around town and airport transfers can be organised.

1800 808 999

www.kununurracountryclub.com.au

Thank you to Rosita Stangl and Mellen Events, for bringing together many magical Kimberley moments.

www.mellenevents.com

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cocktails), I did as she said. I leapt aboard a boatful of strangers and we took off down the Ord River under the light of the full moon. I later realised there was no drop-off in town, but two locals, Mel and Russ, told me not to worry, their daughter was at a friend's sleepover, so I could bunk in her bed. Wine glasses were filled and one of the performers from the Moon Experience, Sara Storer, picked up her guitar and began to play and sing. Sara entertained us, sitting on the boat's bow, as it moved back and forth with the gentle currents. It was quiet except for her beautiful, soulful voice, and as her words flowed down the Ord and were swept into the riverbank's grasses, I had one of my hundred or more Kimberley moments. A moment where I thought – I'm here. I'm alive. What a world...

Long after Sara had packed up her guitar, I climbed into the single bed belonging to my new friends' 11 year-old daughter (thanks Jasmine), and a line from one of Sara's cover songs, originally sung by Little Heroes, came to mind: "Adventure's so hard to come by ... If you ever come back, just drop by ... One perfect day..." ■

