

Travel - Heart of the Kimberley by Tony Barrass - May 29, 2010



Cyril Yeeda, grandson of legendary Kimberley stockman Charlie Yeeda, was among the station's first batch of trainees and now helps run the stables. Picture: Colin Murty *Source: The Australian*

- **DESTINATION AUSTRALIA**

IT is just after 5pm and we're swaying along the Gibb River Road, the big Toyota diesel throwing up a plume of dust that will cling to us all the way to the front gates of Home Valley Station.

On our right the Cockburn Range sneaks up on us and before long is showing why it is regarded as one of the East Kimberley's most spectacular formations.

On our left, the tan landscape, wide and sprinkled with ghost gums and plump boabs, gently rises and falls like the chest of a sleeping giant.

Obviously feeling neglected of our attention, the evening sky then puts on a show that makes you realise, as it always does when you're here, that there are few places on the Australian continent as naturally stunning as the Kimberley. It is as if God had thrown a bucket of paint - a mixture of mauves and bright oranges and deep crimsons - across the floor of heaven.

Too corny? Probably, but in the dozen or so times I've visited the Kimberley, I can't remember once when I haven't been stopped in my tracks at some stage by its imposing and beguiling beauty.

"Not bad, eh?" says [Chris Fenech](#) from beneath his big cattleman's Akubra as he keeps a watchful eye out for errant kangaroos and stray Brahman cattle that have a habit of appearing roadside unannounced, and almost always in fading light.

With wife Nicolle, Chris is one of about 40 workers at Home Valley. They spend about seven months helping to run this unique operation before they return to Sydney to promote the business to the bigger, lucrative markets of the eastern seaboard.

And Home Valley is unique. It is owned and operated by the Indigenous Land Corporation, which is using this and their Karunjie and Durack River stations -- spread over 3.5 million acres (1.4 million hectares) of the east Kimberley -- as an economic base to better the lives of local Aborigines through jobs and training opportunities, somewhat of a rarity for the local Miriwoong Gajirrawong around the nearby towns of Wyndham and Kununurra.

Using a system in which highly qualified mentors are put in key positions on the station, young indigenous trainees are learning the basics, covering everything from how to run a commercial kitchen to teaching tourists about bush tucker to horticulture. The overall plan is delivering real cultural and social benefits to local communities. And you only have to engage any of the young workers to see how much they love their job and relish the opportunity to earn a wage and get ahead in life.

Cyril Yeeda, one of the local indigenous boys and the grandson of legendary Kimberley stockman Charlie Yeeda, is one such worker who is now playing a growing role in running the station's stables. But for the time being, he's in another world, making us chuckle as we hurtle along, singing loudly to country and western singer Faith Hill who is coming through his headphones loud and clear.

Cyril had been working in Wyndham as a gardener before being taken in the first batch of trainees four years ago.

Trainees now number almost 50 per cent of the staff, and that number's growing, which is the whole point. In between songs, Cyril says he's chuffed that he's just finished his Certificate 3 tourism and hospitality level.

As we cross the gently flowing Pentecost River and into the main driveway of the settlement, the Cockburn Range again dominates the landscape. Reminiscent of the backdrops to old John Wayne movies, you almost expect to look up and see smoke signals rising from the jagged ridges.

In fact, controlled burning is being carried out across the Kimberley while we're here, giving the whole area that smoky, spiritual aura so reminiscent of travelling the subcontinent.

Talking of movies, this is where they filmed some of the spectacular scenes for Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*, a fact not lost in the marketing of the station. And why wouldn't you beat that drum for all it's worth?

The Pentecost, which eventually winds its way into the Cambridge Gulf, which in turn empties into the Timor Sea to the north, is celebrated croc country, so if you get out of the car to cast a line, pitch a tent, have a closer look or take some pictures, here's a small tip: be careful where you step.

Home Valley's heart is warm and engaging. Boabs pepper the main guest area and lean over the Dusty Bar, an open-sided shearing shed-like structure where visitors eat, drink and be merry. Two swimming pools allow campers and guests to escape the heat. The accommodation, ranging from the luxurious "grass castles" that overlook Bindoola Creek at the back of the settlement, to basic but clean camping grounds, cater for all comers.

To my mind, nothing clears the dust better than a beer, which I'm served fast and cold. Ten frantic ceiling fans hanging from the overhead beams work furiously in the balmy night, while Powderfinger wafts out of the main kitchen as head chef Anthony Campagna prepares the evening's menu. Later, as we're enjoying a glass of Margaret River sav blanc to wash down the barramundi, a bright orange and black butterfly stops the conversation for a minute and we watch it dive bomb into the glass of plonk. It then twitters off, entertaining tables on its way.

In the morning, just before first light and with the help of a screeching corella or eight to shoe-horn me out of a very comfortable bed, I walk past campers emerging from their rolled-out swags, take a left past the front gate and walk about a kilometre up to a ridge. The burn-offs give the morning a milky, lazy mood and as I wander along, I inadvertently startle a resting 'roo hidden in tall grass, which quickly bounds off at top speed into a rush of tall, brown reeds.

As the day warms up, Chris takes us to several spots around the station.

We sit on the banks of the wonderfully charming Pentecost and watch Troy, the resident fishing expert, help an older European couple catch their first barra. Although the tinny they're on is a good 500m from us, the women's whoops and squeals of delight echo across the water.

Another onlooker -- a croc of about 5m -- slowly drifts toward the dinghy to take a closer look.

If you're into fishing, this is the right spot.

Apart from barramundi, the fat bream and catfish are plentiful. Often they are cooked where they are caught and anyone who may turn their nose up at the much-maligned catfish is asked to take part in a fireside Pepsi test; people can rarely tell the difference between the three.

About another 20km west along the Gibb River Road, we stop at Bindoola Falls as the temperature hits 35C. It's a deep, green pool drilled in a chocolate gorge, which doubles as

raging river in the wet season; we walk down the cliffs and within minutes are bobbing away in the most spectacular of swimming holes, grinning like village idiots.

Home Valley is not of the standard of, say, El Questro, but it is keen to be an alternative to those looking at both top-of-the-range accommodation and excellent camping facilities along the Gibb River Road. Where it does stand out is in its unwritten mission statement to better the cultural and social fabric of the local indigenous community while making a contribution to a vitally important industry in one of the most spectacular settings imaginable. That alone makes it a must-see on any trip to the east Kimberley.

www.hvstation.com.au

The Australian's WA bureau chief Tony Barrass and photographer Colin Murty were guests of Home Valley Station.

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