

EL QUESTRO

IT'S 4AM AND THE FIRST HINT OF MORNING light reveals the contours of an ancient Kimberley landscape. Ranger Sarah Duguid is waiting at the entrance to El Questro Homestead in an African-style safari vehicle. "The track to Buddy's Lookout is a little rough, so hold on to your gear," she says. Reaching the lookout, guests watch entranced as the sun rises and a burst of crimson washes over the vast landscape. "This is what the Kimberley is all about," Sarah says. "I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

El Questro is a 404,600-hectare property in the east Kimberley region of Western Australia. The first pastoral lease was taken up here in 1958 and named with a nod to the big Spanish ranches featured in American western novels. In the early 1990s, it was taken over by visionary English couple Will Burrell and Celia Shelmerdine. Will dreamed of a vast cattle station while Celia fuelled the tourism dream. They opened the homestead to tourists in 1992 after injecting \$10 million into the property. Almost 20 years later, Delaware North bought El Questro and added the three cliff-side retreats, plus improvements across the entire property.

El Questro Homestead is open from late March to late October, which is the dry season in the Kimberley. Everything about the landscape is dramatic, from the massive Durack Boab Tree, just a short walk from the homestead, to the thundering Chamberlain River below. There are hot springs

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to soak in, remote-fishing spots only reached by helicopter and bush tracks to cascading waterfalls. And, at the end of each day, you come back to the luxury of the homestead and share your experiences over pre-dinner drinks and canapes before dinner.

Mornings and evenings are the best time to get outdoors, as that's when the weather is mild. While the landscape may initially appear dry and rocky, tucked away in its creases are lush, verdant the gorges and waterways. One of these is Zebedee Springs, which are mineral-rich hot springs that bubble up out of the ground just a few kilometres from the homestead. They've spawned a tropical terrarium of enormous Livistona palms that surround cascading waterfalls and a natural pool. Zebedee Springs is an exclusive playground for guests of the homestead every afternoon. Sitting in these warm pools surrounded by towering palms beneath an enormous Kimberley stone ridge is a soothing experience. Indeed, some guests swear by its restorative and healing benefits.

Another nearby attraction is Halfway Pool, which is a series of spring-fed pools and rapids enclosed by towering, sheer cliffs. Those who make the easy hike are rewarded for their efforts with a waterfall-fed swimming hole, complete with tropical fish.

After working at El Questro for 14 seasons, general manager, Lori Litwack, and partner Alan Groom, who is head chef, have an incredible knowledge of the place. When asked about a round float bobbing on the Chamberlain River close to the homestead, Lori explains: "If we see that the float has some teeth marks on it, we can tell if a large crocodile has moved in to the area."

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The homestead sits prominently on a cliff top above the Chamberlain River. It's an intimate setting for up to 18 guests, accommodated in nine suites. The three cliff-side retreats have a contemporary feel about them; as if they've been transported from a chic urban resort onto this wild and remote landscape. They are carefully positioned using the natural contours of the cliff top to ensure both spectacular views and complete privacy.

Arriving at the homestead, you feel like you're at a friend's luxury home. You can wander up to the bar for a drink, enjoy quiet time in the library or set off to explore by yourself or with a ranger. Then there are the meals. Dining at the homestead is usually a long-table experience with guests eating together, however a romantic candlelit dinner can be arranged in a secluded riverfront location.

Alan describes his menu as "modern international" featuring the freshest of local ingredients. The multicultural character of the region is reflected in flavours that are the essence of the Kimberley. "My style is to produce dishes that are a melding of Indigenous and Asian ingredients with some European and classical influences," Alan says. "We grow our own herbs and use wild produce such as wild rosella flowers, Capok, lemongrass, mango, lime and guava as well as native spices."

When it comes to seafood, local barramundi, threadfin salmon, goldband snapper all play starring roles. As for the remaining ingredients, most are grown in Kununurra's Ord Valley. Among of Alan's spectacular creations is mudcrab bisque flavoured with lemongrass, sautéed boab root and sea asparagus.



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EL QUESTRO HOMESTEAD

LOCATION
 110km west of Kununurra in the east Kimberley.

GETTING THERE
 Airport transfers are available from Kununurra by road or air. Kununurra is serviced by regular flights from Darwin, Broome and Perth. There are also two airstrips on the property for chartered flights or private aircraft.

WHAT'S INCLUDED
 Accommodation, meals, non-alcoholic beverages, selected Australian and New Zealand wines, beer, spirits, cocktails and champagne, picnic hampers and some activities. Additional charges apply for the cellar master list, specialised touring, and plane and helicopter tours.

WHAT TO BRING
 Sturdy shoes for bushwalking, swimmers, camera, hat, sunscreen, insect repellent and comfortable, loose-fitting clothing.

WHEN TO COME
 El Questro is open from late March to late October. **SOMETHING ABOUT THE WEATHER HERE**

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The best way to experience the magnitude of El Questro station is from the air, indeed many of the best places are only accessible by helicopter. The station pilots know all the good spots and land the helicopter just metres from fish-laden water holes, eddies and snags. Helicopters can also whip guests off to beautiful waterfalls and swimming holes such as Miri Miri Falls. Flying over the stunning gorge country for an afternoon swim in the enormous fresh water pool at the base of the waterfall is delightful. And, as completely inaccessible by road, you can guarantee absolute privacy.

El Questro is a stunning setting for photographers, whether it's capturing the tumultuous skies in the build-up to the wet season, or the painted landscape at dawn and dusk. El Questro rangers ensure you will be at right spot at the best time of day for the ultimate capture. Or, if birdwatching or bushwalking are your thing, rangers will tailor outings to suit. Within sight of the homestead, guests can take a three-kilometre guided cruise through the Chamberlain Gorge. As well as admiring the abundant birdlife, you can watch spotted archerfish take aim and shoot water jets to dislodge their meals. They are incredibly accurate at targeting small reptiles and bugs up to about 1.5 metres.

Whether you've had a full day outdoors, lazed around the pool, or got lost in a book in the library beside the well-stocked bar, you can return each evening to the comfort of the homestead. And on moonless nights when the skies are clear, you can gaze up and see the Milky Way at her most dazzling best.

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