

{outback} **TRAVEL**

An El Questro
luxury cabin
perched on the
edge of the
Chamberlain River.

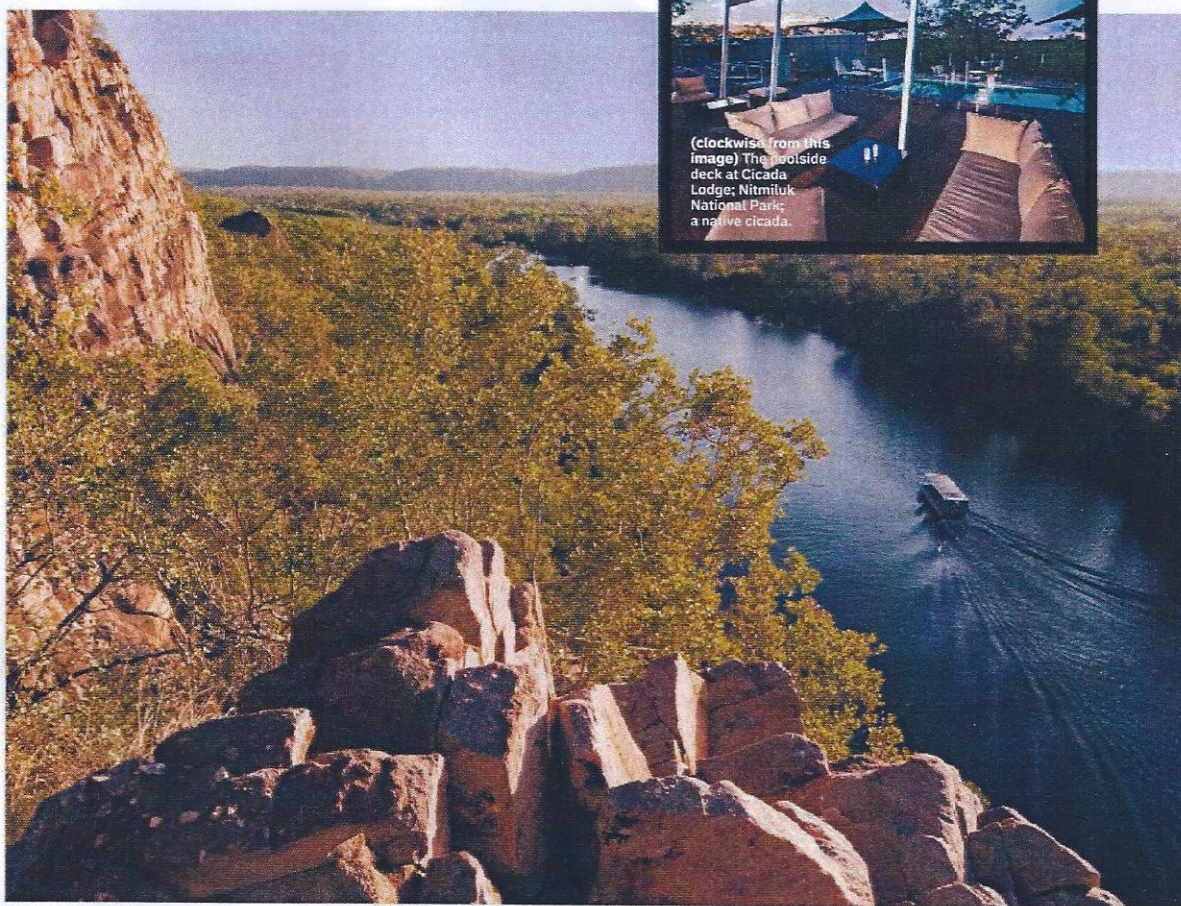
let's get LOST

*Eco-sensitive lodges, indigenous
cultural retreats and luxe
homesteads top the list of
quintessential five-star
destinations in the spectacular
Australian outback.*

WORDS ROB INGRAM

virginaustralia

APRIL 2014 | 083



(clockwise from this image) The poolside deck at Cicada Lodge; Nitmiluk National Park; a native cicada.



The Jawoyn people from the Katherine area in the Northern Territory represent the world's oldest living culture, and their myths and legends go back to a time before time.

Nitmiluk, the Jawoyn name for the Katherine Gorge and Nitmiluk National Park, means 'cicada place'. According to Jawoyn legend, the dragon-like early ancestor Nabilil came from the west near Wadeye, paused at the entrance to the gorge when he heard the 'nit nit nit' song of the cicadas and named the place Nitmiluk.

Jane Runyu-Fordimail, who heads up the Jawoyn-owned Nitmiluk Tours group, says, "To my people, the song of the cicada is soothing and comforting. What better name for a lodge that welcomes people from all over the world?"

Cicada Lodge (Gorge Rd, Katherine, NT; www.cicadalodge.com.au), in the Nitmiluk National Park, about 300 kilometres south of Darwin and 32 kilometres north-east of Katherine, is the latest in sleek properties bringing experiential tourism to the sophisticated Australian market. And as cultural and environmental tourism sectors gain momentum globally, Australia, with its fascinating Indigenous culture, largely pristine environment and strong sense of adventure, is perfectly placed to benefit.

There was a time when the grandeur of the outback wilderness was the preserve of hardy souls who walked long distances in shorts and boots, and were happy to sleep around a campfire. A time even when traditional owners and visitors were awkward about intrusion. But the Jawoyn people's motto is 'sharing our country', and they, and other outback operators, are meeting a new wave of demand.

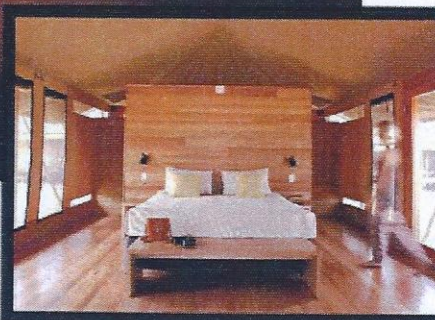
The new generation of outback explorer, while seeking a more gentrified base camp, embraces an ecologically sustainable form of tourism focused on natural areas and fostering cultural understanding, conservation and appreciation.

Cicada Lodge is a well-appointed stay. The strong simple forms and organic integrity of the design allow it to blend into its dramatic escarpment location. Each of the 18 luxury outlying rooms has a private balcony, a generous bedroom, sitting area and a bathroom with Bulgari toiletries, and is dotted among the bushland. Natural earth colours, textures and timber finishes are contemporary as well as appropriate, while much-needed air-conditioning, screens and overhead fans take care of climate control.

The reception and bar share the main lodge building overlooking a pool deck, as does the dining room where the menu is

*(outback)* TRAVEL

(clockwise from this image)
Magpie geese at Mary River Wetlands; a Wildman Wilderness Habitat; camping Wildman style.



a nod to local flavours such as lemon myrtle, pepper berries and even crocodile tail cooked in paperbark with dry saltbush.

The lodge is intended as a base from which guests can enjoy the range of touring options and cultural and natural attractions on offer. A helicopter excursion to an ancient rock art site and the gorge river cruises make indelible experiences.

Hospitality professional and Nitmiluk Tours chief executive officer Clive Pollack says, "The lodge has exceeded all our expectations in bringing a new level of accommodation, service and experience to the Top End. But we don't want guests going away raving about the lodge. We want them to go and talk about the experience."

ENVIRONMENT ON SHOW

This focus on experience is also true of Wildman Wilderness Lodge (Point Stuart Rd, Arnhem, NT; +61 7 5527 6860; www.wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au) on the spectacular Mary River Wetlands, a two-hour drive east of Darwin heading towards neighbouring Kakadu National Park.

While the lodge facilities are impressive, the reason they are here is important," says Grant Hunt, whose Anthology travel group manages the property for its traditional owners. "The wetland is a sensitive ecosystem and because of saltwater intrusion it won't remain like this forever. We regard it as a privilege to showcase it to as many people as possible."

Wildman is upmarket without being exclusive. There are three levels of accommodation: 10 stylish freestanding eco-cabins as well as 15 attractive safari tents, five of which are configured for families, complete with ensuite bathrooms. The communal main lodge houses the

Cicada and Wildman are both owned by the traditional custodians of the land they showcase — the Jawoyn people at Cicada and the descendants of various groups at Wildman, with both enterprises supported by Indigenous Business Australia.

"Guests may come for the spectacular environment," Hunt says, of the unique Northern Territory, "but no-one leaves without experiencing and respecting the traditional culture and social structures."

There is a huge diversity of traditional knowledge, culture, custom and lifestyle among the Indigenous communities, with

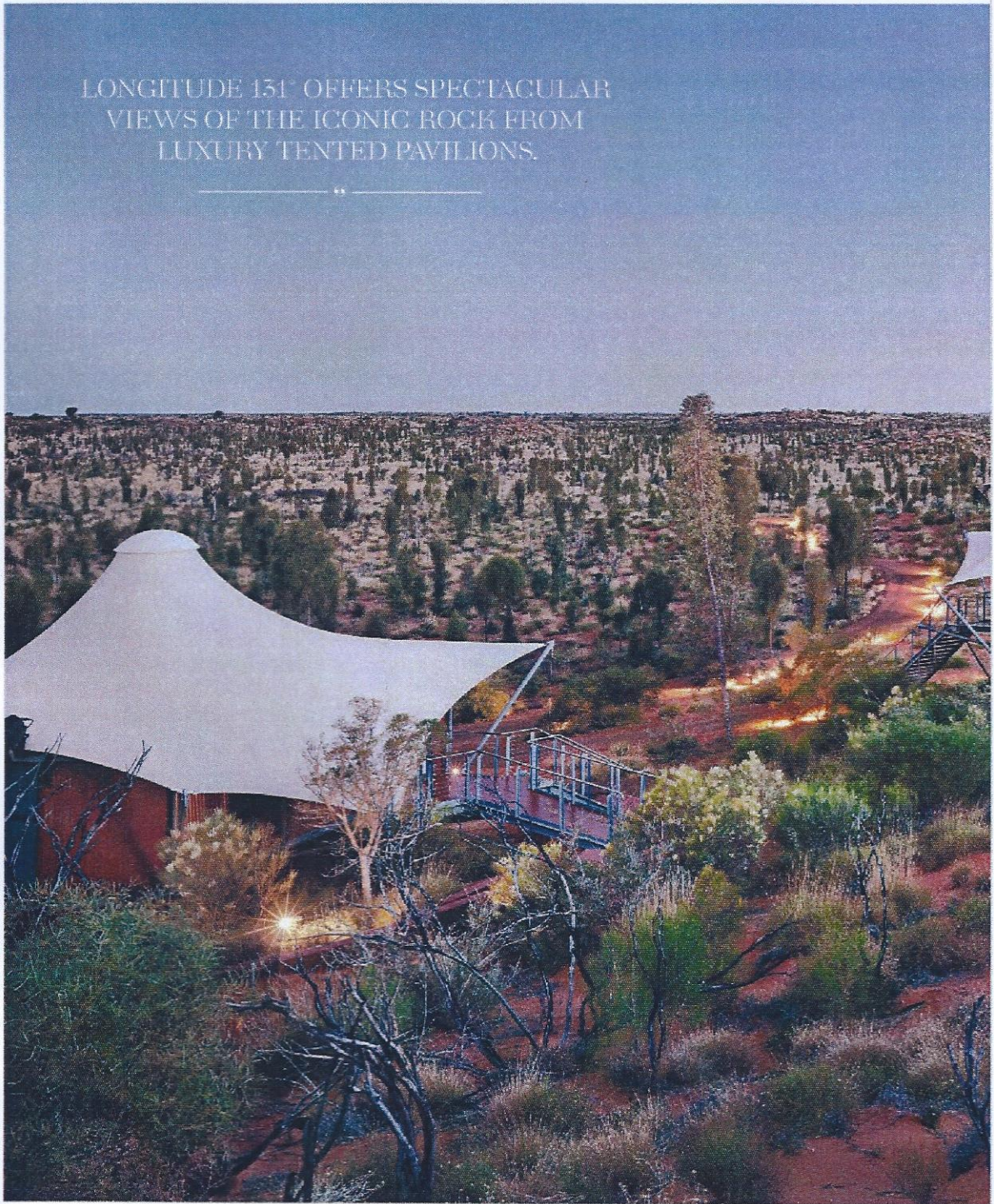
A HELICOPTER EXCURSION TO AN ANCIENT ROCK ART SITE AND THE GORGE RIVER CRUISES MAKE INDELIBLE EXPERIENCES.

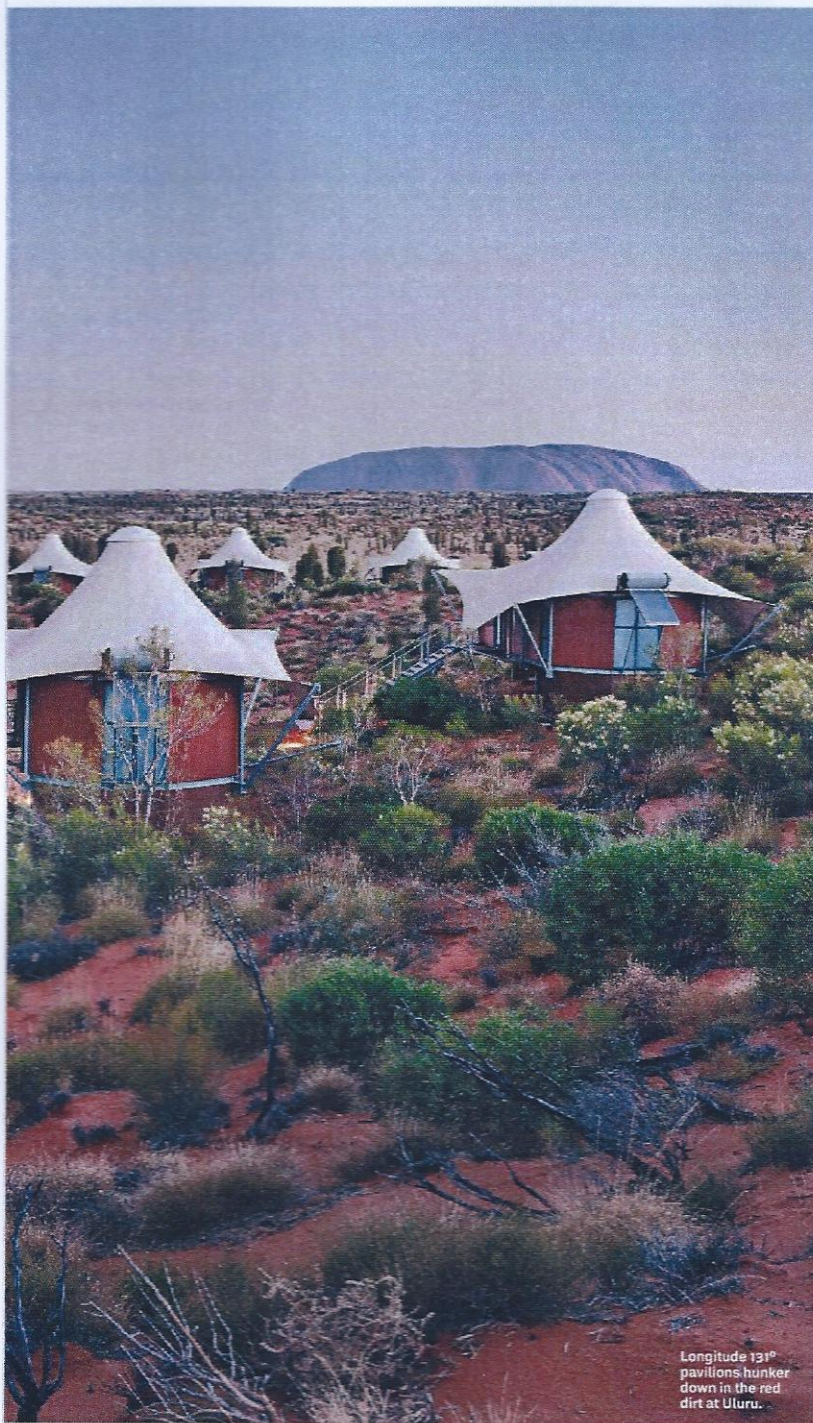
restaurant, bar and lounge and opens onto a deck that overlooks the infinity pool. The most popular activities with guests include cruises of the Home Billabong and the Mary River flood plain, an air-boat safari, a full-day Kakadu tour and a cultural walk with Indigenous guides.

little in common between those living in wetland and desert environments.

For most Australians the spiritual heart of the outback is Uluru, the sandstone monolith rising from a vast sand plain in the south-west of the Territory, but most of its 400,000 annual visitors are foreigners. ►

LONGITUDE 131° OFFERS SPECTACULAR
VIEWS OF THE ICONIC ROCK FROM
LUXURY TENTED PAVILIONS.



[outback] **TRAVEL**

Longitude 131° pavilions hunker down in the red dirt at Uluru.

The closest accommodation to Uluru is Longitude 131° (Yulara Dr, Yulara, NT; +61 2 9918 4355; www.longitude131.com.au) which offers spectacular views of the iconic rock from luxury tented pavilions located on the fringes of the World Heritage-listed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Longitude 131° joined the Baillie Lodges portfolio of luxury wilderness destinations last year, with CEO James Baillie promising to invest in both the property and the experience to "create an even deeper connection with the desert landscape and the Indigenous culture."

The 15 luxury pavilions feature stylish ensuite bathrooms, while the main lodge houses a sophisticated restaurant, lounge and library facilities. The Baillie Lodges association has resulted in a strong focus on gourmet dining, showcasing the flavours of desert foods. Apart from Table 131° dining under the stars, complete with Indigenous performances, guests may arrange to join chef de cuisine Seona McBurney in the kitchen to learn about her 'creative native' flavour matching or go on a bespoke bush tucker tour and tasting.

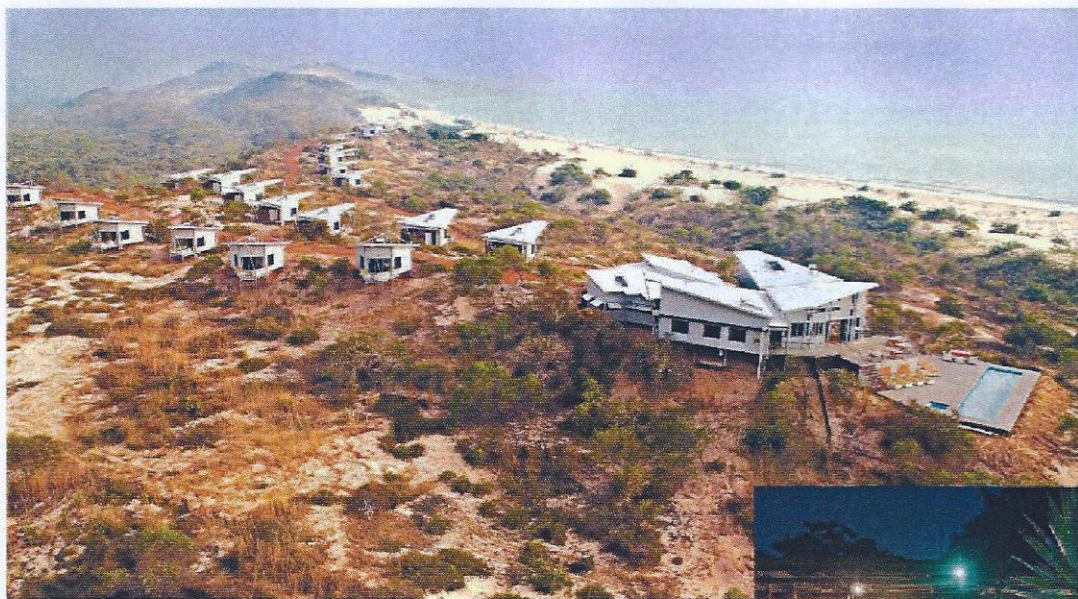
A tailored touring program offers guided walks to Kantju Gorge, Walpa Gorge in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park to see The Olgas, a sunrise walk around the base of Uluru exploring its folds and hidden waterholes, and a visit to Mulgara Gallery to view traditional and contemporary art.

FRONTIER OPULENCE

Three times the size of England, the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia is home to colourful desert, gorges, river valleys, lush rainforest and beaches. El Questro Wilderness Park alone spreads over nearly a million acres. Here the luxury option is the Homestead at El Questro (El Questro Wilderness Park via Kununurra, WA; +61 3 9426 7540; www.elquestro.com.au), a retreat that offers informal elegance for up to 18 guests.

Tim Smith, the managing director of Delaware North Australia Parks and Resorts, which owns El Questro, says the Park is one of the last true frontiers, with its rugged sandstone ranges, dramatic waterfalls, gorges and abundant wildlife. "In the middle of this ancient wilderness lies El Questro Homestead," he says, "perched on top of a cliff with bird's-eye views of the Chamberlain River."

The most sought-after room here is the premium Chamberlain Suite with ►

TRAVEL {outback}

floor-to-ceiling windows, a wrap-around verandah and an indoor-outdoor private double bath overlooking the gorge. Drop the soap and it's likely to be taken by a freshwater croc or barramundi. Another three Cliff Side Retreats sit on the edge of an escarpment with incredible views.

El Questro Homestead has a reputation for gourmet dining, featuring Indigenous flavours in memorable locations such as a secluded cliff top. Also on offer are bush, cultural and nature excursions and a gorge cruise, as well as swimming in waterfalls, rock pools and thermal springs.

COASTAL RETREAT

Beyond the red desert the Berkeley River Lodge (Berkeley River, WA; +61 8 9169 1330; www.berkeleyriver.com.au) brings sophistication to one of the last true coastal wilderness locations in the world. Located on Joseph Bonaparte Gulf on the remote North Kimberley coast overlooking the Timor Sea, the luxury lodge is a mere 150 kilometres from the nearest town of Wyndham. Access is by float plane from Kununurra, a helicopter, your own or a chartered boat, or even as an extension of a Kimberley Coast cruise.

Accommodation is in 20 luxury 'villas' sited on sand dunes with river or ocean views from the Gulf to Reveley Island. The modern design and natural colours and materials allow the villas to blend into the



(clockwise from this image)
A Daintree Rainforest walk; perched on the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf is the Berkeley River Lodge; tranquil waters abound at Bloomfield Lodge.

surrounds, and all have quality inclusions. The main lodge houses Dunes Restaurant, with menus that tie together the produce, seasons and moods of the setting.

The lodge's helicopter facilities and own fishing boats extend the range of guest activities to include river cruises, heli-fishing, wilderness picnics, waterfall and waterhole swimming, and visits to rarely visited landmarks in the area.

On the opposite coast, Bloomfield Lodge (Wongabadda Point, Weary Bay, Qld; +61 7 4035 9166; www.bloomfieldlodge.com.au) is an eco-oasis in the north of the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest. Your



phone won't work here and there's no internet or television. The road from Cairns ends on the wrong side of Weary Bay, so you'll need to complete the journey by boat, a trip that takes about 20 minutes. If you fly in by light aircraft — 30 minutes from Cairns — the pilot usually makes two approaches, the first to scare kangaroos off the runway. Four levels of luxury accommodation are terraced across the hillside to make the most of the spectacular Coral Sea views.

Activities are a tough decision: maybe a guided rainforest walk, a river cruise or reef snorkelling. The menu at the al fresco dining room doesn't shy away from decadence; you can also enjoy a private dinner in a secluded gazebo serenaded by the sounds of the rainforest, far, far away from everyday life. ☺

GETTING THERE To book your flight to any of these destinations, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).