

feature

‘See, over there,’ Mick Clark says, pointing to what look like shiny black berries on a tree on top of Pigeon’s Lookout. “Whatever you do, don’t think of it like a boiled lolly. That’s caustic grevillea. If you were to pick off that fruit and put it on your skin it would burn you. It’s very, very caustic.”

Mick is a very handy man to have in your corner in the Kimberley. Not only can he help you avoid a nasty experience with the local flora, he can also show you which plants double as a BO killer – “bushman’s deodorant” – or, “women’s business only, this one”, help relieve period pain and headaches.

He is also one of El Questro’s undeniable assets. OK, even the affable Queenslander would admit he can’t match the beauty of this vast wilderness but without him it wouldn’t be half as interesting. A thousand tales drip off his silver tongue as he navigates the rockiest of riverbeds in his dusty 4WD, sometimes barely getting out of first gear.

Mick is the head ranger at ELQ, where he’s been returning each season for five years. “I’m a bit of a modern-day gypsy; me and my girl Di have been working away around Australia for 11 years, five seasons here and then come summer we go somewhere else.” What keeps him coming back? “This,” he says, gesturing to the landscape around him. “The Kimberley is one of those places that just gets a hold of you and it doesn’t let you go.”

He’s been captivated, just like Will and Celia Burrell, the young couple who had the vision to turn this seemingly inhospitable landscape into a tourist attraction. The English aristocrat and his Melbourne-born wife bought the property for \$1 million in April

Land OF stories

Twenty-five years after El Questro opened its doors, Julie Hosking gets a taste of a resort like no other.

1991, two weeks shy of Will’s 24th birthday, and 13 months later Emma Gorge resort, with its cluster of tented chalets, opened in the foothills of the Cockburn ranges. A few months later, the luxury lodge followed suit.

“All the cattle station owners along the Gibb River thought this young couple were crazy,” Mick says. “Fancy spending millions of dollars on a place in the middle of nowhere. Who was going to come?”

A lot of people as it turns out. People drawn by the devastatingly beautiful surroundings, the chance to explore at leisure, and then retreat in comfort to share adventures over a few drinks at the Swinging Arm Bar or the steakhouse at the station or over dinner at Emma’s restaurant at Emma Gorge.

Twenty-five years after the Burrells’ vision

became a reality, I step off the plane in Kununurra in time for a special anniversary dinner. The resort is a bit short on drivers to pick up guests today, so Rocket the grader driver greets us. The other couple in transit had been here many years before, camping with their young children; this time they are doing it in style, staying at the luxury homestead.

It’s about an hour and a half’s drive to Emma Gorge, where I’m staying. We drive up past Romeo and Juliet, a strikingly entwined boab – Mick will have more stories about them later – to reception where a young American backpacker, one of many who help keep this seasonal business going, comes out with a warm welcome. I have just enough time for a quick shower and change before the sun sets completely and the party starts.

A long table has been elegantly laid on the resort’s dirt runway – there’s even a red carpet – lanterns strung above to magical effect. All around us, the colours of the ranges change as the sun slips below the horizon. As ELQ general manager Lori Litwack comes over to introduce herself, champagne at the ready, I know I’m in for a memorable night.

The couple opposite me are loved-up Americans who had flown to El Questro on a whim from Sydney after a deal for his latest project got the green light. They are staying at the homestead – strictly for guests only, so there’s no chance of a sneak peek – and are suitably impressed. The rest of the diners within speaking range are Kununurra locals and what a fun crowd; they make me feel like old friends within minutes. The food is outstanding; steak that melts in the mouth, freshly caught barramundi, a dessert table positively bursting at the seams. I suspect the »

Pioneering spirit
The days before the influx of tourists



DYMOCKS
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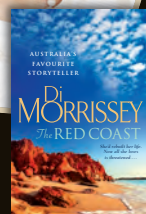
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DI MORRISSEY

SUNDOWNER
Thursday 23rd
November at 6pm



Booklover members \$50 per person, Non members \$55 per person (tables of 8 or 10). Includes welcome drink, sit down sundowner with savoury platters on tables. Beverages included. Author talk, Q&A, book sales & booking signing.

BOOKINGS: <https://www.trybooking.com/306362>

In conversation with William Yeoman, The West Australian Books Editor and West Weekend Staff Writer.



FIONA McINTOSH

MORNING TEA
Wednesday 29th
November at 9.30-11am



Booklover members \$40 per person, non members \$45 per person. Tables of 10. Price includes morning tea with table service, cakes, sandwiches, author talk, Q&A from the audience, book sales and book signing.

BOOKINGS: <https://www.trybooking.com/299044>



KERRI-ANNE KENNERLEY

LUNCH
Thursday 30th
November at 12.30pm



Booklover members \$75 per person, non members \$80 per person. Includes 2 course lunch with beverages, in conversation followed by Q&A from the audience, book sales and book signing.

BOOKINGS: <https://www.trybooking.com/307286>

In conversation with Amanda Keenan, Deputy Editor and Writer, West Weekend.

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Jackaroo's Waterhole.



Explosion Gorge.



The scene is set for El Questro's 25th anniversary dinner.



Branco's Lookout.

El Questro is offering early bird specials across the property. Stay three nights at Emma Gorge or station and only pay for two, plus receive free breakfast for two. Children 12 and under stay and eat free. For the luxury homestead, book four nights and receive 15 per cent off, as well as a complimentary helicopter tour for two. Offers end December 31, see elquestro.com.au or call 1800 837 064.



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MAJOR PARTNERS





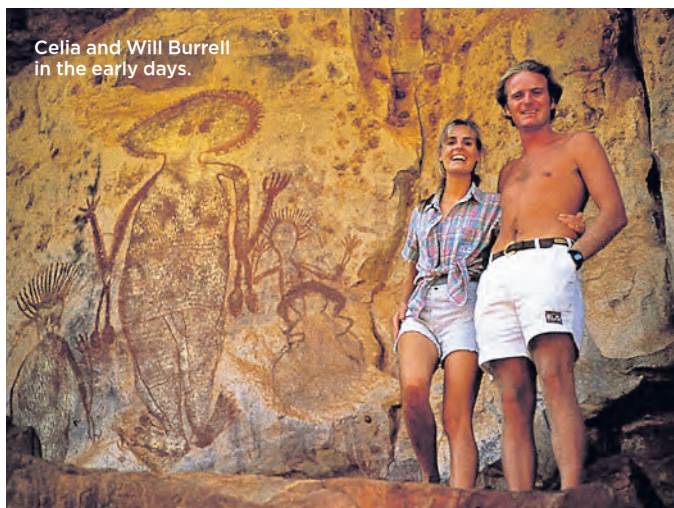
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COMMUNITY PARTNERS





«handiwork of Lori's other half, chef Alan Groom, who I have been reliably informed dishes up Michelin star-worthy fare at the homestead, but the Canadian tells me the credit belongs to the kitchen at Emma Gorge. "I'm so proud of them." As she should be.

In such good company, and with flowing wine and live music, it's hard to drag myself away, but I have an early start in the morning. And the adventure has only just begun.

Just after sunrise, another of the rangers comes to drive me over to the station to join more guests – a crew from Channel Seven's Today Tonight – on the first leg of my tour of El Questro.

It's here, on the startling green banks of the Pentecost River, one of four that traverse the million-acre playground, that I meet Mick and he tells us how it all began. Cattle have been run here since 1903 – there are still about 500 on agistment – but this part of the Kimberley proved a harsh mistress, with many lease holders simply walking off the land, so hard was it to make a living in the rocky landscape.

El Questro sounds rather romantic but it doesn't mean anything as far as anyone can ascertain. "It was named by a bloke called Charles Torrance McMicking in 1958," Mick says. "He liked reading the Zane Grey novels, the spaghetti westerns, so maybe he saw the name in one of those novels but every single owner since has kept that iconic name."

That includes the Burrells, who eventually sold for \$21 million after 14 years turning their piece of paradise into a world-class attraction. Now owned by Delaware North, El Questro offers a range of accommodation to suit every budget, from camping sites to the luxe \$2000-a-night homestead.

While the name is now synonymous with an experience like no other, in my short stay I'm reminded time and again of the vagaries of operating a resort in a place like this. El Questro's remoteness presents all kinds of logistical challenges, as do the Kimberley's often extraordinary wet seasons. Last year the resort copped 1500ml – with an average of 900ml, the deluge caused all manner of chaos as the crew prepared to reopen for the 25th year. "Rocket had to bring our housekeeper to the homestead in the grader," Mick says. "But we've had worse. In 2011, they were locked in the station for 53 days, couldn't drive more than a kilometre."



Font of knowledge
Head ranger
Mick Clark at
Jackaroo's
Waterhole.

As we drive out of the station, Mick points out an old Studebaker truck in the paddock once used to round up feral bulls for mince to export to the hamburger-hungry American market. We're distracted by some cute kangaroos off to the other side. "No, we don't have any kangaroos on El Questro," Mick corrects us. "We've got wallabies and wallaroos. That's a wallaroo, a girl because the males are big and strong and muscly."

Mick takes us to a majestic boab, which he says could be anywhere between 800 and 1100 years old. Carved with a D and barely visible 6, it marks the sixth night Michael "Stumpy" Durack camped here on an 1882 expedition in search of the Ord River. Mick pauses to acknowledge the traditional owners – the largest native title in Australia, El Questro is working on an indigenous land use agreement – before sharing one of their legends.

"The boab tree used to have flowers and leaves all year round and was always boasting 'I'm the biggest and the best, you other trees are worthless'. Now the rainbow serpent heard this and said 'you can't go treating other trees like that'. So he wrapped his big body around the boab, pulled him out of the ground, turned him upside down and shoved him back into the ground: 'that's going to take care of your yap!'"

The not-so boastful boab now only flowers for about three months of the year but it's the symbol of the Kimberley, so maybe it had the last laugh.

This majestic wilderness is a place with so many

wonderful stories, visitors would be crazy not to take one of the dozen or so tours on offer.

There's so much to explore a week would barely cover the best spots. The property is 75km long and 45km wide, with fabulous 4WD tracks, stunning lookouts and great swimming holes, such as the tropical oasis Jackaroo's Waterhole where we stop for smoko. "There's so much to do here," Mick says, "you just need to stop, relax and get on Kimberley time."


Bathe in Zebedee Springs, reviving thermal pools named for a character from TV's The Magic Roundabout but made more famous when Nicole Kidman dubbed them the fertility springs. The actress fell pregnant not long after a visit while filming 2008's Australia. Mick won't give an assurance of the same but he's happy to give a "rock-solid guarantee you'll feel 10 years younger after soaking in its lovely little cascading pools".

There's a real beauty right outside my comfy hut, too: Emma Gorge. But I leave my departure a bit late and only make it halfway up the steep and very rocky climb. Everyone I meet heading back down assures me the payoff at the top, swimming under the 64m droplet waterfall, is worth the effort but the heat defeats me. If you're going to do it towards the end of the season make sure you start at dawn.

A less strenuous but no less lovely expedition is a relaxing boat tour through the rich colours and deep waters of Explosion Gorge, so named because the ever-adventurous Will Burrell set off a few of them in its midst to catch barramundi – apparently without much success.

The highlight for me, though, is an unforgettable sunset at Branco's Lookout. Not even the knowledge that a huge salty – apparently he's swum up from Pigeon Hole in search of his girlfriend – has nested on a ledge at a safe distance below can detract from the splendour that surrounds me.

I can't quite get over the fact they managed to build picnic tables up on this vantage point. Who says the pioneering spirit is dead?

As I snack on cheese and bickies, watching as the setting sun bathes the river and ranges below in mystical light, Mick tops up my plastic glass with another champagne. My cup runneth over. 

The author was a guest of El Questro.