Water borders one of the sand dunes that stretch north-south across the Simpson Desert near Birdsville.

FLIGHT OF EXTREMES

FROM BRISBANE TO BROOME AND BACK AGAIN, A TRAVEL WEST AIR SAFARI GIVES PASSENGERS A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF A SUNBURNT COUNTRY IN ALL ITS GLORY

STORY + PHOTOS **NATHAN DYER**

VIEWED FROM THE WINDOW of a plane, the paddocks of Queensland's Darling Downs appear like a patchwork quilt flung over the rolling countryside. Broad yellow squares and tight green circles; a colourful pattern of crops holding promise of another good season in one of the county's most productive farming districts.

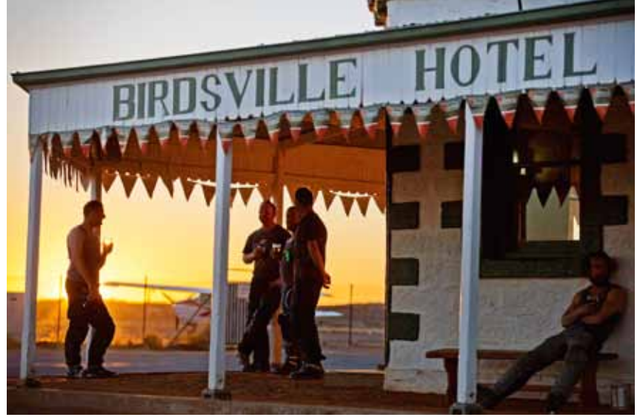
Further north, the farmland is interrupted by spider web-like networks of coal-seam gas mines. At Roma airport, the car park is jammed with white four-wheel-drives brimming with orange lights and safety flags. Still further north, the striking sandstone of Carnarvon Gorge cuts a deep swathe through the surrounding forest as the plane banks and circles low, allowing passengers to take in the beauty of the gorge.

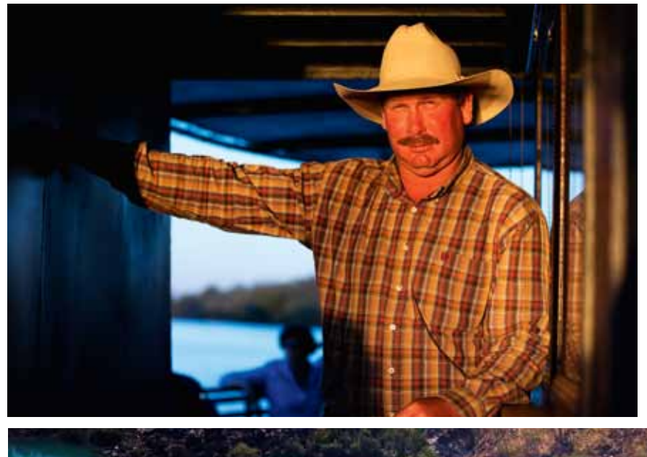
Farming, mining and wilderness: it is a juxtaposition passengers on a Travel West Air Safari will become accustomed to as they travel by private charter from Brisbane to Broome and back again following a nine-day itinerary that reads like a who's who of iconic outback destinations. Birdsville, Coober Pedy, Alice Springs and Kununurra are all on the list, so too is Lake Eyre, Uluru, the Bungle Bungles and Cable Beach, as Travel West hosts Graham and Debbie Reid take guests on a tour that covers the breadth of the continent.

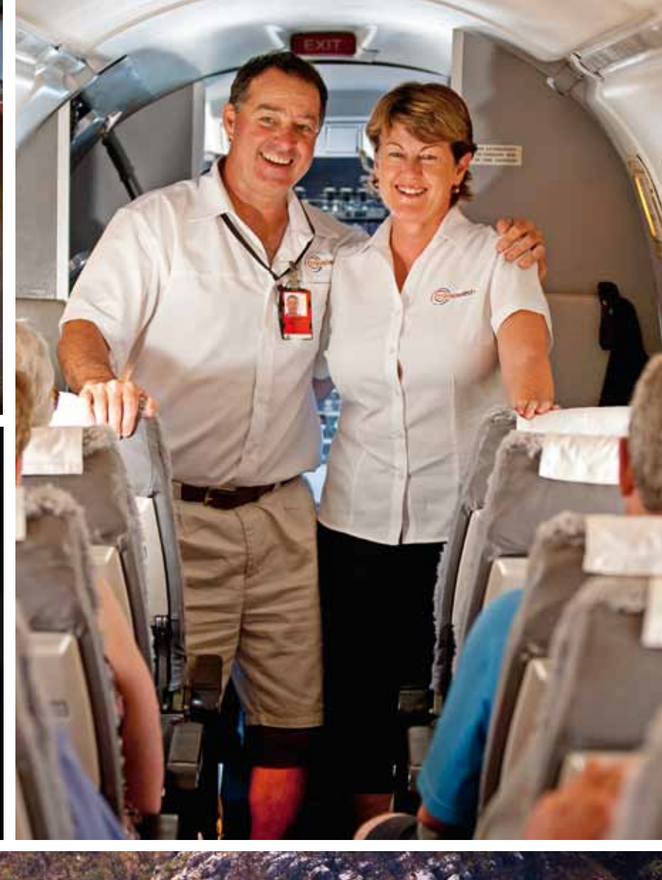
First stop, however, is Longreach and the Stockman's Hall of Fame. Standing like a cathedral to the nation's legendary horsemen and women, it tells a story that started with the 1819 order to muster wild cattle that had escaped from the First Fleet, and blossomed with the blazing of now famous stock routes with names like Canning, Birdsville, Strzelecki, and Murranji, as pastoralists spread across the interior from the 1850s onwards.

On the nearby Thomson River, modern-day stockman and pastoralist Richard Kinnon is leading tourists on a paddle-wheeler tour of the long coolabah-lined reach of river from which the town takes its name. Richard's own story reflects the tales of tenacity that line the walls of the Hall of Fame. After moving from Aramac to Longreach 10 years ago to settle at Outamorella Station, the Kinnons found themselves in the middle of one of the worst droughts in history. Facing ruin, Richard and wife Marisse started a small tourism business selling outback goods and home-style tucker to visitors. Since then, Kinnon & Co has grown to include horse shows, accommodation and boat tours of the Thomson River. "We've been doing this now for seven years and beef cattle has almost become a hobby," Richard says while serving drinks and snacks to guests on his paddle-wheeler, the Thomson Belle. "In this country you need to be able to diversify."

Thankfully, the drought has ended and the Brahman stud cattle on Outamorella Station are now surrounded by waist-high grass. Longreach born and bred, Tony Wilkinson says the country is back at its best. "In the 48 years I've been here, the country has never looked so good," Tony says. A refrigeration mechanic by trade, Tony, who runs the Albert Park Motor Inn with wife Jane, says Longreach has transitioned over the years from a wool centre to a tourist hub, a testament to the region's unique beauty.







CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Kata Tjuta and Uluru are spectacular sights from the air; patrons enjoy a beer on the verandah of the Birdsville Hotel; Travel West operators Graham and Debbie Reid; the Horizontal Falls at Talbot Bay, north-west of Broome, are one of the world's natural wonders; Longreach pastoralist turned tour operator Richard Kinnon on his paddle-wheeler the Thomson Belle.

"People say to me there's nothing out here," Tony says. "But I've seen it in its worst drought and even then it still had a beauty to it."

From Longreach, the tour follows the mighty Diamantina River south-west to Birdsville. The country below throws up a kaleidoscopic colour show: orange and pink sands, dark green waterways, red gibber plains and dark blue dams. Approaching the home of Australia's most famous pub, the 1130 parallel sand dunes of the Simpson Desert stretch in long pink lines across the flat country below. On the edge of town, a cluster of four-wheel-drives is gathered at the base of the mightiest of them all, Big Red.

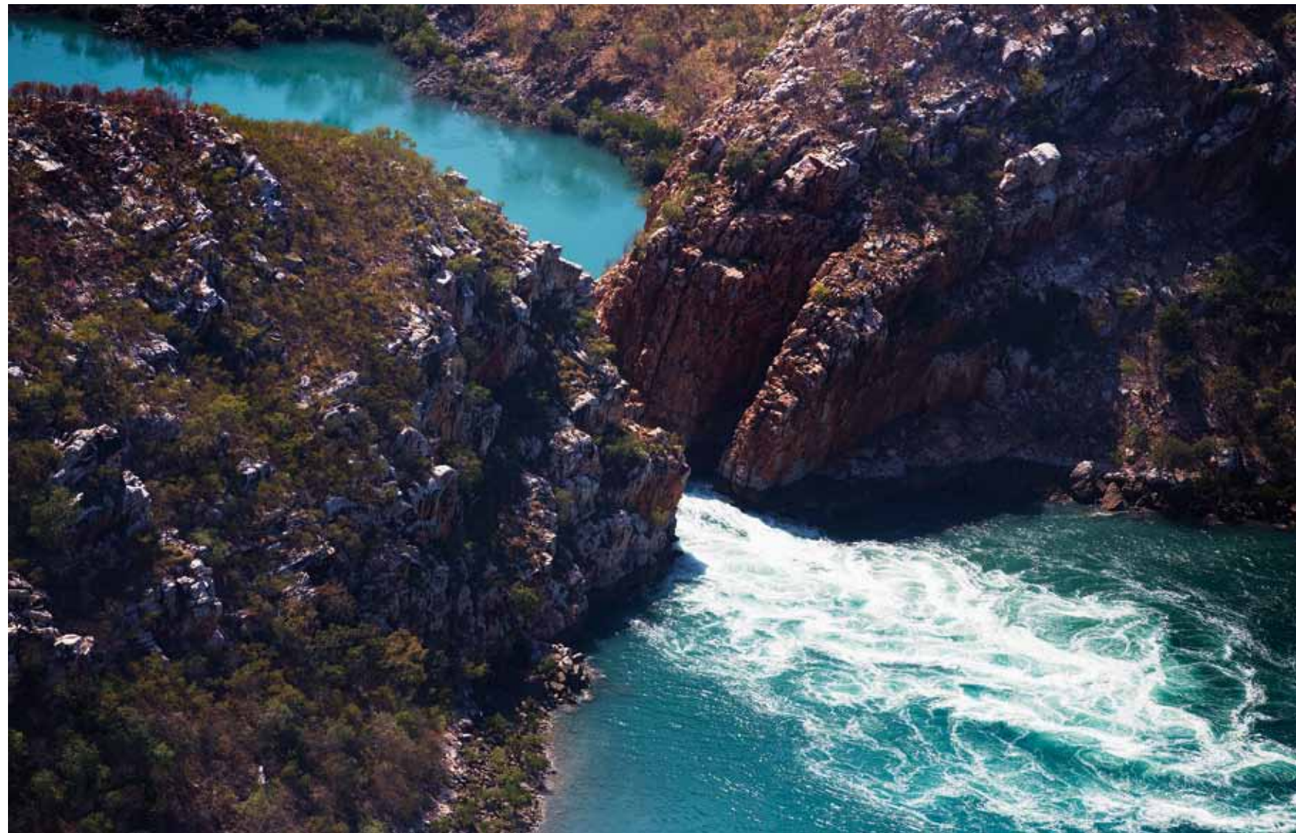
Behind the bar of the Birdsville Hotel, acting manager Darren Collins is recovering from the recent Birdsville races. Darren, in his third stint at the historic hotel, says the famous race meet is always a wild few days, explaining that each year before the masses arrive, staff work all night to remove everything from the bar of the hotel that was built in 1884. "We even take some of the doors off their hinges, so it's all open and standing room only," he says. Now, with the memorabilia back on the walls, rows of Akubras hang from the roof blazoned with the names of former owners like 'Rowdy', 'Patto', 'Nocka' and 'Stitches'. A big shark jaw nailed to the wall has a sign above: "Big Toothed Yellow Belly." And the beer is bloody cold.

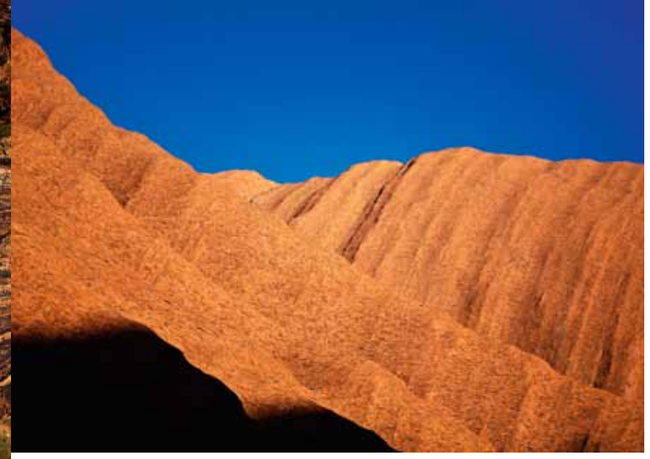
Another local enjoying the post-races peace and quiet is Birdsville officer-in-charge, Senior Constable Neale McShane. Even without the additional 8000 people the races bring into town, Neale says there is rarely a dull moment at the remote policing outpost he's called home for the past seven years. "Whether it's a rescue down the track, assisting the town's only nurse or helping out with an emergency landing, there's always something happening," he says. With his nearest colleagues across the border, and 520 kilometres away at Maree, Neale says common sense is perhaps the most important prerequisite for the job. "And you've got to know how to work with the community, because you need them," he adds.

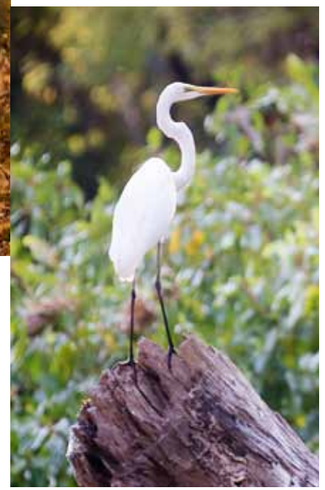
From Birdsville, the air safari tracks south-west towards the world's third-largest salt lake. En route, Graham Reid takes the microphone and motions his guests to look out their windows. Wedged between the Simpson and Sturt Stony deserts below, Goyder Lagoon spreads like a giant green blanket across the desert threaded with hundreds of braided waterways. It's clear from Graham's commentary this is one of his favourite spots.

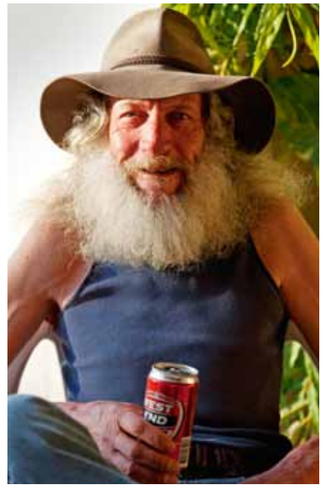
The former road-train driver becomes even more animated with the first glimpse of Australia's ephemeral inland sea. As guests peer out windows, Graham points out the Warburton Groove, a brown watercourse cutting through the white salty expanse of an almost empty Lake Eyre North. Further south, there is still water in Belt Bay – the deepest part of the 8500-square-kilometre lake – and Graham points out Silcrete Island rising out of the salty sea below. In the harsh midday glare the landscape sparkles, with pale pinks and blues, bright white and deep greens in the distance.

An hour later, the landscape has transformed as pilots Graeme Jacklin and Damien Flick line up the Coober Pedy airstrip. Opal mines stretch across the rugged landscape, pocking the earth's surface like craters on the moon. Although the town's halcyon









CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: One of the many deep gorges that cuts through the Bungle Bungle range near Halls Creek; the rock face of Uluru glows in the morning sun; Coober Pedy tourism operator Martin Smith has spent the past 17 years in the once wild opal-mining town; Travel West guests board their charter plane outside the Qantas Museum in Longreach; an egret perches on a log on the Ord River.

opal days have passed, the noticeboard at the local supermarket shows Australia's national gemstone still holds centre stage in this outback town, which produces more than 70 percent of the world's opals. Mining equipment sales fill the pin board. One advertisement offers: "Two dugouts and sheds on large freehold block – $250,000."

Outside, the mercury has hit 32 degrees Celsius and a hot breeze is whipping up clouds of 'Coober Pedy fog'. Greek music is playing from Tom and Mary's Taverna, a tall blond bloke is singing a Slavic tune as he wanders into the hotel, and the smell of warm Hawaiian wafts from John's Pizza Bar. Every second building is underground, and the golf club operates at night with glow-in-the-dark balls because it's regularly too hot to play during the day.

Local tour operator Martin Smith says you need a sense of humour to survive in the once wild town, home to 48 nationalities. "The Greeks, they call me Martin Smithopolous," he laughs. Like many locals, Martin came for a short time and stayed a long time. "I came here from Alice Springs 17 years ago," he says. "I was out of a job at the time and a work opportunity arose and one thing led to another and I'm still here."

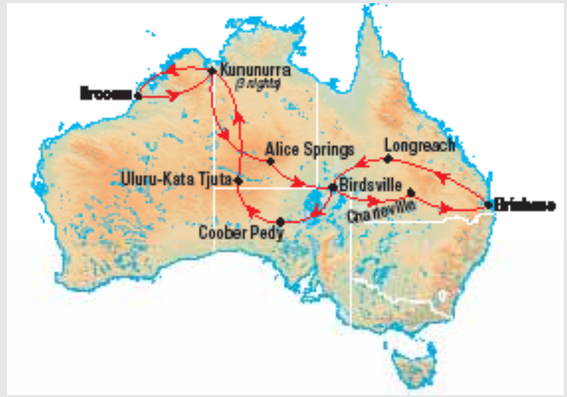
Departing Coober Pedy, the tour passes over the Musgrave Ranges and the 1435-metre Mount Woodroffe, the highest point in South Australia. From there it is a short hop north to Uluru and nearby Kata Tjuta. For the local Anangu Aboriginal people it is a spiritual place governed by *Tjukurpa* – traditional law. Anangu believe their ancestral spirits created Uluru and Kata Tjuta. As the plane circles, a wing tipped towards the rock, the surrounding spinifex golden beneath a bright sun and Uluru's rough surface blaring red, it's hard to imagine a more spectacular sight. On the ground, tour guide John Pollock says there is another view of Uluru equally impressive. "To see it raining on the rock, that's magic," he says. "The whole thing goes purple and streams of water run down the face, but you have to be here when it is raining. Half an hour later and you miss it." It is the kind of ephemeral beauty only those who have visited the outback know.

Leaving Uluru, the safari wings north-west towards the Kimberley. With the Tanami Desert spreading like a red carpet to the horizon, Graham takes the microphone and regales guests with stories of driving road trains across the tough country below. As a driver for Noel Buntine in the mid-1980s, Graham recalls yarns of wild scrub bulls, broken axles and big river crossings carting cattle from isolated stations to the Wyndham meatworks. "You can't beat that sort of experience," Graham says. Many of his 16 guests, most of them retired cockies, nod in understanding.

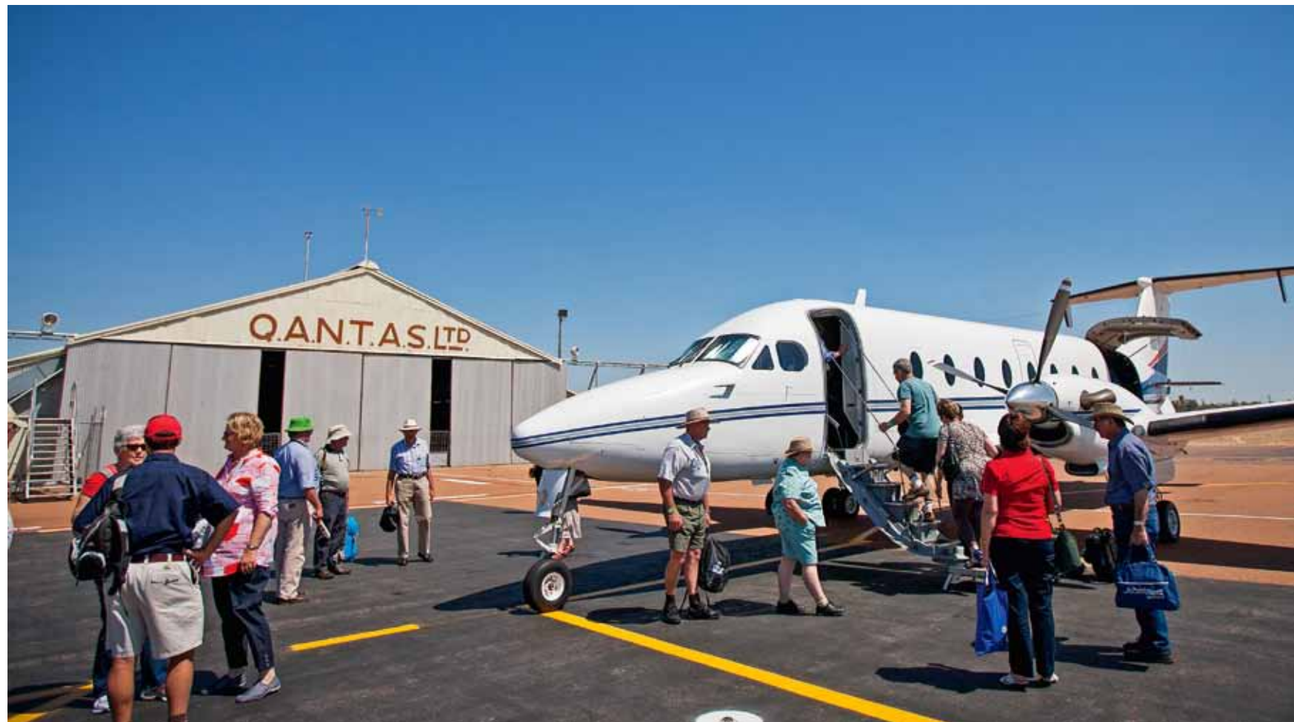
After passing over the beehive domes of the Bungle Bungles and the deep grey pit of the Argyle Diamond Mine, Kununurra and the Ord River appear like an oasis on the horizon. Indian sandalwood and mango plantations spread along the river's banks, and boats leave long, white wakes as they power up and down the river. With Kununurra as a base, the next two days are spent exploring the Kimberley, with the Horizontal Falls first on the list.

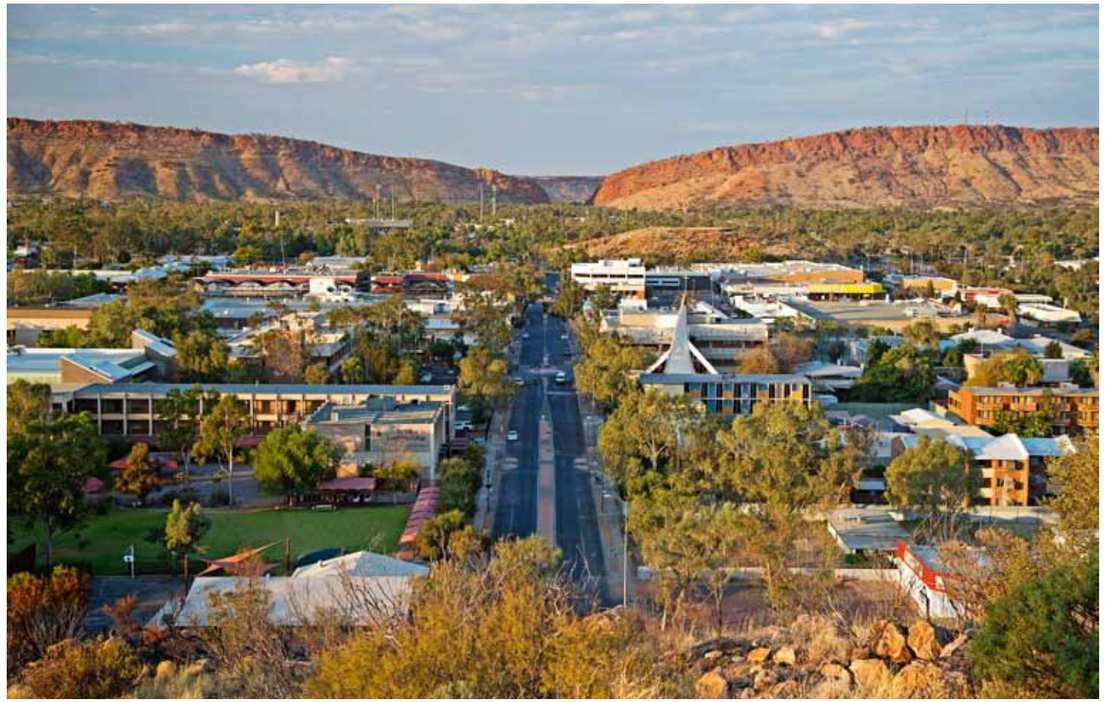
Five hundred kilometres west of Kununurra, the turquoise waters of Talbot Bay seem surreal. As the plane descends, a 10-metre tide is roaring through two narrow cuttings in the bay, the water forming white standing waves as it surges through the gaps. It is clear to see why David Attenborough rates this place as one of the top natural wonders of the world. From the Horizontal Falls, the tour follows the coast south-west to Cape Leveque. As the plane passes over the deep orange cape, the dark grey hulk of a whale glides beneath the clear waters below.

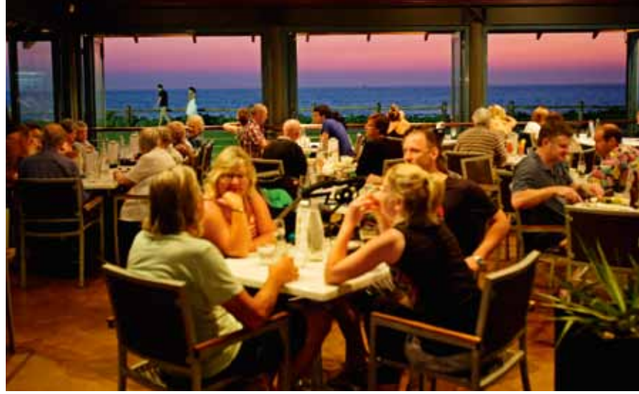
Flying into Broome, you can almost feel the clock slowing down as tourists wander along Cable Beach below. Driving guests around the town's palm tree-lined streets in his red double-decker bus, Calvin Clarke says after 27 years here he still

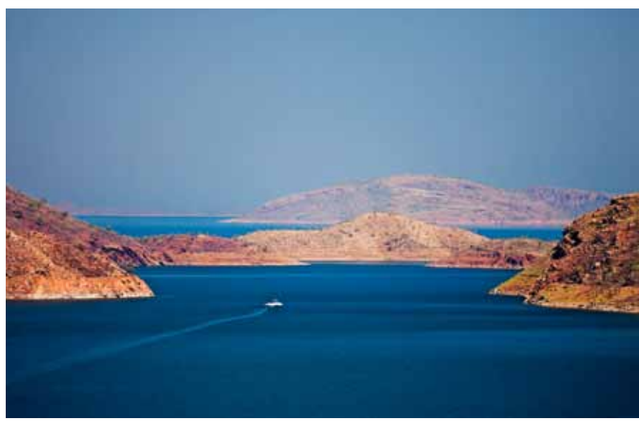


Travel conditions: Travel West's central Australia and the Kimberley air safaris are conducted using Beechcraft 1900 (up to 16 guests) or SAAB 340 (up to 30 guests) aircraft.
Distance: About 9000km
Travelling time: Nine days
Accommodation:
Albert Park Motor Inn, Longreach, phone (07) 4658 2411
www.longreachaccommodation.com
Birdsville Hotel, Birdsville, phone (07) 4656 3244
www.theoutback.com.au/BirdsvilleHotel
Desert Cave Hotel, Coober Pedy, phone (08) 8672 5688
www.desertcave.com.au
Ayers Rock Resort, Yulara, phone 1300 134 044
www.ayersrockresort.com.au
Kununurra Country Club, Kununurra, phone (08) 9168 1024
www.kununurracountryclub.com.au
The Chifley, Alice Springs, phone (08) 8951 4545
www.chifleyhotels.com.au/alice-springs
Cost: $10,850 per person twin share.
Further information:
Travel West, Charleville, phone (07) 4654 3155
www.travelwest.com.au









CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The MacDonnell Ranges are a backdrop for the desert town of Alice Springs; facing west, Cable Beach offers beautiful sunsets; diners at a restaurant on Cable Beach enjoy the twilight views; a boat cuts a wake across the blue waters of Lake Argyle.

finds it a magic place. "I think it remains unique because it is so isolated," he says. "And it has such an amazing history. When you think this little town once produced 80% of the world's pearl shell, it's amazing." Although the introduction of plastic buttons after World War II effectively scuttled the town's pearl-shell industry, the smoky white spheres formed inside the shells are still big business, something reflected by the disproportionate number of jewellery shops in the town of 12,000 people.

Back in Kununurra, former pharmacist, egg farmer and councillor of 30 years, Keith Wright is showing tourists the massive Lake Argyle. Looking over the 1000sq km dam, Keith says with all that water it's no wonder the region is booming, with a long-awaited $310 million expansion of Ord Valley farming land just months from completion. "Australia's not short of water," he tells his guests. "It's just that people live in the wrong places."

Below the dam wall, Jeff Hayley is preparing to take a tour down the Ord River, known for its massive wet season flows, towering red cliffs and prolific wildlife. After 28 years on the river, Jeff reckons he's probably travelled the 55km stretch from the Argyle Dam to Kununurra more than 4000 times. Pulling out from the boat ramp he immediately points out a crocodile. Cameras flash as Jeff noses the boat toward the reptile, and then with a splash it's gone. "If you missed it, don't worry," he says with a smile. "On average there's a crocodile every 100m down this part of the river."

From the green rivers of the Kimberley, the tour heads back east to the nation's dusty centre. Next stop on the itinerary is a place of worship for those men and women behind countless Slim Dusty songs. The Alice Springs National Road Transport Hall of Fame is a tribute to the larger-than-life characters and the big rigs that made, and still make, life in the outback possible. According to co-founder Liz Martin, the museum was opened in 1995 to pay tribute to the people behind the industry. "The trucking industry has always been on the periphery of other industries but never given its own historical significance," Liz says. "And yet, every other industry in Australia depends on it." Standing beneath a giant Kenworth sign, Liz says the industry captures the essence of outback life. "The bad roads, the long days, rigs not built for the conditions – truckies were always there at the forefront of development."

In town, the local paper tells of another big dry – 147 days without rain – breaking a 40-year record. Tourists wander along Todd Mall and Aboriginal artists sit in the shade of ghost gums, colourful canvases spread on the grass before them. Beyond the town centre the MacDonnell Ranges stretch east and west in the rippled folds of the *Yeperenye* (caterpillar) dreaming of the local Arrernte people. And road trains roll through The Gap along the Stuart Highway, bringing supplies to the parched town.

Leaving The Alice, the last leg of the Travel West journey involves a leapfrog itinerary to Birdsville – where curried camel pies are the flavour of the day at the local bakery, then Charleville, then back to Brisbane. After nine days and almost 9000km, Graham and Debbie Reid appear as chipper as they did when the tour began. "I could go another week," Debbie laughs, as the last of her guests disembark. Walking across the tarmac of the Brisbane Jet Base, a guest asks Graham how he remembers everything he talks about on the tour. "Buggered if I know," Graham says. "I just love it."