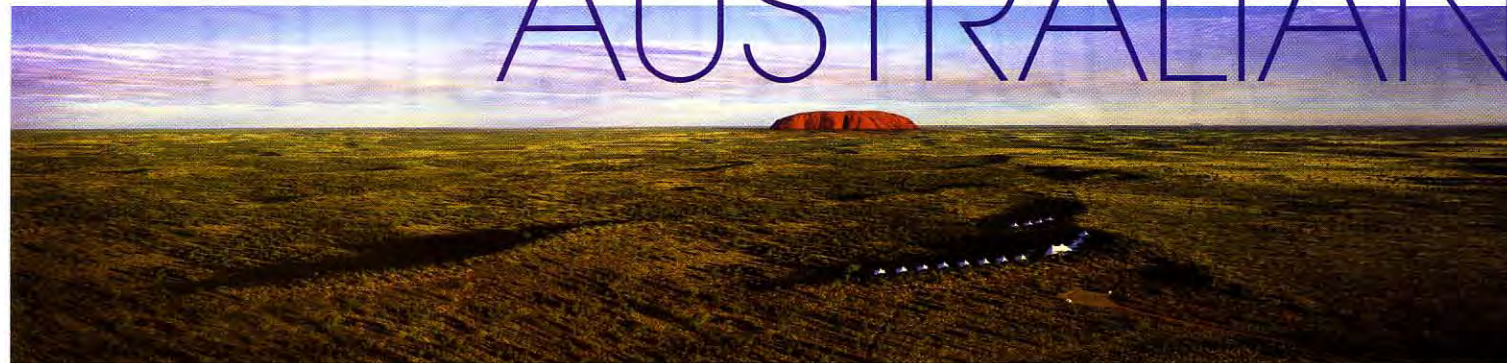


# AUSTRALIAN WALKABOUT



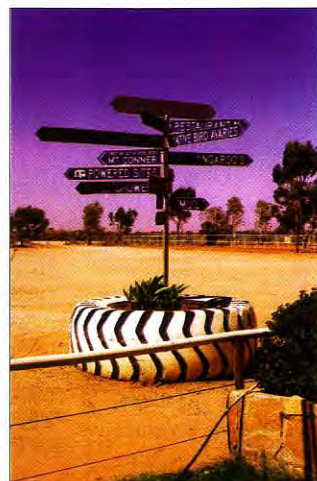
BY KATE AYRTON

If the safari is a journey of contrasts, then Australia may just be the new Africa. With eight million square kilometers of open land ranging from lush tropical rainforests and deserted beaches off the Great Barrier Reef to the scorched red earth of the Outback, the Australian landscape lends itself well to the African wilderness camp experience. Now, courtesy of two savvy Australian Hoteliers, there are a small number of new safari-style camps that successfully combine cultural and environmental sensitivity with cutting edge style, offering modern comforts in dramatic landscapes.

**Longitude 131**, the first luxury safari-style camp of its kind in Australia, is stationed on the border of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and delivers a spectacular front-row view of Uluru (Ayers Rock). Guests can lie back and behold the ever-changing colors of “The Rock” across a blooming desert panorama from the comfort of their beds in one of 15 hand-built, state-of-the-art tents. Perched on steel stilts, these bright spacious rooms (a far cry from what most people would call a tent) are fully kitted and elegantly appointed in rich cappuccino browns. Each room, named after local Australian explorers and adventurers (such as Burke and Wills, Giles and Gosse), tells a different story. Old photographs, letters, maps, and memorabilia decorate the interiors. In the “John McDouall Stuart” room, guests can read about the six expeditions he led to the interior in the late 19th century from pages of his journal on the wall, while examining his sextant and eyeglass.

Visitors are encouraged to explore the mystery of the Central Australian desert region and immerse themselves in the environment and the local culture through a wide range of activities. The popular “Base Walk” around the foot of Uluru is by far the best way to appreciate the awesome size and magnetic spiritual powers of the legendary sandstone monolith. Also interesting is the “Cave Hill Safari,” which involves an all-day excursion to a small Aboriginal community across the Dingo Fence in South Australia. But for many, the real treat is to relax at base camp and enjoy the exceptional view from the shelter of one of Longitude 131’s sumptuous tents. (AUS\$1,350 per night for double, AUS\$950 for single, including all meals, beverages and touring; phone: +61.2.9339-1000; www.longitude131.com.au).

As the sun goes down and the turtles come up, the pop of a champagne cork lures guests to dinner



At **Wilson Island**, just off the coast of Queensland, guests can swap their “blunnies” (blunstone hiking boots) for their “cozzies” (bathing suits) and camp out in style on their own desert island. White sandy beaches and crystal clear aquamarine waters lead to the Great Barrier Reef, exhibiting one of the world’s greatest natural treasures. For three days a week this World Heritage site, also a National and Marine Park, is now exclusively available to guests of P&O Australian Resorts who have created a unique castaway experience for nature-lovers, divers and beachcombers. The island belongs to a large population of rare birds and turtles (including the endangered Loggerhead turtle), that use it as their nesting ground from October – March. Creating suitable lodgings in this fragile environment proved to be quite an eco-challenge, but the solution soon came in the form of 6 modish pod-like tents nestled amongst the Pandanus groves. The rooms, which have names like Tranquility, Rapture and Serenity, all overlook the sea and come complete with deck and hammock – an ideal spot for bird-watching or viewing the turtles as they crawl up the beach to lay their eggs right in front of your tent at dusk.

As the sun goes down and the turtles come up, the pop of a champagne cork lures guests to dinner. Matt Forrest and Kristine Cambridge, a multi-talented young couple, host the camp and immediately make all visitors feel right at home while they cook and entertain in the communal Longhouse. With the champagne flowing and perfect party atmosphere, campers celebrate the end of another day in paradise, Wilson-style. (Rates start at AUS\$1,690 for a twin share, 5 night package – 2 nights on Heron Island - all meals and beverages inclusive or rent the whole island for AUS\$ X; phone: 1.800.225-9849; www.wilsonisland.com).

For those who are looking for something even more private, the exclusive **Bedarra Island** resort, also off the coast of Queensland, has just opened two new Pavilion bungalow suites that are nothing short of a hedonist’s dream. Built on a cliff top overlooking a pretty scalloped beach, these sleek and sexy timber tree-house structures boast sweeping views of the Coral Sea through floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Famous for its outstanding pan-pacific cuisine, room service is the magic word on this island. (AUS\$1,400 per person twin share, including all meals, transfer and activities; phone: 1.800.225-9849; www.poresorts.com). ■

