

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

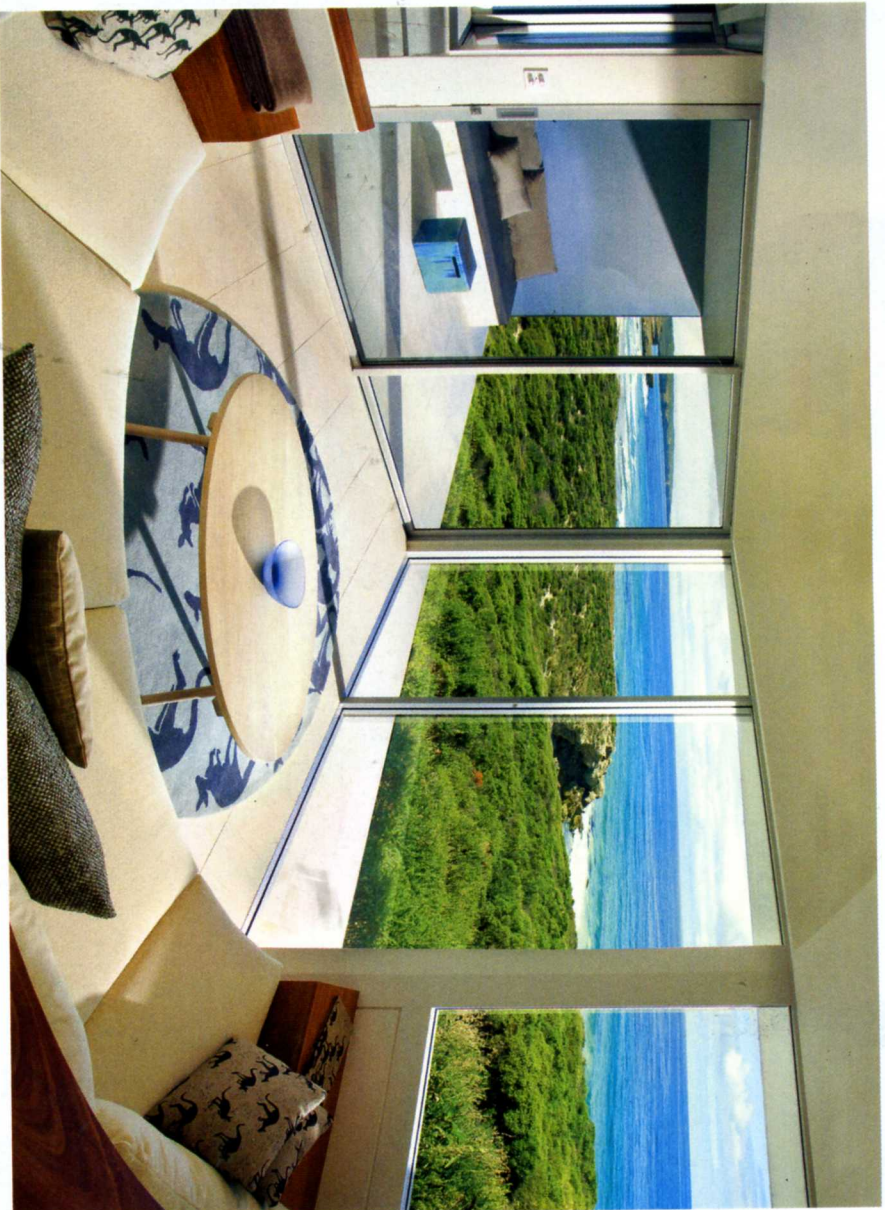
JUST IN TIME FOR TOURISM AUSTRALIA'S \$50 MILLION CAMPAIGN TO SELL THE COUNTRY ON THE BACK OF BAZ LUHRMANN'S FILM, A WHOLE NEW SPECIES OF EXPERIENTIAL LUXURY IS FINALLY EMERGING

It was the old tourism conundrum: why did this country lack the sort of upmarket travel accommodation characteristic of, say, Africa, with its luxury safari camps, or New Zealand, with its boutique design hotels and ultra-indulgent lodges?

It mattered more as international travellers grew richer, yet more jaded, and as the day loomed when backpacker tourism was no longer enough.

That moment is now upon us, according to Tourism Australia figures which show that while international visitor numbers were up only 2 per cent in 2007, spending increased by 13 per cent.

And, just in time, a collection of upmarket destinations has not only emerged, but reached critical mass. In September, Grant Hunt, former head of Voyages Hotels and Resorts and a board member of Tourism Australia, launched Anthology, the Travellers' Collection. Billed as "a compendium of travel experiences", it has taken over four destinations: Tasmania's Bay of Fires, Cradle Mountain Huts Walks and Quamby Estate, and South Australia's Wilpena Pound Resort, with plans to expand to 12



has also lodged plans to develop an eco lodge and 20 permanent eco tents on Hook Island's Back Beach in Queensland's Whitsundays.

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In the same month, Charles Carlow (see "Check-in", page 6), the man behind the Bamurru Plains "wild bush luxury" resort on Kakadu's north-west fringe, announced his latest venture, Sal Salis, a luxury tented camp nestled among the dunes on Western Australia's remote Ningaloo Reef. Inspired by African safari camps, Sal Salis has no mobile phone coverage, limits on numbers and water use, 500-threadcount, organic cotton sheets on handmade jarrah beds, 280 kilometres of pristine reef, gorge walks, whale sharks and manta rays. Carlow will also launch a new eco-training camp next year, catering to aspiring guides and leisure travellers alike on the floodplains of the Mary River, near Kakadu.

Such ventures typify the new adventure-without-hardship approach, by which experience, wildness and wilderness are the luxury: exclusivity the remoteness, rather than traditional tourist stars.

"These things [five-star amenities] are not necessarily consistent with delivering a high-quality eco experience," says Tony McKenna of Laguna Island Adventures, which

has also lodged plans to develop an eco lodge and 20 permanent eco tents on Hook Island's Back Beach in Queensland's Whitsundays.

That said, traditional luxury is also part of the mix. The extraordinary wealth creation of the past 10 years has delivered a whole new class of visitor accommodation, from Margaret River's Cape Lodge, through Longitude 131°, to Hamilton Island's Qualia or the Whitsunday's Woodwark Bay and the exclusive Double and Lizard Islands. Baillie Lodges now has four premium properties: Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island; Bedarra Beach House; its \$17 million Kangaroo Island eco temple, Southern Ocean Lodge, billed as Australia's first true luxury lodge; and the \$10 million Remarkable Lodge, opening in late 2010, located on a hauntingly bleak headland on the Tasman Peninsula.

Drew Kluska, of luxury tour company Elite Australia Experiences, has helped pioneer this territory, handcrafting tours for well-heeled international travellers over the past decade, including jet and air safaris to the five- and

ABOVE: Uninterrupted views from the Osprey terrace and bathroom at Southern Ocean Lodge. Remoteness is key to experiential luxury.

six-star properties noted, luxury yacht charters and private houses and villas.

Elite's Outback Encounter series offers working stations such as the Top End's Bullo River and the Farghers' Angorichina in the Flinders Ranges, along with bush camps such as Faraway Bay in the Kimberley. "One of the things I learnt when I ran small lodges in Africa was that what guests found most amazing was the time spent with people who'd been there for generations," Kluska says. "I can't tell you how many times people have maybe gone to Longitude 131° first, or stayed at one of the more luxurious resorts – your Lizard Island and all that – and then gone to Angorichina Station. And 99 times out of 100 the feedback is about the friendships that they made at places like Angorichina.

"These experiences are very much based on the host, on access. They're a class of thing that can't be googled. You won't find them under 'luxury' or 'five-star Australia'." **MARGUERITE WINTER**

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