

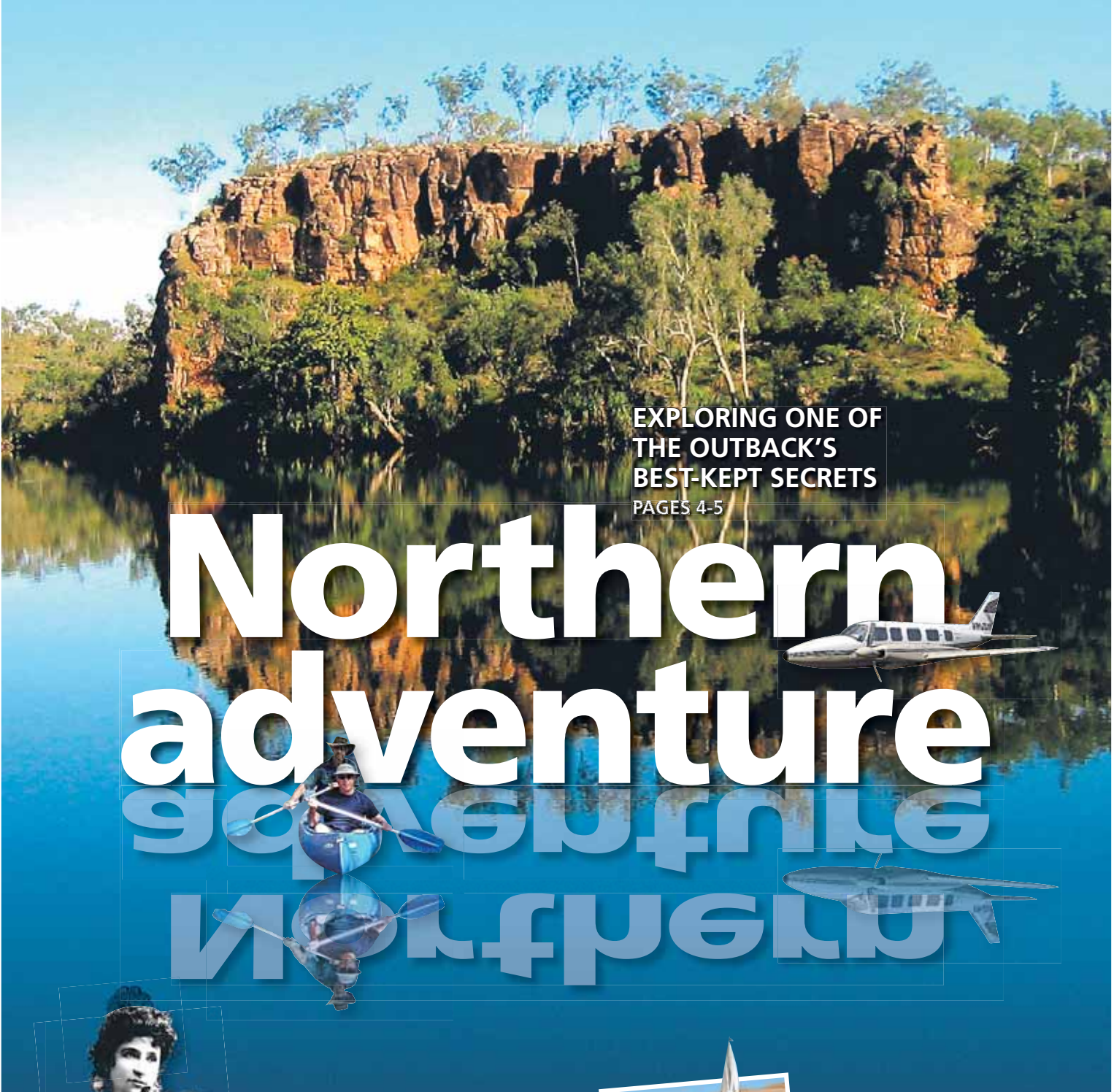
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EXPLORING ONE OF
THE OUTBACK'S
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LAURIE NOWELL goes Outback for a safari holiday that blends Kakadu with the Kimberley

PUNGALINA Station must be one of Australia's best-kept secrets. In the Northern Territory's famous Gulf country, it is a natural paradise unspoilt by humans.

A former cattle station that failed because its terrain was too rugged to allow the productive mustering of cattle, Pungalina has been reborn as a wilderness destination.

The ruggedness and remoteness that contributed to its failure as a cattle operation are Pungalina's key assets as a place to escape the constraints of urban living.

A sort of amalgam of the Kimberley and Kakadu, Pungalina's attractions are twofold.

First is the uniqueness and exclusivity of a pristine Australian wilderness of



First fly in, then

200,000ha shared with a maximum of 12 other guests in the station's comfortable safari camp.

Secondly, there is the range of adventure activities: fishing for barramundi, canoeing through steep red gorges, dropping 50m into a cave that was only recently discovered by white man or merely wallowing in one of the many natural springs throughout the property.

The place is a bird watchers' paradise, with 130 species on view.

Stately jabirus inhabit the considerable wetlands on the property, big bustards can be seen in scrubland — territorial sea eagles and their nests, terns, wild budgerigars, ibis, brightly coloured parrots and the brilliant azure kingfishers are all to be found.

Pungalina's manager and chief guide, Owen Davies, is

the bushman from central casting.

Tall, angular and laconic, he has more than a few campfire tales to tell of the property and district as well as an encyclopedic knowledge of the areas flora and fauna.

Owen is also the official driver of "The Billycart" — a custom-made bush-bashing truck that gives guests a unique view of Pungalina's attractions.

Pungalina's spread is riven by the seasonal Calvert River.

In the wet the river can become a raging torrent, but in the dry it recedes into a series of billabongs — some more than a kilometre long.

In those expansive lagoons are wild and big barramundi — there for taking for the artful angler.

The large amount of water in the area has created bonus attractions.

There are underground thermal springs to swim in — including one that has bubbling water rising through coarse sand, creating a unique natural spa.

There are limestone caves to explore and safe rock holes to swim in, billabongs and creeks to canoe in, some of the planet's oldest fossils and Aboriginal rock art. The station's comfortable camp — which is made up of big



camp out

tents with beds, doonas and linen, hot showers and flushing toilets — has a thermal spring winding through it, providing the perfect place to recover after a long, dusty day.

Fully catered, the kitchen serves great food which, of course, features delicious barramundi and beef.

At Pungalina you are totally looked after. Guided tours are arranged each day to locations that suit your capability or interests. A different experience awaits each time you go out, from the moment you are met at the airstrip until you depart after four days.

To the north, 30km away, is the Gulf of Carpentaria and to the south, the property's front driveway snakes 65km down a four-wheel drive to unsealed Savannah Way highway.

The best way to visit is by air.

Owner Tony Kirkhope says Pungalina and its wilderness



safari camp has been designed to suit fly-in guests.

"While access by four-wheel drive and small aircraft is available, the plan is to promote the place to small air tour groups," he says.

Kirkhope also owns Kirkhope Aviation, a Melbourne-based Outback air charter company.

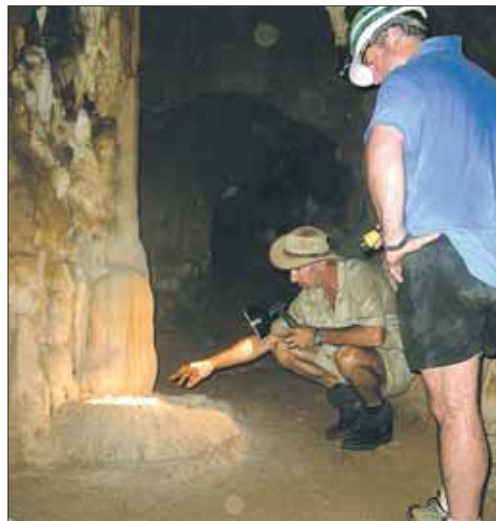
His long-term aim is to bring small groups of six to eight people from Melbourne and across Australia for four or five days at Pungalina.

"This is a seven to eight-day

package that exposes the clients to Outback Australia in a short time," Kirkhope says. "We can also visit places such as Birdsville, opal towns and cattle stations on the way."

Kirkhope says clients with their own group can tailor the length and destinations of their outback air tour.

MORE: Book through Tony Kirkhope 0418 379 263. akirk@ozemail.com.au www.pungalinasafaris.com.au and www.kirkhopeaviation.com.au



Rugged appeal (clockwise from top far left): A water lily, barramundi fishing, the bush-bashing "Billycart", the Kirkhope Aviation Piper Chieftain, enjoying the view, drinks at sunset, inspecting a termite mound, view from above.

