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Striking Gold in Outback Queensland

by Fiona Harper



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Find your fortune and lap up the luxury on the banks of the Gilbert River in Queensland.

Like many young boys living in the bush, Ashley French wanted a motorbike for his birthday. Funds were carefully managed by his grazer parents Rob and Lyn to ensure the station remained prosperous through good times and bad.

Running a cattle station is always a juggling act in order to determine how funds are distributed to keep the business afloat. But Ashley had a plan.

Fossicking for gold

Since he was 10 years old, Ashley saw prospectors coming and going, looking for gold on Gilberton Station. Following the activities of grey nomads who camped out around his home, he'd been finding gold nuggets all his life. So when Mum and Dad told him they couldn't buy him a new motorbike he did what any entrepreneurial young boy would do. He went down to the river and panned for gold until he had enough to purchase his own motorbike.

As a horse rider a few years later he wanted a new saddle. So he headed back to the river, gold pan in hand and found enough gold to buy his saddle. By the time he was 17 years old Ashley boarded a plane to Brisbane, his pockets filled with Gilberton gold nuggets, to purchase a \$22,000 4WD Toyota. When his son Robert was born a few years ago gold nuggets were used as a down payment on the family station wagon.



Robert French has family ties to Gilberton Station going back seven generations. Increasing the family tourism enterprises, his grandmother Lyn has created a luxurious 'tin shed' high on the cliff overlooking Gilbert River. Her and husband Rob travelled far and wide researching camping and glamping options to create Gilberton Outback Retreat.

Luxurious outback retreat

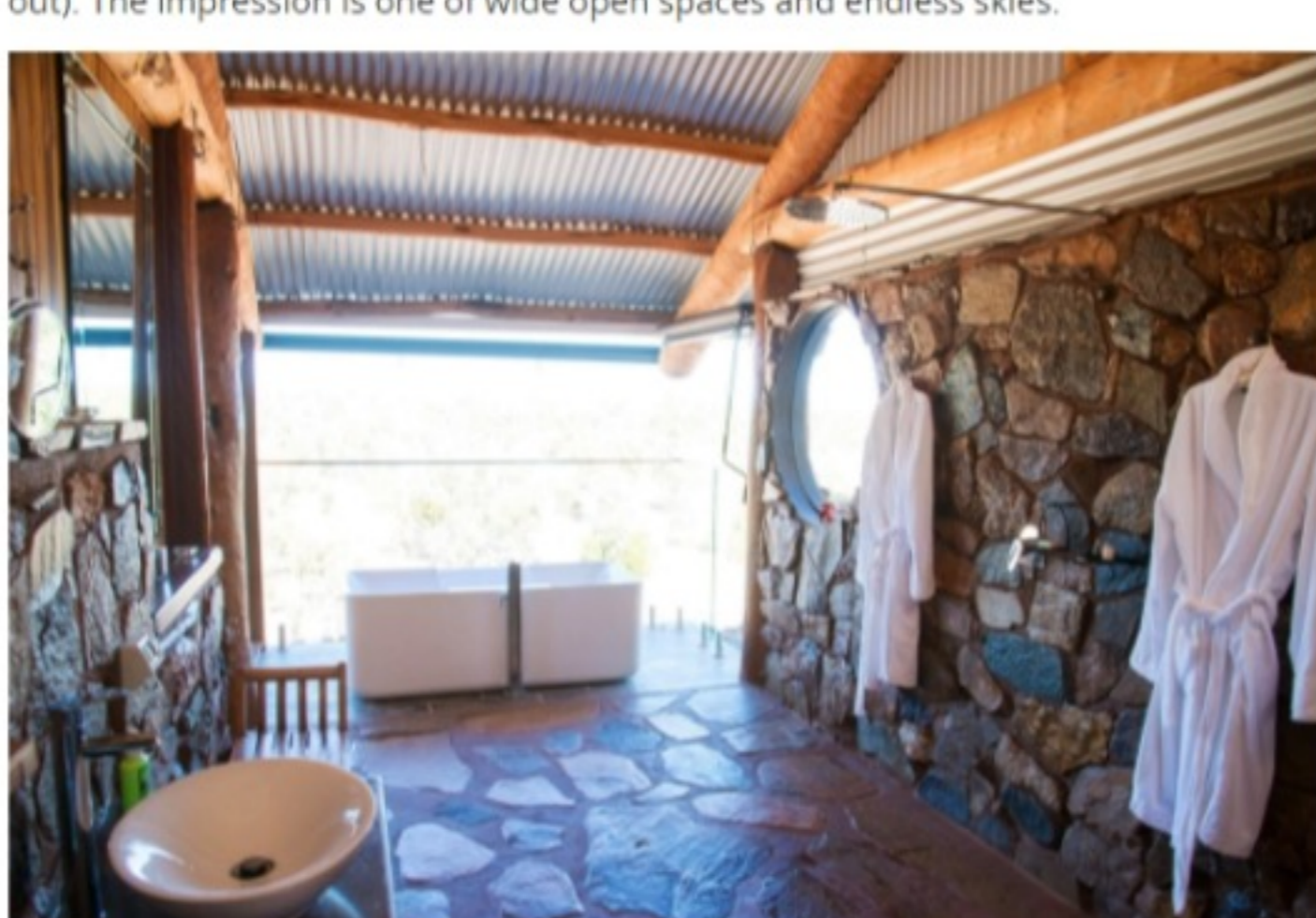
Gilberton Outback Retreat is a splendid cottage filled with luxurious touches. Walls are constructed from a combination of corrugated iron, ironback logs and rock, while station equipment has been craftily repurposed as decor. Saddle stirrups are used as soap holders beneath the rain shower. Old treadle bases from vintage Singer sewing machines have been immaculately restored, topped with a slab of marble in the bathroom and polished timber in the sitting area.



The bathroom floor is a beautiful mosaic of granite and basalt, pleasingly smooth underfoot. A four poster king-sized bed is draped with muslin. Peel the drapes aside and the wide open outback sits front and centre in the view.



The winning feature however is the absence of an entire wall on the northern, river-facing side of the cabin. Frameless, waist-high glass panels prevent guests from stepping over the edge while also keeping wildlife out. The remainder is completely open (though there are roll down blinds if too much fresh air freaks you out). The impression is one of wide open spaces and endless skies.



Perched on the edge in the bathroom end is a double-sized freestanding bath. It's the perfect spot to while away a few hours late afternoon, with a cup of tea or glass of champagne to cap off a busy morning exploring the French family's home turf.

Ancient Aboriginal rock art sites

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the kitchen, arriving at dawn bearing a steaming loaf or crusty bread she's just pulled out of the oven. She's also not bad as a tour guide we discover as we explore a small corner of the 35,000 hectares of Gilberton Station.



With Mt Nation the dominating landmark, Lyn guides her 4WD Land Cruiser towards a hill concealing ancient Aboriginal rock art sites. Surrounded by layer upon layer of ancient hand prints, turtles, lizards and snakes, she knocks up a fire and brews tea beneath an overhang stained black from a millennia of such fires. Little visited and fiercely protected by generations of Indigenous and white fella families, it's a rare privilege to visit these sites. Artefacts carved from stone and dated tens of thousands of years old look like they are waiting for their owner to return. Lyn shows me a birthing cave, open-sided to catch cooling breezes, it's base worn smooth by the labours of countless women. The air is heavy with the souls of those who lived, breathed and died here for who knows how many thousands of years.

Cattle country

We drive past mobs of grazing Braham, stopping at feed bins where Lyn talks to her 'girls' in a soothing voice. Gilberton's cattle are highly sought after due to the amount of care and personal attention the French family gives to its herd. It's hard not to fall in love with these docile, curious creatures. They're like the Labrador of the bovine world with big floppy ears and dark eyes the size of saucers.



Sure, it's a long drive from anywhere to get to Gilberton Outback Retreat, sitting approximately six hours west of Townsville or Cairns. You could always charter a helicopter if you're time poor. However, may we suggest that you take a leave of absence from your city job, load up the 4WD with camping and gold-detecting equipment and head out west. You might just find your fortune like young Ashley French did.

For more information, visit: www.gilbertonoutbackretreat.com

Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventures. Follow her at [Travel Boating Lifestyle](#).

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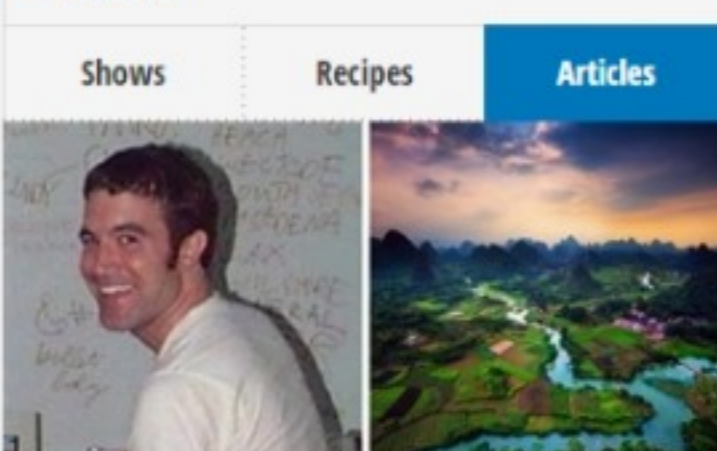
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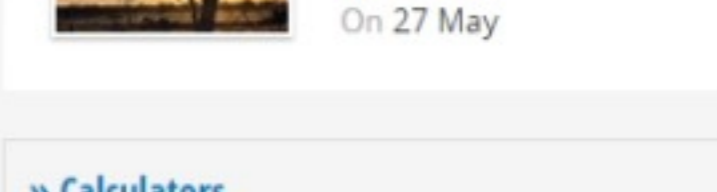
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