



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Sunset over Mt Mulligan; Mt Mulligan glimpsed through a grove of gums; Mt Mulligan Lodge has a rustic look; It blends into its surrounds; The lodge accommodates up to just 16 guests at a time; Lounge by the pool with mountain views; Take the scenic, and bumpy, route from Cairns to get there.

WORDS EMILY MCAULIFFE



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## Old gold and outback elegance 🌿

With immense CULTURAL significance, a *RICH HISTORY* and new luxury accommodation, MT MULLIGAN might just be the most fascinating place you've *NEVER HEARD* of.

EEKOO WAS ANGRY. THE FABLED MALICIOUS spirit that inhabits one of Australia's most significant, albeit largely unknown, landmarks is said to inflict suffering on anyone who trespasses its land. And digging into the belly of the spirit's home – Ngarrabullgan, or Mt Mulligan – in search of coal supposedly invoked the outburst of fury in 1921 that resulted in Queensland's worst mining disaster, which left 75 men dead.

Whether you believe the legend or not, it isn't hard to imagine that someone, or something, would want to protect something so magnificent. The titan monolith jutting out of Tropical North Queensland's outback landscape stretches 18 by 6.5 kilometres, making it almost 10 times the size of Uluru. Seen from above, dense bushland splays out from the mountain's unscalable sandstone cliffs like a green velvet skirt that ripples into infinity. James Venture Mulligan, the eponymous explorer who chanced upon the escarpment on a gold prospecting expedition in the late 1800s, described it as "a mountain once seen, never to be forgotten".

Although the landmark sits beyond the modern consciousness of most, radiocarbon dating suggests Indigenous Australians inhabited the mountain as far back as 37,000 years ago, making it the oldest dated site in Queensland. Some believe Ngarrabullgan is the birthplace of the Rainbow Serpent – creator of the world in Aboriginal mythology.

Geology, archaeology and Dreamtime stories make Mt Mulligan a true wonder of the Aussie outback, and the mountain is surprisingly accessible, located only 150 kilometres west of Cairns (see #9). Despite its historically low visitation, a new luxury resort is helping to put Mt Mulligan on the map.

### LUXURY LODGING

While many guests choose to take a 35-minute helicopter ride to Mt Mulligan Lodge from Cairns, we're taking a scenic route closer to the ground, driving two hours from the picturesque Atherton Tablelands. Heading northwest, we pass rows of mango trees, heavy with a summer crop, before turning near Dimbulah and continuing along a narrow road that quickly turns to dirt. Coins rattle in the centre console as our 4WD bumps along, startling the brumbies that graze by the roadside. A chorus of cicadas amplifies as we drive deeper into the outback and my mobile phone loses reception. For the last, dusty 40 kilometres, we don't pass a single car. The location is remote, but that's part of the appeal.

The nondescript entrance to the lodge suddenly appears to our left and we swing in to see a low-set building surrounded by the quiet of the bush. Mt Mulligan towers in the immediate background behind a row of eucalypts.

Adorned in stone and timber, the lodge has a rustic, natural look that melds with its surrounds. Fully retractable doors on both sides of the reception allow a pleasant breeze to pass through, taking the edge off a hot summer's day. I presume the big fireplace would have been appealing, should we have arrived in the opposing season.

Manager Jody Westbrook greets us with sparkling wine and shows us to the open bar, where guests can help themselves to beer, wine and spirits. She also tells us that cheese and charcuterie platters, or anything else really, can be curated on request.

"We're completely flexible," says Jody, explaining that while all meals and beverages are included, any request is fair game. "If you want something that's not on our daily menu, it's done." We've arrived in time for lunch and the à la carte menu more than appeals as it stands, with an offering of squash risotto with pickled apple, house-cured emu rump with fig jam, and barramundi that's been plucked from the weir right in front of us. I opt for the latter, which is cooked to perfection and paired with a chilled glass of chardonnay.

The view from the dining deck is similar to that enjoyed from the eight guest rooms (including the showers), which line up along the weir's grassy bank. The rooms smell of timber and have a dark, earthy colour palette that seemingly draws the outside in. As I step onto the balcony to admire the deep, corrugated bathtub, a wallaby appears from behind a tree and leans into the weir to drink.

There's no need for a TV with such a beautiful show of nature on the doorstep; not least the majesty of Mt Mulligan, which peeks between the trees.

Out of respect to the Djungan people – the traditional owners of Ngarrabullgan – the mountain cannot be climbed. However, there are plenty of other things to do. As part of the accommodation package at Mt Mulligan Lodge, a daily tour is offered to guests. This includes cattle mustering at the Mt Mulligan Station, a trip to the heritage-listed Tyrconnell gold mine, morning walks around the lodge's 28,000-hectare property (which borders the Aboriginal-owned land that protects Mt Mulligan), and kayaking on the glassy weir. Those with a taste for barramundi can have a shot at fishing for dinner.

For times in between, there's an inky black pool with mountain views and a scattering of lounges and deck chairs for settling down with a book. With a maximum of 16 guests at any time, the exclusive lodge puts relaxation at the fore.

### ABOUT TOWN

Upon arrival, nearly all guests opt for a tour of the now-deserted Mt Mulligan township, so we bundle into a windowless all-terrain vehicle with guide Teniel Lignieres at the wheel. The motor whirs loudly as we chug and bump up the hill and cross the lodge's property border onto public land, where the old town lies.

"We're now heading into what was the busy part of town," says Teniel, before cutting the motor. Ahead of us, low stumps and crumbling bricks are all that remain of a town that once held a thriving community of 300 people – lured to the area by coal deposits. Among the scattered remains, cows tug at tufts of grass with their teeth and chew slowly as they eye us off with vague curiosity. Frangipani trees add a subtle tropical feel to an otherwise dry landscape. →



PHOTOGRAPHY: SEAN SCOTT (MT MULLIGAN); EMILY MCAULIFFE (MT MULLIGAN THROUGH TREES); JASON IERACE (MT MULLIGAN LODGE INTERIORS); WILSON ARCHER (4WD)





As we putter along what was once the main street, Teniel's commentary helps us visualise life in the early 1900s. "To the left is where they had the top pub," she says. "All the women and the rich men were allowed to drink at the top, while the workers were only allowed at the bottom pub." Despite their discriminate patronage, the pubs were unsurprisingly the pinnacles of the small town. Teniel tells us that following a destructive cyclone in 1920, both pubs were up and running again within days, while the also-decimated church would take several years to rebuild. Priorities.

After a stop at the brick kiln for a peek inside its high, intact dome, we continue on to the cemetery. Here, almost a quarter of the town's population was buried in less than a week following the deadly coal-dust explosion in September 1921. We wander around the dispersed, crooked tombstones, shaded by spindly trees, trying to comprehend the immeasurable grief that would have rocked the tight-knit community.

Mining continued after the tragedy, with the financially futile coal mine finally shutting down in 1958, after operating for more than 40 years. Workers and their houses were bundled onto trains and sent off to a mine in Collinsville, leaving Mt Mulligan to slip back into silence.

The mine was exploded upon the last miners' departure and is now little more than a tangle of vines covering a small rocky opening. As we look up at the mountain from the hovelled mine entrance, there's something undeniably ethereal about the place. The grandeur. The stillness. The sense Mt Mulligan isn't just a mountain, but an icon. I imagine that Eekoo is looking down at us, smug with the knowledge that we finally get it. Ngarrabullgan isn't a place to meddle, but a place to admire.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The eight guest rooms at Mt Mulligan Lodge have a dark and earthy colour palette; Food is served with a nose-to-tail philosophy; The scenic route from above; Relax with the elements at the end of the day.

### Spotlight on sustainability

Mt Mulligan Lodge, which forms part of the Northern Escape Collection, is completely off-grid and prioritises sustainability. The solar-powered property draws water from its on-site weir, before passing it through a high-tech filtration system, and all waste is managed and treated on site.

A nose-to-tail food philosophy complements a commitment to highlighting local and native Australian ingredients. "We can do the whole butchery here and we also want people to get a sense of the Australian environment and showcase things like wattle seed and rosella flowers," says chef Amanda Healy of her menu, which also champions Australian proteins such as emu and kangaroo, and uses fruit and vegetables from the Atherton Tablelands. "I like being able to tell people that nearly everything they eat was sourced somewhere between here and the Cairns Airport," she says with both enthusiasm and pride. In doing so, the lodge not only injects money into the local economy, but also keeps its food mileage and carbon footprint low.

As owners of Mt Mulligan Station, the lodge soon plans to source beef from its own farm. "The paddock-to-plate approach is important as it's part of the company's underlying commitment to sustainable practices and minimising ecological impact," says executive director of the Northern Escape Collection, Hayley Morris. "We have aspirations to hero quality cuts of beef sourced directly from the cattle station in our menus, and can take guests on local farm tours to highlight the gourmet food trails of this region."

What's more, \$50 from every booking at Mt Mulligan Lodge goes towards the Morris Family Foundation's Reef Keeper's Fund, which helps protect the Great Barrier Reef. [mountmulligan.com](http://mountmulligan.com)

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON IERACE (FIRE PIT, AERIAL VIEW)



PHOTOGRAPHY: EMILY ABAY (RIVER, 4WD, VILLA VIEWS, AERIAL SHOT)



### INDULGE IN THE LUXURY OF TIME AND SPACE ON THE KIMBERLEY COAST

The term 'barefoot luxury' might have been coined back at the turn of the century for a Maldivian resort, but the shoe fits – so to speak – here in the rusty red soil of Berkeley River Lodge, too. Australia's most remote luxury lodge experience is accessible only by air and lies 250 kilometres north-west of Kununurra on Western Australia's out-of-this-world Kimberley Coast. Open early March to late October each year, the off-grid lodge is strung like pearls along the coastal sand dunes, overlooking the Timor Sea and surrounded by wilderness. The 20 villas all boast large private decks with 180-degree views of the ocean and outback, and an open-air en suite with a freestanding bath that scores serious tub points. Guests can opt to spend their days out and about on outback hikes, joining thrilling 4WD tours, fishing for barramundi in remote spots, swimming in freshwater rockpools, exploring rugged river gorges, seeking out Indigenous rock art, learning about the natural history of the area, or even taking a helicopter tour over the epic landscape. Or they can simply lounge by the 20-metre pool at the main house, before settling in for (spectacular) sunset drinks and a degustation dinner.

It's barefoot luxury, yes – which boils down to high-grade comfort and elegance in a relaxed setting – but it's intangible luxury, too: the luxury of going off-grid, switching off and letting the rhythms of nature and the shifting Kimberley sun shape your day.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Take a 4WD tour across sand and wilderness on the Kimberley Coast; Villas at Berkeley River Lodge overlook the Timor Sea; On the river; The colours here are richest at sunset; Berkeley River Lodge is smack-bang in the sand dunes; Bed down for the night in elegant surrounds inspired by the landscape.

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