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NEWS

There's magic in this here gorge

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WHEN three friends spent an afternoon in their tinny, never in their wildest dreams did they expect to float into a spectacular gorge.

After all, this wasn't the Kimberley in Western Australia, an area with large parts of uninhabited wilderness where dramatic cliff plunges and waterfalls have been "discovered" by white men as recently as 20 years ago. This was Gulf country, the grassy savannah of northwest Queensland.

And the land belonged to Robin Hood cattle station, which had been owned by one of the men's parents for almost 30 years.

That afternoon was in 1992. And that man, Simon Terry now 45 has shaped a living from the discovery he made over a few cold beers with his friends all those years ago.

"I thought the waterhole finished just around the corner ... but we just kept going and going and going. The gorge was extraordinary. It was breathtaking. And I felt a little stupid that it was on my property and we never knew about it."

Three years later, Simon and his new wife Gaye, who together had recently taken on Howlong Station, an area of Robin Hood that includes what is now known as Cobbold Gorge, decided to open a small bush camp so people could visit.

Their move into tourism was, at the time, driven partly by necessity. It was becoming harder for cattle stations in northwest Queensland like elsewhere in Australia to remain profitable.

Thankfully for Simon and Gaye, Cobbold Gorge's tourism business today is booming. Last season (April to October) was their best ever, says Gaye, with the station often cooking for up to 30 or 40 people a night.

It's easy to see why visitors love this place. Robin Hood station is about as beautiful and remote as they come. It's what you envisage the true Outback to be.

We arrive at dusk, having driven six hours inland from Cairns. But once we enter the station, it is still 45 minutes of dry, rolling vistas before we come across signs of life.

The bush camp has clearly come a long way since its early days. There is a spacious wooden bar and restaurant that is open at the back to the sounds of the bush, a swimming pool, even a conference centre and the accommodation units are cool, clean and comfortable.

In its entirety, Robin Hood station is 1284sqkm or 134,760ha. The land is home to three airstrips, 348km of internal cattle fence and 12,000 head of brahman cattle.

First thing the next morning, we are bumping along the station's dusty roads in the ute of chief stockman Ewan Cooper, 48, who gives us a fascinating insight into the cattle business.

Robin Hood uses helicopters, then bikes, then horses to move its cattle. Minimising the use of helicopters keeps stress levels low in the cattle, which may take half a day to travel 10-15km to the closest yard a slow amble by the standards of some stations that rely more heavily on helicopters.

After spending the morning in the paddocks, our trip to the gorge in the afternoon comes as a beautiful shock.

As we set off in our kayaks, Ewan tells me that apart from Litchfield National Park in the Northern Territory, this is the most beautiful place he has seen in Australia.

As we snake through the narrow half-light of the gorge, which is just 2m wide at times, I look up the 30m cliffs to the brilliant blue sky above.

This place is still and eerily silent apart from the splash of a shy freshwater crocodile just as it would have been for Simon and his friends all those years before.

The gorge, which is strung with waterholes and fed year-round by springs, is about 6km in length. But only the last 500m is accessible by cruise boat or kayak.

It is not known how the gorge was formed, but its narrow nature tells us it is young in geological terms, that it was formed in the last 10,000 years or so. Eventually, due to erosion underneath from rocks during floods, the walls will collapse and the gorge will widen.

After we leave the gorge, we stop for a swim in one of the clear, warm waterholes. I feel privileged to know I am one of the few white people who have ever swum here.

But there is a discreet sign that someone knew about this place once. Scratched into one of the sandstone cliffs is "J.E. Clark. 1900".

This is a living testament to the Clark family, the first owners of Robin Hood Station from the late 1800s. If they knew about the gorge, they never mentioned it to Simon's parents, Cob and Mary Terry, who purchased the property from them in 1964.

Simon and Gaye know they are lucky to have what is now a regional icon on their property. They also know that other struggling cattle stations in the Gulf making the foray into tourism will not be so successful.

"I'd hate to be at the end of the road here with a caravan park trying to make a living," says Gaye.

"There's so many going into tourism now because of the need for income and I wonder, are they all going to be viable?"

And while Cobbold Gorge has primarily attracted the domestic market until now, Simon says he'd like to see more international visitors.

But he is not deserting his cattle and is optimistic that the industry will "come good" again.

"It's tough times out there at the moment but if (people) own their country and keep things really tight and sit it out, they'll be right. It'll cycle again," he says.

"We're not going anywhere."

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Staying there: For rates at Cobbold Gorge camping village at Robin Hood Station and tour info, phone 4062 5470, email [cobboldgorge@bigpond.com](mailto:cobboldgorge@bigpond.com) or visit [www.cobboldgorge.com.au](http://www.cobboldgorge.com.au).

Robin Hood station is open to visitors April 1-October 31.

The station is located 400km west of Cairns on a well-maintained gravel road suitable for conventional vehicles (although all roads may become impassable after rain, so call before starting your journey).

Getting there: Cairns and Townsville airports are serviced by Qantas, Virgin Blue and Jetstar.

Robin Hood also has its own airstrip. Contact the station for details on exact position.

The Savannahlander train runs between Cairns and Forsayth. For fares and timetables, phone 1800 793 848 or visit [www.savannahlander.com.au](http://www.savannahlander.com.au).

The writer was a guest of Tourism Queensland.

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