

JANET FIFE-YEOMANS

takes a camping trip in the Kimberley, where she sleeps in a swag under the stars and swims in cool pools at the end of gorges

IN the off season he is a wrangler at a crocodile farm but right now, our guide Dave is running over the rocks through a Kimberley gorge in his bare feet. He points to the plants and flowers that would help us survive in the wild — as food and pharmacy — and others than can be used as sandpaper or kindling to stoke a fire.

On our trek along the legendary Gibb River Road, he has picked up snakes from the road and moved them out of the way of trucks.

And along riverbanks, he knows where the freshwater crocodiles have made their nests and laid eggs so we can avoid them.

But the most amazing thing about Dave McMahon, 27, is that he trained as a fine dining chef in an earlier life. We are not only the safest tour group up here but also the best fed.

It is under the shade of giant boab trees and ghost gums that we camp our way across the Kimberley and into the Bungle Bungles from Broome on our way to Darwin, sleeping in swags under mossie nets and swimming in cool pools at the pointy end of the gorges.

As dusk gathers, sunsets are watched in awestruck silence from lookouts on top of rock formations that have been here for 1.8 billion years while black cockatoos and black kites fly above.

Then with just a fold-up table for a kitchen, a trailer that seems like a food Tardis because it never runs empty and a camp fire as a stove, Dave creates feasts of which Tuscan barramundi on night number one was only the first.

You can do the Kimberley almost without tasting the red dust these days. It is well-gearred up for the luxury traveller with established accommodation in safari tents and cabins or homesteads and day trips to dip in and out of the gorges before heading back to a real bed and hot showers.

But you would never discover the surprising joy of sleeping in a swag under the brightest stars and waking up with the dawn chorus.

I wouldn't have believed it either — but we are sleeping nine hours a night or more and waking up rested and relaxed and unbothered by any nasties other than a snuffling around the campsite one night that we put down to a curious wallaby. Or a snorer from another tent.

As well as being the safest and best-fed, we can also lay claim to being probably the smallest tour group doing the trek. There are five of us plus Dave. With no vehicles larger than a six-seater Landcruiser, family company Venture North can cater for tailor-made trips like ours.

The 11-day itinerary was drawn up by my four fellow travellers, Brenton and Kaaren and Greg and Ruth, together with Venture North and then opened up to fill the final two seats. It was The Tailor, a South Australian-based company which, as the name says, tailors holidays, that recommended Venture North. Then I saw the trip advertised on Venture North's website and here I am on an adventure that invariably draws the comment from friends and colleagues: "Oh, I would love to do that." My advice? Do it!

weekend escape

Swags and fine dining

Sparkling: reflections in Windjana Gorge (above); Ellenbrae Station (top right); and Manning Gorge Waterfall (right).

The Kimberley is another world — peaceful, slow and full of magic.

On the first night at Windjana Gorge, we count 33 freshwater crocs, about twice as many as the number of people camping here for the night. It means the showers and toilets are almost empty.

George, one of the volunteers with enviable jobs of keeping an eye on the campsites and collecting the fees, is packing up his trailer home the next day after his month-long stint is up.

Mt Barnett Station, on the way into Manning Gorge campground, looks busy with half a dozen people sipping coffee outside. But locals say that it's nothing like in peak season when 10 vehicles queue up at every bowser to fill up. No thanks.

We eschew the camp's tinnie and swim across the Manning River, starting the walk to the gorge feeling nice and cool. By now, the time of the day is only

important because of the heat of the sun. There is no mobile phone coverage and watches have been ditched.

Manning Gorge ends in a stunning collection of deep pools with a waterfall from which the water is so pure, you can fill water bottles from the spring at the top. At the famous El Questro Wilderness Park, our only glimpse of the homestead is from Branco's Lookout as the sun dips down behind us and the ranges spread, one behind the other, in the dusk.

Our campsite is next to the creek and our neighbours are Joc and Trevor and two horses they picked up from Gympie in Queensland and are driving back to Exmouth in WA — an epic trip.

In El Questro's Chamberlain Gorge, which we visit by boat because there is evidence a lone saltwater crocodile is living there, archer fish spit at us as we lean over the side. They think we are insects they can catch.



Food and wine hounds sniff

Devoted dogs come along for the ride as the humans hit the wine and food trail, writes **SUSAN BUGG**

WE are setting off on a winery bus tour — nothing unusual for a dozen or so food and wine lovers on a sunny Melbourne Sunday morning.

But the size of the group is doubled by our BFFs — best furry friends — sitting happily on blankets on the coach seats beside us.

Dogs go, too, on a Gourmet Pawprints winery tour. That's the whole point, and always keen to lead the way is Diesel, a 3½-year-old rescue kelpie who's become the pin-up boy for the company started by his owner Kerry Watt last year.

Dog day afternoon: canine tourists take a break (left) and Kerry Watt with her kelpie Diesel.

Today Diesel's crew includes fellow kelpies Denver and Arnie, spaniels Milo and Artie, labs Max and Charli, retriever DJ, Pugsley the handsome black pug and Daisy the excitable pomeranian. I'll own up to being owned by the latter, and she's happy to be with me instead of looking after the house.

We meet bayside at Sandridge Beach in Port Melbourne, where the dogs have a sniff-to-know-you session at the off-lead beach — and owners can say hello — before a short walk along the Beacon Cove waterfront to our waiting coach.

Animal-loving business consultant Watt began her venture with day-long tours a year ago to canine-friendly wineries and eating spots in the Yarra Valley, Daylesford, and on the Bellarine and Mornington peninsulas.

"I wanted to bring together my passions of food, wine and Diesel and to follow my heart," Watt says.

Today is the first of new half-day tours, suggested by a three-time previous customer as an alternative to the