

SPLENDOUR IN THE GRASS

Immersed in nature on the vast plains of outback Queensland

DENISE CULLEN



Mitchell Grass Retreat, main;
comfortable tent interior, below right;
Longreach railway station, below

I wake to the sound of magpie song and the sight of open grasslands bathed in golden light. It's my first morning at Mitchell Grass Retreat, a cluster of 16 glamping tents on the outskirts of Longreach, a town in central-west Queensland that is billed as the heart of the outback.

Previous trips to this prime grazing region have presented Longreach as the epitome of the wide brown land of Australian lore. This time, however, a recent 4.6m flood has turned the landscape green, filling the creeks and rivers with a lazy, latte-like flow, and encouraging the deep-rooted, drought-tolerant Mitchell grasses (which give the retreat its name) to spring back to life.

I'd arrived the previous evening aboard Queensland Rail's Spirit of the Outback. This lumbering route takes about 26 hours from Brisbane's Roma Street station, hugging the coast north as far as Rockhampton, before heading west through a string of small outback towns such as Anakie and Jericho, and terminating at Longreach.

Mitchell Grass Retreat is set on a sprawling 24ha just three minutes' drive from Longreach's elegant railway station, which was built in 1916. As the retreat's owners, Tanya and David Neal, show me around, it becomes clear that the one thing separating guests from nature are the insect screens on the weatherproof canvas tents. Kangaroos graze and bustards stalk through the grasslands, while signage urges guests to be aware of snakes in the warmer months.

"Sometimes there might be a green frog in the toilet – so just let me know (and) I can come and get it out," says Tanya. "Some people don't care, but some people are terrified."

Fortunately, green frogs don't bother me. But I'm grateful for the insect screens, because the winged beasts out this way come in shapes and sizes I've never seen before.

I'm in one of 10 spacious safari-style Gidyea tents, which accommodate solo travellers or couples. Forming one curve in the retreat's leaf-shaped configuration, the tents are decked out in earthy tones of russet and taupe, and equipped with split-cycle airconditioners to help cushion the area's climatic extremes.

The open-plan bedroom contains a king bed dressed in crisp



white cotton, topped with a comforter covered in soft saffron-shaded linen and nubby, textured cushions. At the foot of the bed is a couch and coffee table, but no television, because the idea is to savour the surroundings.

There's a well-equipped kitchenette containing a microwave and full-sized fridge and, out on the front deck, a barbecue for cooking the contents of locally sourced breakfast or barbecue packs that guests can order. Just beyond that is a private firepit with log seating that faces the sunset. An ensuite bathroom with shower, sink and a deep bathtub overlook the grassy plains.

Comprising the second curve of Mitchell Grass Retreat are six larger Mulga tents. Designed to accommodate families, they feature a subtly different layout in that five have a fresco tin baths on rear decks, surrounded by thick foliage. Positioned between the Gidyea and Mulga tents are a communal fire pit, barbecue and pool.

The Neals have a history of hospitality in the area, as the former owners of both the Longreach Motor Inn and Saltbush Retreat. After selling those properties, they went all-in to ride the glamping wave, opening Mitchell Grass Retreat in July 2020.

Since my last visit, they've added a new gathering place, The Tin Shed, a commercial kitchen and a fresco dining area built on a spacious wooden deck overlooking the plains. Six months ago, they purchased seven Longhorn steers, in the company of which guests will be able to enjoy morning tea.

One constant is the series of small but thoughtful touches

IN THE KNOW

Mitchell Grass Retreat is at Lot 162 Longreach Muttaborra Road, Longreach. Gidyea tents from \$385 a night for two, including gourmet breakfast basket.

mitchellgrassretreat.com.au

that allow guests to enjoy this rustic experience in refined comfort. These include portable, lightweight lanterns to light your path from public to private areas at night, complimentary port and chocolates on arrival, soaps handcrafted by a Longreach local, and cheery messages scrawled in chalk on mini blackboards. There are also two sets of ear plugs discreetly resting on bedside tables, because you can't choose who's occupying the tent next to you.

Mitchell Grass Retreat has ample onsite parking for road trippers, but it's also within easy reach for those who prefer others to do the driving. On my first day, I eat breakfast gazing out over the grasslands before heading to Ilfracombe with Brett and Kathy Hintz of Golden West Tours. Brett sweeps one arm towards the vast plains and an unbroken horizon. Visitors often assume the lack of trees results from landclearing, but he explains that "big sky country" is the direct result of the region's cracking clay self-mulching soil.

"If a bird drops a (tree) seed out in the middle of that open country, and the conditions are right, it will germinate," he explains. "(While) it has a taproot going straight down, it will be fine, but as soon as it puts its lateral roots out and the soil dries out and cracks, it breaks those lateral roots off and the plant dies. That's why for millions of years we've had this open country."

Other encounters further my fledgling understanding of the landscape. At the Qantas Founders Museum, I'm given an advance look at new exhibition Carbon_Dating, which opened on March 15 and runs until mid June, showcasing the important but often overlooked role of native grasses.

Pulling the lid off the crate containing artist Delissa Walker's work *The Native Fence*, woven from materials such as black spear grass and bamboo, senior curator Sarah Johnson says she expects the displays to resonate with the region's agricultural community.

"Our industry is heavily reliant on people living sustainably on the land," she adds.

Indeed, even just a few days out here has left me more aware of the natural world – the direction of the wind, the shifts in temperature, and the rising and setting of the sun and moon.

On my final night, I waded into the sparkling sapphire pool, and float on my back until my fingertips crinkle, the horizon turns burnt orange and the first of the stars emerge.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Mitchell Grass Retreat and Outback Queensland.

outbackqueensland.com.au

