



Left, some tourism operators offer the opportunity to round up cattle on horseback; and you can cool off with a swim at Emma Gorge, below.

Mustering up the tourists

If you like the wind in your hair and the saddle beneath you, head north and become a stockman – for a brief moment, **DIANA PLATER** writes

John Rodney – or JR as he's known – shows us how to hold the reins, stockman style. He chooses our horses and gives us a leg-up into the saddle before we head off on our "mini-muster".

The idea is to create the feeling of a real muster – by rounding up the stray cattle with their HV8 brand and leading them back from a billabong through long grass towards a paddock, where they are meant to rest for the night.

We're at Home Valley Station in the East Kimberley and the Brahmin cattle are some of their 16,000 head – many of them were "extras" in the recent film epic, *Australia*.

After a few hours in the saddle, some of us reckon we could just about join up as ringers any day now. That is, the ones who didn't get lost along the way or want to feel the muscles of their backsides ever again!

We're getting a taste of what it might have been like for the stockmen and women – the majority of them Aboriginal – who once herded cattle over vast distances.

They were the backbone of the cattle industry in the Kimberley and the Northern Territory until the 1960s when equal wages came in and many stations laid them off.

Later, some groups were able to buy back some of these stations and establish communities on them.

Many are still run as cattle enterprises.

Realising that many Aboriginal people wouldn't benefit from the High Court's Mabo (No 2) decision and the Native Title Act, the Federal Government set up the Indigenous Land Corporation in 1995 along with the Indigenous Land Fund.

This was to help many of those who were dispossessed of their land and couldn't demonstrate the continuous association necessary to prove native title, the Indigenous Land Corporation says. In 1999 the corporation bought Home Valley and two neighbouring stations, Kurunjie and Durack River Station, on behalf of the traditional owners.

the Balangarra people (at Home Valley) and the Nyaliga people at the other two stations. That's more than 1.42 million hectares combined. As well as being a working tourism business, Home Valley is a base for training Aboriginal people in tourism.

The 14 current trainees are studying tourism courses run by TAFE at Kununurra, as well as other courses such as work preparation, agriculture and horticulture.

While living at Home Valley they work as guides, in transport, serving food and beverages, reception, retail sales, housekeeping and cleaning, office work and horticulture.

Helping JR is Cyril Yeeda, who leads one of the less-experienced riders.

From Halls Creek, Yeeda is training in hospitality, tourism and horticulture. But he prefers to work with horses and focuses on the stables, and getting the horses ready for rides.

A spokeswoman for Home Valley explains the trainees enjoy interacting with the guests and being mentored – that was obvious by the relaxed way he and his young rider communicated.

The station offers a wide range of accommodation from \$15 a night camping spots that have toilets and hot showers to five-star "Grass Castles" suites overlooking Bindoola Creek for around \$420 a night.

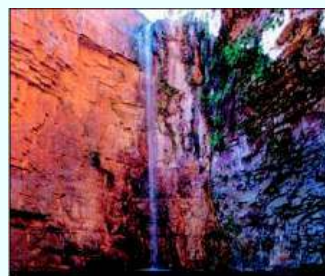
It's an outback experience with a luxurious twist, including a place for fine dining and wining at its revamped Dusty Bar and Grill.

As well as horseriding, outdoor activities include fishing and bird watching.

For many who have "done" the Gibb River Road, it's a welcome stop for replenishment before arriving in Kununurra. Many combine a stay here with one at nearby Voyages El Questro Wilderness Park and Emma Gorge Resort.

The walk to and swim at Emma Gorge is worth it, with thermal water trickling into a large waterhole at the bottom of a waterfall.

Home Valley's 120km, or about one and a



If you go:

- Home Valley Station: www.homevalley.com.au
- Emma Gorge Resort: www.voyages.com.au
- Ord Valley Muster: www.ordvalleymuster.com
- Ivanhoe Coffee and Lunch Bar: call 0427-692-775
- Kimberley Fine Diamonds: www.kimberleydiamonds.com.au
- PumpHouse Restaurant and Bar: call (08) 9169-3222
- Indigenous Land Corporation: www.ilc.gov.au
- Jetstar flies to Darwin. Airmoth flies from Darwin to Kununurra.

half hours' drive, from Kununurra or 69km from the east end of the Gibb River Road.

We were in the East Kimberley for a muster of a different kind – the Ord Valley Muster – which started as a big dinner party, or outback dinner, under the stars seven years ago.

Its aim was to help extend the tourism season in the Dry by a few more weeks, getting people up to the Kimberley in May, rather than June.

But since then it has turned into a major annual event lasting two weeks, with everyone from families with small children to country and western singers involved.

Now the local chamber of commerce runs the event, which includes markets, a basketball carnival, motocross challenge, concerts, 4WD bash, picnics and a tour of the Argyle Diamond Mine, with its big night the Airmoth Kimberley Moon Experience, timed with the full moon.

You can take your own picnic or \$450 a person gets you into the black tie event in the Kimberley Fine Diamonds Corporate Circle, where guests have pre-concert cocktails and canapes, before dinner during the evening's entertainment.

This year's entertainers included the Hoodoo Gurus, the Mirima Dancers, James Blundell, the Australian Army Band Darwin (surprisingly the best music of the night) and Chris Matthews.

Event Director Kris Currow says the economic benefits to the town are huge.

This year accommodation houses were full, additional air services were scheduled, and tour operators reported their busiest time on record.

The economic benefits flowed to tourism and non-tourism businesses throughout the region as visitors moved further afield, making the most of the Kimberley experience, Currow says.

The writer was a guest of the Ord Valley Muster.

AAP