

# A wild life

*A life of adventure has inspired Rhett Walker to develop Lorella Springs for tourists.*

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

Leaning on the bar at Lorella Springs Wilderness Park, Rhett Walker points out waterholes on a map for two middle-aged tourists. “There are nearly 1000 kilometres of tracks out there, and nearly 30km of ocean frontage,” he says to the couple, grinning. “There’s nothing else like it.”

Located along the Savannah Way, 170km by road north-west of Borroloola, Lorella’s Top End landscape of red ridges, pristine beaches and freshwater springs has been Rhett’s home for more than 30 years. Although today the lush campgrounds provide an oasis for travellers, the property has come a long way since Rhett first arrived as a 16 year old after his parents went bankrupt on neighbouring Nathan River station.

“It was New Years Day, 1986,” Rhett explains. “We had nowhere else to go, so we came here and the caretaker on the property said, ‘I’ve been out here for years on my own and I don’t want to see anybody, but you can go and set up in the bush,’” Rhett says. “Mum and I found a spot down on the river with my little brothers and sisters, set up a truck tarpaulin, and we spent the wet season living off the land, eating crocodiles and goannas and barramundi and turtles.”

The journey to that first wet season on Lorella Springs is a rollercoaster of adventure. “In 1970, Mum and Dad bought a Land Rover and a Bolex camera and built a 23-foot [70-metre] boat and left Sydney for Cape York.” After a six-week stopover in Cairns, where Rhett was born, the Walkers launched their boat and headed for Papua New Guinea. “They wanted to do something no-one had done before,” Rhett says.

After exploring remote islands and becoming marooned, the Walkers returned to Australia and made a movie about the journey. *Adventure Unlimited* was distributed through cinemas, shown at the Sydney Opera House and ended up on television. “I have newspaper articles from the time saying I was Australia’s youngest explorer,” Rhett laughs.

A few years later, in early 1975, a crew that included Rhett, his parents and two sisters, sailed north from Sydney on a 22m yacht. For the next five years the Walkers explored the isolated waters of Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. “We had a piano on the yacht Mum used to play and we’d sail into these remote villages and canoes would be paddling out to greet us – they’d never seen anything like us,” Rhett says.

“We lived on bananas, coconuts, fish, rice and rainwater, and we used to grow reef on the bottom of the yacht we’d stay so long at some of those islands.”

The family returned to Sydney in 1980 and three years later the film *Storm Breaker* was released. “We’d take the yacht along the coast, up to Taree and down to Wollongong, and we’d do big showings at all the town halls,” Rhett says. “And we made a lot of money from it.”

Rhett says his parents were never settled in Sydney, so it was no shock when they purchased a remote cattle station in the Northern Territory. “I think they had megalomania and thought a million-acre (405,000-hectare) cattle station with 100km of navigable waterways was what they wanted next,” he says. In 1984, the family moved to Nathan River Station, 720km south-east of Darwin.

Soon after, Cyclone Sandy dumped 787 millimetres of rain in three days, washing down fences and scattering cattle. With his parents’ marriage breaking up and his father returning to Sydney, Rhett dropped out of school to help his mother run the property. “But we had no idea. We weren’t from the Territory, and no matter what we tried we couldn’t make it work,” he says. Two years later, the family was bankrupt.

In 1986, with little more than the clothes on their backs, Nancy Walker and her seven children moved next door to Lorella Springs. Somehow, by the end of that first wet season, Rhett’s dad Peter had sorted out a deal to purchase Lorella in his children’s names and the family took ownership of the largely undeveloped property.

When his mother moved to Darwin to school his younger siblings, Rhett went travelling. “I went away for a few years, trying to start a different life, but Lorella had its hooks in me so deeply I’d keep coming back,” he says. A move back in the early 1990s was cut short when a relationship breakdown forced him to Darwin so he could spend time with his children, Indiana, Tristan and Alaska. For the next 12 years Rhett travelled between the city and the station, pouring what money he had into developing Lorella for tourism.

In 2006, Rhett returned permanently to the station. Twelve years on, Lorella Springs Wilderness Park is one of the Top End’s hidden gems. “We had about 12,000 people come through last year and that’s amazing,” he says. “The whole reason I went into tourism is because I love Lorella so much.”

Rhett Walker of Lorella Springs Wilderness Park, NT.

