



It has been too wet to mow the front lawn of the \$12 million beach house but miraculously the rain has cleared, allowing our helicopter pilot Will to land on the freshly laid turf.

Despite arriving in the worst of Tropical North Queensland's wet season, we are greeted with the postcard view of Pelorus Private Island – the newest addition to billionaire rich lister Chris Morris' tourism empire.

In front of us, the homestead peeks out from beneath the rainforest, its enormous glass windows catching the reflection of the pool and private beach, where jet skis are bobbing in the turquoise water of the Coral Sea.

Computershare co-founder Morris bought Pelorus (just 800 metres north of his first private island, Orpheus) in 2017 and convinced the Queensland government to change the zoning so he could develop it.

A caretaker's cottage has been replaced with an exclusive five-suite residence, accessed by a 30-minute helicopter flight from Townsville over the Great Barrier Reef's 'Great Palm' archipelago.

We are the first group media to stay at Pelorus Private Island, as it's officially named, on a trip originally scheduled for mid-November that was delayed thanks to trouble bringing furniture into the country. As we tour the oversized entertainers' kitchen and lounge, there's no evidence of the frantic rush it took to complete the remote build. In the early days before the structure was built, the first trades on the island slept in swags and fought off mozzies. Unlike Morris' nearby Orpheus Island



Lodge, which has accommodation for up to 28 people across 14 rooms, suites and villas, Pelorus can be booked only for a single group. Think *Glass Onion* rather than *The White Lotus*.

My suite, which connects to the others via

Pelorus Private Island, above left; the writer goes fishing. PHOTOS: JASON IERACE, TESS BENNETT



a verandah that runs the length of the home, has a private deck that stops just metres from the channel that separates Orpheus and Pelorus. I have the same view of palm trees and blue seas from the ensuite shower. The first area we explore is the snorkel

site, 10 minutes by boat from the island. Clad in a stinger suit (not even a private island can make this look glam) I snorkel with the current, exploring the fringing reef below the island's green hills. Back on the boat, there's chilled rosé on offer as we cruise past what is known as Bat Cave, the spot Chris Hemsworth visited while staying at Orpheus in 2017. No one in our media group knows each other well enough to recreate the Instagram-famous photo of Hemsworth and wife Elsa Pataky's aerobic embrace.

The fifth and smallest suite is designed for nannies, security or other staff travelling with guests.

Built on the edge of 400 hectares of untouched habitat and too far for day trippers to reach by boat, Pelorus Private Island is hoping to attract international celebs on their Australian tours. The fifth and smallest suite is designed for nannies, security or other staff travelling with guests.

At sunset, we take to the pool for cocktail hour(s) and are served piña colodas, chilli margaritas and a martini with three olives as we relax into our new Rich-Lister lifestyle.

The Morris family were the first guests to stay on Pelorus, arriving the same day the builders left, and staying for 10 nights over Christmas. "It was unbelievable," Morris tells *Life & Leisure*. "The five grandchildren absolutely loved it because they could jump into the pool and then race out into the water and go snorkelling."

Inspired by the experience of holidaying on a superyacht in the Mediterranean, Morris referred to the development as 'M.Y. Pelorus' [Motor Yacht Pelorus].

"The level of service on superyachts is just one step ahead of any hotel you've been to," says Morris, who owns a fleet of them based out of Port Douglas as well as M.Y. Northern Escape, which is moored in Cannes and available for charter in the Mediterranean for €230,000 (about \$380,000) a week.

On the request of Morris and his wife, Sharon Sills, each Pelorus suite has the same supremely comfortable king-sized bed, pillows and linen as their fleet of superyachts.

Morris has also enlisted M.Y. Northern Escape's head chef, Grant Logan, and his wife, Kate, to manage Pelorus. After seasons working on superyachts around the globe, the couple are pros at personalising the menu and meeting almost any request.

A pattern quickly emerges: Whenever anyone says they might need something – Band-Aids, a snack or ear plugs for snorkelling, Kate appears with it a moment later. More specific (or high-maintenance requests) can be accommodated for guests if they've completed a preference sheet ahead of their visit, allowing time to stock the wine cellar and kitchen with any specially requested ingredients.

Guests are encouraged to help themselves to the fully stocked bar and an open kitchen. "We don't mind guests just going to the fridge to help themselves. It is meant to feel like you are in your own home," Morris says.

He says his staff questioned how far they should take the homestead concept – which is similar to The House, an all-inclusive residence on Lizard Island. For example, did they need numbers on the doors or ironing boards in each room? "I said people here are paying \$20,000 a day, they want someone to do their ironing for them."

If Orpheus is where you honeymoon, Pelorus is where you bring the family for a milestone birthday or anniversary – once you've made some serious money. Prices start at \$20,000 a night, including helicopter transfers from Townsville and all food, alcohol and activities such as snorkelling, jet ski island tours, and boat charters to nearby Hinchinbrook Island or the outer Great Barrier Reef.

During my stay I find myself doing some serious mental arithmetic to justify a return visit. Say I book for 11 adults, the maximum capacity. That's \$26,000 a night. For three nights, that's around \$7000 a person. If I come back for my 40th birthday in five years, I'll need to save \$120 a month to pay just for myself. Two or three interest rate cuts should do the trick.

Day two and the weather has turned. The turquoise blues have turned into moody greys and low-hanging clouds cover the island's peaks. No one minds the change much. We're getting wet anyway – first with a pre-breakfast attempt at spearfishing (thankfully there's just one spear gun and the guide holds on to it the whole time), and later taking the kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and ridiculous-looking Schiller water bikes for a spin off the private beach.

We're given a quick lesson on how to operate the jet skis and sea bob – a kind of underwater electric scooter commonly found on charter yachts that you can use to zip through the water while snorkelling – and left to explore the island's coastline.

Overseeing the fun is Curtis Werrett, Pelorus Private Island's third full-time staff member, who is the activities coordinator. The property has room for eight staff and Orpheus Island Lodge provides additional guides and skippers for fishing trips or boat charters to the outer reef or Hinchinbrook Island.

Most meals are served family style, designed to be shared among the group. Wagyu and coral trout feature heavily during meals, as conversation and laughter fill the home to its cathedral ceilings.

On my final morning at Pelorus, I follow Morris' advice and go fishing. "The best thing about the place is fishing. We get the guys from Orpheus and they know exactly where to go," he tells me. "I caught a yellowfin tuna the other day, bought it back, and we had sashimi for lunch."

"The Med is a wonderful place, but you can't fish in it... the excitement when someone catches something, it's just great."

I'm sceptical that fishing will be the most fun I'll have on a private island, but then again, I've also never been accompanied by a skipper who starts blasting *Eye of the Tiger* the moment I get a bite and start reeling in my catch. That particular fish gets away because I'm laughing too hard to finish the job. But it turns out the guides from Orpheus do know exactly where to go.

With zero fishing experience, I reel in two nannygais and a spangled emperor. With the music and someone else to handle the bait, the trip is feeling more like a party boat than a fishing charter. We're barely a five-minute boat ride from where we woke up, with six of us dropping lines in at the same time. In 90 minutes we've caught 16 fish between us and released 14 back into the ocean.

Since 2011 the Morris Group has created a \$418 million tourism portfolio in Northern Queensland including the five-star Orpheus Island Lodge and Mt Mulligan Lodge, the Port Douglas-based fleet of superyachts, Nautilus Aviation helicopter services, and The Ville Resort-Casino and new luxury hotel Ardo, both in Townsville.

Morris also has his eye on Double Island, off Cairns – the property has fallen into disrepair after being bought by Hong Kong-based billionaire Benny Wu for \$5.68 million in 2012. In October, the Queensland government started legal action to end Wu's lease, which runs until 2099.

So far, Orpheus has escaped a brush with Cyclone Yasi, which passed by just before the resort opened in 2011 and last month's Tropical Jasper. Our helicopter fetched us ahead of schedule to catch our flights home ahead of stormy weather. The Morris Group's luck held last week when Cyclone Kirrily hit Townsville, sparing both Orpheus Island Lodge and Pelorus Private Island. **✚**

The writer travelled to Pelorus Private Island as a guest of Northern Escape Collection and Tourism & Events Queensland.



Chef Grant Logan and his wife, Kate, manage Pelorus Private Residence.



A lioness is unperturbed by the rough-and-tumble of her cubs. PHOTO: CATHERINE MARSHALL

TRAVEL KENYA

Circle of life

When the heavens open, miracles unfold on the Masai Mara, writes Catherine Marshall.

The region is in the grip of a post-lockdown baby boom. Lion cubs leap across the rapids in their first stab at independence. Hyena cubs nibble the Landcruiser's tyres, downy pelts and liquid eyes belying their wild and voracious nature.

A leopard cub born at Great Plains Conservation's Mara Plains Camp has moved on to more suitable pastures; his mother gave birth on a tent roof flap not long ago; the human occupants were swiftly relocated and the "birthing suite" closed until further notice.

Even the camp's sister property, Mara Expedition Camp, is born of the pandemic. When a flood destroyed the original camp, staff took advantage of the lockdown-induced tourism lull to reconstruct it on higher ground. As the retreat took shape, so the landscape surrounding it germinated. Staff established a kitchen garden and planted 3000 indigenous trees; produce is plucked at mealtimes, and the burgeoning thicket of East African greenheart trees, wild olive trees and acacias bristle with birds and browsing wildlife.

"This is a baby that was born during [the height of] COVID," explains camp manager John Parmasau. "Derek [Joubert, chief executive of Great Plains Conservation] said, 'We will cry together and we will laugh together, as a family'."

It was to be a long-distance relationship: for the duration of construction, Joubert and his wife Beverly, co-founder of Great Plains Conservation, were locked down in Botswana. "We had to build [the camp] on WhatsApp and Zoom," Joubert says. "Something unusual happened out of that: the staff who built the camp own it."

Eighteen months later, when lockdowns ended, the Jouberts finally got to see the 1920s-style camp they'd helped deliver: six luxury tents fitted with leather-and-brass

campaign furnishings, scattered with kilim rugs and hung with Beverly's iconic wildlife images; an open-hatched kitchen fitted with a chef's countertop; and plans for a plunge pool built ingeniously into the bed of an old lorry.

"They haven't changed a thing," Parmasau says. The pride taken by staff in their "baby" manifests in the Masai song spilling from the kitchen as head chef Daniel Kimani supervises dinner. From my countertop seat I watch the evening performance: cooks preparing produce from the garden, then searing steak and grilling snapper or dipping date puddings into toffee sauce.

"When making dinner, we communicate through singing," Kimani says. "We are asking each other to pass the garlic, the romesco sauce. Guests like it a lot."

This guest longs to linger in bed as the sun prises apart storm clouds next morning. But I'm rewarded with a double rainbow and a herd of sunlit zebras as guide Frank Keteere leads me across the plains on a dawn drive.

"It's a good time to be here," he says. "It's raining, it's green everywhere, the animals are happy, we are happy."

The wildlife is practically crowing: baboons whoop and dance as a lion, her belly heavy with the previous night's feed, labours up a hill. Spotted hyenas exult at the carcass she has left behind. A hippo leaves his wallowing pod and climbs the riverbank. "He's come out to see what all the commotion's about," Keteere says.

On the horizon, shuka-cloaked Masai herdsmen drive cattle amid the cacophony. "There is always co-operation between them and wildlife," Keteere adds.

I hear more about this co-operation on my way to Mahali Mzuri, Richard Branson and Virgin Limited Edition's 12-tented luxury safari camp, which celebrated its 10th birthday last year. When guide John Kaelo was herding cattle as a boy, he

survived a buffalo attack by lying flat as he'd been taught to do. He vividly recalls the texture of the beast's tongue as it licked his head. "It's like a wire brush – you feel the pain. And then he took off," he says.

"We Masai don't have a phobia of lions. When I'm walking through these bushes my big concern is hippo, elephant and buffalo. But all these animals, they want to avoid you, that's why you see the Masai are wearing red cloths. We put on red, so animals can see you from a distance – even an elephant."

The elephants maintain a respectful distance as I gaze down at them from my private deck at Mahali Mzuri. From their perspective, the camp is a smattering of roofs shaped like Masai bows and balanced on a lofty cloud of bush. The red of those shukas is repeated in the tent drapes and beaded cushions scattered on my bed. At dinner, all the colours and flavours of this country appear on my plate: root vegetable soup served in a calabash, ugali (corn meal) fritters, Swahili vegetable curry.

"It will leave you with memories," says chef John Edison. "You will remember that at Mahali Mzuri, you tasted Kenya."

The wildlife has feasted overnight, too. At dawn, wildebeest and zebra foals sneak drinks from their mothers. The juvenile cheetahs have severed the umbilical cord; free to roam the plains alone, they flop beneath an orange-leaf croton bush and lick their paws. "These are [adult cheetah] Kwei's children," Kaelo says. But the lion cubs won't let their mother be. We find them in a clearing, clambering over the lioness as she tries to sleep off her meal, and hanging off her back as she stretches against the trunk of a tree.

From beneath a bush a lion strikes a warning chord against an interloper, a roar so unexpected it shocks my heart and infuses my bones. A second lion joins in, then a third, and soon we are encircled by the pride's resounding symphony. As it tails off, we hear the sweet mewl of the cubs, their kitty jaws outstretched in imitation of their elders, their velvety bodies thrust defiantly against the unseen enemy.

There's no sign of that leopard cub born earlier at Mara Plains, the Relais & Chateaux property appropriately billed Great Plains Conservation's "mother camp". I keep a lookout for him as I cross the swing bridge to my tent and close the heavy antique doors safely behind me. There are no newborn cubs in the roof flap; it's baboons that are most likely to peer in as I sink into the

bathtub, my modesty concealed by nothing but a tightly fastened mosquito screen.

Next day, guide Dickson Yialle follows the oxbows along the Nkaiitiki River. The rising sun is trapped momentarily beneath an acacia's canopy; the forest hums with kori bustards and cisticolas; the water is full of yawning hippos. At dusk, a

pair of lions emerges from a thicket, their manes blazing in the twilight. "Brothers," Yialle says. "They are looking for females."

When I take off the following day from Mara's Olare Orok Airstrip, I see below me coffee-coloured rivers gushing unimpeded here, and in fits and starts there, through the endless swathe of green. Somewhere down there are those lions, dogged in their desire to produce next season's offspring. **✚**

The writer was a guest of Bench Africa.



Mahali Mzuri's pool, left, is ideal for keeping an eye out for wildlife beyond; a tent at Great Plains Conservation's new Mara Expedition Camp.

