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WHO

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Rise of the anti-hotel

James & Hayley Baillie



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When James met Hayley in 1998, something magical happened, and not just in a romantic sense. For James Baillie, then managing director of P&O Resorts, operators of Queensland's Lizard, Bedarra and Wilson Islands, and expedition cruise leader Hayley Smith (daughter of famed Aussie businessman and explorer, Dick), it was a meeting of minds and the discovery of a shared passion for conservation, the marine environment, design and luxury travel on a small and meaningful scale. Marriage and four adventure-loving sons were to follow. For the rest of us, it meant the birth of Baillie Lodges in 2003 and Australia's newfound recognition as a leading destination for an exciting style of accommodation.

The word "lodge" speaks of hunting parties on country estates, baronial decor and antlered deer heads above the mantelpiece, but in tourism terms it is more defined. A lodge is not a hotel, nor even a resort. Today, the best examples of the concept are small "eco-luxury" estates in areas of natural beauty, cultural importance and environmental excellence. The accommodation is relatively small, and each guestroom, suite or glampertent is designed as a sanctuary. Guests can mingle for drinks, or mix during activities, but the emphasis is on privacy and reconnection.

Looking at the luxury lodge landscape, the average size is about 40 guest rooms. "The sweet spot for Baillie Lodges is 20," says James. "It needs to feel intimate and exclusive but also value for money." Typical extras are plentiful, from the inclusion of drinks and meals to excursions and bespoke experiences. James says he likes the description of a lodge as being "an anti-hotel". It's more personalised, he says, and the luxury elements are "relaxed". The Baillies have been inspired by the vision of Aman Resorts [now branded as Aman] founder Adrian Zecha, particularly his pioneering projects in Bali in the early 1990s with private pool villas in walled compounds that looked and felt intrinsically of the destination. James says that when talking about Baillie Lodges to US-based travel operators, he often describes the experience as "a combination of a stay at an Aman and a Lindblad expedition cruise". He adds that "they totally get it".

The Baillies launched their portfolio by taking over the established Capella Lodge on NSW's World Heritage-listed Lord Howe Island in 2004, and updating its suites and facilities with destination-specific design touches in what James calls a "barefoot luxury glamover". Its serene position, with front-on views of Gower and Lidgbird mountains, is considered the island's finest, and the lodge is the brand's enduring flagship property. James and Hayley were among the first Australian hoteliers to recognise that guests were not just interested in the thread count of sheets and the size of televisions. They want to know the provenance of food and drinks, whether a piece of artwork was locally sourced, and if community artisans were involved in on-site projects. Was the lodge interested in giving back?

Added to the mix in Australia have been Southern Ocean Lodge on South Australia's Kangaroo Island, opened in 2008, the acquisition of Longitude 131 at Uluru-Kata Tjuta in 2013, and the 2019 addition of Silky Oaks Lodge in north Queensland's Daintree Rainforest, reopening December 15 after Covid setbacks. There's been a \$20 million makeover that includes six suite categories, a lighter palette and tropical design flourishes. Hayley is ensuring treatments at the lodge's Healing Waters Spa focus on time-honoured practices that harness the bounty of the rainforest and Mossman River, and that where feasible spa products are sourced from Indigenous companies.

All the Baillie Lodges local properties are members of Luxury Lodges of Australia, of which James is director and chair. The Louise, a 15-suite retreat in South Australia's Barossa Valley, was acquired earlier this year and will be given a light interiors refresh. "It's never been about vast growth but acquiring properties with the right DNA," says James.

Hayley is busy continuing to form fruitful connections with Indigenous communities, primarily in art associations at Longitude 131. As an advocate of "cultural enrichment", she organises artists-in-residence programs four times a year at the Northern Territory property. About 180 artists from Indigenous owned and operated Ernabella Arts in outback South Australia have travelled to the desert lodge so guests can watch the creative process.



Clockwise from top: Capella; Huka Lodge; Silky Oaks Lodge; Longitude 131; Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge



Ernabella's hand-crafted wares feature at Longitude 131, and Baillie says more than \$750,000 in income has been generated for Ernabella Arts by the partnership, including paintings purchased by leading museums and galleries. For the Silky Oaks project, Hayley has commissioned artwork from the region's Kuku Yalanji people, and purchased works from the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and ceramics from Yalanji Arts Centre. Fine arts photographer Catherine Nelson has produced large-scale images of elements of the Daintree.

She is pursuing similar collaborations with Canada's First Nations people on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the site of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, which joined Baillie Lodges in 2020. Similarly, she is engaging with Maori communities in proximity to the legendary Huka Lodge at Lake Taupo on New Zealand's North Island, which joined the portfolio in early 2021, to source art, books, homewares, textiles and bespoke craft pieces. Working around original interior decor elements by top New Zealand designer Virginia Fisher, the Baillies plan to open up the lodge's public areas for more of a lodge-style "great hall" atmosphere.

Such international expansion was a logical step after an affiliate of global private equity firm KSL Capital Partners made a substantial investment in Baillie Lodges in late 2018. The Baillies retained their stake as co-founders, creative directors and "the faces of the business", intent on "guiding the vision [of] wild, experiential luxury", and they continue to operate Capella Lodge independently. Just over a year later, Southern Ocean Lodge, along with vast tracts of bushland on Kangaroo Island, was destroyed by bushfires but the Baillies have grasped the opportunity to expand on the vision of the coastal lodge and plans are well under way for "SOL 2.0". Major work is expected to start in February, 2022 with the launch slated for the first half of 2023. Clearing, replanting and regeneration of the site continues to advance as part of the volunteer Camp SOL environmental initiative. James says there's now a "silver lining" to improve on the original by considering new ideas and advances in building materials. The reborn property will have a four-bedroom clifftop Ocean Pavilion, ideal for couples or families travelling together. Similarly, a spacious Daintree Pavilion is part of the Silky Oaks Lodge revamp, while Longitude 131's two-bedroom Dune Pavilion, with dual views of Uluru and Kata Tjuta, opened in 2017, already stars as the property's top digs.

The Baillies also hope to strengthen the focus on employing local staff. Ultimately, it's about a sense of place and connection, of sustainability, celebrating the location, of first-name terms and genuine friendliness. *Susan Kurosawa is The Australian's associate editor [travel]*