

MOUNT BORRADAILE, Australia

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

Hollywood couldn't improve on Max Davidson. He's exactly what you thought a safari guide should look and act like. A former jackeroo (ranch hand) and buffalo hunter, Max has shocking white hair and beard and wears a battered but beautiful Outback hat that looks like it never comes off.

I saw him scoop water out of the freshwater lagoon with one hand while he piloted the small motorboat with the other, and then casually gulp down a few cups. The rest of us had canteens.

We were heavily covered with insect repellent. Max hardly ever touches the stuff.

But beneath that rough exterior lies a tender soul. Max has a unique "caretaker" deal to set up his safari camp in Arnhem Land, the largest Aboriginal reserve in Australia.

In 1986, the traditional owners of the land, the Ulba Bunidj tribe,

granted Max a lease on 700 square kilometers of this pristine wilderness.

Besides the monetary agreement,, there were two key conditions: he would have to protect everything in the reserve, and a maximum of 70 guests a week would be allowed.

Mount Borradaile lies 12 degrees south of the equator and is one of the richest Aboriginal culture sites in the world. It's practically off the map, at the very tip of the Northern Territory, in fact much closer to Singapore and Jakarta than Sydney.

There are hundreds of rock art paintings that go back, some claim, more than 50,000 years. The numerous caves and labyrinths contain sleeping platforms and cooking areas, and some caves contain piles of skulls and bones.

Max led us on a tour of this vast archeological museum, looking over his shoulder from time to time when one of us lagged behind, just to be sure we were respecting the land, in keeping with his pledge to the Aboriginal owners.

One cave contained a large painting of the Tasmanian tiger that once roamed all over Australia. In another cave, an 18-foot-long rainbow serpent is pictured slithering across the ceiling. Max told us this was a sacred place where young boys underwent initiation ceremonies to enter manhood. Handprints of young boys could be found throughout the cave.

The Aborigines believed that the rainbow serpent traveled throughout the land creating mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes



and plains in its passing. When it finally came to rest, legend has it that spirit people emerged from it and were dispersed to various parts of the country. The Aborigines refer to this period as "Dreamtime," the period when all things were created.

Artifacts of stone and wood, tools and weapons, can be found in many of the caves. Max has a complete inventory of them in his mind. Two of us lagged behind in one area and found a crude spoon and what looked like a human bone tucked away on a small ledge. When Max and the small group reappeared, we excitedly mentioned our unusual find.

"Oh, you mean the spoon and the leg bone," Max said, and then proceeded to tell us not to disturb our "discovery."

The Mount Borradaile campgrounds are down-home and rustic; a dozen tents encircling the main office and dining room, hot and cold running water, toilet and shower blocks just down the path and three squares a day. Nothing

fancy. You wouldn't want fancy here anyway.

On the boat segment of our tour we had minor engine trouble and an assistant waded hip-deep in water to pull the small boat through a narrow channel. It was a scene reminiscent of Humphrey Bogart's classic performance in "The African Queen."

Just up the shore, we spotted a crocodile closing in on a bird but the bird flew off.

"That wasn't a galloper," the guide said, "or all you would have seen was a pile of feathers." He explained that a certain type of croc can actually raise itself on two legs and gallop a few steps after prey.

I thought about his remark that night as I walked down the path to the shower block.

With so few guests, there is no set itinerary. You change plans on the fly.

"What time do you want to have the fish tonight?" Max asked.

It didn't sound as exotic as buffalo or kangaroo, but we were in for a treat. The fish would be



the prized barramundi, a sportfish that can weigh up to 50 pounds. What we would be served tonight was caught earlier in the day.

Max encourages catch-and-release fishing to preserve stocks, since the crocodiles also take a healthy bite out of the tasty fish.

We had barramundi as an appetizer, marinated, and then barramundi as the main course, filleted and fried. I don't recall a more tasty meal.

After our second helpings, Max told tale after tale of Aboriginal lore. On a table in a corner of the room were about 12 didgeridoos, the wooden musical instruments carved out of the eucalyptus trees by the Aborigines. "Go ahead, try them out," Max encouraged.

In addition to being a musical

instrument, each didgeridoo is like a work of art with its individual carving style and painting. While we blew away in horrible discord; Max smiled and pretended it was beautiful music.

It was now time for our return trip to Darwin to catch our midnight flight to Sydney, the first leg of our long voyage back home. A guide would drive us to the dirt landing strip for the arrival of the light aircraft.

Max saw us to the door, and said his goodbyes, still wearing that beautiful, battered hat.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food, Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal.

Email: dmerle@videotron.ca)

For further information on Mount Borradaile and Max Davidson's safari, visit www.arnhemland-safaris.com.