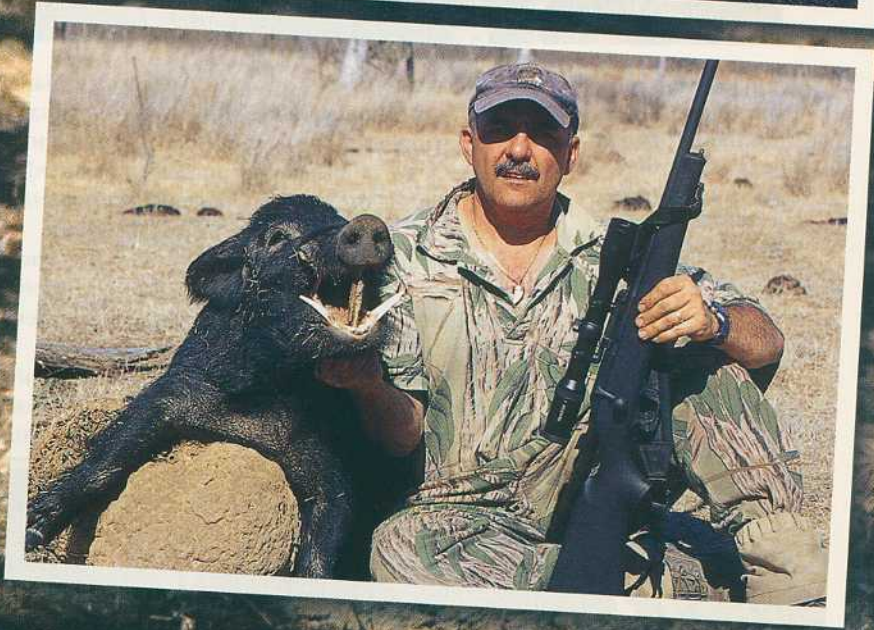
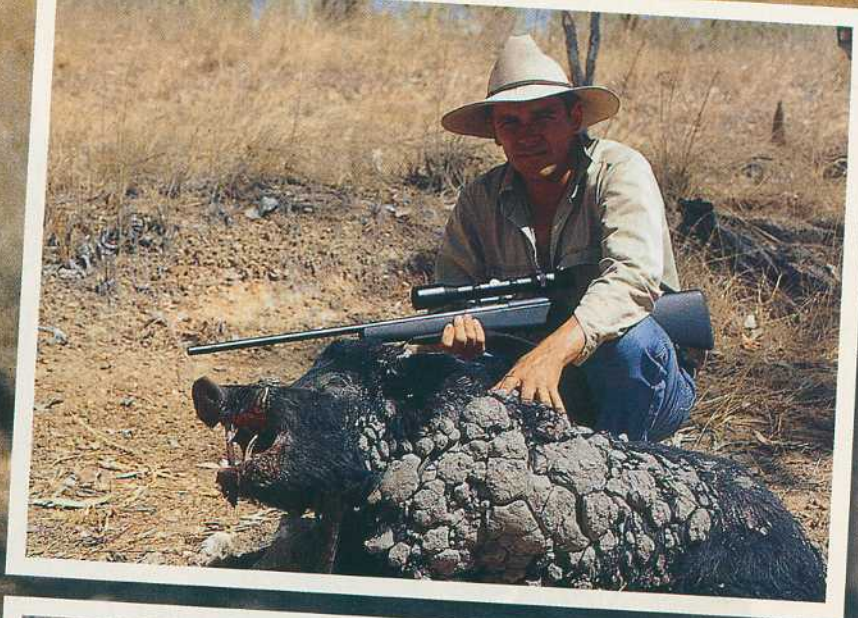
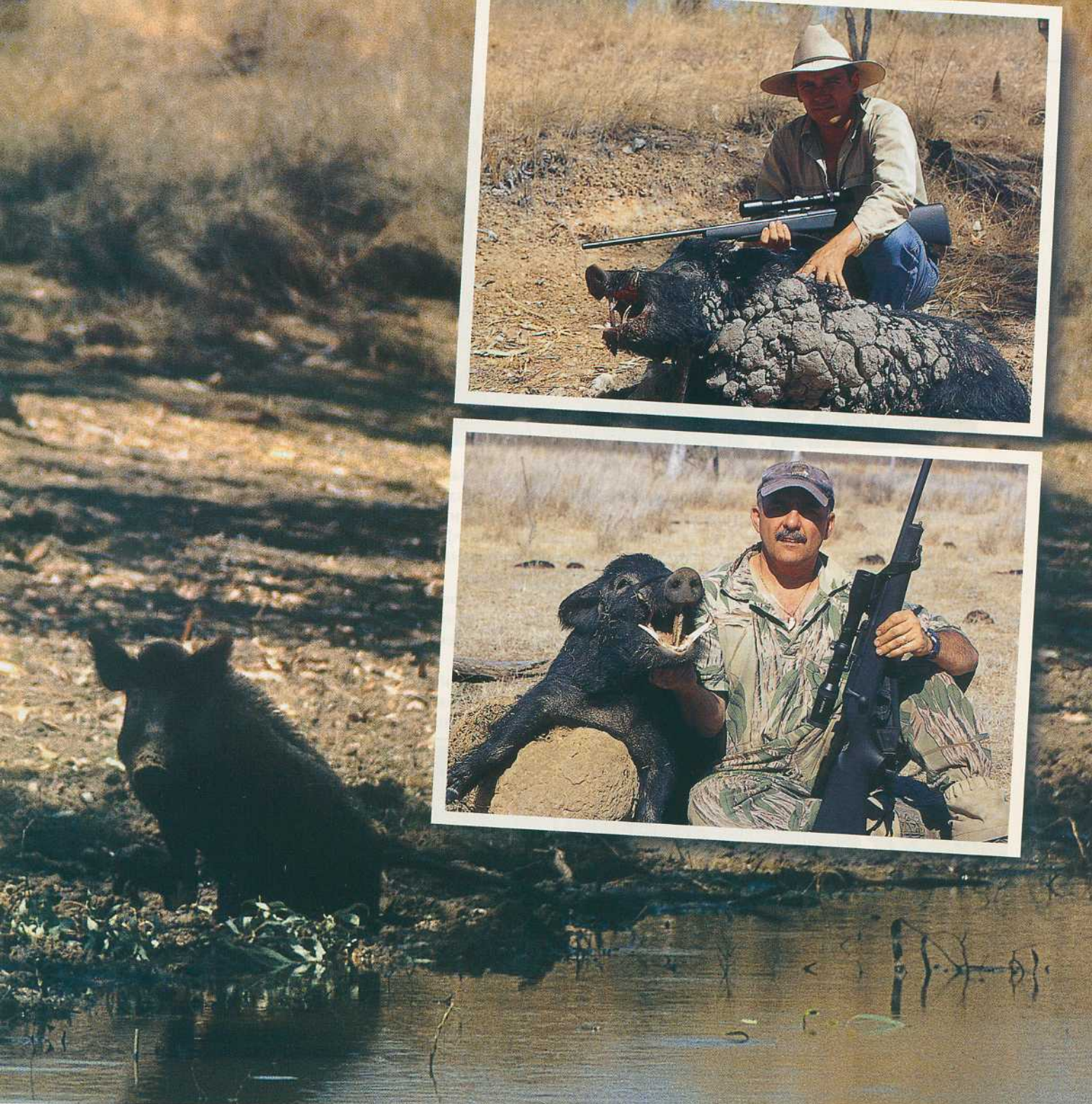


STRATHMORE WILDERNESS LODGE

Despite knocking over hundreds of good pigs in his time, Tony Pizzata could barely believe the quantity and quality of trophy boars on this property.

A SHORT FLIGHT FROM Cairns to the town of Normanton put me in Gulf country, just below Cape York. I was greeted there by Aaron and Naomi Vickers who manage the tourist side of the property I'd be hunting for the next few days. *Strathmore Wilderness Lodge* is a 2.2 million acre station of which approximately one million acres is still wild, free and ungrazed, at least by domestic livestock anyway. After a comfortable trip back to the outskirts of Croydon in the Land Cruiser, we reached our destination. As it was mid to late afternoon, the wildlife had started to make a move, with the occasional sighting



of pigs, roos and the odd dingo boosting my expectations.

I'd never hunted this far north before, having only travelled as far as Charters Towers for chital deer. I'd been told the tales, however, of Queensland's Cape York and Gulf of Carpentaria being Australia's last frontiers, a true mecca for the outdoorsman and a hunter's paradise. Strathmore Station is arguably in the middle of the best pig hunting Australia has to offer and borders Cape York on its northern boundary, taking in much of the Gulf country to the southwest.

Four new bungalows have recently been built in the house paddock to accommodate tourists, nature watchers and above all, hunters. They consist of one and two bedroom units, with modern kitchens, bathrooms and all facilities such as air conditioning and the like. The view from the porch features a breathtaking waterway, laced with waterlilies and an abundance of bird life.

After dinner and a run down on what the following day's plans were, Aaron showed me to my quarters to allow me to settle in for a good night's rest.

INSET TOP: Aaron Vickers alongside a heavily mud-encrusted Gulf country boar.

INSET ABOVE: No matter where they went on the property, Tony and his guide came across top boars.

OUTFITTER PROFILE



Pig hunting at its very best. The animal on the left sports just about the best ivory of any boar Pizzata has ever taken.

In the morning, breakfast was ready at 6am and Aaron had already loaded the new Hilux with supplies to last us the full day. Strathmore has a diesel single cab for one-on-one guided hunts and a dual cab for bigger hunting parties. As we got to the first gate leaving the house paddock, I spotted my first decent boar. "You'd better get out and shoot him before you open the gate," he suggested. I obliged and after several photos, removed the bottom jaw, as the boar sported a representative set of tusks. A little further down the track, we spotted a large mob of pigs working their way across the open plain

towards the river. Strathmore has two major river systems travelling through it for miles – the Gilbert and the Einasleigh, not to mention the numerous creeks and waterholes. Both rivers hold an abundance of wildlife, including fresh and saltwater crocs, barramundi, saratoga, catfish and lots more. But the Gilbert River was where this mob of pigs was heading. Aaron pulled up and said we should stalk in for a closer look, as there would almost certainly be a boar or two amongst the mob. As we inched closer the mob appeared spread out and numbered around 50. We spotted several boars, but nothing huge. After a little video footage and a few photos, we opted to move on.

About 10 minutes down the track, we spotted another lone boar. This fellow was busy feeding at no more than 50m away and after looking up at us, continued to forage for food. Aaron set up the camera, while I loaded my Blaser 7mm and stalked even closer to the nearest tree for a steady rest. At no more than 35m I took the shot, dropping the boar instantly. A close inspection revealed another good set of tusks and in no time Aaron had removed the lower jaw for me.

We were travelling northwest on a main track towards a paddock Aaron hadn't visited for a couple of weeks. Aaron said if we got there by lunchtime we could set up on the edge of a large clearing for a bite to eat and spend the afternoon glassing the many mobs that wander

in to wallow the centre mud flat. He guaranteed we'd see dozens of pigs throughout the day and said I'd get heaps of good video footage and photographs. To cut a long story short, we didn't arrive there until almost 3pm that afternoon, as good boars kept presenting themselves for a shot on the way up. Just after 3pm, I had six or seven good boars in the back of the vehicle. I was beside myself at how the day had progressed. Back home around my usual haunts I'd be happy to hunt all weekend for one good boar.

Setting up for a late lunch in the shade, with fold-out chairs and an esky full of food and cold drinks, we settled in to wait for a big one. There were already pigs out in the middle of the open field, wallowing in the muddy waterholes. There were also three brumbies and a mob of cattle.

By four o'clock we'd spotted dozens of pigs, many of which were boars. Aaron had glassed a huge boar that didn't want to leave the shady scrub, remaining instead bedded down inside the opposite scrubline. With only a couple of hours of light left and a long way from the house paddock, we decided to try and stalk in closer for a crack at him. It took us a good half hour or so to get across undetected. We could hear other boars fighting and many pigs had now fed around us, leaving Aaron and I smack bang in the middle, with nowhere to go but sit there and wait. The big fellow eventually got up and presented me with a front-on shot at no more than 20m distance. At the shot and to my amazement the rest of the mob ran about 10m and stopped. Grunting and snorting, the pigs could actually smell and see us, but continued to simply mill around. I wasn't use to this sort of thing back home, as our pigs would take off on sight, let alone after a shot was fired. Another good boar presented himself for a shot not 25m

away and then another. Raising the rifle, I took aim and dropped the second big fellow. This time the rest of the tribe dispersed quickly. The first boar turned out to be the biggest set of tusks for the trip with nearly 4-1/2 inches of tusk out of the jaw. The second, about 3 inches in protruding tusk. Aaron said it was one of the best boars he'd seen taken on the property and after many photos, some more video and the lower jaws of both boars removed, we headed back.

I'd managed to take nine good boars that day, more than I'd ever expected. Most of these pigs had never seen humans before and probably explains why they were so quiet. Pardon the pun, but I could bore you with details of the same stuff for each of the proceeding days I hunted there. In fact, I brought home a total of 25 sets of ivory for the three and a half days hunting I did. All trophy boars.

Excitement occurs regularly on this place and on one occasion we were heading across one of the remotest blocks of the front 1.2 million acres. It's called Rock Hole and is the only waterhole for many miles at this time of year. In fact, the paddock was 45km from gate-to-gate, with no other known water at this time of year in it. Aaron knew there'd be pigs on it and couldn't wait to get me there. "You'll get a good boar off this, I guarantee it," he said. As we approached in the vehicle, a dingo stood anchored to the centre of the track. Aaron jumped out with the camera as he knew I wanted the footage and I hopped out the other side to take the shot. In no time we were both ready and within moments, the big dog fell to a 160gn Hornady. Jumping back in the vehicle we circled the waterhole, as we knew we may have spooked the odd pig with the report of the 7mm. Aaron was first to notice the fresh muddy water from where a boar had just departed,



Truck loads of trophy boars were on offer – literally.

Exceptionally comfortable accommodation with all the mod cons.

HOME-STYLE COMFORTS

"Of all my hunting trips throughout Australia, Strathmore Wilderness Lodge offered the cleanest and most comfortable accommodation I'd ever stayed in, and that's saying something. A good breakfast, packed lunch and home cooked meals every day courtesy of Aaron's wife, Naomi, were second to none and their hospitality made me comfortable off the bat."



but no sign of the pig. We moved on.

As we neared the wallow we had previously inspected, not 10m away under a shady bush lay a huge boar. It appears the boar got up at the shot and decided to bed down only a matter of metres away in the shade and had gone back to sleep by the time we'd returned. Perhaps he thought he was having a bad dream.

By the time we got out of the vehicle and set up again for video coverage, the big fellow was on his feet and gazing in our direction. Frantically winding the scope down to 3x power, I aimed and took the shot. Again I couldn't believe how quiet the wildlife was, but I wasn't complaining. Throughout the trip we were constantly encountering wallabies, brumbies and scrub bulls, but I wasn't really interested in shooting them, as pigs and dingoes were what I enjoyed hunting most.

Aaron Vickers lives, works and guides on Strathmore Station and knows exactly where the remote waterholes are and hence, where the

pigs are. On many occasions, he also knew where there was a carcass of dead beast that had perished in the heat or from old age. This offered the opportunity for some great video footage and photographs. One carcass must have had at least 70 pigs on it, a sight to see in itself. When not guiding, he's out pushing new tracks, finding new waterholes and exploring new territory. This sort of hands-on information gathered on day in, day out, is what separates a good guide from an excellent guide.

Strathmore Station can be hunted from around early May to mid November, depending on how early or late the wet season starts. I've been told by some hunters that late August to early November is the best time, as the pigs are more concentrated due to a lack of water, but Aaron assures me there's never a shortage of pigs on the place and big boars are even bigger in the earlier months due to an abundance of food and water.

I never did get to the unexplored back million acres they call Red River, but Aaron assures me he will take me there next year. By then he hopes to have a few tracks in, ensuring hunters have easy access to the remotest part of this truly giant property. ■

For enquiries regarding a hunt on Strathmore Station, contact Aaron Vickers on phone/fax (07) 4062 5560 or email: strathmorewildernesslodge@bigpond.com