

TRAVELLING THE GIBB RIVER ROAD – Western Australia

Some 8 years ago Sandra & I travelled the coastal route from Northern Territory down the Western Australia coastline sticking to the tarmac. In Derby and Broome we met fellow travellers who spoke of their experiences travelling the Gibb River Road from Derby to Wyndham. A gravel road, some 660 kms in length, built in the early 60's for the large road trains to transport cattle from the isolated cattle stations to the ports. It was becoming one of the "must do" outback routes.

One needed a 4WD with plenty of spares, food and fuel to last the journey. It got put on the wish list and we dreamed of going back with a 4WD and off road caravan to explore. Somehow other priorities got in the way.

In 2014 we managed to convince the Hobson's and Kerley's to join us to experience travelling the Gibb River Road and Bungle Bungle range. Our initial plan was to hire 4WD campervans. The vans were somewhat basic in facilities and we were advised (incorrectly) that camping and fuel sites were limited. We decided to go upmarket and book a 15 day tour with Outback Safaris travelling in a 4WD Mercedes coach and staying in relative luxury; glamping. The ladies were pleased with this decision.

The Kimberley region of northwest Australia has a certain attraction. Even today it's an isolated and difficult area to explore. With ancient landscapes where one can visualize the earth as it was a billion or so years ago and clothed in a variety of savannah vegetation, the Boab tree and termite mounds. One of the first areas settled by the Aboriginal tribes some 50,000 years ago; explored by the Dutch in the 17th century as they travelled to and from Indonesia and finally explored and settled by colonists seeking cattle grazing land in the 1880's. It has distinct wet and dry seasons. The roads are virtually impassable in the wet. May to September are the dry months.



The map shows our tour route and itinerary. The numbers refer to the nights stayed at each location. On July 1 we flew to Perth, then onto Broome and were delivered to the Cable

Beach Club Resort . Tropical luxury!



We had booked an excursion to ride the Horizontal waterfalls described by David Attenborough as “one of the greatest natural wonders of the world.”

It’s an hour’s flight by

amphibian seaplane north of Broome to Talbot Bay, part of the Buccaneer Archipelago. The coastline of the Kimberley’s has some of the largest tidal ranges in the world; 11 metres. In Talbot Bay, the water is forced through a couple of narrow gaps shown in the photograph above causing a buildup of water that can vary in height from 1.5 to 4 metres; hence the horizontal waterfall. One traverses the “waterfalls” in powerful boats that ride the wall of water. On our trip it was near low tide and the wall was at its lowest level 1.5m; still exciting.

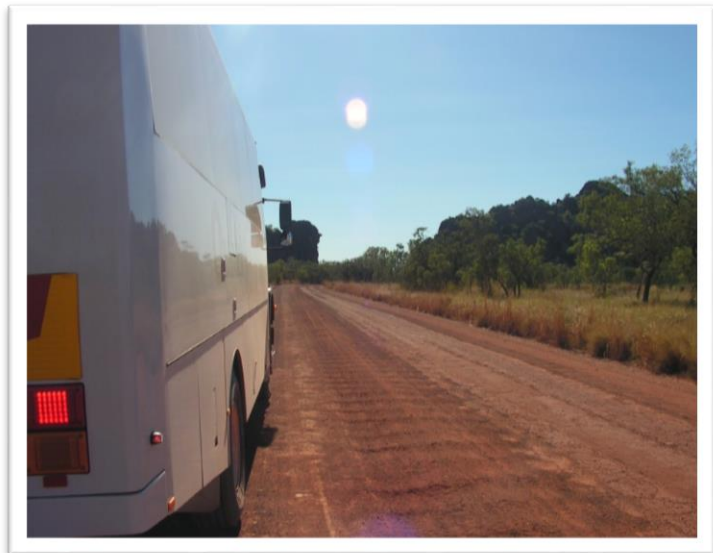


Returning to Broome we met our fellow travelers and guide and travelled north to Derby that marks the beginning of the Gibb. It was a chance to get to know our fellow travelers; another NZ couple from Auckland; the rest Australians. We were generally of similar age with diverse backgrounds. Wayne, our driver and guide proved to be a font of knowledge and provided information and stories about the Road, its history and places of interest we would not have experienced if travelling independently. He had lived and worked on the Stations and Aboriginal communities along the Gibb Road. We will remember some of his favourite sayings “me old mate” and referring to the Aborigines as “the mob.”



Derby was once the main town of the Kimberley and prior to the Gibb Rd the southern terminal for the cattle drive. It still has remnants of its past with a 400m cattle trough and the Boab prison tree used to shackle Aboriginal prisoners caught stealing cattle. The Boab Tree is the signature of the Kimberley.

The 21st century and tourism is catching up with the Gibb. One suspects the tourist travelers greatly outnumber the permanent population. The first 20 or so kms of the road is now sealed and this is being progressively extended each dry season. Once off the seal the corrugations and dust begins. The road is essentially the base rock graded. Locals advised the benefits of grading lasts 3 days and then it's back to the corrugations



Our first stop was at the Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary located about 80kms off the Gibb Road where we stayed 2 nights. This is owned by the Australian Wildlife Fund; a private charity whose aim is to protect the original Australian fauna and flora. They have bought a number of pastoral leases in the Kimberley progressively returning the land to its natural state. It was our introduction to "safari accommodation". Ensuite tents with



the luxuries of home. The pastoral leases in the Kimberley are large; 1 million acres. Many are now owned by mining magnates and wealthy businessmen.

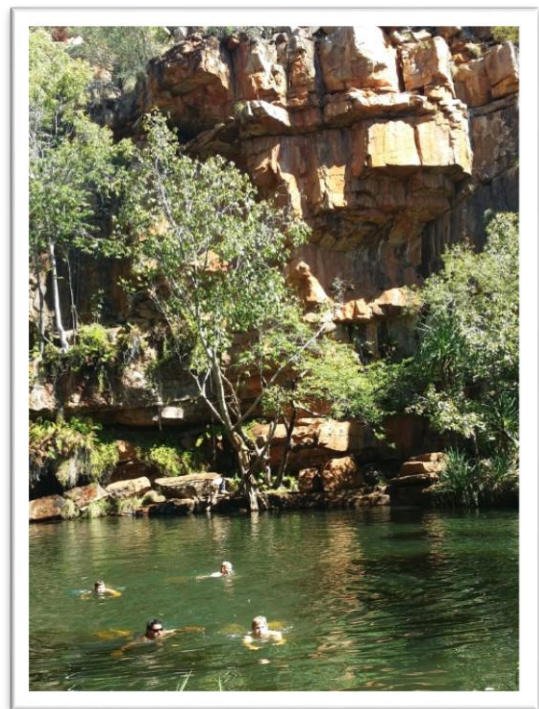
We were given a guided tour of the area and an explanation of the ecosystem. It was explained how fire is still used to renew the grassland with controlled burn-offs. Throughout our trip we saw trees and scrub showing the burn marks from these controlled fires.



Another feature of the Kimberley is the termite mounds. We learnt that Termites are related to cockroaches and the colour of the mound relates to the type of vegetation. The Queen can live for 100 yrs and produce 3000 eggs a day.

One of the features of the Kimberley landscape is a number of gorges with small waterfalls and tranquil rock pools. We stopped at a number for a break and a swim. Generally located off the Gibb Road the walk stretched our legs and bodies from the constant jarring.

Galvan Gorge is an example. It was a 20minute walk into the gorge along a somewhat rocky path. Once there the walk and swim was worthwhile. Water temperature was about 18-20 degs. The vegetation around the pools is quite lush in contrast to the more open vegetation along the Road. The river pools were popular and as it was school holidays a number for families were taking the opportunity to drive the Gibb.



It was truly safari travelling. Wayne had arranged prepared lunches at our nightly stopovers and the bus had its own hot water, tables and chairs. We were well fed.

Most of the river crossings also provided freedom camping opportunities.

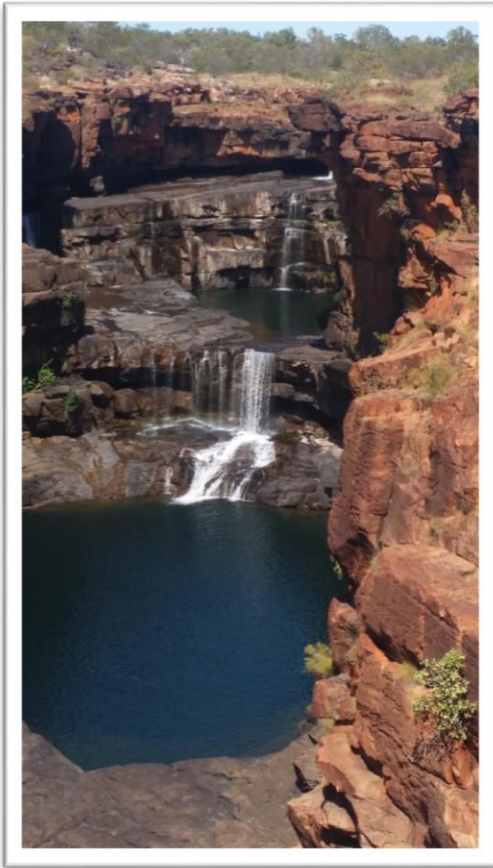
Though like NZ duration was limited to an overnight stopover many had set up camp. The camp on the Gibb River was very popular with at least 50 campers parked up. Whilst we were there a constant stream of off-road caravans, motorhomes and camper trailers were arriving.



Some of the stations along the Gibb provide roadhouse facilities – fuel, toilets, basic shopping and camping. One such is Drysdale station located just off the Gibb Road and

an important stopover for travelers taking the Kalumburu Road to the Mitchell Falls. Drysdale is credited with having one of the most remote restaurant/bars in Australia.

We overnighed at Drysdale and then moved “just up the road” (170kms), to the Ngauwundu Safari Camp for 2 nights that is operated by our tourist company. 5 star luxury in such a remote area seemed rather surreal.



One can reach the Falls by walking for about 2 hours from the Falls campground or taking a 5 minute helicopter flight. We walked in and flew out. The walking trail passes a number of Aborigine Rock Art sites. Some have been dated 35,000 years. There are examples where later art work has been overlaid earlier work. It was interesting to see drawings of animals now extinct. Wayne advised that many of the drawings were teaching points for young men passing through tribal initiation ceremonies. Equally impressive is the landscape. The geological formations, deep gorges and the Falls were well worth the walking effort. Being the dry season the Falls had tranquil water flows but were still impressive. The helicopter provided impressive views of the falls and the nearby Mertens Falls that we crossed when walking in.

Returning to the Gibb road we crossed a number of ancient ranges and rivers on our way to Emma Gorge our next overnight stop. The landscape though appearing barren is visually spectacular.

Civilisation in the form of a sealed road returned at Emma Gorge that forms part of



the El Questro tourist complex. It has a popular natural thermal pool, campground, restaurant and scenic tours. The stop provided relaxing r & r before travelling the next day the final 24kms to the junction of the Gibbs Road and the Kununurra – Wyndham highway.

We travelled to Wyndham to complete the route of the original pioneers. Like Derby, Wyndham shows few signs of its past prosperity.

In the next episode I will cover the final part of our journey through the Bungle Bungle, the Geikie Gorge, Tunnel Creek and the Windjana Gorge.

