

Driving the Gibb River Road - Brian Johnston - December 19, 2010



Driving along the Gibb River Rd in Western Australia. *Source:* Supplied

THE Gibb River Road is an outback adventure accessible to those without advanced 4WD skills, writes Brian Johnston.

The first time I drove the Gibb River Road was about 20 years ago on an adventure with my sister. We bought an old VW Kombi in Darwin and managed to traverse 700km of unpaved road through the Kimberley without serious mishap. These days, I wouldn't recommend anyone drive the Gibb River Road in a 1970s campervan or any two-wheel drive, but anyone with an adventurous spirit can certainly enjoy this outback journey.

If something goes wrong, you're unlikely to wait long for assistance. Accommodation has improved immensely and the road is generally better graded. What hasn't changed is the staggering sense of remoteness and the sheer scale of this frontier country. For most, the journey starts either at Derby or Broome in the west, or Kununurra in the east. It's a mark of the Gibb River Road's growing popularity that some companies now offer one-way 4WD rentals from these towns. You won't need advanced 4WD drive skills, just careful preparation and common sense. At the very least, this is a bone-jolting ride through a remote wilderness. Several people have been killed on the road in recent years.

Certainly, familiarise yourself with your rental car before driving the unsealed road. If using your own vehicle, make sure it gets a thorough mechanical once-over. Although supplies are normally available at roadhouses such as Imintji and Mt Barnett, it's best to be self-sufficient in fuel, water and food, and ideally, in spare parts and tools as well.

If you're doing the road in an easterly direction, your last big chance to use a supermarket and petrol station is at Fitzroy Crossing. But you don't need to be far out of town before the trappings of civilisation fall away and mighty landscapes take over. A first stop might be Geikie Gorge where, according to Aboriginal tradition, a blind tribal elder on a walkabout drowned during the time of the creation. The Panuba people say that the elder can still be heard today in the quiet moments before dusk, sighing and sneezing before sinking under the water.

In the hush of evening, the water does indeed gurgle mysteriously, but the soft splashes are likely to be crocodiles, moving down from their sandbanks into the river. Further north, Tunnel Creek is an eerie place where a river has burrowed right through the hillside, leaving tumbled boulders the size of cottages and pools of deep, black water. And at Windjana Gorge, an atmospheric place of honey-coloured cliffs haunted by giant fruit bats, fossils embedded in the limestone cliffs tell the story of a time when the region lay under the ocean.

North of Windjana, the sealed surface disappears, dust takes over and the Gibb River Road proper begins. As you haul your way through the purple King Leopold Ranges, one of the region's most popular gorges is found along a 30km turn-off. Bell Gorge is a horseshoe of cliffs down which waterfalls tumble. Below, great slabs of rock are just the place to sunbathe and the cool waterhole rewards you with a refreshing dip.

As you continue along the Gibb River Road, a series of gorges awaits: Adcock, Galvans, Manning and Barnett River gorges. Take your time to enjoy these respites from the heat and jolting and they'll reward you with waterlilies and waterfalls, gum-tree oases and cool swims.

The Gibb River Road isn't a journey to make in a hurry. Many of the gorges involve a detour from the main road (Galvins Gorge is the highly popular exception) and the weather and glare can be exhausting.

After gorges come crossings. The crocodile-infested Durack and Pentecost rivers might put paid to your one-way journey if you arrive too early in the dry season and find the water still flowing.

But usually, you drive across dry riverbeds with a few isolated pools of water, blue fragments on stone, framed by the backdrop of the spectacular Cockburn Range in rust-red and purple. You are unlikely to average more than 30km/h on this journey but, as the traditional owners put it, soaking up the spirit of the Kimberley involves sitting on the country for a while.

For those not into camping on this journey, there are some alternatives.

In the Cockburn Ranges, Home Valley Station has luxury suites, swimming pools and fine dining under the baobab trees. The station provides training for local Balangarra people, who can take you on mini-musters and guided walks.

Further east, El Questro has gained quite a reputation as a luxury destination with visitors flown in by helicopter and activities ranging from camel riding to gorge cruises and barramundi fishing. The huge cattle station boasts Aboriginal rock art, barramundi fishing and its own scenic spot, Emma Gorge, a cool, dark valley where white butterflies flit. Other more rustic accommodation is also available along the Gibb River Road at homesteads such as Mt Elizabeth and Drysdale River. Booking in advance is crucial. nte Bush camping is also an option at various properties, usually involving a small fee in return for basic facilities.

Wherever you stay, make sure you arrive by late afternoon, because the hour before sunset sees the landscape at its most beautiful. Staying there: Voyages El Questro, (08)91691777, www.elquestro.com.aunts; Home Valley Station, (08)91614322, www.hvstation.com.au

When: The Gibb River Road is often impassable from November to April. The winter dry season, generally between May and October, is best. More: www.westernaustralia.com