

# Gorge yourself on these views

Brian Johnston - From: [The Daily Telegraph](#) - February 03, 2011



Gibb River Road: Carlton Gorge and the Ord River near Kununurra.

**THE first time I drove the Gibb River Rd was about 20 years ago on an adventure with my sister. We bought a clapped-out VW Kombi in Darwin and, by some miracle, managed to traverse 700km of unpaved road through the Kimberley without mishap.**

Now I look back on our youthful escapade with alarm. These days, I wouldn't recommend anyone drive the Gibb River Rd in a 1970s campervan -- or any two-wheel drive, for that matter.

But anyone with an adventurous spirit can certainly enjoy this classic outback journey. It's one of the great trips accessible to the ordinary traveller, and has become increasingly popular over the past decade.

So if something goes wrong, you're unlikely to wait long for assistance. Levels of accommodation have improved, and the road is better graded than it once was. What hasn't changed is the staggering sense of remoteness and the sheer scale of this country. The unfolding beauty of outback Western Australia is gobsmacking. Mountains stand purple against a big blue sky, orange gorges are bold as a cubist painting, and sunset landscapes make the soul sing.

For most, the journey starts at Derby or Broome in the west, or Kununurra in the east. It's a mark of the Gibb River Rd's growing popularity that some companies now offer one-way 4WD rentals from these towns.

You won't need advanced cross-country driving skills, just careful preparation and commonsense. At the very least, this is a bone-jolting ride through a remote wilderness. At worst, several people have been killed on this road in recent years.

Although supplies are normally available at roadhouses such as Imintji and Mt Barnett, it's best to be self-sufficient in fuel, water, food, spare parts and tools.

Heading east, a first stop might be Geikie Gorge where, according to Aboriginal tradition, a blind tribal elder on walkabout drowned during the time of the creation. The Bunaba people say 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, fossils in the limestone tell the story of a time when this whole region lay under the ocean.

North of Windjana, the sealed surface disappears, dust takes over, and the Gibb River Rd proper begins. As you haul your way through the purple King Leopold Ranges, one of the region's most popular gorges is found down a 30km turn-off. Bell Gorge is a horseshoe of cliffs down which waterfalls tumble.

As you move on, 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 gum-tree oases.

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.

You're unlikely to average more than 30km/h on this journey but, as traditional owners put it, soaking up the spirit of the Kimberley involves "sitting on the country" for a while.

### **For those not into camping, there are some alternatives. In the Cockburn Ranges, Home Valley Station has luxury suites, swimming pools and fine dining under boab trees.**

Further east, El Questro is a luxury destination with visitors flown in by helicopter, and activities ranging from camel riding to gorge cruises and barramundi fishing.

More rustic accommodation is available along the Gibb River Rd at homesteads such as Mt Elizabeth and Drysdale River. Booking in advance is crucial.

Wherever you stay, make sure you arrive by late afternoon, because the hour before sunset sees the landscape at its most beautiful, and should be enjoyed -- preferably with a cold beer from your Esky.

Getting there: Fly to Perth and connect to Kununurra

Staying there: Voyages El Questro, 08 9169 1777, [elquestro.com.au](http://elquestro.com.au); Home Valley Station, 08 9161 4322, [hvstation.com.au](http://hvstation.com.au)

When: The Gibb River Road is often impassable from November to April, the winter dry season, generally May to October, is best

Seeing there: Mountains, gorges, rivers

More: [westernaustralia.com](http://westernaustralia.com)