

Escape: Drive the wild west Brian Johnston - January 07, 2011



The Gibb River Road is a classic outback journey of dust, gorges and waterholes. This is the Geikie Gorge.
Source: Supplied

THE first time I drove the Gibb River road was about 20 years ago on an adventure with my sister.

We bought a clapped-out VW Combi in Darwin and, by some miracle, 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 classic outback journey.

It's one of the great trips accessible to the ordinary traveller, and has become increasingly popular during the past decade.

If something goes wrong, you're unlikely to wait long for help.

Levels of accommodation have improved immensely, and the road is generally better graded than it once was.

What hasn't changed is the staggering sense of remoteness and the sheer scale of this frontier 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.

After dark, a kaleidoscope of stars overwhelms anyone used to city nights.

For most, the journey starts either at Derby or Broome in the west, or Kununurra in the east.

Some companies now offer one-way 4WD rentals from these towns. You won't need advanced driving skills, just careful preparation and common sense.

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.

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

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.

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 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.

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 Windjana Gorge is an atmospheric place of honey-coloured cliffs haunted by giant fruit bats. 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 down 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, while 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. Many of the gorges involve a detour from the main road (Galvins Gorge is the highly popular exception).

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.

For those not into camping, there are some alternatives. In the Cockburn Ranges, Home Valley Station has luxury suites, swimming pools, mini-musters and guided walks.

Further east, El Questro's guests are flown in by helicopter, with activities ranging from camel riding to gorge cruises and barramundi fishing. 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. Bush camping is also an option at various properties, usually involving a small fee in return for basic facilities.