

Kimberley Trip Notes

15th June 2007

We'd planned this trip for a while, and I'd spent plenty of time reading guidebooks etc on the Kimberley (north western Australia, for those not in the know). However, it was an article in *Wingspan*, a birdo magazine, which got my juices running – Mornington Wilderness camp and all the wonderful birds you could see there. That was breakfast time in Subiaco, Perth. We ate dinner in Broome, sort of the entry to the Kimberley. It was a cosy little Thai place in the heart of Broome on a Friday night.... Broome didn't strike me as a really attractive place, but it would be a pearl in comparison by the end of the trip!!

16th June

With much anticipation, we took delivery of our 4 wheel drive (4wd/4x4) after a lengthy run down on engine and battery maintenance, where everything was in the camper, and how to 4wd... or at least use it. Armed with this knowledge and our camper, we were off! ...Straight to the supermarket, where we battled with hundreds of other people to fill our trolley with 2 weeks supplies (planning to hit Kununurra for the third week's supplies). Three visits to the supermarket later and we were ready (more than ready) to hit the open road.

First stop was the Broome Bird Observatory, where we found a spot to park the van (sorry, the camper will have several names) and made our way to the shade house come kitchen come bird hide, where we sat and watched bush birds for quite a while. Cute little double-barred finches, beautiful rainbow bee-eaters and the funny greater bowerbirds were regulars, along with the agile wallabies.

After dinner we had fun working out which bed we should sleep in, as there was one "down stairs" (you pulled out extra boards from the long seat running up the camper) and one up stairs (you pulled out two boards from the compartment over the cab). We decided without much need for thought on the top bed, as the bottom one was a little too cosy. It was a bit of an adventure getting up there every night, and out in the morning!

17th June

After a morning's walk birding and checking out Roebuck Bay with the tide coming in *really* fast we hit the road, heading up to Derby. Along the way we saw many of the iconic boabs, or baobab. Interestingly, both Australian Aboriginal people and Africans have the same legend that the tree is upside down. The Australian species is very important to Aboriginal people, as it offers quite a lot of bush tucker and water. One of the stops that we made was at the prison tree, a very large boab with slit in it. Apparently police use to put their aboriginal prisoners in the tree while en route to Derby, back when horseback was the norm for the Kimberley. It is a huge tree and flanked by large spinifex-termite mounds and European heritage sites, including a long water trough that used to be important for people droving their cattle to Derby abattoir.



Sorry, getting carried away. Finally we got onto the Gibb River Road – the best way to get a feel for the Kimberley, apparently. A single lane of tar lasted for about 60km and then we were onto the gravel road. After a couple of hours we got to Windjana Gorge, the first of our Kimberley gorges. Creeping into the campground (sorry Ranger Dave!), we parked in the van in a likely spot and headed over the gorge to have a look. The 100m cliff of limestone reared straight up out of the flat plain.

Through this, the river had worn a long, wide channel, the gorge. Pedestrian entry to the gorge is through a narrow slit, narrower than a hallway. Once through, you enter almost a secret chamber with the trees forming pillars and roof over a sandy floor and the river and the cliffs flanking it on either side. The cliff was orange in this place, from embedded sediment, and the setting sun reflected off it, giving the chamber an orangey, pink, glow. It was pretty magic.

Back at camp we pulled out the table and chairs, retrieved a couple of beers from the esky (really a fridge), opened a packed of chips and settled back to admire the cliffs in the setting sun. The beer and chip thing is a nightly ritual while camping.

18th June 2007

Up early, we drove on up to Tunnel Creek. Here, we grabbed our headlights and headed up down into the tunnel. This creek runs *through* the limestone, rather than having made a channel, and so we were walking through a cave, with a sandy, sometimes rocky, and often wet, floor. The walls and roof were far (enough) away in most cases that you could have been walking down any sandy riverbed, just in the dark! Boots and socks were soon off, though, as we splashed through sometimes knee deep, and of course very cold, water to reach the end of the tunnel. At the end of the channel we briefly explored, only we'd stashed our hats in a side crevice near the beginning, and so were reluctant to explore far. The cliffs were interesting though, and we could see boabs far up on the surrounding steep ridges.

Back at Windjana we attempted the walk up the gorge. However, it was pretty hot, so we gave up and found a likely swimming spot. However, the river is one of the best spots in the Kimberley to see freshwater crocodiles (freshies), and although they won't attack you unless you stick your thumb somewhere you shouldn't, it still makes for a tentative and quick swimming.

19th June

After a hot night, we woke up to spits of rain. We pack up camp and headed off up the Gibb River Road towards Bell Gorge. However, we drove through steadily worsening rain, and by the time we got to Lennard Gorge, close to Bell Gorge, the road was a slushy mess. We walked down to Lennard Gorge and it was amazing – a multi-faced waterfall plunging down into a very narrow canyon. We were fairly high above it and in the by now persistent rain, it was impossible to take photos. Oh well, we thought, our memories would have to suffice.

Back at the car park, we spoke to a couple who were listening to the radio. Bell Gorge road was closed due to the rain! Undeterred, we drove on to Imintji store. After speaking to others around who'd listened to the weather forecast, we decided to camp just down the road at Saddler's Creek with some other people and see what tomorrow held. I was, at this stage, surprised that the road was still open.

20th June

Well, I spent a nervous night, thinking about the creek just meters from the van and all that rain, but it was fine. However, a visit to the store by neighbours revealed that they'd had 75mm of rain in 24hrs!! And this was the "dry" season, average monthly rainfall just 18mm. The Gibb River Road where we were was still open, but it was closed from Mt Barnett, just 80km up the road, to Wyndham. What to do!

Our neighbours both had all-wheel-drive vehicles rather than 4wd, and both had trailers. They had found that the trailers were pushing them around on the road in the mud and so had wisely decided to stay put. Great entertainment for the day, however, was watching one guy winch his vehicle and then camper trailer out of the

mud and onto firm ground! I had great fun playing in mud puddles all morning with his two little girls.

Later in the day, and after another visit to the store, Eric and I decided that we should get out while the going was not too bad. We figured we could get at least some of the way out today. We left our buddies behind, and thought of them often in the next week, stuck besides Saddler's Creek. Around dark we found a firm bit of shoulder (after an adventure with a *very* soft bit of mud that involved low ratio 4wd) and camped for the night. The rain had definitely eased during the day, but it didn't appear to be over.



21st June to 27th June

After much slipping and sliding (black mud is fun! ... provided you don't mind driving sideways for a bit) we made it back to the tar and then into Derby. We bought a large sponge, and headed to the old water trough, where we washed the camper to get rid of the worst of the mud!

Now starts the time-killing part of our trip. We went on to Fitzroy Crossing from here (what a hole). We spent two nights here at the Crossing Inn from which we based our sorties to Geikie Gorge and the Fitzroy River. We went on the boat ride, relaxed, did a heap of bird watching, and best of all, explored the limestone ridges. These incredibly sharp limestone ridges were covered in equally sharp spinifex. The views were quite amazing and there were lots of interesting nooks and crannies. I kept expecting to see chameleons and lemurs... it really felt like what I imagine parts of Madagascar to be like. Other highlights included the azure kingfisher, spotted by Eric (just gorgeous) and brolgas.

From Fitzroy Crossing we drove up towards Halls Creek. We spent two nights short of Halls Creek at a 24hr stopping point off the main road, in a self-made mini caravan park. It was quite a surprise to find it. Highlights were included finding the resident greater bowerbird's three bowers – this years, resplendent in great and white pebbles and bones, and the last two years still standing but in disrepair, still with most of their pebbles. Low points included going into Halls Creek (Broome was looking fabulous by this stage).

At Halls Creek we found out that the Bungle Bungles, our next stop and aim of at least my trip was still closed, as was the road to Wolfe Creek meteor crater and would be for days... provided we had good drying days!! Our own examination of the satellite imagery on the Bureau of Met website suggested another day of cloud and then it should clear up. With all gravel roads still closed, we decided that the best course of action would be to go up closer to the entrance to the Bungle Bungles and just wait for it to open.

So we spent the next three days camped next to the Ord River at one of the 24 hr rest areas. We enjoyed the river and had a spa bath in the water flowing through the old causeway. The birds were great, with Gouldian finch, red-backed fairy wren and long-tailed finch, as well as long look at red-tailed black-cockatoos.

28th June 2007

Rumour had it that the Bungle Bungles would open today, so with much trepidation we packed up camp and went up to the gate. The "road closed" sign was gone, but the

gate was still chained shut. So we settled in to wait. Luckily the Ranger turned up just then and I discovered that of course the gate was closed – it's a station gate, designed to keep cattle in ...duh! So we set off along the track. It turned out to be a really good drive over a reasonable track with plenty of blind crests and windy passages. The crossing of the Frank River was an adventure... let's just say lots of really big rocks sent the vehicle bucking and rearing through the river. No damage done, though! The landscape was fabulous, with harsh mountains surrounding us for most of the way with spinifex, rocks and trees covering the fore ground. Finally in front of us was yet another range, but this time further away. It looked spectacular but we couldn't quite find the right spot to take a photo of it. I was a bit confused, because the trip meter said we should arrive at the Bungle Bungles at any moment....

Finally we arrived at the visitors centre where we registered and found out the range we could see *was* the Bungle Bungles!! And that the classic “domes” can only be seen in one area. Armed with a map we set off up to Echidna Chasm, stopping en route at the lookout, where we finally got the view and the photo we wanted of the range.

Echidna Chasm was awesome. I don't mean that in the “gnarly dude” way, either. The chasm started off as a narrow, pebbled, creek bed with plants overhanging and tall Livistona palms above, all enclosed by very tall, red, cliffs. It wasn't long, however, until the entrance started to look wide, as the chasm narrowed. The plants gave up, and the cliffs towered. Soon it was narrow enough to touch with a hand on either wall, before opening up again into a chamber. It looked like the end of it, but closer examination of the far wall revealed a narrow opening leading into a yet narrower passage. Here, I couldn't even have my arms akimbo without knocking the sides. A couple of small ladder climbs later and we were at the end. In the bottom of the furthest crevice I found a frog and a very small snake... both quite cold, I imagine! The light throughout this chasm was incredible. We had hurried here because apparently the best time is as close to midday as possible, and we were not disappointed. The light bouncing off the walls added an orange glow and the curves and depth to the crevice of the chasm was amazing. We were really lucky in our timing too, in that most people were coming in as we were going out.



After lunch at Echidna Chasm we went on to Mini Palms Gorge. The walk starts in the pebbled creek bed and takes you up past great lumps of rock. The entrance to the gorge is narrow and great boulders of conglomerate make this gorge a skinny-people-only gorge! Once through the narrow opening, the gorge opens up into essentially two mini gorges. The track follows the right hand gorge along the creek bed and then up and up. The track and platforms provided some fabulous views back through the mouth of the gorge to the country beyond. Finally, a huge boulder blocked the path. Stairs led up to a platform perched on top of this rock. The final chamber of the gorge, beyond this great boulder, seemed to have a perfectly flat floor formed by sediment, with some trees and mini palms in it. The gorge led into a cave. How far it went I could not tell. This area must have been very important to aboriginal people.

Worn out, we headed to camp, catching some of the sun's rays on the range and spending some time watching a pair of brolgas walking, grazing and calling to each other.

29th June 2007

This morning we headed to Cathedral Gorge and the domes. The drive down there takes you past some hints of what the domes will look like but even the few isolated domes next to the road didn't prepare us for the real thing. Grabbing water, hats and some "emergency" muesli bars, we set off on the domes walk. This walk took us through and around some of the domes, giving a really good taste of them, the termites, and the vegetation. The termites were quite incredible. There were termite mounds perched right up on the domes, far above the ground and their food source. We could only guess that floodwaters were what drove them up and up. A thin mud-coated tunnel was all that joined them to the ground. The plants were also interesting. Spinifex dominated the ground, but a red-flowered grevillea added quite a lot of colour to the otherwise green vegetation.

From the domes we went on to Cathedral Gorge. The track led first between widely spaced domes, but they quickly narrowed to all cliffs. The track crossed and re-crossed the creek, once requiring either feet wetting or rock climbing (very small)! Some fabulous reflections of the domes could be seen in the pools of water at the start of the gorge itself. Finally, the path arrived at Cathedral Gorge. Well! I was pretty gob smacked. The ceiling on one half is like the inside of a perfect cone, arching up high above. The other side is sheer cliffs, stretching to perhaps over 100m. The acoustics were amazing. The slightest whisper resonated. For the sound alone I could see why it was called "Cathedral". In the middle of the chamber was a large pool. Reasonably stagnate at this time of the year, but you could see where the waterfall would cascade down in the wet. Eric and I were keen to experience the place in silence, but give people exciting acoustics and they just have to try it out, even though it's obvious that they're good, and revolving tour groups made silence impossible.



Picaninny Creek and the lookout were great, revealing yet more of the majesty of the place.... this time with fewer people.

We decided that we had seen all we could and while we could have spent more time soaking up the atmosphere, it was time to hit the road. We had just enough time to do the 2hr drive out. Along the way we had the privilege of getting a very close view of dingoes, which seemed to think that they owned the road, and spinifex pigeons, put up by cattle when we were taking a break. The Frank River loomed, but luckily for me Eric volunteered to drive through it. I went up stream a little and took photos. With my heart in my mouth I forgot to zoom in, but the photos still show the depth of the river!!

30th June 2007

Having camped next the Ord River again, we then hit the road for Kununurra. Once there we restocked our larder and then went to Mirima National Park, which is right in Kununurra. This NP is much like the Bungle Bungles domes, in that it's got some of the same sloped and rounded cliffs and colour banding. At dusk we joined up with a friend of mine and her husband. After a very welcome shower at their place (the first since Fitzroy Crossing!!) we went to the local pub for dinner. Anxious to eat the local delicacy, barramundi, I chose the barramundi wings. This dish certainly very exciting! We finally decided that they have to be the cheek of the fish, as two fins were still attached, one on an edge at the top of the V-shape and one on the side, and the bones were flat and strong. Oh, and did I mention large? Unfortunately we didn't take the camera, so you'll have to use your imagination! Despite the initial "yikes!" they were actually very good, and very filling!!

1st July 2007

We decided to take a scenic flight and so headed to the airport and boarded our “diamond class” plane. It was quite the experience! The landscape was fabulous across Lake Argyle, the Bungle Bungles and the Argyle Diamond Mine, but Eric will never take a scenic flight again.... unless they promise to No, actually, I don’t think all the promises in the world would get him up again.

We drove from here out to get back onto the Gibb River Road again. All open to 4WDs, some weight limitations. At the start of the road was a large yellow sign reading “stray animals next 670km” – yep, we were in station country.

We arrived at El Questro station, booking into a private bush campsite. We armed ourselves with maps etc and headed off to camp. We checked out Chamberlain Gorge and then found our campsite, throwing out some invading Germans (I think they miss understood instructions at the store!). We enjoyed dinner by the full moon’s light, listening to the barking owls.

2nd July 2007

We went to Moonlight Gorge first. The gorge itself wasn’t particularly stunning, being short, wide and with low cliffs, but the first waterhole you come to is. After exploring the gorge, hot and sweaty, we took the plunge... man was it cold!! But crystal clear, such that you could see perfectly the bottom, but there was not way you could touch it.

From Moonlight we went to Zebedee Springs, thermal springs set amongst tall palms. It was quite an amazing spot, but also one of the most popular on the station, so quite crowded!! The water is just cool enough such that if you were in a bath you’d be considering getting out. I took a dip, but Eric held off, not wanting to get hot again already!



From here we back tracked back to El Questro Gorge, which we followed up to Half Way Pool. The gorge here was quite narrow, about 6m, and the walls are covered in ferns and mosses and greenery. Having got hot again on the walk, we jumped in again. Again, the water was crystal clear and only slightly warmer than Moonlight. We didn’t have time to get the end of the gorge.

Before settling into camp for the night we headed off to a look out near camp. The view of the Pentecost River was fabulous.

3rd July 2007

We got up really early to achieve Eric’s brilliant idea of a dip in Zebedee Springs before going horse riding. It was fabulous to have the Springs to ourselves, even if it was only for 10mins (should have got up earlier!!), and it was luxurious to have a warm bath in the dawn! We dashed back to the station village and on to the stables. Here we were assigned our mounts – Black Jack for me and Filly for Eric. Also on our ride were an English girl and her boyfriend, luckily of comparable experience to Eric and I, so we had a really good ride. We had three really long canters, 2 on a flat plain, and the other winding through the samplings and over drainage ditches! The final excitement was crossing the river. We crossed through a deep pool, so up went the feet as the water level approached the knees and then the bum! No one fell off or got soaking, but it was hilariously good fun with the water just a hand span from Black Jack’s wither!

A bit stiff, we went on to Emma Gorge. The gorge itself is a hot walk, as it is all exposed to the sun. The final water hole, however, is magic. The towering cliffs encircle a stunning pool of water. A waterfall falls gracefully down one face and droplets tumble from the opposite face, down onto the rocky edge of the pool. Feeling rather hot and bothered we were quick to strip off, but not so quick to jump in – the water was absolutely freezing! Once in, it was magic. The pool was again, crystal clear. So clear and so deep that you could tread water, count your toes, and not be able to see the bottom. Eric in his exploring found a warm spring feeding between the cracks in the rocks under an overhang and so I braved the freezing water and joined him where the small trickle of just-warm water escaped. It took quite a lot of sun bathing to warm me up after this pool, but it was so beautiful it was worth it.

Emma Gorge behind us, we drove on south west on the Gibb River Road. The crossing of the Pentecost River was good.... But not one you'd want to break down in with saltwater crocs living near by! The Cockburn Ranges we'd been following for a while provided fabulous landscape views. We bush camped at Dawn Creek.

4th July 2007

After watching the crimson finches, we got on the road. As the Gibb unfolded under our wheels we could see why it had been closed for so long. Massive puddles still took up halves of the road and often we were driving on the wrong side of the road for 100s of meters to avoid huge stretches of mud and torn up road. We turned off the Gibb to get to Barnett River Gorge. The track in was very rough but the gorge was worth it. After a short “are you sure there's not crocs here” debate, we launched off the perfect rock launching platform and swam up the gorge exploring. It was gorgeous! We ate our lunch perched on a ledge above the river, admiring the view.

The afternoon's drive took up down to Mt Barnett Roadhouse where we booked into the camping at the Manning River. At the Manning River we found ourselves a good camping spot and had a look at the river. It was a pretty good spot!

5th July 2007

We spent the morning walking to Manning Gorge. The walk started with either a swim or following the track through the pandanus. What they hadn't mentioned at the shop was the knee-deep wade for most of the pandanus way! After that the track headed up over the rocky ridges. It was a great walk, with good scenery. By the time we got to Manning Gorge we were pretty hot so were only too pleased to join everyone else in the water. The waterfall proved irresistible so we swam over and then went behind it. It was impossible to touch the bottom behind the fall and the need for constant movement, and the cold, drove me back to shore. Within minutes, however, I was back in the water, joining Eric in an exciting climb up next to the waterfall to see the other side. Having thoroughly enjoyed our time at Manning Gorge, we headed back, spotting some faded rock art and funky lizards on the way back. I chose the swim back across the river at the end and enjoyed it so much I took the polystyrene box provided for ferrying clothes back across for the next people.

After filling up with diesel and final rations at the roadhouse we headed off to Galvan's Gorge. This petite waterhole with waterfall was charming. Again, the water was crystal clear, and this one wasn't even that cold!

The final leg of the day took us past Imintji store and Saddler's Creek and the loop was looped. We camped at Silent Grove, the



packed campground for Bell Gorge. There was a line for the women's (cold) showers, but this provided good opportunities for tales of the road.

6th July 2007

We headed up to Bell Gorge early. The short walk in followed a tiny creek and we were beginning to wonder what we were going to see when the tiny creek joined a big one just before a big waterfall. It was necessary to cross the creek to get to the bottom of the falls, however, so off we waded. After the climb down, and despite the early hour, we jumped in. The current from the falls was very strong, so I quickly opted out and floated back down to the launching point. We explored down stream a little and it looked exciting, but sheer drops got in the way of exploring further.

From Bell Gorge we drove on back to Lennard Gorge. After exclaiming again over the gorge and this time taking photos, we climbed down to swim upstream of the waterfalls. This time, however, the water, although clear, was full of algae and was not refreshing. Despite this, Lennard Gorge remains a highlight, because this is where we saw a Merten's water monitor (goanna) first sunning himself, and then after a swim, eat a fish he'd caught! It was pretty cool.

We decided to go back to Windjana Gorge for the night. We were most entertained by kids trying to play cricket in the gloaming (where'd the ball go?).

7th July 2007

We sorted out the location of vehicle drop off for the next day before heading off towards Derby and Broome. We stopped at the water trough again outside Derby and booked a sunset camel ride. The long drive over, we were finally in Broome, amazingly found camping right next to Cable Beach and made to the beach for our camel ride. The ride was great. Yes, it's a terrible corny, touristy, thing to do, but the sunset was absolutely beautiful and being led around on a camel is a very relaxing way to appreciate it. The beach is sooooo long and there were vehicles stretched out as far as I could see, with plenty of people walking, riding bikes, enjoying wine and cheese and swimming everywhere. We got in plenty of other people's holiday snaps due to our revered positions on the camel train. The camel ride over, we ditched our left over pasta meal and had a great dinner and drinks at the Sunset Café overlooking the beach and sunset.



8th July 2007

Up early we took the van down onto the beach and had breakfast. This time the beach was nearly deserted and it was glorious. It was a great end to a great holiday.

We sent the rest of the day clearing the vehicle (upon return they commented how clean it was!) and then killing time in Broome on a Sunday afternoon (better than Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing, but it's still not that great).

The flight back was uneventful and we crashed into bed very late, trying not to think of Monday.

