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4-wheel-drive Australian adventure on legendary Gibb River Road

HIGHLIGHTS

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BY ERIC VOHR
Chicago Tribune

Ten years ago, my travel partner spent some time bumming around Australia in a four-wheel-drive SUV.

She returned with only one regret: skipping the legendary Gibb River Road, a 410-mile-long former cattle route that cuts through the sprawling Kimberley region in Western Australia. Her visit had taken place during the wet season (November to April) - the wrong time to tackle the flood-prone Gibb. The road trip remained on her bucket list until this summer, when we finally crossed it off.

The Gibb River Road is a dirt and gravel road that slices through the Kimberley's massive savanna, a sparsely populated stretch home to a mere 35,000 souls and lots of cattle.

During the wet season, heavy rains pretty much shut down the Kimberley, swelling the rivers and turning dirt roads to mush. These same rains have created the fabulous gorges, oases and waterfalls that make the Kimberley one of the most magical natural destinations in the world. In the dry season (May to October) the waters recede, the roads are graded, and it's all blue skies and sunshine.

Our Outback adventure started in June in a sleepy little town called Broome, 140 miles from the west end of the Gibb. It's one of the main staging areas for picking up gear and renting cars and trailers for the trek - one that requires careful planning if you don't go with a tour operator. Lodging, restaurants, shops and gas stations are scattered. Most people overnight in tents or pop-up trailers, like the one we rented from Crikey Camper Hire (www.crikeycamperhire.com.au). We bought our food in advance, much of it in cans, and had a car battery-powered fridge to store the rest.

What the Gibb River Road lacks in amenities it more than makes up for in beauty. The landscape brims with towering, blood-red termite mounds, bloated boab trees and wavy sand-colored savanna grasses, occasionally punctuated by springing wallabies and tropical birds. We saw so many exotic parakeets, parrots and noisy cockatoos, it was like someone had left the cages open in a thousand pet shops.

The real stars of the Gibb are the gorges, and the first we visited was Windjana. To enter Windjana Gorge, you walk through a narrow gap in the face of the Napier Range into a lush oasis, rimmed by towering walls of ocher-red rock, million-year-old fossils, and paperbark, cajeput, fig and leichhardt trees.

Freshwater crocodiles were lounging in the first pool we encountered during our 2-mile trek along the gorge's mostly dry riverbed. Unlike their bigger cousins, saltwater crocodiles (aka "salties"), this species isn't known for eating people. But the reptiles have sharp teeth and don't appreciate humans getting too close, so we decided against swimming.

A typical day on the Gibb entails waking at sunrise to the sound of cockatoos, driving through stunning terrain, navigating deep river crossings, swimming in pristine billabongs, playing in waterfalls, hiking through gorges, kayaking deserted rivers, preparing glorious meals under star-spangled skies and falling asleep to the sound of howling wild dingoes.

One hundred fifty miles off the Gibb, Mitchell Falls is a rite of passage for many Australians. Getting to it can be treacherous. Luckily we arrived just after the road had been graded, so it wasn't too bad, just slow-going.

From our campground, we followed a relatively easy hiking trail to the falls. On the way, we passed Mertens Falls, where I took a quick shower in the cascading waters and toured a gallery of ancient rock art painted by aboriginal people tens of thousands of years ago.

When we finally arrived at Mitchell Falls, it was obvious what all the hype was about. Four towering falls, each feeding the next, provided so many photo opportunities that we almost filled our camera's memory card. The swirling cool water in the billabong above the first waterfall is free of saltwater crocodiles and perfect for swimming. (These falls are relatively close to the coast and some of the lower pools reportedly do have salties.)

We also enjoyed smaller, less famous watering holes on the Gibb, such as Matthew Gorge at Mount Hart. This lush garden and pool dotted with colorful lily pads and shaded by eucalyptus trees is nothing less than magnificent. Best of all, we had it to ourselves.

When we finally reached the eastern end of Gibb River Road, we were tempted to turn around and do it again. But we'd run out of time. So we drove the rather boring, paved Highway 1 back to Broome.

Our adventure wasn't completely over. We took one last four-wheel-drive trek to the Bungle Bungle Range about 30 miles off the highway. This collection of beehive-shaped, red-and-black striped domes wasn't "discovered" by the public until the 1980s. That gives you some idea of how large and remote the Kimberley is. Hiking options abound in the canyons here, but a helicopter ride is a must to see the full expanse and majesty of the range (www.helispirit.com.au).

How you tackle Gibb River Road is a matter of personal preference - and budget. You can venture out alone with a four-wheel drive, a tent and a prayer, or join an all-inclusive, comfy tour and leave the driving to someone else. (We stayed a couple of nights in one of the high-end, safari-style camps operated by Australian Pacific Touring, and it was very nice. The 15-day Kimberley Complete guided trip with food and lodging is priced at \$7,495 per person; www.aptouring.com/destinations/australia/kimberley.)

No matter how you do it, the Gibb will shake open your cage and set you free. Shake is a very operative word on the Gibb, as the rumble of the "washboard" we encountered on these roads was strong enough to unscrew the lids on food jars. It also shook our wheel loose, sending our left front tire spinning into the bush.

Thankfully nobody on the Gibb passes you without checking to see if you're "all right, mate." A couple of new friends helped us get our wheel back on, so we could limp to a repair shop.

Even the owner of Crikey Camper Hire was friendly and helpful when we called and told him we needed repairs.

"Threw a wheel?" he asked. "No worries, mate, I've done it myself ... but, most importantly, are you having fun?"

(Eric Vohr is a freelance writer.)



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