

Draft Notes: Gibb River Rd Gorges: June 14-28, 2015

First draft, December 2013. We have not been able to finalise all the necessary arrangements, we may have to make some changes to this itinerary. Please let us know if you find an obvious error or anything that doesn't seem to make sense.

Section 1: Kununurra to Mornington: June 14-21

There is no way to avoid a long drive somewhere on the trip so we get ours over and done with on the first day by driving from Kununurra to Barnett Gorge or as close to it as we can get. We spend the next day doing a leisurely explore of the gorge area.

From Barnett, we move further west to Lennard Gorge. Although it is only a few kilometres long, Lennard Gorge is bounded by the highest cliffs we encounter on the trip. We plan carry our packs well away from the vehicle to a secluded camp site well away from the 4WD visitors. From there we will do a long day walk. Just how strenuous that walk will be will depend on just how much the group wants to do. Our normal walk takes us along a ridge and down to the end of the gorge, returning either along the opposite side or by swimming through. (Those who had lidos and swam through on the last trip which did so thought it was one of the real highlights of the trip – sheer rock walls dropping more than 100 metres into a gorge less than two metres wide in places.) A much more ambitious possibility is a walk to the top of nearby Mt Herbert, one of the tallest peaks in the Kimberley.

From Lennard, we drive to Bell Gorge where a series of waterfalls drops down into a long gorge. Depending on how we are going for time, we have the choice of doing a half day walk and moving on or putting on our packs and walking down to camp in the gorge next to one of the many beautiful pools, well away from the 4WD campers. (Camping is not permitted in the area visited by day-walkers.) You don't need to walk far to get away from the 4WD tourists.

We return to the vehicles and drive to Mount House Station where we will visit Moll Gorge. Depending on the time we arrive, we may camp near the vehicles or we may move further into the gorge. We plan to spend two nights at a base camp in the gorge doing a fairly long day walk (or a shorter one if people prefer).

On the final day of this section, we walk back to the vehicle and drive to the 3 Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary where we meet anyone coming in to join the group and say farewell to anyone leaving.

Section 2: Mornington to Mount Elizabeth: June 21-28

The Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary is owned by the Australian Wilderness Conservancy and managed for conservation values. To get an idea of what is on offer, we recommend you visit the Mornington pages on the Australian Wildlife Conservancy website. Go to www.australianwildlife.org/AWC-Sanctuaries/Mornington-Sanctuary/Mornington-General-Description.aspx

We were last granted access to do an overnight walk and camp in Sir John Gorge in 2009. While we hope to be able to do it again, we cannot be sure until we have made new arrangements. We will do that when we have our first booking. We hope to spend two nights up Sir John and three at the Mornington campground. (If you would prefer accommodation, it may be possible to upgrade. See the Mornington website for information and cost.)

Sir John is spectacular but it's far from all that Mornington has to offer. We plan to include a one day canoe trip at Dimond Gorge and a few other things such as a guided bird or ecology tour, Lake Gladstone and an evening information talk. We'll check out the other possibilities and choose the best on offer when we get there.

From Mornington we drive the 100 km back to the main road and head east to Galvan's Gorge, the smallest and most easily accessible of the gorges along the road, hardly a gorge at all. It is, however, the starting point for a walk which will take us to something really special, the upper Isdell Gorge. A short, easy walk of about 5 km takes us to the top of the gorge. We expect to spend three nights here exploring both with and without packs as we wander through a magnificent bit of country that will remain forever unknown to non-walkers.

We finish the section with the drive back out to the main road and on to Mount Elizabeth where we meet those coming in for the final section. Those finishing with this section then fly back to Kununurra. If the final section does not run, we will all drive back to Kununurra.

We return to the vehicle and drive a short distance to the Aboriginal owned Mt Barnett roadhouse and do the walk to the waterfall at the top of Manning Gorge, a particularly pretty but fairly heavily visited spot. You can be lazy, play the tourist and stick to the marked track or you can do what some of us did on our last trip and lilo or walk back along the gorge. It's not only beautiful, it's almost untouched.

We saw no one between the falls and the campsite on our last two walks there. Rather than spend the night in the huge, generally crowded campsite at Manning, we drive a relatively short distance and spend the night at Silent Grove or Mount Elizabeth. The following morning, those joining fly in and those leaving fly back to Kununurra.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall	Level 2.
Climate	Level 3. Generally dry, average daytime max low 30's, average night minimum 14-18°, but can get below 7°C on occasion.
Terrain	Level 2-3. Some flat, some steep, some rock hopping. A complete mix. Much of the harder terrain is done with daypacks and much is optional. The walk at Lennard Gorge (probably done without full packs) includes a very steep section which some people find quite difficult. How hard it is depends on how much you want to do.
Vegetation	Level 2. Can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt. Most of the walking will be fairly open but some will be through thick grasses including spinifex. Gaiters or long trousers and seed socks strongly recommended.
Hours	Generally 4-6 hours walking per day.
Packs	Waterproofing. If you want to do one of the optional gorge lilo trips, you need to be able to waterproof your daypack. Pack weight - level 2. You never need to carry more than three nights food.
Art	Little art found on sections 1 & 2. You may see a minor site at Moll Gorge, one or two fairly good sites at Manning and a couple of sites at Sir John and the upper Isdell. All are found on the relatively strenuous options. Several major sites on section three.
Campsites	Mix of sand, rock ledges and campgrounds. Some bush sites excellent, some less so. Campgrounds can be fairly crowded but most were fairly quiet in 2003.
Swims	Good to excellent in most of the gorges and much enjoyed by those from cooler climates. Water temperature may be on the cool side for those used to hot climates. The swim through Lennard Gorge provides you with wonderful views which cannot be obtained in any other way. It is, however, long and cold. For safety reasons, there should be at least one airbed for every two persons or one thermarest for one person doing the swim. If you wish to do this swim, you will need to bring an airbed. Wearing thermals during the swim can help keep you warm and allow you to take the time to enjoy this spectacular area. If some members of the group wish to do the swim and others do not, the guide will have to assess the situation and decide whether or not it is safe for a small group to do the swim on their own.
Lowlights	Sharing campgrounds with a lot of people. Very long drive at the start of the trip.
Highlights	Tremendous variety of gorge scenery – each gorge has its own special characteristics. Great swimming.
Wildlife	The Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary, a protected area, is noted for its birds. It may be possible to do a short guided birdwatching walk. Best to bring binoculars if you are particularly interested in birds. Moll Gorges had lots of freshwater crocodiles.
Fishing	Some good possibilities at Moll and Bachsten. Not as good, but possible in some of the other gorges.
Maps	The main maps used on this trip are the Kimberley tourist map and the 1:50 000 Isdell (Bell Gorge), Mt Herbert (Lennard Gorge), Messmate Creek (upper Isdell which extends onto Divide hill and Moll Gorge), Barnett Range (Barnett Gorge), Mt Barnett (Manning Gorge) and Mornington (Diamond and Sir John Gorges – Sir John extends onto Glenroy and Warton) topographic maps. 1:50 000: Bachsten covers the Bachsten Creek walk. The 1:100 000 Isdell (Bell Gorge) and Richenda (Lennard Gorge) maps cover the same areas plus some of the surrounds. The 1:100 000 Packhorse Range covers the upper Isdell. The 1:100 000 Glenroy and Lerida maps cover the Mornington area.

Notes

Bringing fresh fruit, vegetables or honey into WA is illegal whether you come by road or plane. (You cannot even bring in boxes or other containers that once contained fruit or vegetables.) Bags are checked both on the highway and at the airport. There will be time to do some shopping in Kununurra. Coles is open 24 hours; Tuckerbox (the other supermarket) from 6 am to 8 pm every day.

A day pack is particularly useful on all sections of this trip.

You never have to carry more than you need for the walk you are doing. Additional food and clothing can be left in the vehicle during the walks.

You should always keep a water bottle, your lunch and some money with you during the drives as you cannot easily get into your pack during the journey. You should have enough money to pay for your drinks and ice creams at several stops on each section.

It is a good idea to have a change of clothes and a towel to take advantage of the hot showers at the campgrounds at Mornington and/or Mount Elizabeth,

Some of the walks are on private property. If a property changes hands or the owner changes their mind about access, we may have to modify the itinerary.

Although this is one of our easiest trips and none of the walks are particularly long, All the walking is off-track. People who have never done any off-track walking are likely to find it more difficult than those who have had such experience.

Special note. Diamond Gorge was the proposed site for a dam on the Fitzroy River, now reprieved. This trip lets you see for yourself what would be lost if such a dam is ever built. If you find out more about this issue, please contact Environs Kimberley, PO Box 309, Broome WA 6725; phone (08) 9193 5079; fax (08) 9193 5052.

What do our clients say?

The following comments were provided by Lorraine Billet from Adelaide who did the 2003 Gibb Road Gorges trip just after having done a long walk in Kakadu with the Adelaide Bushwalking Club.

“Highlights – definitely the variety within the gorges. I’m surprised that you don’t get more people interested in this trip – it suited us well, after Kakadu and my knee problem. We always wanted to do the Gibb River Road but didn’t have a suitable vehicle and certainly wanted to do more walking than the average tourist. Maybe it is not challenging enough for the macho walkers, though the gorges can be so.

“Since I have been back, I have been asked what was the main differences between the ABW Kakadu walk and the Willis Walkabouts trip in the Kimberley and which one was better. My reply was the Kimberley was better – we visited 10 gorges – we drove to them all – some of which we then walked between 100m and 5Km to a base camp from which we then did a long day walk, so most of our time was spent in good scenery.

“On the other hand, in Kakadu, there was a lot of walking in flat, high-grassed country between the much fewer gorges, so less time was spent in scenic conditions – and in the Kimberley, the gorges were more spectacular with deeper and much larger waterholes – and, of course, the packs were much lighter.”

After reading the above, we can’t resist adding a comment about Kakadu. With almost 30 years experience walking in Kakadu, we believe that our routes are the best that the park has to offer, almost certainly better than what you would choose if you decided to walk on your own without consulting anyone who has had a lot of experience walking in the park. Now here’s a quote from Peter Blackband from Sydney, another participant in that same Gibb Road trip.

“The time since the Gibb River Road trip has given an opportunity to reflect on those 15 days in the Kimberley. I think that trip is excellent - you cover so much that the private tourist sees and those travelling with tour operators, but additionally, we saw so much more and often that was the best to see. Walking away from the 'end of the road' , base camping and day walking took us to so much more than all the other tourists ever see. A great trip and one that I recommend most highly to any person who has had some experience in the bush but wants to experience the Kimberley.”

DRAFT Itinerary: Gibb River Road Gorges

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is a **DRAFT**. Some of the walks are on private property. Permissions can change due to mustering and other factors beyond our control. We might, for example, cut a day out of section two so that we could arrive at Mount Elizabeth and spend the final night there.

Section 1 Kununurra to Mornington

Day 0 Those beginning with section one travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between Kununurra and Perth and Darwin. Most connections to the eastern states are made through Darwin. Pre-trip meeting , 6 p.m., outdoor area, Kimberley Croc Lodge. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 Drive to Barnett Gorge or as close as we can get. Bush camp near car or short walk to camp.

Day 2 If not there, finish drive to Barnett Gorge and walk to camp site (about 40 min from end of vehicle track). Day walk exploring the area.

Day 3 Drive to Lennard Gorge. Carry packs to bush camp site.

Day 4 Day walk and possible float through Lennard Gorge. Same camp as day 3.

Day 5 Return to car. Drive to Moll Gorge, stopping to check in at Mt House. Camp near car.

Day 6 Walk to base camp in Moll Gorge. Bit of exploring on the way.

Day 7 Day walk from Moll Gorge camp.

Day 8 Finish walk at Moll. Drive to Mornington, Check in. Fly back to Kununurra for those ending here.

Section 2 Mornington to Mt Elizabeth

Day 7 Those beginning with section two travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between Kununurra and Perth and Darwin. Connections to the eastern states are normally made through Darwin.

Day 8 Pick up from your accommodation in Kununurra provided you have given us the address at least a week before departure or have made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. If you are unable to notify us where you are staying, the pick up is from in front of the Kununurra Visitors Centre. Time to be advised.
Fly to Mornington Check in. Drive to Sir John.

Day 9 Day walk from base camp.

Day 10 Return to car, drive to Mornington, camp in camp ground. Short trip somewhere.

Day 11 Dimond Gorge canoe trip. Overnight at camp ground.

Day 12 Something else at Mornington. Depends on what's available.

Day 13 Drive to Galvan's Gorge. Start Upper Isdell walk, about 1½-2 hours to camp site.

Day 14 Upper Isdell day walk.

Day 15 Return to vehicle. Drive to Mt Elizabeth or Silent Grove and fly back to Kununurra. If we have to drive back to Kununurra, we will drop day 12 above and begin the drive on day 14, finishing it on day 15.

Important Note **Air North** (part of Regional Link), the main airline currently operating into Kununurra uses some relatively small aircraft with an official baggage allowance of only 13 kg. See the Getting Here page on our website or contact Regional Link for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au
Virgin offers a limited number of flights between Kununurra and Perth. Their aircraft are larger. Worth checking.

Final Note Although there is a good chance that the trip will run exactly as per the itinerary above, things change and we cannot be sure.