

Gibb River Rd Gorges: June 21 - July 12, 2009

This is longest and most comprehensive trip on the Gibb River Road, the one that best shows you all that the area has to offer. No other tour operator will take you to many of the places we visit as many of them can only be reached on walks of two days or more.

Note. More than any other trip we offer, this itinerary can be modified to suit the interests and abilities of the group. As shown in the draft itinerary at the end of this document, we will visit the gorges in a different order if our new connecting trip runs.

If you want to get a better idea of what this trip is like, please see the Gibb Photo Galleries on our website.

Section 1: Kununurra to Manning: June 21-28

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 Fitzroy Crossing if we do the tourist gorges (Geike, Tunnel Creek and Windjana) or straight to Lennard Gorge if we give the tourist gorges a miss. Those who book early can help make the decision.

If we do the tourist route, we would spend a night in a campground at Fitzroy Crossing and do a cruise at Geike Gorge, either the short cruise run by the National Parks people or a longer one run by the local Aboriginal people. At Tunnel Creek, we would take torches and wade through the cave which goes straight through the range. At Windjana, we would do a short walk where we would encounter the greatest concentration of freshwater crocodiles that we have ever seen.

Although only a few kilometres long, Lennard Gorge is bounded by the highest cliffs we encounter on the trip. We plan to spend two nights here, carrying our packs well away from the vehicle to a secluded camp site well away from the 4WD visitors. The following day 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 lilos and swam through in 2003 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 (we did this in 2003), doing a longer walk and staying in the campground 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.) Walking downstream for half an hour in 2003, gave us the exclusive use of some pools. You don't need to walk far to get away from the 4WD tourists.

The next morning we return to the vehicle, drive back out toward the Gibb River Road, stopping at a point about 1½ km from an escarpment below which flows one of the major tributaries of Bell Creek. We put on our packs and walk in to a base camp spending the rest of the day and the following one exploring without packs.

The next day, 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 walk. We spend the final night of this section at the Manning Gorge campground. The next morning, a small plane flies in anyone joining us for the section and takes those leaving back to Kununurra.

Section 2: Manning to Mount Elizabeth: June 28 - July 5

Once those joining for the second section have arrived, we head west again, toward 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'll continue downstream and set ourselves up by one of the bigger pools. Depending on what else we are doing, we will spend three or four 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.

Then it's back to the vehicles and back to the turn off to the Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary and Mount House Stations where we will visit Moll, Sir John and Dimond Gorges. We hope to begin with Moll Gorge.

On our last trip, we arrived fairly late and camped on a lovely sandbank next to a huge pool a few hundred metres from the end of the 4WD track. A leisurely walk with packs the next morning brought us to an even nicer spot where we spent two nights, doing a day walk further up the gorge. It was perfect as everyone could decide just how energetic they wanted to be. Some walked for the full day, some for half a day and a couple of people spent most of the day relaxing at the camp. This trip will be the same, as easy or as energetic as you'd like.

We then return to the main track and head toward the Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary owned by the Australian Wilderness Conservancy and managed for conservation values.

But, alas, if you don't use it, you lose it. After our 2003 trip, in exchange for an extra fee which was to be used to help preserve and rehabilitate the environment, we were granted exclusive access to do an overnight walk and camp in Sir John Gorge. As the trip hasn't run since, the management has decided that the issue of overnight walks is one which needs further consideration before granting permission for anyone to do an overnight walk there.

Sir John remains a beautiful place, so if we have time, we will do go to the Mornington Campground where we'll spend two nights, doing a long walk at Sir John one day and a canoe trip at Dimond Gorge on the other. 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.

Section 3: Munja Track and Bachsten Creek: July 5-12

At Mount Elizabeth Station where meet our vehicles and collect the key which will let us through the locked gate and onto the track which leads to our walk.

The long drive from Mount Elizabeth is very rough and will take the better part of a day. (Some short sections are so rough that it may take ten minutes to cover one kilometre.) We will, however, have the occasional stop for a stretch or to look at some of the art sites along the way.

Eventually we come to a small safari camp near Bachsten Falls, nice enough but there is much better a bit further. We will do a four or five day loop down the creek below the falls, through a pass to another creek, up a gorge to another waterfall and finally back to where we began. We did this as a day walk in 2001 and as an overnight walk in 2002. By taking more time, we can drop our packs and explore well beyond where we have been before without having to carry our packs any further. On our previous visits, we found a number of Aboriginal art sites. With more time, we should find more. For those who are interested, the fishing should be excellent. We will be making a special effort to find a major art site we have been told of which is only a short distance of the track we've walked before.

If you would like to see photos of this walk, go to the Photo Gallery page on our website and click onto "The Bachsten Creek Area."

Back at the car, a relatively short drive takes us to Wren Gorge where we find a lovely small waterfall, several beautiful pools and an abundance of Aboriginal rock art. Depending on how we are going for time, we may stop here for a night or we may continue on towards the Munja airstrip where we will pick up or drop off anyone doing only one section of the trip. If no one is coming in or out, we will stop when we reach the Brockman River, where we begin section two.

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. Windjana and 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

The flight at the end of this trip depends on the Charnley trip which follows. If that trip does not run, we will drive back to Kununurra. It is unlikely that it will take place **exactly** as indicated. However, even if we drive back, the final itinerary will be very similar in the way that the trip is organised and which walks are included.

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 Fitzroy Crossing, Windjana, Manning and/or Mornington,

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 depends on a connecting trip. If that trip does not run, we will have to drive back to Kununurra and change the order we visit the gorges.**

Note 3 **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 Manning Gorge**

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 Backpackers. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 Early morning pick up. Pick up is 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.
Drive to Fitzroy Crossing. Overnight in campground.

Day 2 Geike Gorge cruise. Drive to Tunnel Creek for short walk. Drive to Windjana Gorge for short walk. Overnight in Windjana campground.

Day 3 Drive to Lennard Gorge. Day walk. Lennard River bush camp.

Day 4 Drive to Bell Gorge. Carry packs to bush camp site.

Day 5-6 Return to vehicle and drive a short distance to the next walk. The end of our Middle Isdell walk passes within 1½ km of the Bell Gorge road. We'll park and head in for a two night base camp, exploring with day packs for the rest of the time.

- Day 7** Return to vehicle. Drive to Manning Gorge, rest of day exploring Manning. Overnight at campground.
- Day 8** Flight back to Kununurra for those finishing here, arriving in time for mid morning flights.

Section 2 Manning to End

- 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 between 4.30 and 5.30 a.m. for those beginning with this section. Pick up is from your accommodation in Kununurra provided you have given us the address at least a week before the section one departure. If you are unable to notify us where you are staying, the pick up is from in front of the Kununurra Visitors Centre. Fly to Mount Barnett Make sure you confirm the pick up time in advance.
Drive to Galvan's Gorge. Start Upper Isdell walk.
- Day 9-10** Upper Isdell walk.
- Day 11** Return to vehicle and drive to Moll Gorge. Carry packs to Moll Gorge base camp.
- Day 12** Day walk up Moll Gorge
- Day 13** Return to vehicle. Drive to start of Sir John Gorge. Day walk up gorge then on to Mornington campground.
- Day 14** Dimond Gorge canoe trip. Overnight at Mornington campground.
- Day 15** Drive to Mount Elizabeth. Fly back to Kununurra for those ending here.

Sec 3 Munja - Bachsten

- Day 14** Those beginning with section three travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between
- Day 15** 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 Mt Elizabeth Station. Begin drive along Munja Track.
- Day 16** Drive to Bachsten camp ground. Park car and begin walk.
- Day 17-19** Bush camping, carrying packs most days.
- Day 20** Return to vehicle and drive to Wren Gorge. Camp at gorge – short walk from vehicle.
- Day 21** Drive to Pantijan airstrip and camp nearby.
- Day 22** Early morning flight back to Kununurra.

Important Note **Regional Link** (formerly Air North), the only airline currently operating into Kununurra uses relatively small and has a baggage allowance of only 13 kg. Unless special arrangements have been made, if you are flying to Kununurra and your baggage weighs more than 13 kg, it may not get on the plane with you. (This would be very unusual but it is possible.)

Contact Regional Link for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000;

Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au

Qantas Link cancelled their peak season direct flights to and from Perth in late 2006. Call 131313 to see if they are running again.