

Draft Notes: Kimberley Coast Explorer: March 5 – April 15, 2017

Important Note. We have had to make major changes to the first section of this trip, reverting to a route similar to one we used in the 1990s. The trip notes below describe the trip as we intend to run it. There are a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the weather, which may require us to make substantial revisions to this itinerary. As of November 2016, these notes remain a work in progress. We know that there will be some changes, hopefully minor, but we can't be 100% sure until we've heard back from all our service providers.

This is our most ambitious expedition. Those taking part need above average in fitness and a sense of adventure as we trek off into the unknown. This is also the most expensive trip we offer. However, like all our trips, it offers excellent value for money. But be warned, trips like this are always subject to change due to weather or other conditions.

Looking for Aboriginal art sites is an important part of this trip. We will visit the best sites we have found on previous trips and search for others. Although it is not yet possible to date most of the paintings, existing research suggests that the styles we see will range from early twentieth century back more than 10 000 years. If you are not particularly interested in the art, you might still enjoy poking around the various rock formations or perhaps you would prefer to relax near a pool and watch the birds or have a swim while others go exploring. The choice is yours.

Section 1: Berkeley River to King George: March 5-19

For the first time ever, we plan to begin our trip with a light aircraft flight from Kununurra to the Berkeley River Lodge airstrip. We will charter their boat to drop us off near the top of Berkeley Gorge.

We plan to make the first few days as relaxed as possible as late March is normally quite hot and everyone will need time to acclimatise. (The trip dates were chosen to make sure that we get to see all the waterfalls when they are flowing well.) The description below assumes that we can be dropped off near the head of the gorge. If we have to land near the mouth, we will do the first part in reverse before cutting across to rejoin the route as described.



Mt Casuarina & Berkeley Gorge TD

From the top of the gorge, we begin a three-day journey north to Casuarina Creek. On the way we stop to explore some of the small creeks and waterfalls which flow into Berkeley Gorge, probably reaching one or both of the campsites along the way by lunch time and spending the afternoon with day packs. We hope to camp for two nights near where we reach Casuarina Creek.

A day walk from our base camp on Casuarina brings us over the top of Mt Casuarina, to the waterfall where Casuarina Creek tumbles into the tidal gorge and back along the creek to our camp. From here, we will probably follow Casuarina Creek upstream for a day or two — some of the places we found the last time we did this route are too nice to miss, deep gorges, lovely pools and a wide variety of vegetation ranging from dense monsoon forest to sparse sandstone scrub.



Crossing Casuarina Creek RW

From Casuarina Creek, we begin a cross country trek to a creek which drops into the east branch of King George Sound about 70 kilometres from the point where Casuarina Creek enters the tidal gorge. Along the way we stop and explore a number of the small creeks we pass. We should reach several potential campsites by lunch time, allowing us to explore the creeks carrying no more than day packs. One of these creeks has a waterfall where the creek does a right angle bend as it drops into a narrow gorge, so narrow that the map maker didn't even see the waterfall. In flood conditions in 1995, this waterfall was incredible. The next time the trip ran, it was a trickle.

The creek we get to at King George passes through a small gorge with some excellent Aboriginal art. At the bottom, it drops over a waterfall into the tidal area below, a spectacular sight. Above the falls, swimming is safe. Down below, the big crocs reign supreme.



Crossing the creek near King George, 1995 RW



Side falls, Berkeley Gorge RW



Casuarina Falls & tidal gorge RW



No Name Falls, 1995 RW

Near the falls, there is a relatively easy way down to the sound. There we will be met by a float plane or boat which will transport us, probably taking two trips, to the west side of the King George River. In full flood, the King George would be almost impossible to cross. The boat solves that problem while giving us some great views of the falls from below.

Those leaving at this point will return to Kununurra, arriving sometime in the afternoon — too late to fly back south.

Maps. 1:50 000 Berkeley, Casuarina, Rulhieres. 1:100 000 Casuarina, Berkeley

Section 2: King George to Faraway Bay: March 19-29

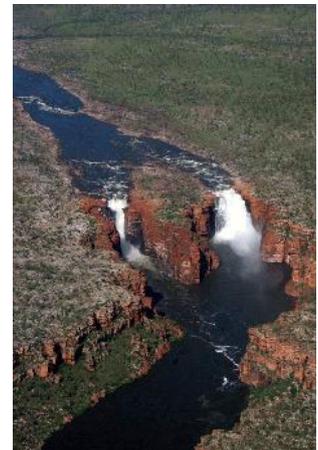
Those flying in or out should get an aerial view of King George Falls as at right. Those continuing will have to be content with views from ground level. The two photos below were taken from the same spot on our 2011 trip, before and after a big rain storm.



King George Falls, before



TD King George Falls, after



King George Falls

CI

The climb up from where we get dropped off is quite steep but isn't long. We should reach our campsite near the river within an hour of when we begin. Better still, we will spend at least two, maybe three nights here as we explore the area.

If the King George is low enough for crossing the smaller branch to be safe, we will go have a close look at the main falls. But, even if we can't get up close, there are some easily accessible points where we can get great views of both branches at once.

Moving on, we follow the King George river upstream into an area of interesting rock mazes where we find yet more Aboriginal art. From here, we head cross country to a small, unnamed creek which we follow down to where it tumbles over a waterfall into the sea below.

Nearby rocky headlands provide magnificent views out over the ocean and back toward King George Gorge behind us. Down below is a sandy beach where we spotted turtle nests on several trips. Those who wish to try some fishing will have a chance to do so.



Fishing on the beach

TD



Good catch

CI

From here, we swing westward to Koolama Gorge, named for a boat attacked and badly damaged by Japanese aircraft in February 1942. If we have two nights, we can go down to the beach and follow a marked heritage trail where signs explain what happened.



Photographing the art

RW

You can read about it on the Wikipedia Koolama page, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koolama>.

From Koolama, we continue west to another unnamed creek where our final camp is above a fairly tall waterfall which plunges into a gorge below. Depending on water levels, we may choose to camp with the views at the falls or at a large pool about 200 m upstream.



Koolama Gorge camp



TD Koolama Gorge catch

TD



Relaxing at Faraway Bay

CI



Faraway Bay dining room

CI

From here it is only a few km to the track between the resort and airstrip at Faraway Bay. We spend the night at the lodge, a wonderful taste of luxury after walking for three and a half weeks.

Next morning, we get a lift to their airstrip where we pick up our next food drop and meet those joining us for the final sections. Those leaving here fly back to Kununurra. As with section one, same day flight connections are unlikely to be possible.

Maps. 1:50 000 King George, Rulhieres, Sanz. 1:100 000 King George, Rulhieres

Section 3: Faraway Bay to and along Lower Drysdale River: March 29 - April 8

Almost every time we have done this section, we have made major changes to the route. This trip will be no exception. The description below should be considered as a basic outline, not as an exact description of what we will find.

From the airstrip, we head roughly north toward an area with a number of interesting Aboriginal art sites and middens as well as some wonderful sea views. We spend the afternoon exploring without packs.

The following day, we move a short distance to a small waterfall which plunges into the sea below. Again there are a number of interesting art sites and a good walk without packs in the afternoon. Sitting at the top of the cliffs looking down the bay at sunset is truly magnificent.



Monitor Falls camp

TD

We spend the next two or three days working our way to a major north-south creek. The terrain is a mix of flat and easy plus some very broken rocky country. We have never managed to take the same route twice. Back in the early 1990s before we had a GPS, one group found a major art site which we have never seen since. In 2012, we had a really good look in the area where we thought it should have been. It wasn't there. Now that we have ruled out most of the possibilities, we have a good idea where the site may be. It's a little bit out of the way, but, it's close to a larger creek than the one we camped on in 2012, so, if the group is interested, we'll have another go at finding it.



Twin Falls

TD

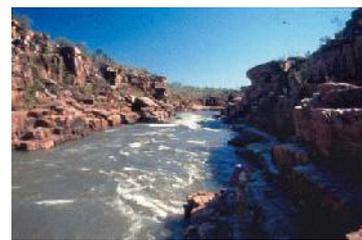
Once we arrive at the north-south creek, nameless on the map, we'll spend a full two days working our way down past the many huge pools to where it plunges over a tall waterfall into Glycosmis Bay below. A couple of hundred metres away, a second creek plunges over a second waterfall, hence the name Twin Falls.

If we get here in time to spend two nights, we'll have the choice of doing an interesting walk down to a beach below or a drier walk to an area which we have been told contains a good concentration of Aboriginal art sites. Either walk takes most of the day.

From here, we head up the smaller creek and work our way to the top of the lower Drysdale River Gorge. We may choose to follow a route we have used before or we may choose to explore further afield in the hope of finding something more interesting. Whichever, we choose, we will eventually enter a labyrinth of broken sandstone which borders the Drysdale — the largest river in this part of the Kimberley.

If section four does not operate, we will do something similar to what we have done in previous years. This will bring us to the lower Drysdale which we will then follow down through the lower gorge where flood debris 20 metres up on the cliff tops gives mute testimony to the awesome force of the Drysdale River in flood. The last kilometre takes us through some of the roughest terrain on the entire trip and brings us out to our final camp, a nice sandy spot just above a fishing camp.

If section four operates, we may aim further downstream and follow the Drysdale up through the gorge at the beginning of section four.



Lower Drysdale Gorge, 1995

RW

On the final morning, a float plane brings in those joining for the final section and takes those leaving at the end of this section back to Kununurra. The flight takes about 70 minutes and gives you very different views of this part of the Kimberley.

Note. If no one is going in or out at the end of section three, there will be **no food drop** which will make it necessary to carry food for the full final two weeks.

Maps. 1:50 000 Drysdale, Sanz, Raff. 1:100 000 Drysdale, Rulhieres & a corner on King George

Section 4: Drysdale River to Kalumburu: April 8-15

It is unsafe to swim across the lower Drysdale so we will get the float plane to take us across, or, if the fishing camp is operating, we may get them to do it by boat. If the camp is not open and we do not have a food drop, we may have to remain on the east side of the river for two or three days if we cannot find a safe crossing lower down.

East side or west, we follow the Drysdale upstream for a couple of days before turning off onto some smaller creeks. The first group we took along this route loved it. The next went a somewhat different way and didn't find it as enjoyable. We'll try and revert to the first section. Our final camp should be near a nice pool and waterfall only a short walk from the Aboriginal community of Kalumburu where we meet the plane which will take us back to Kununurra. The trip is over but the memories will last a lifetime.

Maps. 1:50 000 Drysdale, Andrew Creek, Kalumburu. 1:100 000 Drysdale

Notes

This is a major expedition. Except for the one night at Faraway Bay, those taking part will be completely isolated for the full six weeks. Although we will be carrying a satellite phone, if a serious accident were to occur, it could easily be several days, perhaps more, before help could be obtained.

Although we will be averaging less than ten kilometres per day, some of the areas through which we will be travelling are quite rugged. This, combined with the need to carry up to two weeks worth of food, makes good physical fitness absolutely essential.

Besides the above average fitness, you need the ability to swim, a sense of adventure and a desire to explore one of the least known wilderness areas in Australia. You do not, however, need to be a superman or superwoman. Some of those who have done previous trips were in their mid to late 50's, a few had never done a walk longer than three days. They all enjoyed the trip.

The trip includes a lot of rock hopping with a full pack on and even a bit of clambering over large boulders. Anyone who has done some off-trail rock hopping is unlikely to have any problem with the terrain. However, we strongly recommend that anyone who has never done any off-trail rock hopping find some place where they can try it and see how well they cope. Most people cope reasonably well right from the start. A few have serious difficulties which are impossible to overcome quickly.

As the trip will include a number of day-walks, you should bring a day pack or bum bag.

The three food drops must be organised the day before the trip starts. Come prepared with separate packages containing your breakfasts and lunches for sections two and three.

Walking in the tropics can be hard on clothes and footwear. If you are doing two or more sections, consider putting an extra set in with your food. Also include things like spare batteries, first aid supplies, sunscreen, etc. If you don't need them, they can go back with the plane.

It may be necessary to float your pack across a creek at some stage. Be prepared. No pack is totally waterproof. The best way to keep things dry is to place them inside two garbage bags or a heavy duty pack liner, sealed with heavy duty rubber bands, inside the pack. (Plastic bags on the outside of a pack are guaranteed to leak. Even inside a pack garbages last only a short time before tearing.)

Although we carry an emergency radio, you need to be aware that no radio (and no satellite phone) is 100% reliable. Solar storms can disrupt reception for days. If an accident occurs at a time when we cannot get through on the radio, all we can do is sit and wait. There is no ordinary telephone that we could reach in less than two weeks.

We expect warm to hot conditions, possibly quite humid at times, with relatively little rain for most of the trip.

However, the weather is completely unpredictable at this time of year.

Since 1992, we have encountered the tail ends of four cyclones. The edge of Cyclone Chloe in 1995 poured rain on us for a full week and turned the landscape into a quagmire. In 1998, we didn't get a cyclone, but we did get one incredible overnight storm where we had strong wind and over 200 mm of rain. In all three cases, the rain turned the coastal waterfalls into some of the most spectacular sights ever seen on any of our trips.

Those who were prepared had no real problems. Those who were not felt cold when they were sitting still. You do not need the kind of cold, wet weather gear you would need on a walk in Tasmania. You should be prepared with something like a lightweight rain shell or poncho to keep you comfortable if we encounter unusual weather.

If you like fishing, bring a light weight fishing line. It can be excellent in several of the places we visit.

If we take a boat from Wyndham at the start, our departure time will be determined by the tides. This could mean getting up as early as 3 a.m. to make the connection.

Warning 1! Exceptionally severe flooding can cause route changes and/or delay your return. Have a look at the report one of our clients wrote about our 1995 trip and you'll get a better understanding of just what can happen.

http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/kimcoast_avis.shtml

Warning 2! Hiking boots, no matter how new or how expensive, can fall apart on a trip like this. If you are doing more than one section of the trip, we strongly recommend that you have spare boots come in with the food drops. If you don't need them, they can go back with the aircraft.

Map. The 1:1 million Kimberley tourist map covers the entire walk, showing you where you are relative to other places in the region.

Terrain and difficulty

Overall Level 5

Climate Level 4. It will be hot (although not as hot as you might think) and it will be humid.

The average daily maximum is 34°C (93°F). Temperatures over 35°C are relatively common. The average nighttime minimum temperature is 21-24°C (70-77°F). The lowest ever recorded is 11°C (52°F). You are not going to get seriously cold, but if there are strong winds, a light-weight windcheater can make you more comfortable. Sleeping bags are not needed. Rain is fairly likely but we might not get a single drop.

On average it rains about one day out of three, mostly in short, sharp bursts. Averages can, however, be misleading. A late season cyclonic depression might make it rain for days at a time. (This makes it somewhat harder to walk but it also makes the waterfalls more spectacular and keeps it relatively cool.) It's just as likely that it won't rain at all. This would make it hotter than normal. There will be many opportunities to swim and cool off, but you must be prepared for hot, humid conditions.

Terrain Level 3.

Some sections of the walk are fairly flat and relatively easy. Others involve considerable rock hopping and are moderately difficult. There are a few steep climbs but these are short and over relatively quickly for most groups. As short as they are, these climbs are strenuous. Some may require using your hands to hold on as you climb up or down. None are technically difficult. None require ropes or other special equipment. There will be some places where you have to step from stone to stone as you walk along the edge of a creek.

You may have to float your pack across a flooded creek. **If you can't swim at least 100 m unaided, do not do this trip.**

Even in the boggiest of seasons, the Kimberley has nothing that can compare with the mud of Tasmania. However, if you have a particularly wet year, you may find yourself sinking up to mid calf regularly on some days.

None of the walking is on a marked trail. If you have never done any off-track walking through moderately rough terrain, nothing we can say can adequately describe the experience. The photos on our website, www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au, can give you a partial picture, but they cannot substitute for the real thing. Most of those who have not had any off-track walking experience find it more difficult than those who have done it before.

Anyone who does not regularly (average twice a month) go bushwalking carrying a full pack would benefit from doing some pre-trip training. Do this and you will almost certainly enjoy the trip. If you are not an experienced off-track bushwalker and you don't do any training or any other form of strenuous physical exercise, you might feel that the trip is more of an endurance test than the pleasure most people experience.

Vegetation Level 2-3. Much of the walking is through relatively flat, open woodland with a grassy understorey. Some short sections of grass may hide a broken rocky surface where you will have to be particularly careful. There may be some slow sections where you will have to pass through thick scrub. The vegetation can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt.

The spear grass normally reaches its peak in March, often three or four metres tall in some areas (much shorter in others). We may encounter short sections of partially collapsed and seeding spear grass during some portion of the trip, but this late it is unlikely that there will be much.

This is the best time of year for wildflowers. Flower photos, T Dixon, 2011.



In really wet conditions, the rain cannot flow away as fast as it falls so you can be walking through water for kilometres at a time. AD



- Hours** Generally 4-6 hours. A few days might be longer.
- Packs** **Pack weight** - level 4. You need to carry two weeks food. This will include about 3½-4½ kg of the evening meals. You do not need a sleeping bag but you do need a tent with a fly.
- Art** We visit a good number of sites. Some areas have much more than others.
- Swims** This is the best time to see the waterfalls. We will have good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
- Camp sites** Mix of sand and rock ledges and possibly grass. Most sites should be good to excellent but we have to avoid some of our dry season campsites which could get flooded. You are unlikely to see anyone else anywhere along the route.
- Lowlights** Heat and humidity. Possible lack of rain can make it more uncomfortable than normal. Exceptional rain can slow us down.
- Highlights** The waterfalls seen at their spectacular best. Great swimming. Aboriginal art sites. The lush green landscape that dry season visitors can only imagine.
- Wildlife** Birds are always present but spread out at this time of year. You are unlikely to see many large animals. Wildlife photos, T Dixon, 2011.



Cooling off in a lily pond ^{TD}



Jewel beetle



Blue winged kookaburra



Spiny-tailed gecko

You can see a bird list from our 2009 & 2011 trips at www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/pdf/kimcoast_birdlist_2011.pdf

Fishing Mediocre in some areas, potentially excellent in others.

Photos Most of the photos here were taken on our 2011 trip. TD = Tracey Dixon, CJ = Colin Johnstone, AD = Allan Donnelly. Photos labelled RW were taken by Russell Willis most on our 2009 trip, a few from 1995.



Fishing on the boat at Faraway Bay ^{CJ}

Final Note

These notes are a draft based on previous trips. There have been several changes to the available transport since our last trip. We will not be able to finalise these notes until sometime late in 2015.

Itinerary: Kimberley Coast Explorer

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change.

Section 1 Berkeley to King George

Day 0 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. Pre-trip meeting, 6 p.m., outdoor area, Kimberley Croc Lodge. **This meeting is important.** This is when we will arrange the food drops and the pick up details for the following morning.

Day 1 Pick up. This may be as early as 3 a.m. The arrangements for the pick up will be made at the pre-trip meeting. Seaplane to Berkeley River. Begin walk, camp on unnamed creek.

Day 2–14 Bush camping, carrying full packs.

Day 15 Float plane arrives with food drop. Those ending here return to Kununurra in late afternoon. Drop off at your accommodation.

Section 2 King George to Faraway Bay

Day 15 Those beginning with this section are picked up from their accommodation by Alligator Airways. Pick up time to be arranged shortly before departure or phone Alligator Airways on (08) 9168 1333. Fly to King George Sound and meet those doing section 2. Bush camp near drop off point.

Day 16-23 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days

Day 24 Beach pick up by boat. Cruise to Faraway Bay via King George Gorge. Overnight at lodge.

Day 25 Drive to airstrip and meet plane with food drop. Those finishing with this section return to Kununurra that morning. Drop off at your accommodation.

Section 3 Faraway Bay to and along lower Drysdale River

Day 25 Those beginning with this section are picked up from their accommodation by Alligator Airways. Pick up time to be arranged shortly before departure or phone Alligator on (08) 9168 1333. Fly to Faraway Bay airstrip and meet those continuing on to section 3. Begin walk.

Day 26–34 Bush camping carrying full packs most days.

Day 35 Those leaving at the end of this section take a float plane flight from Drysdale River to Kununurra arriving late afternoon. Drop off at your accommodation.

Section 4 Drysdale River to Kalumburu

Day 35 Those beginning with this section are picked up from their accommodation by Alligator Airways. Pick up time to be arranged shortly before departure or phone Alligator on (08) 9168 1333. Fly to Drysdale River and meet those continuing on to section 4. Begin walk.

Day 36-41 Bush camping carrying full packs every day.

Day 42 Arrive at Kalumburu. Fly back to Kununurra. Drop off at your accommodation.

Important Note **Air North** the only airline currently operating into Kununurra uses relatively small aircraft, one of which 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 Air North for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000; Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au **Skywest**, now part of Virgin, also offers a few flights to Kununurra from Perth and Broome.