

Draft Notes: Kimberley Coast Explorer: March 11 – April 21, 2012

Important Note. The trip notes below describe the trip as we've run it in the past. There have been a number of changes which may require us to make substantial revisions to this itinerary. Please let us know if you would like to be kept informed of any changes.

This is most ambitious expedition we offer. Those taking part need to be above average in fitness and will need 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: East of the Berkeley River to King George River: March 11-25

While flying out to join the second section of the 1998 trip, I (Russell Willis) passed over a spectacular waterfall I had never seen before. It was too much to resist so, tides permitting, we will land on the western side of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, southeast of the mouth of the Berkeley River. From there, we head inland to explore the many pools along the unnamed creek which feeds the waterfall. Whether we take a boat or a seaplane to get to the start of the walk will be determined by the number of people in the group and what is available.

We plan to make the first few days as relaxed as possible given the distance we have to travel 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.) Eventually we reach the Berkeley River and Berkeley Falls.

From here, we begin the walk north along the spectacular 20 km Berkeley Gorge to Casuarina Creek, stopping to explore some of the small creeks and waterfalls which flow into the gorge along the way. As the edge of the gorge is quite rugged, we may decide to walk further inland for the final section and do a day walk down Casuarina Creek to Casuarina Falls via the top of Mt Casuarina. From here, we will probably follow Casuarina Creek upstream for a day or two — some of the places we found on our last few trips are too nice to miss, deep gorges, lovely pools and a wide variety of vegetation ranging from dense monsoon forest to sparse sandstone scrub.

Somewhere near Casuarina Creek, we expect to be picked up by a boat or plane which will bring in a food drop and take those continuing to somewhere in or near King George Sound about 70 kilometres from the point where Casuarina Creek enters the tidal gorge. Using this transport allows us to spend more time exploring the new areas and revisiting the most interesting of the areas we have walked through on previous trips.

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

Notes on section one.

Those doing only section one will probably not see King George Falls.

Possible itinerary change. If we use a boat for the pickup at the end of this section, those finishing here would continue to Faraway Bay (see sec 2) where they would spend a night before returning to Kununurra. If the boat is not available, it might be necessary to walk to King George Sound. We will know which we will be able to do well before departure.

Maps. 1:50 000 Berkeley, Casuarina, Delancourt River & possibly Buckle Head. 1:100 000 Casuarina, Berkeley

Section 2: King George to Faraway Bay: March 25 - April 4

If we can get dropped off where we want to start, this section will begin with a two night camp in a magnificent gorge on an unnamed creek. A bit of climbing brings us to some outstanding views over the gorge below. We enjoy some excellent swimming in a series of pools joined by waterfalls. The final 30 metre drop gives another great view — and ensures that no crocs can come anywhere near. We might, however, have to get dropped somewhere nearby so it could be a day's walk to get there.

We follow this creek upstream, either in the creek bed itself or on the flatter area above, gradually working our way out into the more open country above the gorge. Along the way we encounter a variety of Aboriginal art sites. From here we have an easy walk over to the King George River.

We may choose to walk well upstream of King George Falls and follow the river down, or we may aim for a spot closer to the falls and do a day walk into an area of interesting rock mazes. Then it's downstream to the magnificent King George Falls where two separate branches tumble between 80 and 90 metres into the tidal gorge below. The views are spectacular, more so at this time of year when the falls are still flowing. Red rock, blue sky and a deep dark ocean, no camera can possibly do it justice. Perhaps we need a poet.

Reluctantly, we leave this awe inspiring place and work our way over to another delightful creek full of lilies and cool swimming holes. We follow this creek back to the coast where it drops 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.

From here, we swing westward on a daywalk to explore a lovely small gorge and some more waterfalls we visited for the first time in 1998. On the final full day, a boat comes in to meet us at the beach and take us up King George Gorge so that we can enjoy views which cannot be obtained in any other way. We then continue around the coast to Faraway Bay and spend the night at the lodge there. 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 section. 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: April 4-14

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 have two choices. On the first, a relatively easy afternoon walk from the Faraway Bay airstrip brings us to an interesting creek system with some nice pools and an interesting Aboriginal art site at the top of a small waterfall which plunges over a sheer cliff into a tidal creek. From the pools at the top, you enjoy magnificent views out to the ocean and offshore islands. We spend two nights here, enjoying the special treats that come in with the food drop and doing a day walk to another interesting creek and more Aboriginal art.

The other possibility is to walk a slightly longer distance to where we would do the day walk, then go to the creek mentioned above on the second, or even the third day.

These easy days are followed by a much longer and more strenuous one as we make our way west to a major north-south creek. Much of the route is fairly flat, but there is some rough country and a substantial distance to be covered. Once we have reached this creek, we follow it north to where it drops 30-40 metres over a cliff into a tidal gorge. Immediately to the west, a smaller creek cascades down into the same gorge.

From here, we work our way to the top of the lower Drysdale River Gorge. We may choose to follow the route we used in 1998, straightforward but not very spectacular, 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 the Alligator Air 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.

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 minute and gives you very different views of this part of the Kimberley.

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

Section 4: Drysdale River to Kalumburu: April 14-21

Depending on which route we chose in section three, we may follow the Drysdale upstream through the lower gorge or we may take a short cut along some smaller creeks, a faster route which would get us to the unknown section more quickly. Our planned route looks interesting on the map. Other than that, we have no idea what we will encounter as we work our way over to 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. Those taking part will be completely isolated for the full five 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 will 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 garbage 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 three 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.

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.

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 Backpackers. **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. Boat or seaplane to Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. 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 **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.