

ROAD TRIP

AMAZING JOURNEYS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

CAPTIVATING KIMBERLEY

The Kimberley coastline captures most of the attention, but the vast interior includes breathtaking geological formations, intriguing Indigenous and settler stories, and a host of colourful characters

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN



"IT'S THE SIZE, the magnitude," says guide Vinnie Antony, describing the allure of the Kimberley. "You can see a lot of red cliff photos, but until you get up here, you don't understand the size and how beautiful the culture is. It's an ancient landscape and it's got a strong power about the place."

Fractured sandstone cliffs, an unfathomable 1.8 million years old, loom above as we drift through Chamberlain Gorge. Late afternoon light licks the ridgetops luminous orange, mirrored in the water like molten gold. We pause to feed archer fish that spit a jet of water at food in our outstretched hands (and occasionally my face) as they would a flying insect to knock it into the water. It's also with an insect-like sense of smallness that we find ourselves on this waterway within the 250,000-hectare El Questro Wilderness Park, itself just a smudge on the map of the colossal Kimberley, nearly twice the size of Victoria.

The vast and remote Kimberley region in northwest Western Australia can seem daunting for independent travellers, hence I've joined a 10-day Globus 'Contrasts of the Kimberley' coach tour from Darwin to Broome. Meeting for pre-departure drinks, we discover our group of 24 is all Aussies bar one Kiwi couple. Some are returning Globus customers, others first-time coach-trippers.

As we head south through savannah country, tour director Juliet Hudson teases out threads of disparate stories - Indigenous, colonial, geological, pastoral, wartime, pearling and mining - which over the coming days get spun, dyed and braided into a narrative on the very fabric of life out here and stretched over the landscape.

A stop at Adelaide River War Cemetery proves a poignant postscript to Darwin's Bicentennial Park WWII walking trail, which describes the bombing of Darwin on February 19, 1942. The garden cemetery includes storyboards and videos recounting the conflict and its terrible impact from both Australian and Japanese perspectives.



We pause to feed archer fish that spit a jet of water at food in our outstretched hands

At Katherine, 320km southeast of Darwin, we visit Top Didj Cultural Experiences & Art Gallery. Local NAIDOC Elder of the Year, artist and recent TikTok star, Dalabon man Manuel Pamkal, welcomes us to country. Framed by wavy salt and pepper hair and a Spanish moss beard, his smile-creased face oozes warmth as he shares language, culture and insights into living off the land as a kid on Jawoyn country.

On a sunset dinner cruise of Nitmiluk Gorge (formerly Katherine Gorge) in Jawoyn-owned Nitmiluk National Park, Manuel's nephew, Jamie Brookes, tells how the Rainbow Serpent Bolung created the landscape, gouging out the Katherine River before curling up to rest in a deep pool in the second gorge. Rock falls have divided the serpentine ravine into 13 gorges, which trap water in the dry season and impede navigation, confining cruises to the first two or three gorges.

Nitmiluk (pronounced nit-me-look) means cicada place, but all is quiet as Jamie interprets layers of rock art. Craggy cliffs cradle pockets of spinifex, red-flowering grevillea and Livistona palms. Ochre rockfaces dribble black lichen tears and glow honeycomb in the setting sun as we sip sparkling wine and dine on kangaroo with rosella apple relish, paperbark-smoked chicken and lemon myrtle barramundi.

We head west on the Victoria Highway the next day, stopping at the Timber Creek Police Museum. Juliet has teed up a chat with curator Barry 'Bazza' Burrowes, a jack-of-all-trades whose 'Hell West and Crooked' business card lists services as diverse as stirrup extensions, revolutions started and marriages wrecked.

Main Image: Getty Images



Clockwise from far left: flying over the Lake Argyle dam wall; Bazza Burrowes leans into his stories at the Timber Creek Police Museum; rockfalls have divided Nitmiluk Gorge into 13 gorges; Manuel Pamkal of Top Didj Cultural Experiences has even found fame on TikTok; an evening cruise on Lake Argyle.



A member of the Australian Light Horse Association, Bazza leans against the doorframe as he recounts local history, including settler atrocities such as the 1890 police guard massacre of 60 innocent Aboriginal men in chains (suspected of cattle theft) after they'd been cleared and their release ordered. The inside of the 1908 police building is reminiscent of an old farm shed, with historical records displayed amongst rustic agricultural implements and equine gear.

Beside the road, spindly kapok trees wave buttercup-yellow flowers and termite mounds spire skywards. Bulbous boob trees begin to appear with mesmerising silhouettes. In lieu of blurry bus-window photos, I buy *The Boab Tree* book by Pat Lowe at the next roadhouse.

As we cross into Western Australia, Juliet explains the Kimberley was named by explorer and surveyor Alexander Forrest, who subsequently became a land agent for many of the area's early leaseholders, like the Durack family. Their story spans Irish immigration, pastoral dynasty and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme. In 1883, they undertook Australia's then-longest cattle drive of 4828km from Coopers Creek in Queensland to Argyle Downs station in WA, with 7250 breeding cattle and 200 horses. It took two years and four months, resulting in the loss of half the cattle and several men.

After countless kilometres of flat terrain, the Carr Boyd Range folds around us, framing glimpses of Lake Argyle's sapphire water. We lunch on battered cobbler and chips while enjoying a panoramic vista above the fathomless blue man-made lake, backdropped by crumpled russet ranges spreading gnarly fingers into the water.

According to Greg Smith, owner and operator of Lake Argyle Cruises, silver cobbler is the more palatable name for Lake Argyle's catfish that are commercially caught 10 months of the year. As we feed the archer fish, catfish join the melee, in turn





attracting one of the lake’s estimated 35,000 freshwater crocodiles, which stealthily glides in and snatches a feed.

Kimberley Durack first mooted the Ord River Irrigation Scheme in 1939 to capture wet-season flood waters and irrigate the fertile plains in the dry. It includes the Kununurra Diversion Dam built in 1963 and the Ord River Dam built in 1972, which forms Lake Argyle, holding 21 times the water of Sydney Harbour. We cruise past the dam wall and spot rock-hopping wallabies before a ‘refreshing’ sunset swim, with noodles under our arms, glasses of wine in hand and nibblies floating on an esky lid.

Having two nights in Kununurra, I take the optional day-tour to the Bungle Bungle Range in Purnululu National Park, flying with Aviair. From above, the Ord’s gravity-fed irrigation scheme spawns an algae-like growth of vibrant green crops – mangoes, sandalwood, cotton, chia and chickpeas among them – and Lake Argyle wells like indigo ink in the valleys of the Carr Boyd Range. Pilot Brent Dorsett points out the Argyle Downs Homestead, relocated from below the waterline and now a museum and monument to the three-million-hectare Durack empire.

The Gija and Jaru traditional custodians have lived here for thousands of years, but the remarkable Bungle Bungle formations didn’t become widely known until they featured in a 1982 documentary. From the air, the ridges of weathered sandstone stacks resemble stupas of an earlier civilisation. On the ground, the gargantuan beehive-shaped domes tower 300 metres above us and radiate retained heat. Like Kununurra’s unique striped siltstone known as zebra rock, the domes are horizontally banded in burnt orange and gunmetal grey, the latter the result of cyanobacteria growing on moist areas. Spinifex fans from pitted holes and termite nests balance totem-like on ledges.

Honeyeaters chirrup and chortle as Ivan and Brian of Bungle Bungle Guided Tours lead us along a dry creek bed prolific with citrus-yellow wattle, stopping to interpret Aboriginal rock art and



Clockwise from top left: Brian from Bungle Bungle Guided Tours; the range’s stacks were formed from layers of ancient seabeds; ‘happy hour’ in the water with Lake Argyle Cruises; seen from the ground the Bungle Bungle formations resemble beehives.



A freshie sunning itself at Geikie Gorge.



Exploring the Bungle Bungles on foot.



The horizontal falls at Talbot Bay.

From the air, the ridges of weathered sandstone stacks resemble stupas of an earlier civilisation

point out an endemic grevillea with buttermilk blooms. The track culminates in a massive ochre amphitheatre, aptly named Cathedral Gorge, that defies my wide-angle lens. Picnicking beneath its undercut overhangs, I try to visualise torrents of wet-season water thundering over the precipice and swirling around the cavern. During afternoon tea at Bungle Bungle Savannah Lodge, double-barred and zebra finches frolic around a water source backdropped by mauve-flowered mulla mulla grass.

The return flight passes over Argyle’s open cut diamond mine, now under regeneration after it closed in 2020. One of the world’s most productive diamond mines, it’s famous for rare pink diamonds and an intriguing Hollywood-worthy \$50 million heist. Involving a former horse trainer, an ex-cop security guard, his wife (who becomes the former’s lover) and corrupt cops, it’s chronicled in the ABC podcast ‘Pink Diamond Heist’.

Before departing Kununurra the next day, we visit The Sandalwood Shop, learning how the hemiparasitic trees rely on neighbouring tree roots for their nutrients, using up to four host trees in the 15 years it takes to produce the oil-rich heartwood. Used as a traditional medicine by Aboriginal people, sandalwood’s therapeutic properties are now widely recognised, and several shopping bags make it onto the bus.

The Victoria Highway crosses Diversion Dam and we stop to view the 20 radial gates that regulate the Ord’s flow. Travelling back into cattle country, we detour north to one of Australia’s hottest towns. Wyndham was established to support the Halls Creek gold rush in the mid-1880s and has a mean maximum temperature of 35.6°C. Its port on the Cambridge Gulf became

crucial to the pastoral industry, housing a meatworks from 1919 to 1986, and it still exports live cattle.

Our genial driver Glenn coaxes the coach up the Bastion Range’s snaking turns for panoramic views from Five Rivers Lookout. We’ve followed the Ord River from Lake Argyle and now watch it flow into the Gulf, along with the Durack, King, Pentecost and Forrest rivers. Mangrove-lined channels penetrate immense mudflats in green crystal-like tentacles, creating abstract artworks that drone photographers dream about. We pose next to Wyndham’s ‘Big Croc’, a 20-metre metal and concrete specimen built by TAFE students, before lunch at Croc Café & Bakery – famous, of course, for its croc pies.

Juliet steers us to Warriu Park, where Andrew Hickson’s larger-than-life bronze sculptures meticulously depict an Aboriginal family with a dingo, kangaroo, goanna and snake. Originally intended for Perth’s Kings Park, they look magnificent in the red dirt setting and the plaque’s sentiment is spot-on: “Aboriginal spirits will always survive in this timeless, beautiful land.”

A visit to The Grotto then delivers us into that timeless landscape, via 144 zigzagging stone steps down a ravine. Tree roots cobweb over cracked cliffs, unruly grasses sprout from fissures like octogenarians’ eyebrows, and shadows liken the rock pool to crude oil.

We spend two nights at Emma Gorge Resort within El Questro Wilderness Park, where meditation apps and alarms are redundant. I fall asleep in a safari-style glamping cabin listening to trickling water and wake to a cappella birdsong.

I book the optional day-tour, starting with a guided walk to Emma Gorge, where morning sunlight casts dappled shadows on the stony track. Guide Todd Smith points out spiralling pandanus, rippled sandstone from an ancient seabed, and a freshwater croc lurking in the waters of Turquoise Pool. The gorge terminates in soaring 65-metre walls that corral a



This area was a huge inland sea during the Devonian period that began 419 million years ago

freshwater pool as clear as it is cold. Feathery earrings of five-finger ferns dangle from above and a waterfall in the far corner beckons the brave. I swim in the opposite direction towards a trickle of warm water.

The thermal water of Zebedee Springs is a balmy 28-32°C. We arrive after midday, when the public must depart, and have the place to ourselves. Soaking in frond-lined pools of water heated deep within the earth and looking up through lofty Livistona palms to the age-old sandstone escarpment, it feels so primeval that I expect a pterodactyl to fly over.

After lunch in The Steakhouse at El Questro Station and the best crispy-skin barramundi of the trip, I meet artist-in-residence Coralee McCarthy, who is as obsessed with boabs as I’ve become. “The whimsical style of my art goes perfectly with these crazy, human-like ancient plants,” she says. I agree and leave with a collection of her cards. The afternoon is spent with Vinnie, cruising the Chamberlain River, which flows on to become the Pentecost.

Next day is our longest, tackling 600km of the Great Northern Highway to Fitzroy Crossing. It’s a day of unusual sights, including a live cane toad deposit box at a roadhouse (where they are humanely euthanised) and a chap pushing his belongings in a wheelchair in the middle of nowhere. Juliet cranks up Cold Chisel as we cross the Bow River, passes around books set in the Kimberley, and puts Baz Luhrmann’s movie



Clockwise from far left: a glorious Broome sunset; taking a dip on the optional day-tour to Emma Gorge; a bird’s eye view of the horizontal falls; pausing for a moment of reflection in the Bungle Bungles.



Australia (2008) on the screen. We “ooh” and “aah” as we recognise many of the locations.

At our accommodation, Fitzroy River Lodge, newspaper clippings tell of the MacDonald family, who ran nearby Fossil Downs cattle station continuously from 1882 until 2015, when it was bought by Gina Rinehart’s Hancock Agriculture. The MacDonalds pipped the Duracks for Australia’s longest cattle drive, a 5600km journey from Goulburn in NSW to Fossil Downs. They departed in 1883 with 700 cattle and 60 horses and arrived three years and three months later with 327 cattle and 13 horses.

During the Devonian period that began 419 million years ago, this area was a huge inland sea and is renowned for fossils, including WA’s fossil emblem, the Gogo fish. The Geikie Range was a barrier reef and on a trip with Danggu Geikie Gorge boat tours we see where the Fitzroy River’s flood waters have gouged the ochre-veneered limestone walls back to alabaster. Streaked with pink algae in parts, they resemble coconut ice confectionery.

From here it’s on to Broome, as Juliet strings together stories of pearls – from hard-hat diving for shells used in manufacturing buttons to today’s cultured pearl industry. A tiki tour of town shows off its recent multi-million-dollar beautification before we hit Cable Beach for sunset drinks.

Many of us stay on in Broome, taking the optional day-tour with Horizontal Falls Seaplane Adventures. From above, the

west Kimberley collides with the Indian Ocean and at Talbot Bay we watch the enormous 10-metre tidal flow being squeezed through pinched gaps in the McLarty Ranges. This creates ‘horizontal waterfalls’ whose buffeting force we experience later on a high-speed boat ride. Flying on to Cape Leveque, we visit the Indigenous-owned Ardyaloon trochus shell hatchery before lunch and a pearling demonstration at Cygnet Bay Pearl Farm. It’s a fitting finale for our outback to ocean, Contrasts of the Kimberley adventure.

COACH OR CRUISE?

While Briar Jensen found her Kimberley coach trip (see globus.com.au) to be an enriching and hassle-free way to explore this remote region, visitors can also take in the sites on an NRMA-owned Coral Expeditions Kimberley Cruise. The 10-night voyage from Darwin to Broome aboard the *Coral Adventurer* small cruise ship will see you join expert guides at spectacular new destinations each day, such as Montgomery Reef, King George River, Mitchell Falls and the horizontal waterfalls at Talbot Bay. Then you can retire to your comfortable stateroom and enjoy sunset drinks on your private balcony. Visit coralexpeditions.com for more information.

Experience the unforgettable Queensland

Outback

2023 Dates

LEGENDARY LONGREACH & WINTON - 8 DAY TOUR

Scenic view from Carisbrooke Station

Includes: One way flight Brisbane to Longreach. Daylight Rail on the Spirit of the Outback and the Tilt Train. All ensuite accommodation, meals, entries and activities. Savannah Guides Operator driver-guide.

From \$5,329 pp Twin Share. Special offer on 17 May 2023 departure. Alternative tour dates available in 2023. Not in conjunction with any other offer.

BIRDVILLE DESERT ESCAPE - 10 DAY TOUR

Famous Birdsville Hotel

Includes: One way first class overnight rail sleeper from Brisbane to Longreach. One way Economy flight Charleville to Brisbane. All ensuite accommodation, meals, entries and activities. Savannah Guides Operator driver and host.

From \$5,928 pp Twin Share*. Special offer on 6 May 2023 departure. *Senior rate. Alternative tour dates available in 2023 which include first class rail sleeper. Not in conjunction with any other offer.

Call 07 4658 3000 or visit outbackaussietours.com.au

*Subject to availability. Included flights are with an airline of Outback Aussie Tours' choosing, and subject to the airlines booking and carriage conditions. Refer to outbackaussietours.com.au for full terms & conditions.