

A NOMADIC LIFE

Following the steps of the last desert nomads is just one highlight from this Gibson Desert adventure

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA BLOFFWITCH





Time to get everyone
over the sand dunes

When talking about a trip to the Gibson Desert and you hear of roads such as the Eagle Highway, you could easily be thinking it's some smooth and wide open road through the desert. Boy, is that a misnomer! When we turned from the Talawana Track onto the Eagle Highway, the track was so narrow that you couldn't have even turned around if you wanted to. Trees also encroached on the track,

so you quickly became accustomed to that high pitched sound of branches scraping the sides of your 4WD and camper trailer as they left their mark behind. It's here we were most grateful for the second skin we'd applied to the vehicle before leaving home. But you soon forgot the state of the track when you got through all that to a cleared area and could see what was waiting for you out the other side. The desert backdrop was full of colour from the vibrant wildflowers, so making regular stops for taking photos was a must. And the dark



■ WHERE:

The Gibson Desert is located in remote central Western Australia. Travelling the Great Central Road, access is via Warburton (560km from Yulara and 560km from Laverton). From Alice Springs, travel the Gary Junction Road before turning onto the Gary Highway.

■ INFORMATION:

The Gibson Desert measures more than 150,000 square kilometres and is flanked by the Great Sandy, Little Sandy and Great Victoria deserts. With very few roads through this area, it's remoteness sees very few visitors each year, making the Gibson Desert a cracking destination for any 4WD adventurers prepared to make the journey.





Visiting the site where the last desert nomads were picked up in the 1970s was pretty special



There was no shortage of cracking camps along the Eagle Highway



ONE MAJOR BENEFIT OF TRAVELLING WITH A GROUP IS THERE'S ALWAYS PLENTY OF HANDS TO HELP OUT WHEN NEEDED

■ CAMPSITES:

With such vast open spaces, finding a camp is not difficult. Some tracks pass close to rock holes, so avoid setting up too close when you'll be sharing them with visiting birds and other wildlife.

Warri Camp	Eagle & Hussar Bore	Mungilli Claypan
   	   	   
   	   	   
   	   	   
   	   	   

clouds that loomed overhead made for another interesting conversation at a coffee stop when we were unlikely to get out of the desert in a hurry if caught in any downpour. I'd be lying if I said I slept well that night when I could hear the rain on the camper, but as it turned out, it wasn't enough to cause us any issues the following day.

Now Len Beadell pretty well put in most of the tracks around here, but the Eagle Highway actually isn't one of his. This one was put in by the Eagle Oil Company as recently as the early 1980s when they were looking for oil in the desert. As you drive the track, you can still see the clearing of the airstrip and a few remnants of a couple of the camps. The pick here is the Warri campsite where a shed and windmill still stands, and you'll easily be protected from the wind if you set up

camp close to the trees. But we had to take it slowly on the campsite access track as it was pretty washed out.

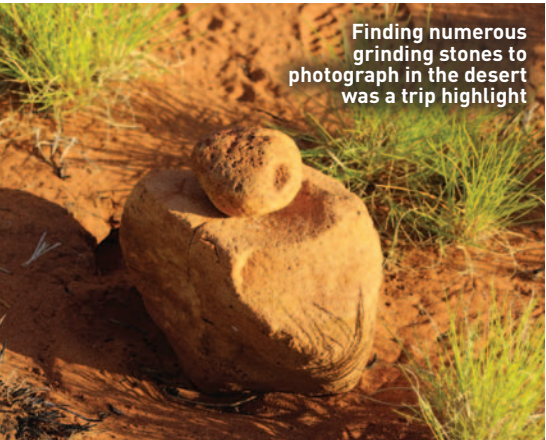
If you take a look at a map of the region and followed our route, you would be right in thinking we had been backtracking and driven a big loop. But there was very good reason for this. The next phase of our adventure had us doing something completely different, as we had been invited to meet up with some traditional owners of the area, the Birriliburu. This was an opportunity we grabbed with both hands! The plan was to then travel to Mungkulu Claypan in the Constance Headland area of the desert in convoy with members of Western Australian organisation, Track Care. Here the group would build and install camping equipment, and also have the



It's all hands on deck to get everyone safely through to base camp at Mungkulu Claypan



It was my first experience seeing a thorny devil in the desert



Finding numerous grinding stones to photograph in the desert was a trip highlight



We were shown how to find bush tucker during the "ladies" walk

opportunity to learn the importance of this culturally rich area in the process.

When being accustomed to travelling with only a small group like we had since leaving home, it was an odd feeling coming across so many people that we'd now be travelling with for the next week or so. We all met at the Eagle & Hussar Bore which now sort of resembled a dirt track version of Melbourne's Bourke Street Mall. There were people and cars everywhere! Travelling to the build site took nearly three days as terrain was rugged and couldn't be rushed. Tracks were mainly non-existent causing a couple of minor tyre issues for some, and a few gnarly crossings and sand dunes posed a problem for those towing heavy equipment. But that's one major benefit of travelling with a group as there's always plenty of hands to help out when needed.

But what made this whole experience really extraordinary was travelling through the area where the last desert nomads roamed less than



Our guides needed no maps to find this rockhole!

40 years ago. And if that alone wasn't pretty special, to be also given the rare opportunity to hear stories and shown significant sites firsthand from two of our travelling companions who walked this area as a young man and a child, was just priceless. It was simply incredible that they needed no maps for highlighting geographical points of interest around here.

Setting up camp on a large clay pan provided loads of space for everyone, and the nightly campfire brought the group together. During the day, the campsite build process steadily took shape, but we also took advantage of visiting a nearby gorge and rockhole where we learnt about their significant cultural importance. We even came across a tree blazed by Dr Bill Peasley during 1976 while on his search for the last two members of the Mandildjara tribe living a traditional nomadic life in the desert. Being invited to these special places wasn't something we took for granted and which we found to be a sensational part of this overall experience.

Our stay at Mungkulu Claypan didn't happen without mishap when a medical emergency for one of the party meant a 12 hour drive from base camp to Parnngurr for an RFDS evacuation to Port Hedland. It just goes to show how isolated you really are out here, and even when taking all the precautions, things can, and do, go wrong.

With the build process a success and now

■ **FUEL & SUPPLIES:**
There is no fuel available close by so ensure you have adequate supplies. Fuel and supplies within the region is available from Warburton (south east), Carnegie (south west), and Parnngurr (north west). We allowed for regular low range, second gear driving while towing.

■ **BUDGET ATTRACTIONS:**
The region itself is the attraction, so bushwalking, photography and general exploring can all be experienced. We spotted evidence of early Aboriginal occupation and followed in European explorer footsteps prior to meeting up with the rest of our touring party.

■ **WHAT TO TAKE:**
The remoteness of this trip means it's advisable to travel with at least one other vehicle. You'll need to be completely self-sufficient, so taking some sort of communication such as a satellite phone and an EPIRB is essential. Your recovery kit should include an air compressor, traction aids, spare parts, at least two spare tyres and tubes, and a tyre repair kit. Calculate your fuel, food and water for the duration of your trip, and build in a minimum of 3 additional days in the case of an emergency.

■ **BEST TIME TO TRAVEL:**
The Gibson Desert is best visited during May – August when temperatures are milder and you're more likely to see wildflowers in bloom. Outside of these months, things begin to warm up, especially in summer when temperatures are extreme.

■ **THINGS TO DO:**
General bushwalking and exploring are the main activities here. Look for signs of birdlife around rock holes and keep watch for camels. The flowering honey suckle grevilleas were extremely sweet if you are prepared to give them a taste!

■ **TRIP STANDARD:**
Trips are rated A through to E, with A meaning not suitable to tow a camper trailer at all and E meaning perfectly suitable for all types of camper trailers. The nature of this trip and its remoteness would see it as B-grade. Roads/tracks varied considerably – some sections were good whereas others were sandy, stony or corrugated. The Eagle Highway was narrow with a few sections overgrown that caused pin striping to the vehicle and camper trailer.

■ **RESTRICTIONS AND PERMITS:**
No permits were required for travelling the Eagle Highway, but the area we travelled to the west is by invitation only.

■ **KEY CONTACTS:**
Carnegie Station
PH: (08) 9981 2991
Warburton Roadhouse
PH: (08) 8956 7656
Parnngurr Community
PH: (08) 9176 9009



**■ AUTHOR'S OPINION:****What was your favourite part of the trip?**

For this part of our trip we saw another side of the Gibson Desert when we learnt what the desert meant to the traditional owners.

Where else have you been recently?

We have spent a few weeks exploring the Gibson Desert region travelling the Gary Highway and Talawana Track.

Where are you heading next and why?

Our Gibson Desert portion of our amazing trip has come to an end and we'll next travel part of the Canning Stock Route to explore some of the spectacular attractions along here. I hope to also visit one of the places I've had on my bucket list for a few years, Lake Disappointment.

IF YOU'RE DREAMING ABOUT THE ULTIMATE DESERT ADVENTURE, START PLANNING AND GET YOURSELF TO THE GIBSON DESERT

complete, it was time to pack up and move on. This has been an absolute cracking experience that I doubt we'll forget in a hurry, as we've travelled to a spectacular desert destination with likeminded people who enjoy remote travel as much as we do. So if you like meeting people and visiting those hard to get to places, why not volunteer some of your trip time? The rewards can be just as good as the effort, or even better!

Well there you have it - we've finally come to the end of what can only be described as an absolutely epic adventure to the Gibson Desert. This has been one hell of a trip, and I have no doubt the Gibson hasn't seen the last of us. So if you're dreaming about the ultimate desert adventure, start planning and get yourself to the Gibson Desert because there's really nothing else like it! ■