

SPINIFEX & SAND

NO TRIP TO THE GIBSON DESERT
IS COMPLETE WITHOUT TACKLING
THE GARY HIGHWAY AND
TALAWANA TRACK

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When you've travelled almost 3,000kms from home to reach the Gibson Desert, there's probably going to be a few high fives amongst your touring party when you finally get here. And why not, as getting here is half the fun! So when our trip itinerary next had us continuing along the Gary Highway and Talawana Track, we knew our desert adventure was going to be anything but dull.

Turning onto what was a heavily corrugated Gary Highway, you've got to have a bit of a laugh. Highway...really? Len Beadell sure had a droll sense of humour when naming these outback roads. But even with the road in crappy

■ 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:

This section of the Gibson Desert has some fantastic scenery, a significant amount of birdlife, and was full of wildflowers when we visited during July and August. It's an extremely remote area and best suited to experienced 4WD tourers.

■ CAMPSITES:

Finding a bush camp through here was not difficult as there were plenty of places to stop. Tracks often go past bores, so avoid setting up too close to the bore when they're frequented by birds and other wildlife.

CHARLIE'S KNOB



LAKE COHEN



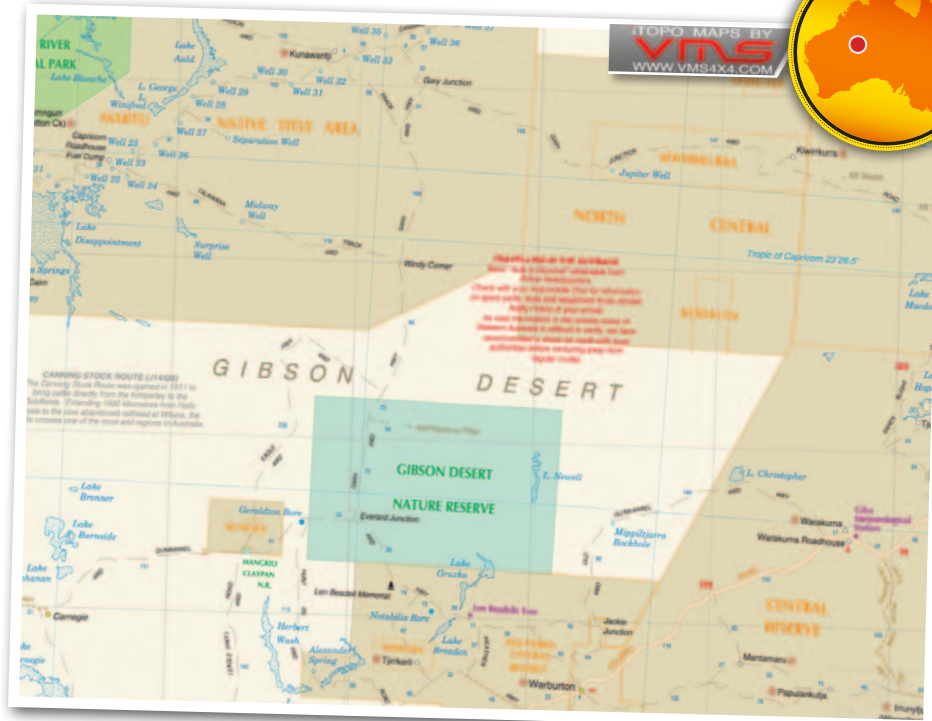
MIDWAY WELL



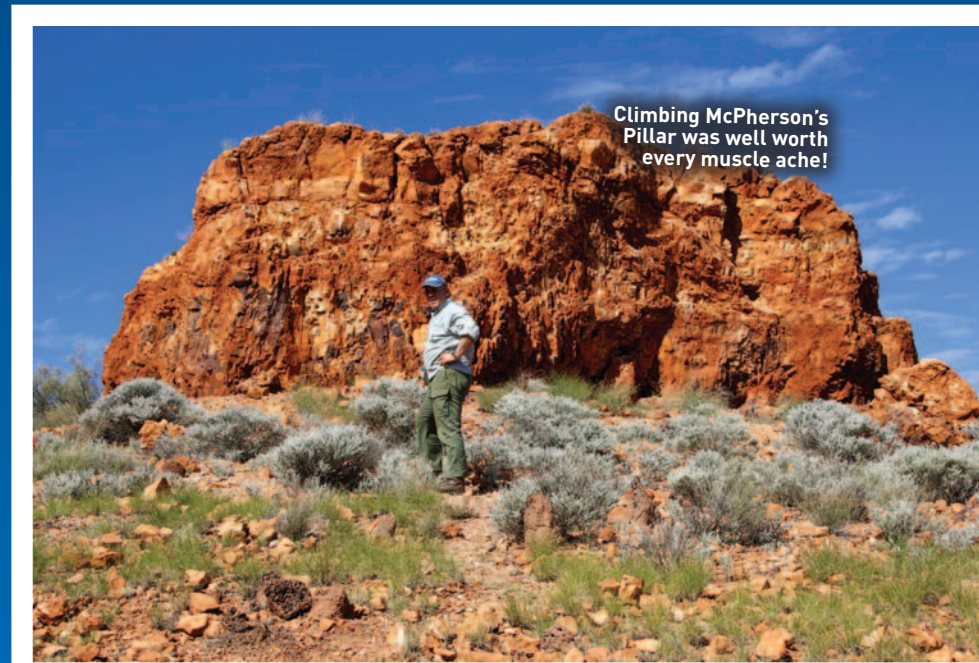
condition I was stoked to be travelling on it, as I somehow knew this part of the trip was going to be a cracker.

The road conditions improved as we travelled further into the Gibson Desert where we found the landscape flat as a pancake for miles and miles. But every now and then there would be something that came completely left field to blow us away. Charlie's Knob was a typical example of this when it rose up out of the landscape pretty well in the middle of nowhere, and the area surrounding its base made sensational camping. Another spectacular sunset here topped off a great day behind the wheel.

When you're camping in the middle of nowhere, I don't reckon you can beat sitting around a crackling campfire. Besides being out under the stars cooking up a storm, it was also an opportunity for our travelling party to get together and discuss travel plans for the following day. Early on in the piece, we all took the attitude that when we came across anything on the map that looked like it could be climbed, we did! As it turned out, our next stop thirty kilometres off the highway was a sensational sight. McPherson's Pillar was screaming to be explored and an interesting climb for those that tried.



It was quite evident the scenery was changing travelling north along the Gary Highway because what started as flat red sand and spinifex, spinifex, and more spinifex, a few hills now crept in along with some termite mounds. Sure these mounds wouldn't rival the monsters seen up Cape York, but they easily stood more than a metre high and added to the diversity of the landscape. Ok, it's probably important I mention spinifex again because somehow I developed a love/hate relationship with the stuff. As good as it looked from a distance, you'd be crazy to wear anything but long pants out here, as you unquestionably can't avoid brushing past a plant (or thousand) at some stage. I can only speak from my experience, but their fine needles can easily make their way through jeans and made a mess of my hands when collecting firewood if I wasn't wearing gloves. Trying to pick out splinters was anything but fun, so make sure you travel with a set of knee high gaiters and a pair or two of leather gloves for protection. You'll thank me for it!



**IF WE CAME ACROSS
ANYTHING ON THE MAP THAT
LOOKED LIKE IT COULD BE
CLIMBED, WE DID!**

There was nowhere else I'd rather have been when I was experiencing landscapes like this



■ FUEL & SUPPLIES:

There is no fuel available close by so ensure you have adequate supplies. The closest refueling point is along the Talawana Track where you can pre-arrange a fuel drop at Well 23 of the Canning Stock Route. Fuel is delivered here in 200 litre drums so you'll need a pump to decant it. This request will need to be organised 6 weeks prior to your date of arrival with Outback Fuel Distributors (previously Capricorn Roadhouse). A further 100kms from Well 23, fuel and basic supplies are available at the Parnngurr (Cotton Creek) Community. Confirm opening times beforehand.

■ BUDGET ATTRACTIONS:

The scenery speaks for itself out here, so you won't need a cent to visit the attractions. Exploring is the reason why you visit this region, and camping under a million stars each night is sure to have you relaxed and rested in no time!

■ WHAT TO TAKE:

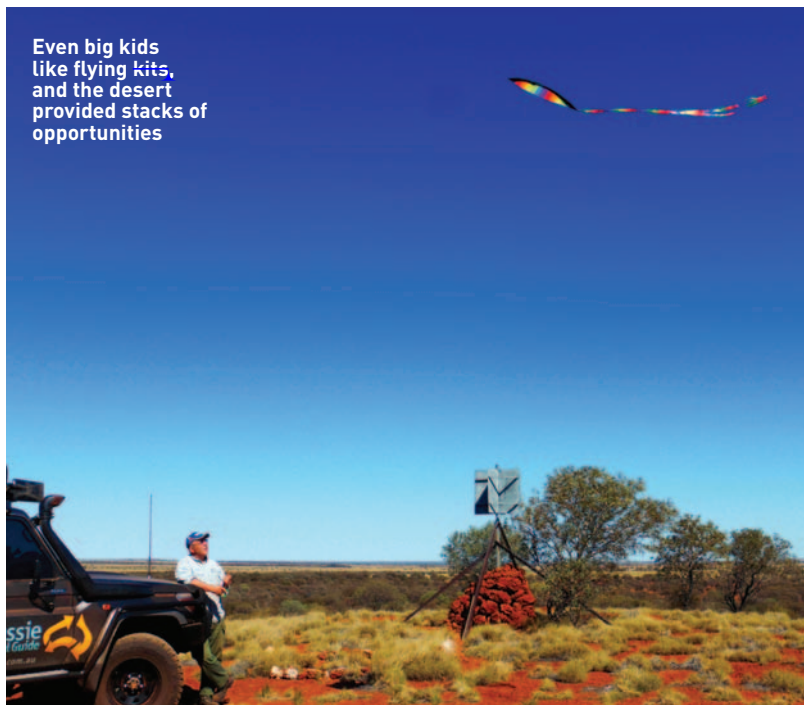
You need to be fully self-sufficient for this trip and it's also advisable to travel with at least one other vehicle. Days can be warm to hot and nights can be cool, so wearing clothing that can be layered is your best option. You also can't come all this way without a good recovery kit - include a set or two of vehicle traction aids, air compressor, spare parts, a minimum of two spare tyres, a couple of tubes, and a tyre repair kit. At least one vehicle in your travelling party should have a satellite phone. 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:

It's best to travel during May – August, although even during late winter, temperatures begin to warm up. Visiting during these months also means you're likely to see the desert looking spectacular from all the wildflowers.



Even big kids like flying kits, and the desert provided stacks of opportunities



We turned onto the Talawana and the road conditions varied anywhere from corrugations and ruts through to stony and sandy sections. This meant driving conditions often changed in the blink of an eye and kept you on your toes. One section here was pretty tight making it hard to avoid pin striping down both sides of the vehicle and camper. I reckon you're pretty well fighting a losing battle trying to dodge all the branches,

so you can't be too precious about scratching the duco on a trip like this.

But that doesn't mean you can't take precautions. We'd been pre-warned about overgrown and narrow tracks, so we applied a magical product to our vehicle's duco before leaving home that acts like a second skin. If the skin was broken anywhere after brushing past branches, we only needed to touch it up with a

THE TIGHT TRACK MADE IT HARD TO AVOID PIN STRIPING DOWN BOTH SIDES OF THE VEHICLE AND CAMPER

These delicate wildflowers around the outside of Lake Cohen stretched for hundreds of metres



With the Gary Highway being full of awesome attractions, if there was one place I would have liked to have stayed longer than it had to be Lake Cohen. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected to see a lake with water and birds in the middle of the desert. And to top it off, the smallest of vibrant purple flowers could be seen all around the lake like they were hanging on for dear life in the dry mud. Sunset and sunrise here was super spectacular and I doubt I'll forget this place in a hurry.

Another thing that surprised me in the desert was just how much wind there was. I'm not talking about a gentle breeze here as on a couple of occasions it really blew a gale. So what do you do when it's windy in the desert? Fly a kite of course! The top of McDougall Knoll made a cracking spot to take a coffee break and hey, nobody said you

have to be a kid to fly a kite to have this much fun in the desert. And night time entertainment was also something special when you're so remote and able to experience a night sky overloaded with stars. When kicking back around the campfire and reclining my chair to gaze up, it wasn't uncommon to see around 5 falling stars, often within an hour. Surely there can't be too many other places around with such odds, or maybe it was just my good luck.

Coming to the end of the Gary Highway where the road intersects with the Talawana Track, we'd now reached Windy Corner. It's the last place I ever thought we'd find a visitors' book to sign. And surprisingly, there were a few names above ours for this season, but we're definitely not talking pages' worth of names.





Not every vehicle makes it out of the Gibson Desert so we stopped to take a look at the relics at every opportunity

small paint brush. Removing it was just as simple when it only needed a quick wash off with water. It definitely weaved its magic, and we think it's worth every cent, plus some!

When the Talawana Track tightly weaved through a magnificent acacia grove, you couldn't avoid having to slow right down. But that was one of the highlights along here because even with the windows up, the desert's bush choir was in full song and could easily be heard over our music. So we knew we couldn't be far from

water with all the birds around. A quick look at the map saw us only a stones' throw from Midway Well which was another opportunity to refill our water supplies from the bore. There couldn't have been too many recent visitors here as the full sized bath used by birds and animals for a drink was an unhealthy dark shade of green and fouled with dead birds which we cleaned out. Just a simple gesture of leaving a stick partly submerged in the water can make all the difference for birds and small wildlife, as



Place a stick in any waterhole you come by – birds and animals will love you for it

■ THINGS TO DO:

There's stacks of opportunities for walking and climbing through the desert. Charlie's Knob and McPherson's Pillar have sensational 360° views if you take the time to climb them. There's also more Len Beadell markers along here, and the birdlife was incredible around Lake Cohen and the passing waterholes.

■ TRIP STANDARD:

The nature of this trip and its remoteness would see it as A-grade. Roads/tracks varied considerably – some sections were good whereas others were sandy, stony or corrugated. Parts were also heavily overgrown causing pin striping to the vehicle and camper trailer.

■ RESTRICTIONS AND PERMITS:

For this section of our trip, no permits were required for travelling the Gary Highway or the Talawana Track.

■ KEY CONTACTS:

**Outback Fuel Distributors
(Well 23 Fuel Drop)**

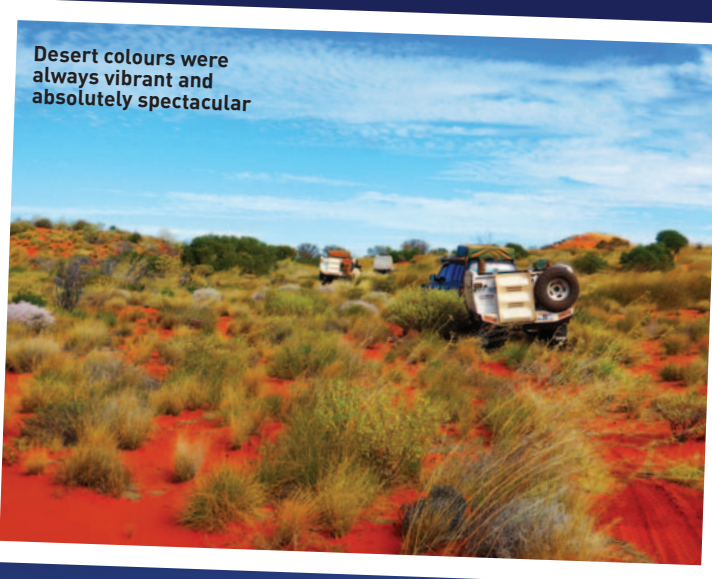
PH: 0418 139 139

Parnngurr Community

PH: (08) 9176 9009



The spinifex seemed to go on forever along the Gary Highway



Desert colours were always vibrant and absolutely spectacular

OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE GARY HIGHWAY AND TALAWANA TRACK WAS NOTHING SHORT OF SENSATIONAL



ADVERT

Firewood wasn't always
the best quality but
more than adequate for
cooking and keeping
warm on cool nights



they'll use the stick to perch on to drink before taking the risk of falling in and drowning.

So travelling through this part of the Gibson Desert, we were criss-crossing the route taken by explorer David Carnegie during his 13 month exploration trip of the 1890s. His expedition was nothing short of epic, as it started down at the WA goldfields, through the desert, and up to Halls Creek in the Kimberley. Not bad if you ask me for a 25 year old! Being able to refer to his records of the places he named, his descriptions of the landscape and features, and what he encountered, made everything very real.

Our experience of the Gary Highway and Talawana Track was nothing short of sensational, but it was time our travelling party turned around to head down the Eagle Highway for the next part of our desert adventure. We'll next visit the historical site where the last aboriginal nomads living in the desert were found, and we've also planned to meet up with some others to help build some camping infrastructure on the western edge of the Gibson Desert. Catch you then! ■

■ AUTHOR'S OPINION:

What was your favourite part of the trip?

The ever changing scenery made this a sensational trip, especially when arriving at a lake in the desert which actually contained water. There was much more birdlife than I'd expected and heaps of camels to be seen. To top it off, the spectacular and towering McPherson's Pillar and Charlie's Knob was completely unexpected when the rest of the landscape was so flat.

Where else have you been recently?

To travel to the Gibson Desert, we passed through South Australia's APY lands and came up through Warburton in Western Australia.

Where are you heading next and why?

We make our way into the heart of the Gibson Desert and meet up with some locals and other volunteers to help them build campsite infrastructure on the edge of the western Gibson Desert.