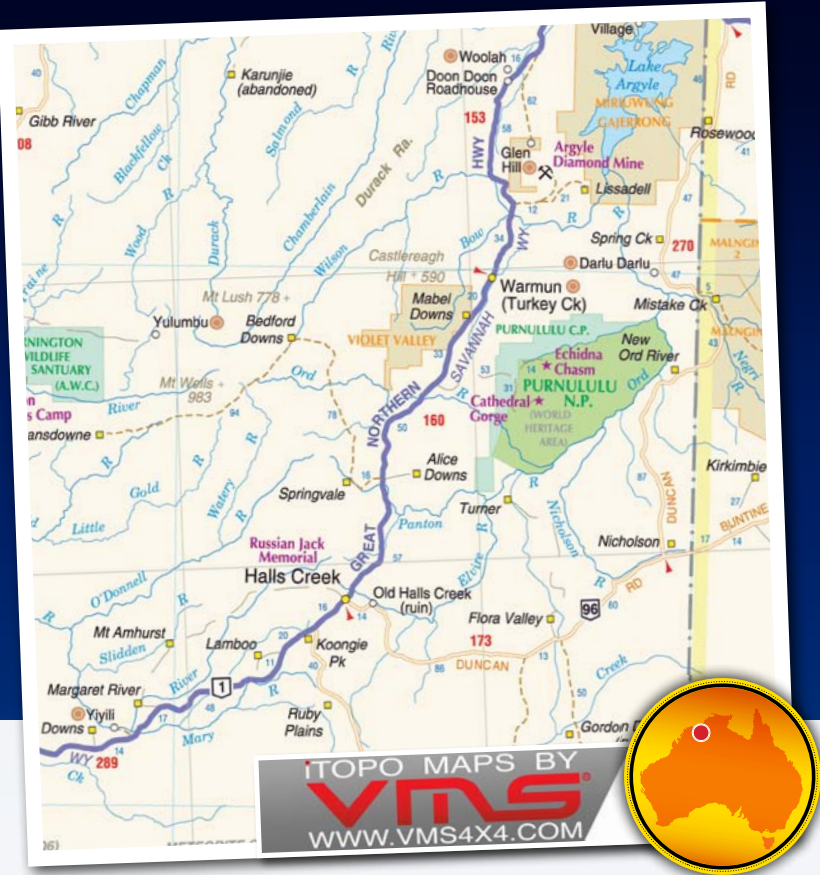


OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

You won't want to leave the Kimberley before exploring these unique and spectacular gems

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA BLOFFWITCH



There is only one word that could describe our Kimberley adventure so far and that's "epic"! But even with everything we'd experienced this trip, we knew there were plenty more good times to be had in the east Kimberley. So after restocking supplies and fuel, we left Kununurra and headed for Lake Argyle which was only a short hop, skip and jump away.

If you ever thought that Lake Argyle is just another mass of water, wait until you see it. The lake's sheer size will completely blow you away! The Ord River which was dammed in the early 1970s has created a massive lake that stretches forever on the land which formed part of historical Argyle Downs Station. To gain an appreciation of the lake's magnitude, you really need to experience it from the water. So

■ WHERE:

The east Kimberley can be accessed via a range of routes. From the bitumen, travel the Victoria Highway from Katherine or the Great Northern Highway from Broome. For dirt road alternatives, travel the Tanami Road from Alice Springs or the Buchanan from Dunmarra which joins up with the Duncan Road.

■ INFORMATION:

This region is an adventurer's paradise as there is so much on offer. Whether you're into boating, fishing, gorges, history, gold fossicking, photography, swimming, birdwatching, bushwalking, rock climbing, 4WDing, stunning natural attractions, or bush camping, it's got the lot!

■ FUEL & SUPPLIES:

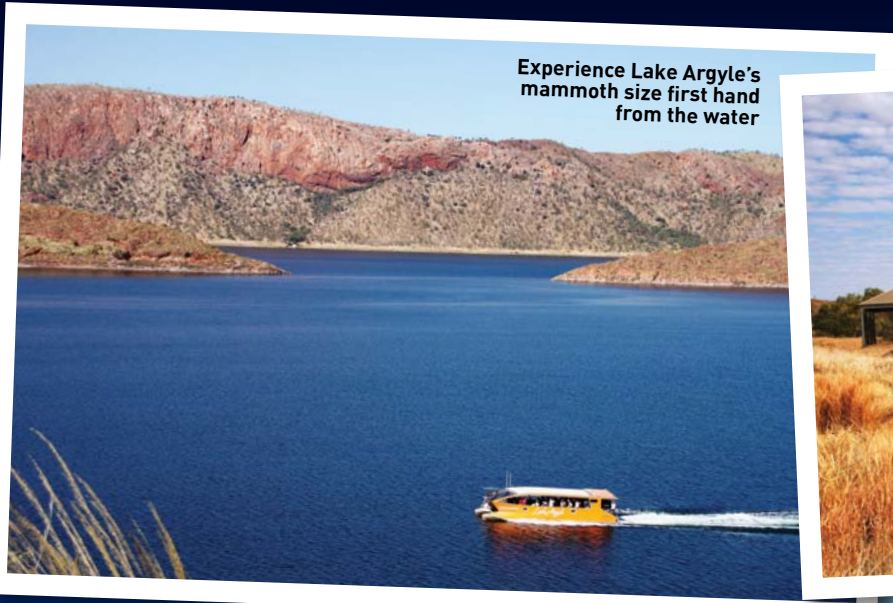
Fuel and basic supplies are available from Lake Argyle and Warmun. Halls Creek has fuel and supplies readily available, but there are no facilities when travelling the Duncan Road.

■ BUDGET ATTRACTIONS:

The east Kimberley is full of great things to see and do. There is phenomenal sunsets at Lake Argyle, visit the Zebra Rock Mine, camp at the spectacular Sawpit Gorge, walk around Old Halls Creek, participate in the release of the weather balloon at Halls Creek, witness two of Australia's best natural attractions, Purnululu National Park and Wolfe Creek crater.

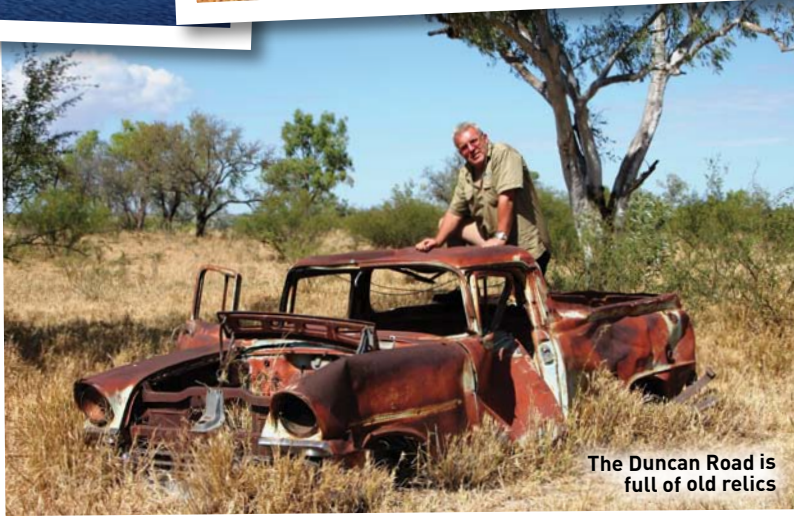
■ WHAT TO TAKE:

For travelling the Duncan Road and visiting places such as Purnululu and Wolfe Creek, take recovery gear, air compressor, basic spare parts and a repair kit.



set yourself up for a night or two in the resort's caravan park and take advantage of one of the many boat or helicopter tours they have on offer. Sunsets from the resort are simply spectacular when the sun hits those rich red rocks and you need to experience those stunning views from the infinity pool first hand.

Not far from the resort is the historic Argyle Downs Homestead Museum. This homestead was originally built by the pioneering family, the Duracks in the 1880s, but was dismantled and rebuilt at its present site when the homestead was in the firing line of being flooded with the damming of the Ord River. Today you can tour the museum which contains



THE DUNCAN ROAD IS
ONE OF THE MOST SCENIC
ROUTES IN THE KIMBERLEY



■ **BEST TIME TO TRAVEL:**

The Duncan Road, Purnululu National Park tracks and the Tanami Road can be closed during wet season rains. The best times to visit are from April to October when conditions are more favourable. Check with the Halls Creek Visitor Centre for current road conditions. The road to Lake Argyle is sealed and is open all year around.

■ **TRIP STANDARD:**

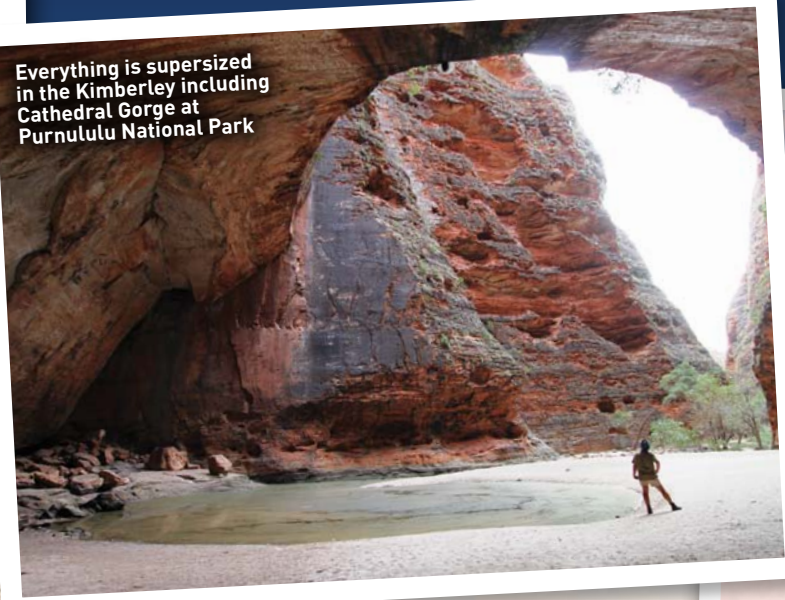
Whenever travelling the region's dirt tracks air down your tyres. The Duncan Road and Purnululu National Park are suitable for off road camper trailers and would be D-grade. Water crossings can be experienced on both tracks. The road to Wolfe Creek Crater can be heavily corrugated and is also suitable for off road camper trailers and would be D-grade.

■ **THINGS TO DO:**

Lake Argyle: cruise, swimming.

Duncan Road: excellent camping, Zebra Rock Mine cruises, Sawpit Gorge.

Closer to Halls Creek: Old Halls Creek, Caroline Pool, Palm Springs, China Wall, Town Walk, Purnululu National Park.



Everything is supersized in the Kimberley including Cathedral Gorge at Purnululu National Park



Surprisingly this stone from Zebra Rock Mine is all natural

IF YOU EVER THOUGHT THAT LAKE ARGYLE IS JUST ANOTHER MASS OF WATER, WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE IT!

The infinity pool at Lake Argyle would have one of the best views in the Kimberley

artefacts from the Duracks' pioneering days and is well worth the look.

After our couple of days R&R at Lake Argyle, dirt roads again were calling and we set off for the Duncan Road. This dirt road doesn't get lots of traffic so makes it an adventurous alternative for travelling to Halls Creek. The 440 kilometre road has been in good condition each time we've visited, but still air down your tyres and don't be complacent. I think the Duncan Road would seriously be one of the most scenic routes in the Kimberley. There is no opportunity for fuel along this route, so ensure you have adequate supplies.

We hadn't travelled on the dirt for long before

pulling in at the Zebra Rock Mine for a couple of nights. This is one place definitely worth getting off the main road for. Zebra rock is one of those uniquely Kimberley gems. In fact, it's so unique that it's actually only found in the eastern Kimberley. The striking 600+ million year old rocks mined on site display stripes giving the impression the rocks have been painted. There is a gallery which has a variety of the rocks on show and for sale, and there is also a fossicking area for guests if you want to have a go.

But it's not only rocks that are the drawcard here. The campground at the mine is cheap as chips and a good alternative to caravan parks

while still providing amenities, water and an excellent central fireplace. They offer some spectacular cruises along the eastern section of Lake Argyle so we experienced the wetland sunset cruise for ourselves. In a nutshell, it was a cracking tour! In fact, with all the cruises we've experienced when travelling Australia, we rated this as one of the best. Everything about this tour oozed spectacular. The birdlife and number of freshwater crocodiles was incredible, and as the sun set, it lit up the entire sky with its warm glow. It was one of those tours I didn't want to end.

Continuing our adventure along the Duncan Road, we could see from the map that the road



My perfect campsite – shade, water, and something good to eat and drink!

cris-crossed the WA/NT border on a number of occasions and there were plenty of excellent opportunities for bush camping next to water. This area had initially been explored in the 1870s by Alexander Forrest which has seen the east Kimberley as cattle country since the 1880s. With the number of stations within the region today, there is no doubt you will come across wandering stock at some stage so be prepared.

As you drive towards Halls Creek, it is incredible how there is a complete change in scenery by Flora Valley Station. The red dirt

still remains, but gone are the typical ranges and boab trees. In fact, pretty well everything is gone! There is very little to resemble anything typically Kimberley as you drive this section through the open savannah style plains. But before long, the landscape returns to the magnificent spinifex covered red rolling hills we are accustomed to that stretch for miles.

This section of the Duncan has loads of attractions to explore and you could easily spend a couple of days along here. Sawpit Gorge would have to be one of the jewels in the

■ CAMPSITES:

There is no shortage of options in the east Kimberley. You can't go past the bush camping as this area has simply some of the region's best. For caravan parks, these can be found at Lake Argyle, Halls Creek, Warmun (Turkey Creek), and one is also close to Purnululu (Bungle Bungles).

ZEBRA ROCK MINE



SAWPIT GORGE (FREE CAMP)



PURNULULU NATIONAL PARK



■ RESTRICTIONS AND PERMITS:

A National Parks permit is required for visiting Purnululu National Park which can be obtained at the Halls Creek Visitor Centre. Camping in the National Park needs to be booked online prior to visiting.

■ KEY CONTACTS:

LAKE ARGYLE RESORT & CARAVAN PARK
PH: (08) 9168 7777

HALLS CREEK VISITOR CENTRE
PH: (08) 9168 6262

WA PARKS & WILDLIFE
PH: (08) 9168 4200



Wolfe Creek Crater needs to be on every tourer's must-see list

TIME YOUR VISIT RIGHT AND WOLFE CREEK WILL BE FULL OF COLOUR WITH WILDFLOWERS AND BIRDLIFE

region and it's not until you reach the car park that the gorge truly reveals itself. This area is begging to be explored if you've got the time where you'll definitely be rewarded with some spectacular scenery. And if you're here early enough in the dry season, you can swim in the gorge's Black Elvire River. Camping is available at the base of the gorge, or if you'd prefer a little more seclusion, cross the creek bed, engage low range and make your way up the hill on the other side which only fits a vehicle or two.

Other attractions along here include Caroline Pool, Palm Springs, China Wall and the Stone Hut. All are worthy of a visit as they each played a part in the early goldfield history surrounding Halls Creek. And make sure you stop at Old Halls Creek which is located only 16kms from the Halls Creek township we know today.

Although many of the buildings have succumbed to the elements, the remains of the post office are still visible. If you'd like to stop for a break, there's a top spot past the old township when you cross the bridge of the original creek and follow the track to your left.

After finally hitting the black top again, it was time to pump up the tyres and make a brief stop at Halls Creek to pick up a few supplies, refuel and continue to another favourite, Purnululu (Bungle Bungles). There are two campgrounds within the park for camping with one permitting generators. Toilets, untreated water and firewood are all provided in the campgrounds as

well as a few picnic tables and bbqs. The park's northern end highlights include Echidna Chasm with its tall livistona palms, and Kungkalanayi Lookout has magical 360° views of the surrounding ridges and escarpments.

The southern end of the park consists more of the typical orange-striped domes that most people associate with the Bungles, and the grandeur of Cathedral Gorge with its magnificent amphitheatre is a cracker. So if you can allow a couple of days in the park to see all the attractions you definitely won't be bored!

We made our way back to Halls Creek, refuelled and before we knew it, were dropping



Our camp at Sawpit Gorge was a real cracker



■ AUTHOR'S OPINION:

What was your favourite part of the trip?

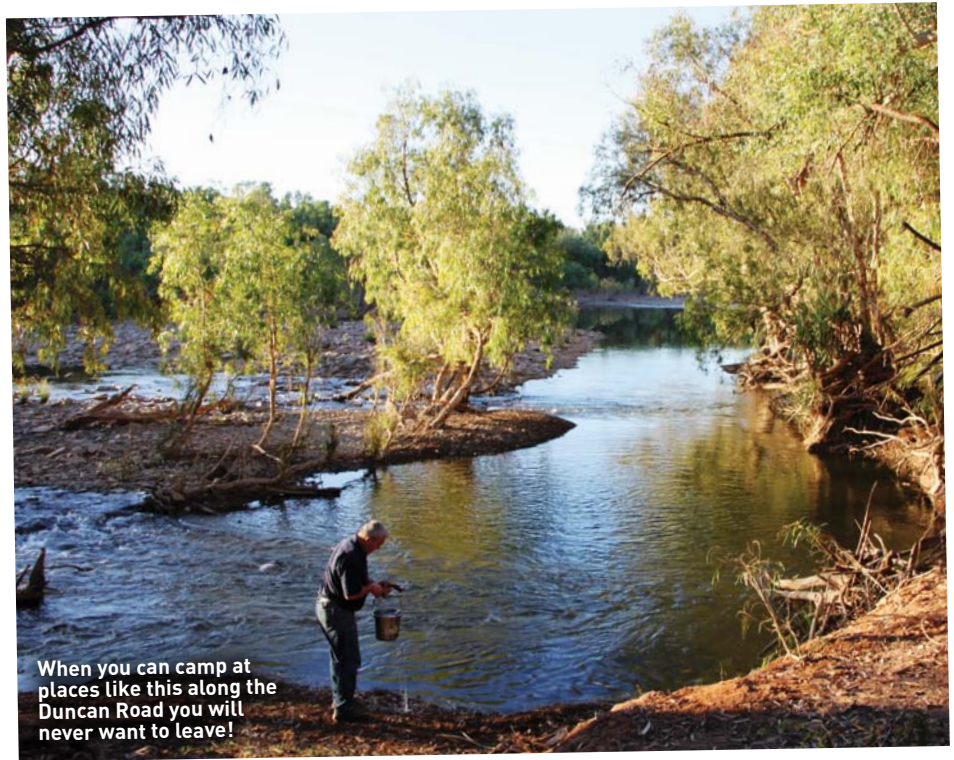
Everything! Lake Argyle was spectacular and the sunset cruise at Zebra Rock Mine was simply amazing. Purnululu and Wolfe Creek are incredible natural attractions and I also loved learning about the history surrounding Halls Creek. Then to top it off, camping along the remote Duncan Road was a real winner.

Where else have you been recently?

We travelled around the Kununurra and Wyndham regions where we had an opportunity to do a mixture of 4WDing, sightseeing and experiencing the laid-back feel of these two Kimberley towns.

Where are you heading next and why?

Our Kimberley adventure will come to an end as we travel home via the Tanami Road. But we won't sit still for long as we might just do a run up to Birdsville before joining an expedition to WA's Gibson Desert to retrace early explorer footsteps and volunteer our time at an indigenous community. We then move on to WA's Karlamilyi National Park (Rudall River).



When you can camp at places like this along the Duncan Road you will never want to leave!



our tyres again for the final leg down the Tanami Road before heading home. If you're around this area, a side trip to Wolfe Creek Crater should be high on your must-visit list. Photos don't really do the crater justice which spans nearly 900 metres, and a walk down inside the crater gives you a completely different perspective. Time your visit right and the crater floor will be full of colour with wildflowers and loads of birdlife.

Well it's hard to believe that our epic Kimberley adventure was coming to an end. This region is a tourist's paradise and the biggest dilemma is how to squeeze everything in. No matter what your interests are, the Kimberley offers something for everyone. And if you're anything like me, you'll be sucked in good and proper, and one visit is never going to be enough! But do your preparation, know your limits and the capability of your vehicle and camper trailer, and this could be the holiday of a lifetime.

So if you've been thinking about visiting, the Kimberley is an ever changing place. So think no more and just get out there and do it. And you never know, I might just see you there! ■