

THE GIBB'S WONDERFUL WEST

With red dirt, amazing sunsets, spectacular attractions and the very best of 4WDing and bush camping, Derby and the Gibb River Road has it all

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA BLOFFWITCH

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■ **WHERE:**

Derby and the Gibb River Road are located in Western Australia's Kimberley region. Access to Derby is via the Derby Highway when travelling from Broome and the Gibb River Road turnoff is located 7km south of Derby.

■ **INFORMATION:**

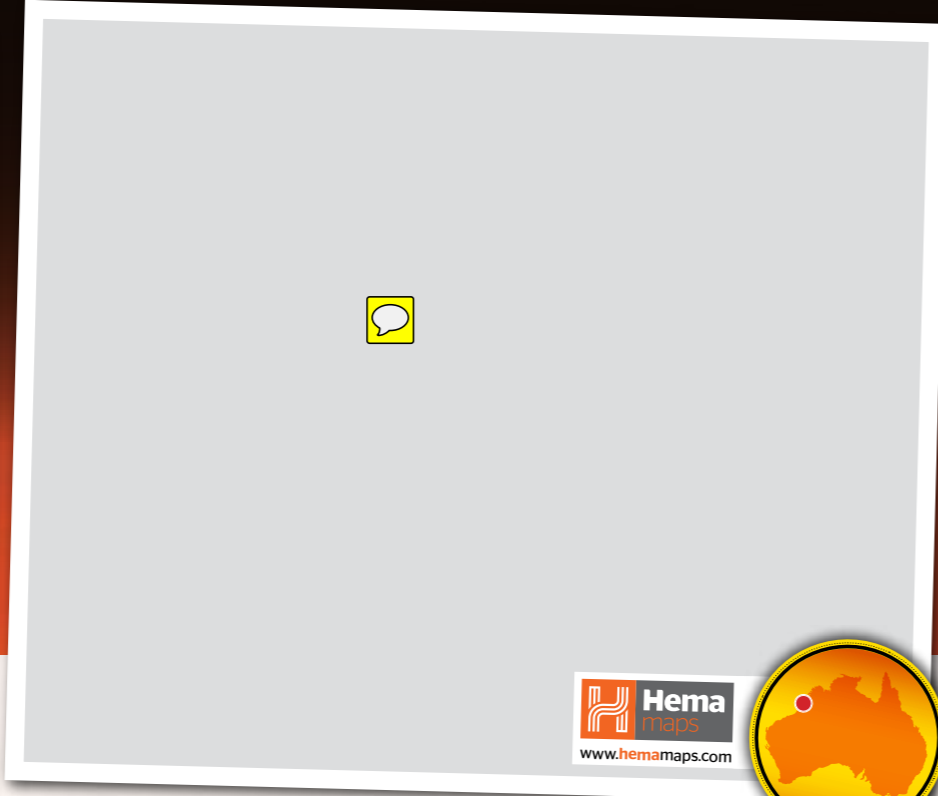
The region offers spectacular scenery, excellent fishing, 4WDing, canoeing, swimming, bushwalking, plenty of attractions, and amazing camping locations.

■ **FUEL & SUPPLIES:**

Fuel and supplies are readily available from Derby. Along the Gibb River Road, fuel and basic supplies are available at Mt Barnett Roadhouse, Drysdale Station, and El Questro (ELQ also has LPG gas refill facilities). Tyre repairs are also available at Over the Range Tyres, Drysdale Station, Ellenbrae, Home Valley & El Questro Stations. Note: Imintji Store which offered diesel and supplies has recently closed so ensure you make other preparations until further notice.

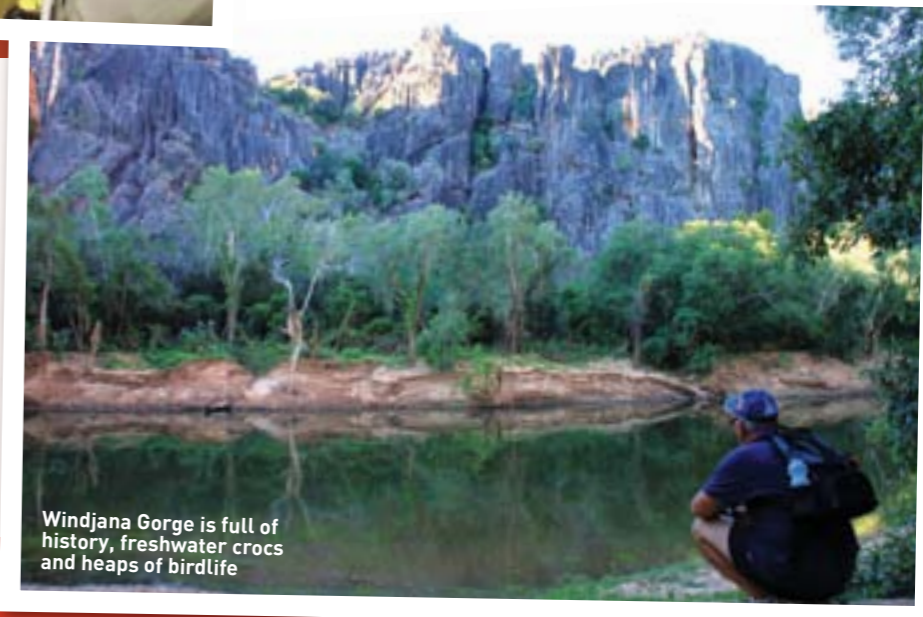
■ **BUDGET ATTRACTIONS:**

Around Derby, fish from the town jetty, witness spectacular sunsets and hug a massive boab tree at 12 Mile Dinner Camp. Out of town, visit Myall's Bore, the Prison Boab Tree and Frosty's Pool. Although slightly off the Gibb River Road, Windjana Gorge and Tunnel Creek should be high on your must-see list. Once you're on the Gibb you are spoiled for choice! You can visit many gorges with excellent swimming opportunities (have loads more fun if you bring an inflatable tube). Some gorges are free and others are located on stations (payable).



When you think Kimberley, most people automatically think of the Gibb River Road. And there is a very good reason for this! This iconic destination should be added to every tourer's must see list because it pretty well has everything. With spectacular scenery, jaw dropping gorges and waterfalls, the region is also a playground for 4WDers and camping

enthusiasts. To start our Gibb River Road adventure, we chose to do it from west to east and begin from Derby. We only planned an overnight stay in Derby as we were looking to maximise our time on the "Gibb". We restocked our supplies, settled in at the caravan park, then headed out for the rest of the day. Derby's history dates back to the early 1880s when interestingly, the region was viewed



as two areas and known as the Kimberlies. The "western" Kimberley stations were occupied by sheep pastoralists whereas the "eastern" Kimberley was renowned for its beef. In later years the sheep were replaced by beef and today the area is simply referred to as the Kimberley. Whilst in Derby, we took time to visit the historic prison boab tree. The small space within this tree was used to hold up to 30 prisoners over a century ago before they were taken to Derby gaol in Loch Street. Not far away is the enormous Myall's Bore. When cattle were brought to Derby's port during the early 1900s to be shipped, the bore's 120 metre length enabled up to 500 head of cattle to be watered at any one time before the

THE KIMBERLEY SHOULD BE ON EVERY TOURER'S MUST SEE LIST BECAUSE IT PRETTY MUCH HAS EVERYTHING

■ **WHAT TO TAKE:**

Derby has many services so you should re-stock here before venturing onto the Gibb River Road. If you need any items to be ordered in, it could take several days. Be self-sufficient when travelling the Gibb River Road. Take recovery gear, air compressor, basic spare parts and a repair kit.

■ **BEST TIME TO TRAVEL:**

Derby can be visited all year around whereas the Gibb River Road is closed during wet season rains. Sections of the Gibb can begin to open at different times, so if any doubt, check the road conditions with the Derby Visitor Centre.

■ **TRIP STANDARD:**

Once you reach the Gibb River Road dirt, air down your tyres. The road is generally in good condition with some corrugations and is E-grade, suitable for off road camper trailers. The Fairfield Leopold Road (where Windjana Gorge and Tunnel Creek are located) can be heavily corrugated. When visiting the Gibb River Road stations, their side tracks could be D-grade as they vary - water crossings and some rough patches can be encountered.

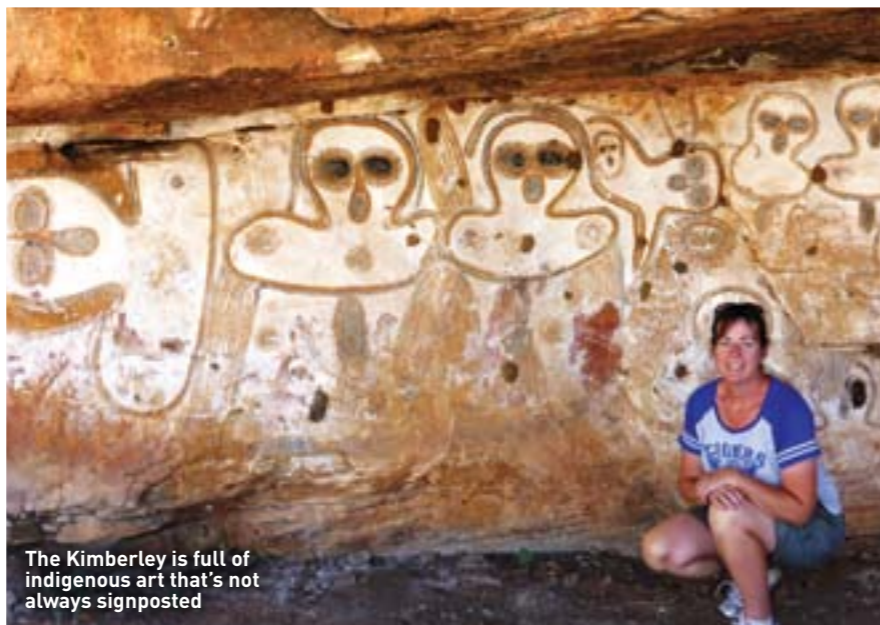
■ **THINGS TO DO:**

Derby

Fish and chips on the jetty, Wharfinger's Museum, Prison Boab Tree, Boab Festival (July), Horizontal Falls tour (cheaper from Derby than Broome).

Gibb River Road

Swimming, bushwalking, aboriginal art, canoeing, 4WDing, photography, fishing, and a range of tours.



The Kimberley is full of indigenous art that's not always signposted

walk into Derby. Later in the day we opted to spend sunset down at the town's jetty where you can experience the magnificent flaming red sunsets, but arrive at the jetty early as there can be loads of locals and visitors!

Excitement was in the air the following morning as we packed up, refuelled and headed to the "Gibb". Even after travelling to the Kimberley for 20+ years, it still gives us

a buzz when hitting the dirt. The Gibb itself is only 660km and if you were to travel this old stock route from one end to the other, you could easily do it in a couple of days. But it's the attractions off the Gibb which are the biggest visitor drawcards. If you have the time, there are more than 20 spectacular gorges waiting to be explored along this iconic stretch of road. You'd be hard pressed to find



THE KIDS ARE GOING TO LOVE SPOTTING ALL THE FRESHWATER CROCS AT WINDJANA GORGE

those types of stats anywhere else in Australia.

Around the first 110kms is single lane tarmac so no need to air down tyres just yet. After reaching the dirt and dropping our tyre pressures, we took the turnoff for Windjana Gorge and Tunnel Creek. Choosing to camp in the non-generator section of the Windjana Gorge campground, it was already getting hot, but we set up in no time with the Tvan.

It was late morning and from past experience we knew Windjana Gorge is best seen early in the morning or later in the day. We took the opportunity to visit the old ruins of Lillimooloora located 3kms from the campground. Not a lot today remains if you visit the old homestead, but allow an hour to walk around the ruins and to read the storyboards about the area's past.

Later in the day we walked into Windjana Gorge from the campground. When you first lay eyes on the gorge, it's hard not to feel dwarfed by its towering walls which are up to 100 metres in places. Taking a walk into the gorge, the kids will love seeing all of the freshwater crocs

as Windjana is one of the best places in the Kimberley to see them in their natural habitat. Just don't get too close!

Another attraction to add to your must-see list has got to be Tunnel Creek. Each time we come to the Kimberley, I love visiting here. It's 35kms from Windjana Gorge and walking (mostly wading) through this unique 750m long tunnel is loads of fun for the entire family. You will need a good bright torch (or two) and wear shoes that can get wet as the water in the tunnel can be anywhere from ankle deep to waist height, and is home to the odd freshwater croc. Also shine your torch around the tunnel to spot Australia's only carnivorous bat.

The Gibb River Road has numerous stations and stunning attractions, so you are very spoilt for choice. This visit we stopped at Bell Gorge which is another favourite as the waterfalls flow late into the dry season making it an excellent place for swimming. The gorge campground is located at Silent Grove (10kms from the falls) and has good facilities with showers and toilets available.



Myall's Bore would have been a magnificent sight when surrounded by cattle in days gone by



We continued our adventure to Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary which is located 88kms off the Gibb River Road. It is one of the longer drives to visit attractions, but well worth it. There is an excellent range of activities here including swimming, bushwalking, guided tours and a couple of spectacular gorges which are best experienced by canoe. We hired one of the sanctuary's canoes and paddled our way through both Dimond and Sir John Gorge. This is an activity everyone will love! Here's a tip – book the canoe upon your arrival at the sanctuary as they

book out quickly during peak times.

Further along the Gibb is where you find Galvans Gorge. This gorge would have to be one of the easiest to access around here and has towering high cliffs and a cascading waterfall. It's definitely a tropical oasis and another magical place to cool off. Walk to the far side of the gorge to see a small amount of aboriginal art when you visit.

We took the opportunity to refuel at Mt Barnett Roadhouse and also paid for access to Manning Gorge and the campground for a night.

A collapsed section of Tunnel Creek allows light to penetrate before you return to the dark



CAMPsites:

Derby has a couple of caravan parks which are busy during the main tourist season so book in advance if possible. Camping options along the Gibb River Road are plentiful at the various stations (payable) and free camping is also available.

WINDJANA GORGE NATIONAL PARK



LENNARD RIVER

GPS: 17° 23' 34'S 124° 45' 22'E



MORNINGTON WILDERNESS CAMP



RESTRICTIONS AND PERMITS:

Along the Gibb River Road, you will require a vehicle access permit and camping permit for the National Parks at Windjana Gorge, Bells Gorge, and if travelling to Mitchell Falls, at Munurru and Mitchell River. These can be organised at the individual parks or for a cheaper option purchase a four week pass from the National Parks office in Broome and Kununurra.

KEY CONTACTS:

DERBY VISITOR CENTRE
PH: 1800 621 426

WA PARKS & WILDLIFE
PH: (08) 9168 4200

OVER THE RANGE TYRES
PH: (08) 9191 7887



With backpacks on, plenty of water and some snacks, we walked to the gorge first thing the next morning when it was cooler as it's a 3km walk to the gorge in full sun. Adding some fun to the gorge walk is the need to cross Manning Creek located only a short distance from the campground. A flat bottom boat to ferry your gear across the 50m wide creek is provided and is fun for kids of all ages.

Our last stop on our best of the west Kimberley visit was Mt Elizabeth Station. Having a good sized campground, attractions here include two

gorges, Warla and Wunnamurra. Whilst the drive to Warla is not difficult, the drive to Wunnamurra is slow going with 4WD low required in places. Having a 4WD with high clearance is recommended. We made a day of our visit to Wunnamurra as the gorge is spectacular and you can see loads of Wandjina style aboriginal art if you go exploring down the gorge.

If you are a 4WDer seeking a challenging track, Mt Elizabeth Station is where you access the rugged and remote Munja Track. This 260km track which takes you to Walcott Inlett isn't for



Dad's got the lucky job of pulling the family across Manning Creek

YOU'RE SPOILT FOR CHOICE WITH MORE THAN 20 SPECTACULAR GORGES ALONG THE GIBB WAITING TO BE EXPLORED



■ AUTHOR'S OPINION:

What was your favourite part of the trip?

All of it! Whether it's large boabs, a spectacular sunset, jaw-dropping scenery, camping under a sky full of stars, or challenging 4WD tracks, I just love the lot.

Where else have you been recently?

We have travelled from Broome and the Dampier Peninsula where we had some magnificent campsites overlooking the spectacular Indian Ocean. It was an amazing tropical paradise experience.

Where are you heading next and why?

We continue our adventure along the Gibb River Road including taking some time to re-visit one of the best natural attractions in Australia, Mitchell Falls.



If you think this view looks good it's even better from a canoe at Mornington

the first time 4WDer and won't suit all styles of camper trailers. You need a high clearance 4WD, vehicle recovery gear, and must be self-sufficient. You'll need very deep pockets if your vehicle needs to be recovered from here! The track is an amazing experience, but it's not something you want to rush - allow at least 7 days.

So this brings our Derby and western Gibb River Road adventure to an end. We've been 4WDing, swimming, bushwalking, canoeing, taken stacks of photos, camped under a million stars and seen some of the best natural attractions the region has to offer. We know the eastern section of the Gibb is going to be just as good as the west, so let's get cracking! ■

DON'T MISS PART 3 OF LINDA'S SPECTACULAR KIMBERLEY ADVENTURE!

Nest issue, Linda's hitting the eastern stretch of the Gibb including the spectacular Mitchell Falls!

