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**Finding ourselves back in the Kimberley to escape another cold southerly winter, we're always super excited when reaching the Gibb River Road.**

**Choosing to travel east to west this time between Kununurra and Derby, it's only a short hop, skip and jump to El Questro Wilderness Park from the Great Northern Highway by Kununurra.**

**So it's not surprising El Questro's location sees it a popular destination with visitors and locals alike, when it has so much to offer.**



▲ *The views from the lookouts are nothing short of spectacular.*

# Questro

## WILDERNESS PARK

*A Gibb River Road highlight that's a destination in its own right*

Words by Linda Bloffwitch  
Photos by My Aussie Travel Guide



In its pastoral heyday, El Questro topped a million acres after starting out as a series of pastoral leases dating back to the 1880s. Today's 700,000 acre offering still has a pastoral connection, but the wilderness park has been transformed into what can only be described as an iconic Kimberley tourist destination.

An area where El Questro unquestionably shines is in its attractions as there's plenty of them. The wilderness park is nestled amongst some rugged yet spectacular ranges, so the scenery is simply breathtaking with 360° panoramic views in places. With four major river systems passing through the property, there's no shortage of gorges to explore and there's always water around the place. But that doesn't mean you can swim everywhere as there are saltwater crocodiles in some waterways as well.



*Boabs were knocked over like skittles during the massive 2011 wet season.* ▲

On one particular visit during 2011, we were able to experience the aftermath of that year's massive wet season firsthand. Boab trees hundreds of years old lay flattened like skittles along the water's edge, while other trees had been completely uprooted and floated downstream to end their days wedged metres in the air.

▼ *An historical boab tree located at El Questro blazed by the pioneering Durack family.*





When initially arriving at El Questro, you reach the central hub of the park known as the Station. You could say this is where a lot of the action happens. Visitors need a pass to visit El Questro which can be arranged here at reception. The pass gives visitors access to the wilderness park's attractions (gorges, 4WD tracks, lookouts, etc), and also covers a visit to Emma Gorge which is part of the wilderness park property. Camping fees are an additional cost to the permit and payable on a per person basis.

Many visitors base themselves at the Station and shoot off to a range of self-guided activities which vary in distance. As they're located anywhere from a few kilometres away and upwards, driving is the way to go. With so many gorges to explore, bushwalks also vary in distance and are graded from 1 (easy) to 5 (difficult). Each of the gorge car parks have interpretive signs that include walking distances, safety tips and other useful information so you know what to expect before setting off.

Zebedee Springs is one of the more popular and shorter attractions we always visit at El Questro as it's an easy half hour walk from the car park. This natural oasis with its Livistona palms provides a tranquil rainforest-type feel, and who can resist relaxing in that dreamy thermal water. Out of all of the El Questro attractions, this is one of the very few that's not open to the public all day. So our advice is to enjoy it first thing in the morning as it's a sensational way to kick off a day full of adventure.

Another of our favourite gorges within the park is El Questro Gorge. The walk passes through a narrow creek bed while surrounded by palm and fern clad escarpments, and it's well shaded on a typically warm Kimberley day. The track becomes more challenging after you've reached Halfway Pool where you can swim before continuing on, or perhaps deciding not to go any further. Moonshine Gorge

*It's only a short distance to reach Zebedee Thermal Springs while walking through a tropical oasis.*



and Amalia Gorge are other attractions where your legs will get a good workout, with Amalia's waterfall being a phenomenal sight when it's flowing. But you'll need to visit the park early in the season to truly appreciate Amalia as it stops flowing quite early in the dry season.

Aside from the gorge walks, there's a number of 4WD tracks around the wilderness park that lead to some of the best scenery we think you'll ever find in the Kimberley. The track to Saddleback Ridge is a 6km rough and steep ride, but just wait until you see the view from the top. Hands down, it would be one of the most spectacular lookout points in the wilderness park. Not to be surpassed, Branco's and Pigeon Hole lookouts also have breathtaking views no matter what time of the day you visit. Our tip is to take a cold drink or two and hang around for sunset at one of the lookouts ... the afternoon glow on the escarpment is pretty spectacular. Or you could venture out further and take the Cockburn Range 4WD circuit which follows part of the Karunjie Track. Hit the reception staff up for further details.



*Explosion Gorge is one of ▲ the many park attractions.*

Between El Questro's rugged landscape and the park's size which dwarfs the entire ACT, it's impossible to get to all the attractions. Around 20 guided tours covering land, water and air are offered, to help visitors experience other areas of this beautiful region.

A sunset cruise along the Chamberlain River is one tour we recently took, and what a memorable tour it turned out to be. Not only did it provide a different way to see the breathtaking surrounding landscape, but we did it in style with the tour including some sparkling wine and fresh fruit along the way. At the turn-around point, tour

▼ *The Cockburn Range 4WD Circuit takes in the Karunjie Track.*







▲ *Feeding the cheeky archer fish while enjoying a glass of bubbly is part of the Chamberlain River cruise.*

participants feed cheeky, water-spitting Archerfish, and the resident barramundi is quite happy to be hand fed as well. Not a bad life here for a fish! Don't be tempted to drop in a line as this naturally is one spot where fishing isn't allowed.

But there's plenty of other places for fishing and the El Questro guides know where all the good spots are. For any die hard

▼ *The Chamberlain River boat cruise tour has you back just in time for sunset.*



fisho, it's hard to beat one of their heli-fishing tours. Not only will they land you at a private location to fish for barramundi, bream, mangrove jack and threadfin salmon, but having the chance to see the Kimberley landscape from the air is an absolute treat.

If fishing's not your thing and you'd still like to experience El Questro from the air, other helicopter tours can be arranged.

You'll enjoy your own piece of paradise if you take to the skies and visit Miri Miri or Amaroo Falls. Both attractions have cascading waterfalls and pristine swimming holes. Add a gourmet picnic lunch into the mix and we think you'll never want to leave these picture-perfect destinations. Adventure seekers are also covered with a heli-tour to the Lost City. Make sure to wear sturdy shoes for this tour as scaling around rock crevices and crawling through a number of caves is part of the tour.



▲ *Crossing the Pentecost River to reach the main Station grounds.*

Back on terra firma, another couple of tours share all sorts of history and culture information. The bush culture tour provides an insight into the plants used by the indigenous and a station tour gives an insight into the pioneering heritage of the wilderness park. Horse lovers will be in heaven if they join the park's horse riding tour which must have some of the best Kimberley landscape as a backdrop. Nature lovers also aren't forgotten and can learn more about local birdlife on the bird watching tour as well.

Besides the Station being the place to book any tours and check in, it's also the heart of the wilderness park for dining. All meals, hot, cold and alcoholic drinks are available at the Swinging Arm Bar where live music plays during the main tourist season. The menus here have recently been revamped and a range of take-away options are also available.

*The Swinging Arm Bar is a popular place for visitors to gather each afternoon.*



At the end of the day, there's no shortage for somewhere to bunker down in the wilderness park. In fact, there's a complete gamut of choices to cover all budgets. Black Cockatoo is the main campground at El Questro and has everything a camper needs within a short walking distance. It's a large campground with a mix of powered and unpowered sites. Campfires are permitted, but only at designated fire pits within the campground. The amenities at Black Cockatoo include a mix of toilet and shower blocks or ensuite shower/toilet combos. Some laundry facilities and camp kitchens with barbeques have your washing and cooking needs covered as well. Drinking water is available at most taps around the campground unless otherwise signposted.

For a bit more seclusion, there's around 30 private bush-style campsites dotted along the Pentecost River. These can be a popular option so it would be advisable to book ahead. Toilets are located at some of these sites, but keep in mind you'll need to return to the Station for all other amenities. Generators are allowed at the private campsites, but with restricted hours at the Black Cockatoo Campground.

Camping tents are another choice at the Station as well if you don't have your own camping gear. Or for a bit more luxury, there's River or Garden view rooms which have all the creature comforts. But El Questro's diamond level of accommodation



is the Homestead. This exclusive retreat is cantilevered over the stunning Chamberlain Gorge below, so it's priced accordingly.

Plan your visit wisely so you can take advantage of the El Questro visitor's pass by visiting Emma Gorge. Heading back out to the Gibb River Road, the turnoff is only four kilometres from El Questro when driving back towards Kununurra. Emma Gorge is another oasis in the Kimberley which offers cabin style accommodation, swimming pool, restaurant and bar. Its spectacular gorge is a 3.2km return walk with some boulder hopping along the way. It's just a matter of taking your time and don't be in any hurry. The swimming waterhole at the end of the gorge is well worth the trek in with its spectacular 65 metre high walls. But be prepared, as the water can sure be cold.

With everything El Questro Wilderness Park offers and its close proximity to Kununurra, it's easy to see why it's a popular choice for tourists and locals alike. So if you're planning a trip to the Gibb River Road and have got El Questro on your list to visit, you never know, we might just see you there.



*Getting ready to set up for a few days in the Black Cockatoo campground.* ▲



*The safari style tented cabins at Emma Gorge are another accommodation option.* ▲

*A visit to Emma Gorge is just one visitor highlight.*

