

MOUNT HART WILDERNESS LODGE

Words by Linda Bloffwitch

Photos by Linda Bloffwitch & Philip Schubert

*A station stay fit
for a king along the
Gibb River Road*

After leaving Kununurra and meandering our way west along the Gibb River Road for a couple of weeks, I was looking forward to our return visit to Mount Hart Wilderness Lodge. Lying on the western end of the Gibb, Mount Hart is approximately 240km from Derby and 560km from Kununurra. But unlike other stations along the Gibb, Mount Hart's location within a conservation park is unique and like no other station in the Kimberley.

But it hasn't always been this way, as the original Mount Hart Station pastoral lease was one million acres (which is a similar number to many other Kimberley stations). Despite many people giving Mount Hart a go as a cattle station over a 75 year period, the rugged and mountainous terrain made conditions for managing cattle difficult, and the property was eventually de-classified as a pastoral lease in 1987.

Once the lease was de-classified, the Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation (now Parks and Wildlife) stepped in and bought the station which eventually became the King Leopold Ranges Conservation Park. After an agreement was reached to have a section of the conservation park allocated to tourism, work began to upgrade the station buildings which had laid dormant for a few years during the 1980s. By 1990, Mount Hart opened its doors to tourism for the first time.

Having visited Mount Hart a number of times over the years, we were eager to see and experience the changes that we'd heard so much about. As luck had it, we didn't have to wait long, noticing the entrance track had received a huge makeover since our last visit. You could say it's now more akin to a good formed gravel road, and no doubt welcoming news for



The King Leopold Ranges - rugged beauty. ▲

those towing caravans or trailers. Funnily enough, we find the entrance track here is one of the prettiest station drives along the Gibb. It winds through the towering King Leopold range and we allow plenty of time to admire the outcrops of black dolerite rocks which dot the landscape en route to the homestead. It's hard to ignore these outcrops as they make a bold statement against the bright blue sky when they're devoid of any greenery.

▼ *Driving along the entrance track towards the homestead.*





▲ Walking to the homestead feels like being at a resort.

Before we knew it, we arrived at the homestead grounds which more resembled a tropical oasis. We'd heard while staying in Kununurra it hadn't been a huge wet season in the Kimberley, but there appeared to be no shortage of water here. The magnificent looking garden and lush grass combined with paved paths and lighting all provided a resort feel.

To allow us plenty of time to take in all the attractions and activities, we checked in for a few nights and made our way to the campground to set up. Finding a good site here isn't



▲ Getting set up in the campground before heading out to explore.

difficult, as the campground is spacious and sits alongside the Barker River. With an abundance of tall trees providing shade at various times of the day, you've got plenty of options for setting up camp if you're chasing the sun for a solar setup. The taps scattered all around the campground provide access to water, and firepits are

dotted throughout the campground as well. Good-sized amenities are located at one end of the campground and include several combined showers and toilets. With the Barker River so close to the campground, you don't need to go far at all for a swim to help wash off that Kimberley red dust. And if you're travelling with a canoe or tube, either would be just as good for exploring the river from on top of the water.

▼ You can't miss these signs if you're passing by along the Gibb River Road.





◀ Taking a break at Barker Pool.

The odd couple – a strangler fig and old boab. ▼



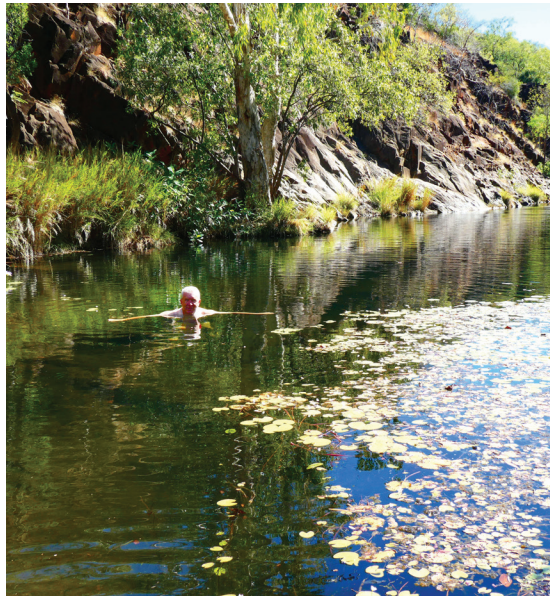
Away from the campground, there's other accommodation options by reception. Here you'll find rooms at the renovated homestead, and some good-sized ensuite safari style tents have been added since our last visit and located within the homestead grounds. There's also payable wi-fi available around this area as well. Whichever style of accommodation you've chosen and once all settled in, there's no shortage of attractions to explore. One attraction is the Secret Fishing Hole which is a nice little fishing spot further up the Barker River and just a short walk from the campground.

But if fishing's not your scene, Barker Pool is a large waterhole located close to the homestead. With the tall trees offering shade, plus picnic tables provided, it wouldn't be difficult to settle in here for a while.

To see other attractions further afield, hop in the car to visit places such as Annie Creek waterhole. What this attraction lacks in size, it makes up for in sheer relaxation. Having experienced flowing water here now on

each of our visits, this little oasis with its trickling water provides a refreshing refuge on warm Kimberley days, and while you're here, be sure to check out the amazing relationship between a magnificent boab and strangler fig.

Enjoying the refreshing cool waters in the pool at Dolerite Gorge. ▼



Dolerite Gorge is another Mount Hart favourite, and you'll need your swimwear for this one as well. There are many places to swim as you walk into the gorge, but reach the large pool (about one kilometre from the car park) and you could be lucky enough to have this place all to yourself. This is another place where you'll find those large outcrops of dolerite boulders lining the walls of the gorge, hence its name. While it's not the typical landscape you see elsewhere in the Kimberley, it's nonetheless picture perfect.

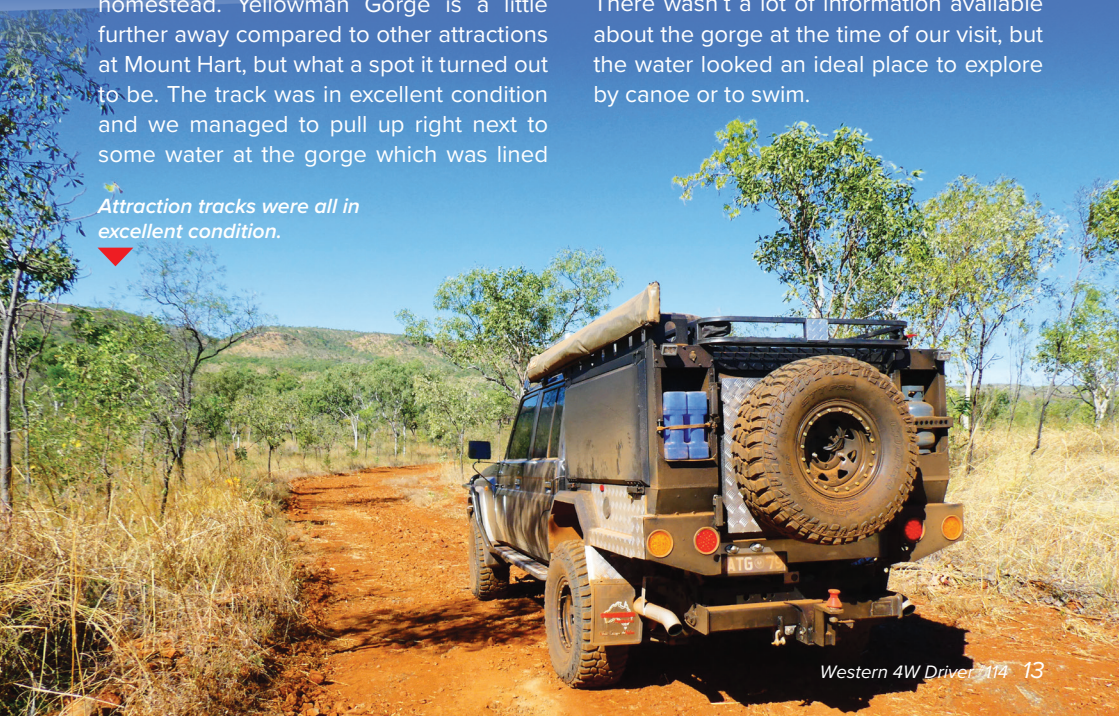


Dark dolerite rock isn't found in many places around the Kimberley, but there's pockets of it around Mount Hart. ▲

But there was also a new attraction for us to check out during this visit. We'd learnt from our lodge hosts a track had recently been cut to another gorge 20 kilometres from the homestead. Yellowman Gorge is a little further away compared to other attractions at Mount Hart, but what a spot it turned out to be. The track was in excellent condition and we managed to pull up right next to some water at the gorge which was lined

with water-lilies and shaded by tall trees. There wasn't a lot of information available about the gorge at the time of our visit, but the water looked an ideal place to explore by canoe or to swim.

Attraction tracks were all in excellent condition. ▼



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Flowing water was undeniably in abundance at Mount Hart compared to other places we'd stopped by along the Gibb River Road this trip. Elsewhere, we'd found most of the waterfalls had stopped and waterholes were drying up. While wet season rains had delivered some water to the east Kimberley, the rain gods had definitely smiled on this area in the west as water flowed freely wherever we went on the property, and where there's water, you'll find birds. Any bird lovers will be in their element here as there's been more than 120 species recorded, including rare and endangered species like the purple-crowned fairy wren and Gouldian finch.

Besides the water-based attractions, there's much more on offer at Mount Hart

Safari-style ensuite tents are another accommodation option Mount Hart offers.



A dessert fit for a queen (or king). ▲

Wilderness Lodge. Settlers Bar offers casual style meals and coffees, and is the place to be if you're looking to relax with an afternoon drink. A communal firepit is located nearby and popular for chatting with fellow travellers and warming up on what can be chilly Kimberley winter nights.

Aside from Settlers Bar, the lodge offers a dining room experience for meals 7 nights a week which we couldn't go past. We'd heard so many good reviews before leaving home and wanted to try it out for ourselves. If you've ever had any reservations about not getting good food in the Kimberley, we can assure you there's nothing to worry about. Our three-course dinner made by resident chef, Brad, was sumptuous and consisted of homemade breads and dips, followed by melt-in-your-mouth chicken cooked three ways, vegetables and Yorkshire pudding. My tastebuds were in sweet heaven with a homemade dessert trio of citrus cake, ice cream and an appropriate for the location heart-shaped biscuit. We shared our dinner table with other lodge guests, and all agreed the meal and its presentation would rival many eastern states restaurants.

But for an experience with a difference, it's hard to go past having dinner under a million-star sky. If you time your Mount

▲ ***The campground amenities have combined shower and toilet facilities.***

Hart visit right, it's possible to join in on their gourmet style dinners underneath the stars at Sunset Hill. This area isn't far from the homestead's airstrip, and as its name implies, it's a top spot at Mount Hart to capture the setting sun. Sunset Hill comes complete with decking and the long table would easily accommodate a couple of dozen guests. Unfortunately for us, dinners weren't scheduled during our stay, but that didn't stop us making our way there on our last day armed with our camera, and some drinks and nibbles in hand.

At Sunset Hill we joined other lodge guests, who happily shared stories of their Mount Hart and Gibb River Road adventures. As the sun dipped behind the King Leopold Ranges, we were left with a striking pink-tinged sky that had us longing for more. With that, we all chinked our glasses to toast the beautiful surroundings, and agreed it was the perfect way to finish our stay at Mount Hart Wilderness Lodge.



Time to pull up a chair with other Mount Hart visitors, settle back, and get ready for sunset. ▲



For more details about travelling to Mt Hart and the Gibb River Road region, Linda and Grant have an audio travel guide available at www.myaussietravelguide.com.au

▼ *Reaping the rewards of a setting sun at Sunset Hill.*

