



A bird's eye view of the upper Ord River by Kununurra.



Flying High

OVER THE KIMBERLEY

By Grant & Linda Hanan

The Kimberley overflows with breathtaking attractions and taking to the skies for a bird's eye view gives a completely different perspective. Grant and Linda share their tips on top flights that visit the best the west can offer.

It doesn't matter where you go in the Kimberley, its rugged and majestic landscape is some of the best scenery in the country. But when the size of the region means large distances between attractions or they're simply impossible to get to with a 4WD, you'll need an alternative mode of transport. Although that's far from being a bad thing. This is where taking one of the many available air tours will give you a completely different experience to what you get on the ground. When up in the air and having a bird's eye view, you get to witness an everchanging landscape to help you appreciate the size and magnitude of this incredible area. With numerous fixed-wing, seaplane and helicopter tours offered around the region, there's plenty of opportunities to get in on the action. Air tours are also the perfect way to get a lot of information quickly. Pilots double as tour guides and provide commentary along the way while passengers can listen intently through supplied headphones. Tours generally depart from the main hubs around the Kimberley, and whether you're flying over land or one of the coastal regions, be assured the breathtaking scenery alone will be a visit highlight. Let's take a look at a few of the top tours being offered.

BUNGLE BUNGLE NATIONAL PARK

If you're planning a trip to the Kimberley, many visitors include a stopover at Purnululu (Bungle Bungle National Park). But if time isn't on your side to be able to incorporate the travel needed from the highway plus a night or two in the park, a day flight tour from Kununurra can be a good introduction. The tour showcases the stunning scenery from the air as well as a first-hand and close-up experience of the domes at ground level as well. For that reason, we've always found Kununurra an excellent spot to have as a base for a few days when many tours leave from here.

Aviair offers a variety of tours around the Kimberley region including the day tour we took to Purnululu. The day starts with an early morning pick up of guests from their

A walking tour of the Bungles is included with the Aviair day flight from Kununurra.



A flight over Bungle Bungle shows how widespread the domes really are.

accommodation around Kununurra. We're all briefed and weighed with our bags inside Aviair's terminal at the airport. It's about now we dreaded squeezing in that extra piece of pizza last night! After another briefing by our pilot in the plane before taking off, it's up, up and away as we take to the skies. The flight takes only an hour from Kununurra, but the scenery below grabs



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our attention the minute we leave terra firma. This flight pretty well tracks the Ord River and on to Lake Argyle while flying over some of the Ord irrigation area along the way. After arriving at Bellburn Airstrip within the National Park, guests tuck into some morning tea before hopping on the awaiting Bungle Bungle Savannah Lodge & Tours bus. The walking tour takes visitors to the southern end of the park for a moderate hike into Cathedral Gorge and passes the very picturesque and snow-white sun-bleached bed of Piccaninny Creek.

Our guides for the day provided ongoing commentary during the walking tour, while sharing their knowledge about a range of topics. These include the six seasons in the Kimberley, some geography, and the area's flora and fauna. But not only from a European perspective, but indigenous as well. Cathedral Gorge is a where the tour stops for a picnic-style lunch (provided), and there's plenty of time for pics and to soak in this awe-inspiring landmark. The return walk is just as interesting when our indigenous guide stops to explain the use of many plants found nearby.

After getting back onto the air-conditioned bus, the next stop is the Bungle Bungle Savannah Lodge. The tour stops here

for afternoon tea before leaving for the return flight to Kununurra. The lodge has visitors well covered, with a number of cabins, restaurant, swimming pool and a licensed bar. So it's possible to stay here overnight as well when booked ahead, and is a glamping treat for those looking to extend their Bungle Bungle experience. The flight back to Kununurra takes in a view of the massive Argyle Diamond Mine complex and the rugged Osmand Range before arriving in Kununurra just prior to sunset. The tour ends after a short run into town and dropping you back at your accommodation. This tour is a full day that we found provides the best of both worlds ... you get breathtaking views from the air, but also that first-hand experience of one of the region's most favoured attractions at ground level.

LAKE ARGYLE

We'll be the first to say a visit and cruise to Lake Argyle should be on every Kimberley visitor's list, but a visit by seaplane takes things up a notch. When the full lake tops more than a phenomenal 20 Sydney Harbours in size and covers around 1,000 square kilometres, the seaplane provides an incredible experience from water level



It's hard to imagine the size of Lake Argyle until you take to the skies and there's water for miles.

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▲ Enjoying a fabulous morning tea on our own private Lake Argyle island.

as well as the air. Kimberley Air Tours are based in Kununurra and run half day tours that showcase some of the best scenery of Lake Argyle if that's ever possible. Taking off from the calm water of Lake Kununurra is a thrill in itself, but the scenery as we flew low-level towards Lake Argyle was simply out of this world. This was a highlight for the flight in general, as you get to see the lake and its islands quite close up, clearly making out flocks of birds in some instances.

Taking off and landing on water was a highlight of our Lake Argyle tour.

After passing over Lake Argyle, the flight then tracks towards the Bungles over spectacular ranges and the large cattle station properties of Lissadell and Texas Downs. It was mustering time when we visited and could easily make out yards full of cattle below. After circling the plane over the Bungles in both directions for passengers, our pilot ensured we were all able to get good views of a number of park highlights.

The return leg was just as exciting as the plane passes over Argyle Diamond Mine before landing directly on Lake Argyle. If you thought landing on tarmac was fun, flying in low towards water and landing on the lake was thrilling to say the least. With a super-smooth landing, our pilot taxied the plane towards one of the many islands where we disembarked on shore for some homestyle morning tea and a walk around the island. With no other people within cooee and being on our own private island, this turned out such a memorable stop.

As we boarded the plane for the last leg back to Kununurra, we felt like kids on a show ride as we picked up speed to take off from the lake. Naturally, it was smiles all round. Before we knew it, we were airborne and got a chance to appreciate the last of the breathtaking scenery before landing back safely on Lake Kununurra. This tour runs both mornings and afternoons out of Kununurra, and now having experienced it for ourselves, we completely understand why this tour is so popular.

HORIZONTAL FALLS

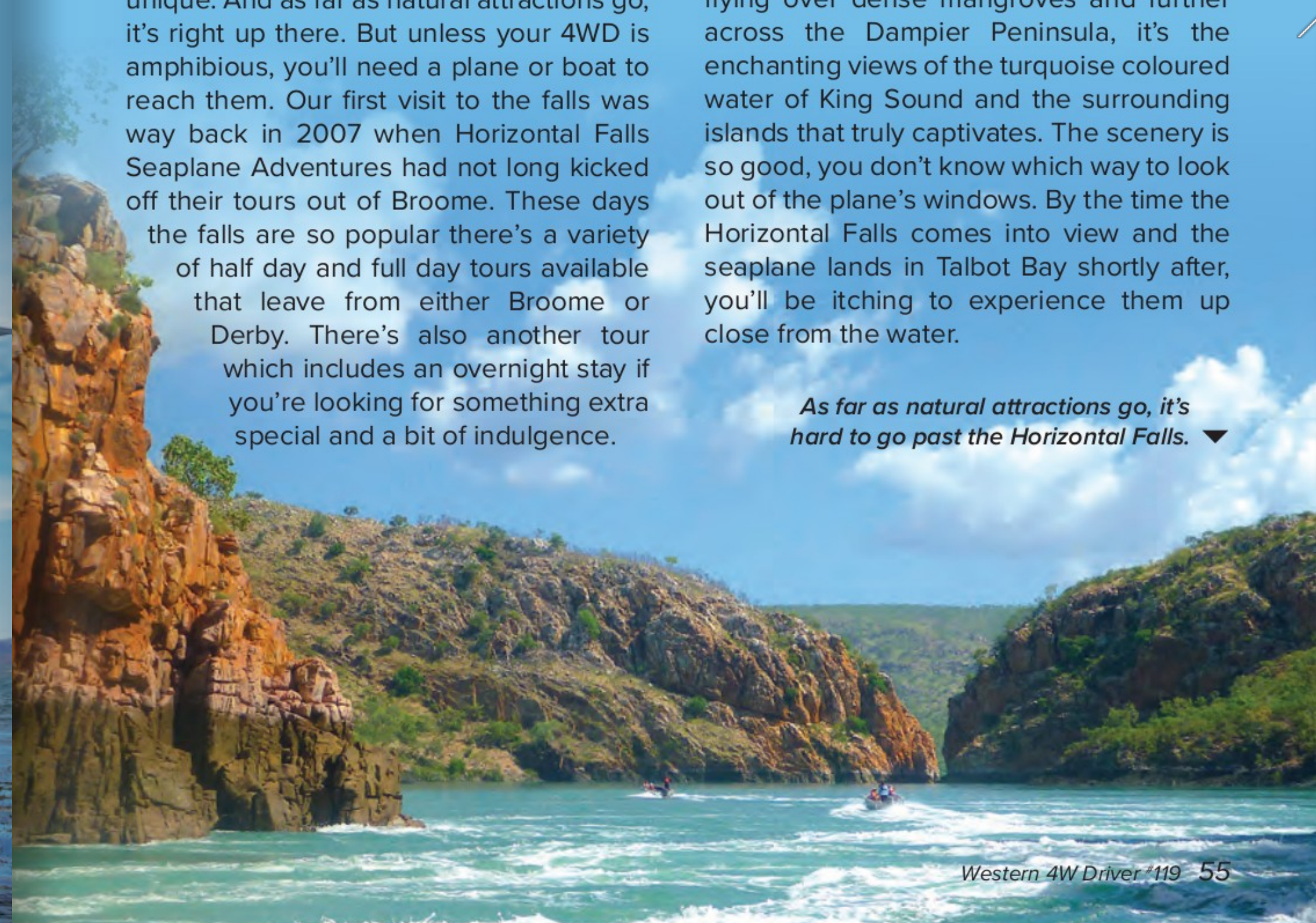
It's no secret the Horizontal Falls is a Kimberley attraction that is completely unique. And as far as natural attractions go, it's right up there. But unless your 4WD is amphibious, you'll need a plane or boat to reach them. Our first visit to the falls was way back in 2007 when Horizontal Falls Seaplane Adventures had not long kicked off their tours out of Broome. These days the falls are so popular there's a variety of half day and full day tours available that leave from either Broome or Derby. There's also another tour which includes an overnight stay if you're looking for something extra special and a bit of indulgence.



Experiencing the Horizontal Falls ▲ from water level is fun for all.

The flight takes only an hour from Broome to reach the falls, but we didn't mind if it took longer. In true Kimberley fashion, the scenery below is as captivating as ever the moment the flight departs Broome. Initially flying over dense mangroves and further across the Dampier Peninsula, it's the enchanting views of the turquoise coloured water of King Sound and the surrounding islands that truly captivates. The scenery is so good, you don't know which way to look out of the plane's windows. By the time the Horizontal Falls comes into view and the seaplane lands in Talbot Bay shortly after, you'll be itching to experience them up close from the water.

As far as natural attractions go, it's hard to go past the Horizontal Falls. ▼





▲ The Horizontal Falls' opening looks much tighter from the air.

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The tour has guests arriving at a luxury houseboat base with a cooked breakfast or barbecue lunch included depending on which tour you're on. Settling back in a chair on the deck and eating an alfresco style meal isn't exactly a hard thing to do anywhere, but the surroundings here are nothing short of picture-perfect. The fast boat ride is both thrill-seeking and informative. The narrow gap between the falls provides loads of fun as the boat zooms through the swirling waters of the two falls before turning around to do it all again. Guides also provide commentary about the falls and the unique rock formations within the bay, so the tour is educational at the same time.

The return flight to Broome is just as spectacular when it hugs the coastline all the way back. Tours with Horizontal Falls Seaplane Adventures include airport transfers from accommodation around Broome. This tour is definitely right up there ... it's an amazing day from start to finish and one we think you'll remember for a very long time.

Our helicopter flight landed on the mudflats with the magnificent Cockburn Range as a backdrop.



▲ Flying over Mitchell Falls provides a completely different perspective.

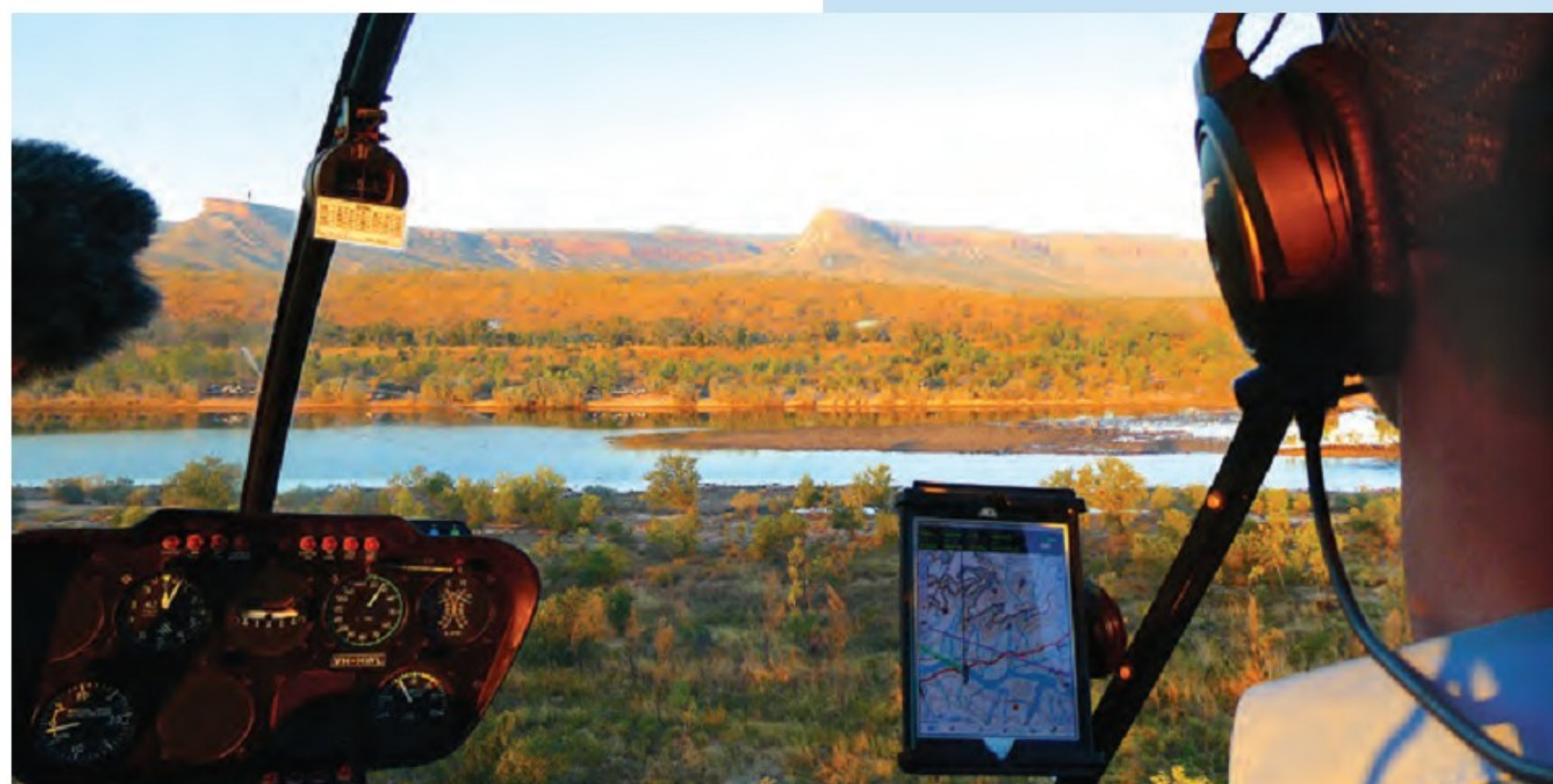
HELICOPTER FLIGHTS

While fixed wing tours in the Kimberley are a good option for attractions that are further afield, it's hard to go past a helicopter tour for short distance attractions or to take you to those hard to get to type places. Besides their ability to get to places where no runway is required, their hovering capability means we can get much closer to attractions. Helispirit has pretty well got the region covered for visiting a range of attractions by helicopter and has bases at some of the big-ticket destinations.

Mitchell Falls is one of these places where being on a helicopter comes into its own. A hike to the falls from the campground generally takes 2-3 hours, but less than 10 minutes by helicopter.



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▲ Our sunset view at the Pentecost River was far from average.

We've always found walking into the falls is best done in the cool of the day, but when some visitors end up camping some distance away at King Edward River and day trip it to Mitchell Falls, the helicopter transfer one way (or both) can be a good option. But the flight isn't good just for those day trippers. The 360° views from the chopper are breathtaking and give a completely different perspective to what you experience on the ground. Helispirit has a base by the Mitchell Falls campground during the main tourist season and offers the short taxi service to and from Mitchell Falls, but other scenic tours go as far as the coast as well.

Other Helispirit bases within the region include the Bungles and El Questro to get you close to sights that in some cases are otherwise inaccessible. Visiting a secluded waterfall, heli-fishing, a private sunset tour, or even creating your own custom itinerary are all possible out of El Questro. Tours vary in price, duration and the number of passengers, so it pays to do some research beforehand. When there's so many choices of helicopter tours around the Kimberley where you can experience jaw-dropping scenery and attractions, it makes the decision for selecting which tour to go on far from easy.

As much as we love our 4WD to go exploring, there's so much more to experience about the Kimberley when you take to the skies. Whether you're looking to experience the contrasting colours of the ranges, see the vast amount of water firsthand, or simply have the ability to see things up close and from another perspective, get yourself on at least one Kimberley air tour. We guarantee it will be one of your Kimberley trip highlights.

INFORMATION BAY

For more information about these and other flights, go to:

Aviair
aviair.com.au

Horizontal Seaplane Adventures
horizontalfallsadventures.com.au

Helispirit
helispirit.com.au

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