

Monday 28 February 2011

Bush driving along the Gibb River Road, Western Australia

Nick Redmayne finds spectacular landscapes and a warm welcome as he tackles a remote former stock route in outback Western Australia.



Image 1 of 3

The landscape shouted Australia, indeed Baz Luhrmann's eponymous film was shot hereabouts 8:00AM GMT 27 Feb 2011

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"So you're giving us two spares?" I inquired at the car rental desk. "Nope, just the one mate."

"And a tyre compressor?" "Nope, we just pump 'em up high, it's better that way."

"What about tools?" "If something goes wrong just turn it off, leave it, and turn it on again. If that doesn't fix it then there's nothing you can do anyway."

The Gibb River Road's 373 miles bisect the remote heart of Western Australia's Kimberley Plateau. Primarily a stock route, connecting cattle stations the size of Belgium with the port of Wyndham, the Gibb also allows 4WD access to the striking landscape of water-filled gorges that characterises the wild and beautiful outback of the Kimberley.

Little of the road is paved, and the surface varies from impassable from November to March (in what's known as "the Wet") to gravel or filling-loosening ridges and tyre-shredding rocks during "the Dry".

It was not all driving, of course. Beyond Derby, at Bell Gorge, tiered pools of dark water, shadowed by ochre cliffs and connected by a tumbling cascade, lay at the end of an increasingly verdant bush walk. Through boabs, kapoks and pandanus palms, a final scramble descended steeply to the water.

After a dip, we pressed on, the serene calm of the gorge replaced by 18 miles of bone-jarringly bumpy road. Ahead, as light faded, the occupants of a stationary camper van flagged us down.

"We have a flat tyre but do not know where is the spare," said the Swiss driver. He and I crawled about in the red dirt, winding down the secret spare and swapping it for the shredded flat. His wife took pictures of their holiday adventure while unseasonal rain added a little damp drama of its own.

Swiss headlights bouncing in our mirror, we drove on, smugly elated at having taught a lesson in bush survival to ill-attuned Europeans. The gentle pirouette our truck then unexpectedly performed, ending with its nose in what Australians describe as "natural bush" was simply further education, only this time for us.

At the outset in Broome, on a sunset-bathed Cable Beach, Western Australia had seemed defined by the Indian Ocean. Nightly, a parade of 4WDs trundled out to meet the sea, saluting the sun as though upon the eve of battle.

WA's economy is founded on iron ore, though these days finished steel is imported, marked Toyota, Nissan or Mitsubishi and is as likely to be found queuing at a drive-through Chicken Treat as negotiating a remote desert track. That said, the allure of the interior and the red dirt of the outback endures, drawing a mixed bag of home-and-away adventurers to the Gibb River Road every year.

On the veranda at Mount Elizabeth Station, a wallaby reclined languidly on a dog bed. Close by, Pat Lacy, whose father-in-law took the station's first pastoral lease in 1945, observed our arrival. "You're late." She was right. A flat tyre 10 miles beyond Mount Barnett Roadhouse, a cross-threaded wheel nut, a dodgy jack handle, a dubious spare and a temperature of 100F (38C) had made for a taxing last couple of hours. "Do you fancy a beer?" Pat asked. I liked her already.

Mount Elizabeth's 500,000 acres support 6,000 head of cattle, many destined for the dinner tables of south-east Asia. A shout from the kitchen suggested our own dinner was ready.

"Our last cook lasted three days," Pat said. "He'd skipped parole and the coppers were on to him. He just took off."

Pat described the station's wealth of Aboriginal rock art. "We had one old Aboriginal guy who led tourists to the sites around our little gorge out back. He was great; did it for 15 years, just told 'em the story. The young guys now just aren't interested so I've got permission and try to do it myself. I just wish we'd find an indigenous guy."

I mentioned a rumoured plan to surface the Gibb River Road. "Yeah, there's still a move to metal the surface," said Butch. "It'd be a good thing. Think of all the cars and caravans that'd come here. Just a few locals don't want their privacy invaded." I looked at Pat – she gave nothing away.

After a protracted return to Mount Barnett for tyre repairs, we were back on the road. Strangely enticing countdown signs promising fresh scones prompted a diversion along the three-mile access road to Ellenbrae Station. Years ago I'd met Byrne Terry who, together with his wife Anne, had created a travellers' stopover in tune with the bush and its wild inhabitants. It was a bittersweet return.

Byrne had been killed in a motorcycle accident in 2001 – a memorial stone commemorated his life and that of his brother who'd died in an air accident overseas. We brewed our own coffee in the station's outdoor

kitchen and listened to the elderly Dutch caretakers' account of early European exploration. We ate the scones as crimson finches mobbed seed feeders suspended over a balustrade.

By the time we pulled into Home Valley, another flat lay slung in the back of the truck. In the shadow of the Cockburn Ranges' flat-topped mesas, on the banks of the Pentecost river, we kept an eye out for Cedric, a large male crocodile, watched the sun go down and listened to tales of bull sharks and big barras. The landscape shouted Australia, indeed Baz Luhrmann's eponymous film, best viewed for its scenery, was shot hereabouts.

Chris Fenech from the station had kindly offered a lift while their workshop judged whether our rubber could be repaired. "We've got a supply run tomorrow if you need a new tyre."

Next day, beyond the near-dry Pentecost river crossing, dirt became gravel and then asphalt – the smooth silence of the road akin to stepping ashore following a sea voyage. Now, passing drivers no longer raised a finger in acknowledgement of mutual reliance.

At the city limits of Kununurra, population 2,000, we'd reached one of the Kimberley's three main centres. A little sad at having concluded our hopeful travels, we parked the truck, smiled and considered its transformation from pristine white to shades of orange, before making our way to eat.

"But sir, it's 8.30pm. The restaurant is closed."

We had definitely arrived.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/activityandadventure/8347959/Bush-driving-along-the-Gibb-River-Road-Western-Australia.html>