

Get Away From it ALL

by Kevin Jackson

When I'm asked about exotic destinations, the first place that comes to mind is the Kimberley Region in Western Australia. If you ever wanted to have a spot-on outback Australia experience the Kimberleys have it all. There are several factors that contribute to the uniqueness of this location, but the one distinguishing factor that separates the Kimberley Region of Australia from so many other destinations is its purity. The true Aussie cowboys, the ancient Crocodiles, the Aboriginal culture and the vast expansiveness make this region one of a kind.

Located in the northernmost part of Western Australia and covering some 421,451 square kilometers (approximately 261,000 miles), the Kimberleys are home to only 38,000 people – meaning that there are fewer people per kilometer there than almost any other place on the planet. Bordered on the west by the Indian Ocean, on the north by the Timor Sea, on the south by the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts, and on the east by the Northern Territory, it is the size of California with only one paved road traversing the wilderness.

Diverse Landscape

Out in the Kimberleys, everything is BIG – the distances, the clear night skies, the enormous boab trees, the ancient granite gorges, the prehistoric crocodiles and best of all the authentic outback personalities. The famous horizontal waterfalls of the Kimberley have been described as the eighth Wonder of the World, and the King George River and Berkley River boast magnificent waterfalls that tower several hundred feet into the air.

When the Kimberleys were being created, back in the Devonian era, a barrier reef system formed before a subsequent drop in sea levels left this region dry. This reef system, similar to the Great Barrier Reef off the eastern coast of Australia, is still visible today in the form of the Napier Range and the Ningbing Range. Some of the features are Tunnel Creek, Windjana Gorge and Geikie Gorge. Several of these gorge systems have yet to be explored and can only be accessed by helicopter or several days of bushwhacking.

Climactically diverse, this region is nearly uninhabitable in the monsoon season – when the only road is flooded – annually creating rejuvenated open savannah woodland, dominated by low eucalyptus and boab trees. In the more sheltered gorges are patches of rainforest classified as one of the most floristically rich parts of Australia.

The exclusivity and stunning colors of the sunsets over this ancient land are just a taste of the indelible experiences you'll take away from a journey into this region. To further enhance your outback experience take a trip into Purnululu National Park where you will marvel at the thousands of huge beehive-shaped mounds of the Bungle Bungle Range. Striped in orange and black colors, these sandstone mounds rise majestically from the red earth and are one of Western Australia's most significant natural features.



The Aboriginal Culture

The cultures of the Kimberley Region are as diverse as the landscape itself. The Aboriginal influence in this area is still very strong, as evidenced by the rock art dotted throughout the region. The traditional beliefs of the local aboriginal people are very much alive in their contemporary artwork, in their dancing, their ceremonial and spiritual rites and in the strong family ties that bond them together.

The Kimberley region is home to hundreds of thousands of rock art paintings and drawings, known as Bradshaw or Wandjina rock art. These beautiful and mysterious paintings are hidden in outback bush galleries on the huge escarpments and terracotta rock surfaces of the Kimberleys.

As well as being one of the first areas settled by people, the Kimberley Region became one of the last areas of productive land in Australia – where indigenous people lived in their traditional manner free from the influence of European settlement. As the world's oldest continual culture, there is a certain sense of mystery and magic to be found in the Kimberleys.

Wildlife

The Kimberley wildlife is as unusual as it is beautiful, with some species not found anywhere else in the world. The elegant Jabiru and Brolga, along with numerous other unusual varieties of birds, provide hours of interest for even the most experienced twitcher.

Other wildlife includes big colonies of fruit bats and a variety of marsupials. The giant green turtle and migrating whales are regular sightings during certain times of the season. The Kimberleys are also home to some of the biggest estuarine saltwater crocodiles; these crocodiles can travel several thousand miles from the sea and make their homes in the narrow estuaries of the Kimberley Gorges. Saltwater crocodiles are the largest reptiles in the world in terms of weight and can be found lazing on sandbars of the Pentecost River. They can grow to over 18 feet in length and their jaws can exert a pressure of several thousand pounds. They are huge, territorial and aggressive, and they are plentiful across the Kimberleys. Just be sure to go with a trained guide when exploring areas inhabited by crocodiles.

Wild and wonderful, the Kimberleys are one of the world's last great wilderness areas!

Hopefully this article will whet your appetite to visit this still exotic part of the world before the movie "Australia" (2008), which was set in this region, causes a tourism gold rush. ✦

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Photos courtesy of Pedro O'Connor

