

Trek amid rugged beauty

Abigail Flanagan

Travelling through the Kimberley in western Australia with my sister and our teenage boys on a nine-day group camping tour was an adventure we will not forget.

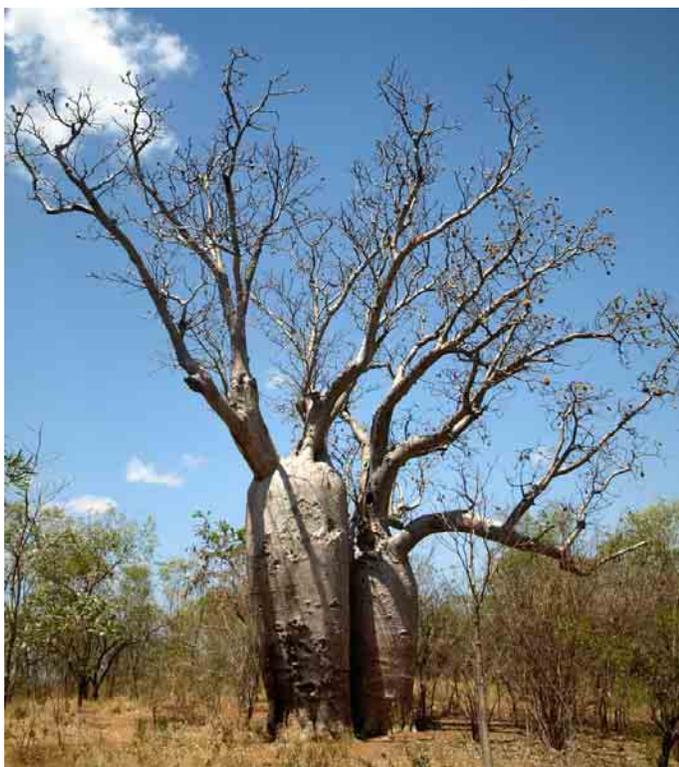
At 421,451 square kilometres, the Kimberley is more than 380 times bigger than Hong Kong, yet it's one of the most sparsely populated areas on the planet. The Gibb snakes through its prehistoric heart, and we drove for hours through spinifex bush, past termite mounds and gum trees, without spotting another being.

Only the hulking Boab trees hinted at human form. Aboriginal Dreamtime stories say "the Creation Spirits punished the Boab for being too arrogant by replanting it on its head with its roots in the air". The Boabs' strong spiritual presence was undeniable, and no wonder – they're able to withstand fire and floods, and some are more than 1,500 years old. They're also one of the most useful, providing everything from water to bark that can be used to weave rope or treat fever.

That night we slept in the open. We'd chosen the Camping Plus option: basic camping some nights, and more luxurious "glamping" on the others. En-suite tents with beds won on comfort, but dozing off beneath the luminescent Milky Way proved unforgettable.

The Kimberley has two seasons: the wet (November to April) and the dry (May to October). During the unpredictable wet season, torrential rain causes rivers to rise as much as 20 metres, rendering roads impassible. The dry season brings blue skies and balmy days, but as its grip tightens, waterfalls wither and bushfires ravage the arid land. That the 19th century's pastoral pioneers – men like the MacDonalDs and McKenzies, who survived a 6,000km, three-year cattle drive from New South Wales – got this far, let alone created lucrative cattle stations, is astonishing.

Visiting in August, there was still water aplenty at the Kimberley's spectacular gorges, although not always easily reached. At Bell Gorge, we had to



Boab trees in the Kimberley are centuries old. Photo: Thinkstock

help each other scramble over a rocky creek and down a steep cliff face.

At Manning Gorge, we had to cross the river using only a polystyrene box – just large enough to ferry one rucksack in – and a life jacket. One squad-building hour later, we were across, but an arduous trek still lay ahead. A rusty red trail marked by rock cairns led us through 6-foot-tall spear grass and across rocky outcrops, higher and higher.

"This better be worth it," the boys said. But as we crested the final ridge, their miserable mutterings ceased.

Paperbark trees lined a sand-fringed river. Beyond, water raged down jet-stained falls into a colossal emerald pool. We jumped into the icy water and swam under the falls where rainbows glistened. Never has potential hypothermia seemed so alluring.

Group tours have their limitations, but ours packed in all the elements. At El Questro Wilderness Park, we cruised the Chamberlain Gorge and soaked in Zebedee Springs' 30 degrees Celsius pools. On Lake Argyll – at 980 square kilometres, the southern hemisphere's largest

manmade lake – we snapped hissing crocodiles and fed friendly catfish.

But the highlight was Purnululu National Park's Bungle Bungle Range. Formed over 360 million years, the Bungles' fragile striped domes of conglomerate rock and sandstone stand more than 200 metres high. From ground level it's impossible to comprehend the Bungles' scale, so we took a helicopter tour. At 670 metres, it was difficult to know what was more astounding: the enormity of this bizarre landscape, or that until 1983, when a TV crew flew over, few people other than the local Kija Aboriginal community knew it existed.

Some 2,500km after setting off, we bounced back into the town of Broome, dishevelled, happy and covered in red dust. The Kimberley had taught us a few vital life lessons – namely, that nobody does it better than Mother Nature.

How to get there

Cathay Pacific has regular flights between Hong Kong and Broome. Tours can be booked through Kimberley Wild Expeditions, www.kimberleywild.com.au