The Kimberley

A VAST AREA WITH INCREDIBLE SCENERY

The Kimberley is a truly inspiring vast region in northern Western Australia. It covers 423,517 square kilometres, representing one sixth of the state – and is twice the size of Victoria. The rugged natural landscape varies from dramatic mountain ranges with spectacular gorges, waterfalls and cave systems to spinifex plains, and undergoes enormous transformation through the seasons. There are two distinct seasons, with tropical rain and storms during the wet season from November to April and clear, sunny days during the dry season from May to October. The wet season, which brings 90 per cent of the region’s rainfall, results in the flooding of many of the rivers, such as the Fitzroy River. The Kimberley has a rich Aboriginal heritage, with a number of groups living in the region from as long as 40,000 years ago. Approximately half of the Kimberley’s population is Aboriginal, with 30 language groups represented.

BROOME

Originally a pearling port, Broome is the largest town in the region and the gateway to the Kimberley. The pearling industry thrived during the 19th century and the town of Broome, named after the Governor of Western Australia, Sir Frederick Broome, was proclaimed in 1883. At its peak, the area provided up to 80 per cent of the world’s pearl shell output. World War II had a devastating impact on the industry, with men enlisting to serve their country and the product no longer in demand across the world. Following the war, the town and industry gained momentum but were crippled by the outbreak of World War II. Once more, however, they recovered. During the late 1950s Broome’s pearling industry found new life with an emerging market in cultured pearls. Pearling is still one of the major industries in the Kimberley and Broome has the reputation of producing some of the finest pearls in the world.

Today, tourism plays an important role in the local economy. The city’s permanent population is approximately 15,000 but in peak season this number can treble. Visitors to Broome can explore Chinatown – with the Chinese being just one of the nationalities drawn to the area in the hope of finding their fortune – the historic Streeter’s Jetty, originally used by the pearling lugger, and, a short distance outside of the town, at Willie Creek Pearl Farm, learn how cultured pearls are produced. Each year from March to October a wonderful natural phenomenon occurs along the coastline in the area. Known as Staircase to the Moon, the light of the full moon reflecting off the exposed mudflats of Roebuck Bay at very low tide creates the impression of stairs leading to the moon.

CABLE BEACH

A famous landmark of the area is Cable Beach – a beautiful 22-kilometre stretch of white sand and turquoise water six kilometres from Broome. The beach got its name from the historic telegraph cable that was laid between Broome and Java in 1889, linking Australia’s north-west with the world. Camel rides along the beach at sunset are a popular activity. A fascinating nearby attraction is Gantheaume Point, where the footprints of dinosaurs, believed to be 130 million years old, preserved in the reef rock, can be seen at low tide.

DERBY

Approximately 230 kilometres north-east of Broome, at King Sound, Derby is one of only three towns in the region with a population greater than 3000. Derby is famous for its boab trees, notably the Boab Prison Tree on the outskirts of the town – a hollow boab, thought to be around 1500 years old, measuring more than 14 metres in circumference.

One of the main local attractions, in the Buccaneer Archipelago, is the Horizontal Falls – yet another incredible natural phenomenon of the Kimberley. Despite the name, these are actually powerful tidal movements between two narrow gaps in Talbot Bay that create the effect of a ‘horizontal’ waterfall. Sir David Attenborough has described the falls as one of the world’s greatest natural wonders. The Buccaneer Archipelago is magnificent in its own right, dotted with more than 800 islands, with rainforest, mangroves and sandy beaches. On some of the islands and
nearby mainland, rock art is found, reflecting a long Aboriginal history in the area.

**FITZROY CROSSING**

Fitzroy Crossing, approximately 390 kilometres east of Broome, is a small town on the banks of the Fitzroy River. The area was settled by Europeans during the 1880s but Aboriginal people have lived in the area for many thousands of years. It is now a popular destination for travellers through the Kimberley region, with Geikie Gorge National Park situated 18 kilometres from the town, being the main attraction. Geikie Gorge is part of a 350-million-year-old limestone barrier reef that stretches across the West Kimberley. Water levels in the gorge, which was carved out by the powerful Fitzroy River, vary dramatically between the dry and wet season. The gorge has towering multi-coloured walls, stained orange, yellow and grey by the fluctuating water levels – a magnificent sight. The gorge is surrounded by plant and bird life, and the waters are teeming with fish, including sawfish and stingrays; freshwater crocodiles are also plentiful. The traditional owners of this land are the Bunuba people, who call the gorge Damajku.

**HALLS CREEK**

Halls Creek, situated about 290 kilometres east of Fitzroy Crossing, was the location of the state’s first gold discovery, in 1885, which led to thousands of prospectors flocking to the area. Remnants of the gold rush days can be seen at the original town site, called Old Halls Creek. One of the main local attractions is China Wall, a natural quartz formation that rises up to six metres high, which bears some resemblance to the Great Wall of China, hence its name. Today, Halls Creek is primarily an agricultural and mining service centre but also a gateway for tourists to regional highlights, such as Wolfe Creek Crater National Park and Purnululu National Park.

**WOLFE CREEK CRATER**

Approximately 150 kilometres south of Halls Creek, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, is the Wolfe Creek Crater, within the national park of the same name. It is an enormous crater, more than 800 metres across and with the floor about 60 metres below the rim, created when a meteorite crashed to Earth thousands of years ago. The local Aboriginal people, the Ojaru, call the crater Kondimalal and its appearance is explained in their Dreamtime story.

**PURNULVU NATIONAL PARK**

North-east of Halls Creek is the remarkable Bungle Bungle Range, or Purnululu as the traditional owners know it. The range has a most unusual appearance with enormous sandstone domes, which have been eroded over 20 million years. The domes, which have orange, grey and black horizontal bands and rise more than 250 metres, have been likened to giant beehives. Between the domes there is a network of deep gorges. In some parts lush vegetation, such as fan palms, appears – an unusual sight in this part of the country. In 1987 Purnululu National Park and Purnululu Conservation Reserve were established. The remote area’s great natural beauty and geological significance were officially recognised in 2003 when it was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. The park is jointly managed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the two Aboriginal groups with connections to the area, the Kija and the Ojaru, for whom it has strong cultural and spiritual significance.
KUNUNURRA

In the far north-east of the Kimberley, just a short distance from the border with the Northern Territory, is the town of Kununurra. The remote town is more than 1000 kilometres from any major city: over 3000 kilometres from Perth and over 1000 kilometres from Darwin. The landscape surrounding the town is stunning, with many rivers, waterfalls, ranges and gorges to explore. Some of the local sights include Mirima National Park and the Ord River Irrigation Area, with Lake Argyle and Lake Kununurra being the focal points. At Mirima National Park, also known as ’Hidden Valley’, similar smaller rock formations to those found in Purnululu National Park can be seen. For this reason this picturesque location is sometimes called a ‘Mini Bungle Bungle’. The park gets its name from the traditional owners, the Miriwing and Gajerrong people, who call the area Mirima and for whom the land has great cultural and spiritual value. Lake Argyle is Australia’s largest man-made reservoir and is now a thriving ecosystem. The Lake Argyle and Kununurra wetlands support a wide variety of significant animal life, a fact which has been recognised by their listing as a Ramsar (Wetlands of International Importance) site. South of Kununurra is the Argyle Diamond Mine, which is one of the largest diamond-producing mines in the world and the primary source of rare beautiful pink diamonds.

GIBB RIVER ROAD

Stretching from the Wyndham and Kununurra junction of the Great Northern Highway approximately 660 kilometres west to Derby is the Gibb River Road. The route, originally a cattle road, is popular with travellers as it provides access to some incredible scenery with ranges, gorges, rock pools and waterfalls, diverse plant and animal life and the chance to learn about the area’s rich Aboriginal heritage. Within the area are the breathtaking Mitchell Falls on the Mitchell Plateau.