

# ABOVE AND BEYOND

WORDS AND  
IMAGES  
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TACKLING THE ROAD LESS-TRAVELLED  
BRINGS REWARDS

It was a privilege to be allowed to swim in this amazing natural pool.

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1. The wet season winds certainly blow hard up here.

2. HeliSpirit give you the best views of the falls and expansive landscapes.

3. Kalumburu is very welcoming to travellers.



The Northern Kimberley certainly gets busy during the dry season; the Gibb River Road cops a hammering with plenty of traffic. But if you turn north and head toward the Kalumburu coast, you will experience an amazingly beautiful area, with fewer people to share it with. Once you've been there, you'll want to come back time and again.

The Mitchell Plateau also has a massive offering with the spectacular Mitchell Falls and is also usually devoid of backpackers in hire cars, as they aren't supposed to venture north of Drysdale River Station, meaning you're more likely to come across overlanders with the same ideals as you.

Drysdale River Station is the last fuel stop before Kalumburu and offers a couple of camping options, hot showers, drinking water, laundry facilities, limited supplies and restaurant/bar. If you arrive at lunchtime, I highly recommend the Kimberley Beef Burger.

From here the road usually degrades, with corrugations savage on suspension, camper-trailers and caravans. On this occasion though, it had been recently graded so it was a good 100km run to the turnoff to the Mitchell Plateau.

Six kilometres from the turnoff is the King Edward River crossing and a further two clicks bring you to the Munurru Campground. I prefer to stay here than down at the falls as it is quieter, with great swimming holes, and you won't find a

better place to launch a canoe. It's a safe place to swim too; the only crocs you'll find will be a few freshies that keep to themselves and the colourful ones on the kids' feet.

The campground itself has a few hybrid toilets dotted around and the sites are dispersed nicely so you don't feel like you are camping on someone else's doorstep. A few sites cater for large groups, the biggest being reserved for the bus groups, but they rarely stop at Munurru anymore. A short drive from the camp is a couple of amazing rock art sites that are definitely worth checking out.

The drive to Mitchell Falls from Munurru is approximately 76km and the road conditions are variable. In my case, the last 20km were the roughest and the going was slow, so I dropped another 10psi out of the tyres to smooth the ride.

The highlights of the falls are the walks (do the long walk in) and swimming in the refreshingly cool water pools. This will also give you the opportunity to see some more rock art below Mertens Falls. Once you've dried off, catch a HeliSpirit helicopter back to the carpark, but keep in mind you need to book the flight before you take the walk. Make sure you take a camera and grab a seat in the rear, as the chopper pilot will do a couple of figure eights above the falls before heading back, ample time to capture those awesome shots.





The Kalumburu Road is notorious for being as tough as guts on tyres, suspension and the bolted-on bits of your 4WD. I encountered a road crew doing a stellar job of smoothing the road out, only 30km south of town. Beyond the nice new roadwork, the road really bared its teeth; it suddenly became very rugged, and I was forced to a crawling speed. The rocks, ruts, washouts and corrugations were terrible; my suspension and tyres took a hammering. It's no wonder the town gets its supplies brought in by barge! The final push into town took two hours.

Kalumburu, which means 'end of the road' in the native language, is a tidy town, kept clean by proud people. Fuel is available during certain hours and the takeaway next to the supermarket serves beautiful hot chips. The old mission is still prominent in the community and you can explore the wide range of

artefacts in the Fr Thomas Gill Museum, for a small fee paid at the mission café. Keep an eye out for the bullet holes from the Japanese raid and the story about the local cannibals. It is here that you can learn about the Japanese air attack on Kalumburu (76 years ago this year) that killed six innocent people as well as destroying the mission.

This is not the final stop though, as paradise is just a little further north at McGowans Sunset Beach. Here you are welcomed by the host Matt Flinders, and his trusty offsider Bruce (the Blue Heeler Kelpie), and what great hosts they are. Matt will give you a rundown on the showers (no hot water but none needed up here), the toilets (BYO paper), the WiFi (\$5 per day) and the phone number to give your family and friends so they can call you. Then you can set up pretty much wherever you want.



Me, I was pushing the boundary by setting my swag up on a beachfront site, just ripe for the taking by one of the oversized 'local residents', aka crocs. Matt assured me I would be safe but did ask if I had more than one chair and a table to put around my swag. The great thing about McGowans Beach is the complete lack of sand flies and midges, although there are mozzies and the occasional snake – it isn't advisable to walk around without boots on at night.

Matt will also tell you about all the best places to see and the safe waterholes to swim in. I was lucky enough to be given directions to a swimming hole only recently made accessible by the local traditional owners, and what an amazingly beautiful spot it was.



1. The track didn't get any better from here.

2. The clear Kimberley night sky is a million-star view.

3. The boabs are a popular place to stop and prop.

4. I must admit I was a bit nervous sleeping here, but what a view!





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1. Crossing the King Edward River is generally a breeze.

2. The remains of Pogo are slowly being taken over by nature.

3. Evidence that the Kimberley played an important role during the Second World War.

4. Empty fuel drums are slowly rusting away.

5-6. The cultural sites are great examples of Bradshaw (Gwion Gwion) rock art.

7. The wildflowers were abundant at Munurru.

8. The Mitchell Plateau is no slouch when it comes to 'must-see' spots.

9. The mission museum is intriguing, with the evidence of the tragic Japanese attack on display.

10. The King Edward River reaches the coast near Kalumburu.

11. The mission at Kalumburu is a focal point for the community.

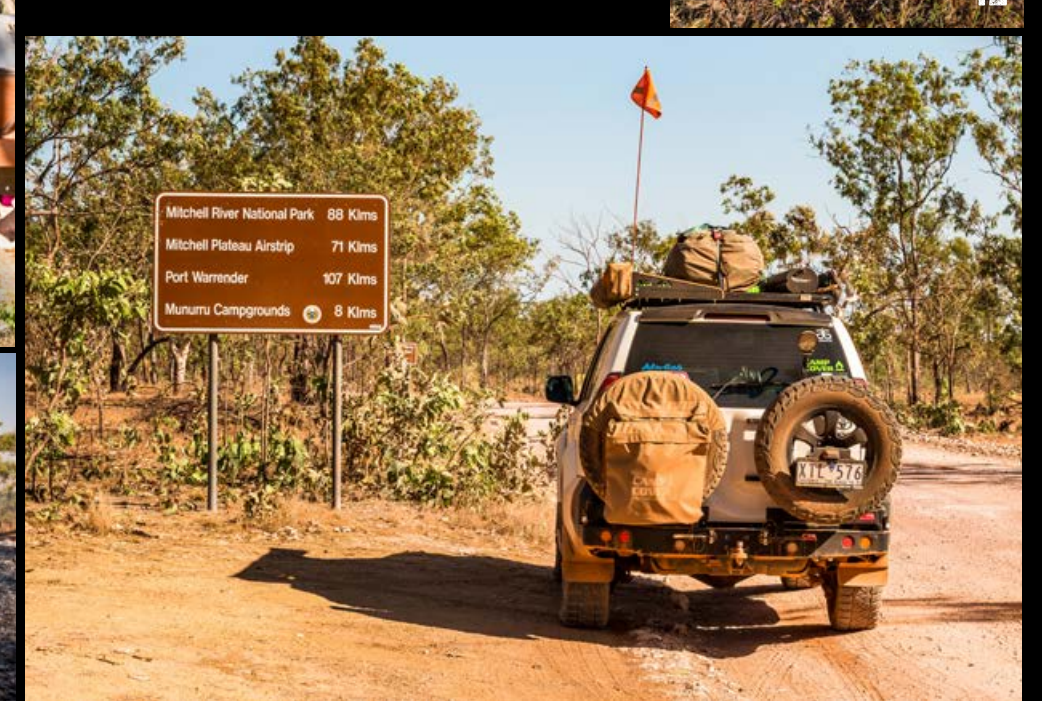
12. Bruce was a fantastic host, along with his owner Matt.

32. Each afternoon this guy visits the campsite.

14. The cool burn fires reduce the undergrowth, something we could learn in Victoria.



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The slowly burning fire created an eerie feeling.

With the smoke haze from a slow-burning bush fire just over the range, and the waterfall still flowing, I climbed to the top of the escarpment and made my way to the champagne pool at the top of the cliff. It was the perfect place to escape the heat and relax in the cool water.

Before returning to camp I detoured to view a couple of WW2 plane wrecks that still lie behind the airport. They are signposted yet difficult to find. I then decided to head to the old Pago Mission ruins. Abandoned at the start of WW2 due to the lack of water, the church was dismantled and relocated to Kalumburu. There is little remaining of Pago now as the bush slowly takes over.


During the war, the US Air Force formed a base here, with their warplanes taking off through the mangroves; today you can still see plenty of rusting fuel barrels strewn in the sand. The track to Pago is a real challenge at the start of the dry season as the track is overgrown. There are a few washouts and a couple of water crossings, but it does become much easier toward the end of the dry season.

I enjoyed my last night relaxing and joined some fellow campers from western Victoria for dinner and a bottle of wine. We concluded the night walking among the rock pools, checking out all the Hermit Crabs that occupy the beach. We kept the torch sweeping also in case there were any eyes watching us.

You can drink alcohol at McGowans Sunset Beach and Honeymoon Bay, but there's a 20km 'dry community' circle drawn around Kalumburu, meaning alcohol cannot be consumed or be visible from the outside of your vehicle within this zone.





So, was two nights stay long enough to really get my teeth stuck into this place? Not a bloody chance, but it means I'll be heading back as soon as I can. You see, I missed out on things like enjoying fresh Kimberley oysters prised from the rocks, hunting for mud crabs in the mangroves, walking out to McGowan Island on the low-tide, jumping on a fishing charter from Honeymoon Bay and exploring more of the safe local swimming holes. 

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## DESTINATION DETAILS

### LOCATION

When Malcolm Douglas first introduced us to Western Australia's Kimberley region in the 1980s, it was still the 'wild west' where many feared to tread. Even today there are some places that white man has never seen and are impossible to get to even with a 4WD. The region around Kalumburu is becoming more accessible and more popular with those who love remote travel, basic camping and access to the best fishing spots, with McGowans Beach and Honeymoon Bay the perfect destinations.

### DIFFICULTY

Accessible by road in the dry season only, the Kalumburu Road can be treacherous by the time the wet has dissipated. Generally, it is nothing more than a rough track, but tourism is helping the push to improve the road, as was evident during the 2018 dry season. Take your time, reduce your tyre pressures and forget about towing anything less than a trailer or caravan specifically constructed for the worst conditions imaginable. Ensure you have good communication equipment, are set up for remote travel and your vehicle is suitable for the route. Having two spare tyres is an asset and it is best to carry all the water you will need for drinking. The store at Kalumburu has limited supplies with the barge only coming in once every two weeks.

### COMFORT ZONE

During the dry season, temperatures can still be high, but mild weather is the norm. The humidity can be high, so be prepared for that, and mozzies are around once the sun begins to dip. There are no sand flies or midges at McGowans. BYO toilet paper too, as Matt doesn't supply it.

### PERMITS AND INFORMATION

A permit is required to access Kalumburu, currently \$50 per vehicle, that can be purchased at McGowans Beach and Honeymoon Bay. Wet weather can close the road and advice on current road conditions is available at Drysdale River Station.

#### Drysdale River Station:

[drysdaleriver.com.au](http://drysdaleriver.com.au)

#### Kalumburu Aboriginal Corporation:

[kalumburu.org](http://kalumburu.org)

#### McGowans Sunset Beach Camping:

[thegibbriverroad.com](http://thegibbriverroad.com)

#### Mitchell River National Park:

[parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au](http://parks.dpaw.wa.gov.au)

#### HeliSpirit Helicopter Flights:

[helispirit.com.au](http://helispirit.com.au)

