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Get into top gear in Australia

NICK HASLAM takes an unforgettable road trip through Top End with its spectacular wetlands and locally revered saltwater crocodiles

"IN 375 kilometres take the next left," says our GPS, Matilda. We're exploring Australia's Top End, an area covering more than half-a-million square miles spanning the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

My partner Solange and I had arrived on our Emirates flight to Perth a few days before, taking a connecting service to Darwin. From here we picked up our 4WD campervan to drive west to the pearl farming port of Broome, a journey of more than 1,200 miles along numerous makeshift roads.

However, we couldn't leave Darwin without exploring Kakadu National Park. We stop at the ancient rock art site of Ubirr, overlooking emerald green wetlands. Here, Aboriginal tour guide and former park ranger Vic Cooper points out paintings of two masted ships, marking the indigenous population's first contact with white explorers nearly 300 years before. "My people have come here since time began," he says.

Later, as we cruise up the East Alligator river in a small boat his daughter Cynthia shows extraordinary cool as a large saltwater croc splashes into the water just a few feet away. "No worries," she says. "These big fellas have never jumped a boat yet." I ask if it's safe to swim in the national park. She says: "Only one place, your hotel pool."

Katherine is the next stop, 200 miles down the highway. As we leave an Aboriginal lookout, we hear an ominous hiss – a back tyre is punctured. A battered old pick-up parks alongside. "What's the problem, mate?" asks the driver. Within minutes Dave is in

the dirt beside me, his wife Shirl passing spanners and exchanging recipes with Solange. Twenty minutes later the huge wheel has been changed and, armed with a couple of cold beers from our on-board fridge as a thank you, they wave us off.

After a breakfast cruise through the spectacular Katherine Gorge, edged with dramatic sandstone cliffs, we head west along the Victoria Highway. We camp in Gregory National Park, famed for its gorges and Aboriginal art.

Here we cook steak on an open fire under a sky scattered with brilliant stars and depart at dawn as squabbling fruit bats come to roost in the eucalyptus trees above our van.

The next stop is a 60-mile detour off the highway – Bullo River Station, a cattle farm spanning 800 square miles.

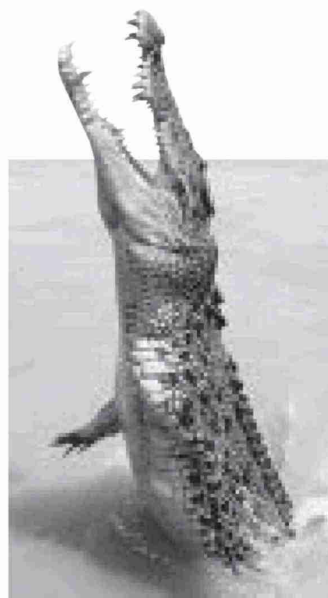
I jump at the offer of a helicopter flight with owner Franz Ranacher who wants to check his cattle. Swooping low he points out the sinister shapes of saltwater crocs basking on mudflats. "We lose 150 cattle a year to them," he says. "Those big fellas can pull a half-ton steer into the water and drown it quicker than a flash."

The following day we cross the border into Western Australia and arrive at the country's youngest town, Kununurra. Another flight awaits from the tiny airport to Purnululu National Park some 60 miles south.

Known only to a few cattle drovers until the late Fifties, the park centres around the Bungle Bungle Ranges, high rounded sandstone hills striped vivid red and black by years of erosion.

The area has been a sacred place for Aboriginals for millennia and, walking beneath the high cliffs later that day with Aboriginal guide Jimmy Coles, it is easy to see why. The echoing 200ft-high

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



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CAREFUL AS YOU GO: A vehicle crosses the East Alligator River in Northern Territory, home to saltwater crocs, right



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Camp fires, crocs and epic film sets

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

chasms feel like the interior of a vast natural cathedral. That night we sit by a roaring fire in the tented camp.

Back in Kununurra we leave the Tarmac for the notorious Gibb River Road, 410 miles of old unsurfaced driving trails linking the remote cattle stations of north-west Australia. Windows firmly closed against the fine red dust, we drive at speed along the corrugated trail, splashing through the 650ft-wide ford of the Pentecost River which featured memorably in Baz Luhrmann's epic film *Australia*.

To my amazement a man is standing knee-deep in the middle of the ford taking photos of his stationary vehicle. That night at the Homestead Valley Station local cattleman John Reynolds rolls his eyes in disbelief when I recount the story. "Not a good thing to do if you value your health," he says laconically. "Big salties always hang around there waiting for something edible to come along!"

For three days we drive through spectacular mountain



ranges of bright-red rock, swooping down through fords and crossing wide plains of savannah grass.

On the last day we take a detour to the Windjana Gorge, a

fantastic, almost surreal, jagged chasm of stark cliffs, clear water and sandy beaches thronged with freshwater crocodiles.

At dusk, I see a large road sign warning of an intersection ahead. Switching the gearbox into two-wheel drive for the first time in 400 miles, we head into the coastal town of Derby, north of Broome, as the sun goes down over the calm waters of King Sound.

We raise a glass of chilled champagne and toast a memorable journey. We have driven nearly 1,800 miles, seen some of the most beautiful and remote parts of Australia – and we've survived the Gibb.

THE KNOWLEDGE:

Austravel (0800 988 4834/www.austravel.com) offers a 13-night Darwin to Broome self-drive experience via the Gibb River Road from £2,995pp (two sharing), half board. Price includes return flights from Gatwick or Heathrow to Perth, and onward internal flights to Darwin and from Broome with Emirates (0844 800 2777/www.emirates.com). Nine days 4x4 car hire also included.

Accommodation in various hotels and lodges. [Tourism Western Australia](http://www.tourismwesternaustralia.com): 0207 438 4606/www.tourismwesternaustralia.com
[Tourism NT](http://www.tourismnt.com): 0207 438 4641/www.tourismnt.com



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DRAMATIC VIEWS: A boat cruise along the Katherine Gorge with its giant sandstone cliffs

