

Charnley Explorer July 12-26, 2009

On our first trip in 2000, the route we walked to get to the Charnley was a fairly difficult one. In 2001, we found a much easier way to get there and found we had created a truly outstanding trip.

We begin with a flight from Kununurra to the Pantijan airstrip. This saves a long two day drive. From the airstrip, a 20 km drive brings us to the Brockman River and the start of the walk. A short walk of about one km downstream brings us to the much larger Calder River, hitting it at a point where it passes through some particularly interesting rock formations. We spend the rest of the day exploring the lower Calder without full packs.

The following morning we walk to the Charnley. The walk is about nine km. This will probably be the longest distance we cover in one day with packs on this section. The terrain is moderately easy but it can be hot. We should get to the Charnley mid afternoon.

The Charnley is one of the most spectacular, but least accessible rivers in the Kimberley. The lower section goes through something like 30 km of continuous gorge. There is a wealth of Aboriginal art in a variety of styles showing that this has been a special place for thousands of years.

Walking along the Charnley is always slow and often not easy. On our short visit to this part of the river in 2001, we found that we had to climb up out of the gorge on a number of occasions. In 2002, we had a group who were better at rock climbing so we didn't need to climb out at all. The climbs out aren't particularly difficult, but thick spinifex on top can make the walking there very slow.

In order to explore the area properly, we will do a number of day walks, the first of which will be down the Charnley to near where it empties into Walcott Inlet. Other walks will be along some of the larger tributaries, all of which were flowing in August in both 2001 and the drier 2002. Our aim is to cover about 10 km moving upstream with packs, then do another daywalk further still, before following another tributary stream back toward the Calder. Our previous experience shows that following this particular creek is much easier than any of the other possible paths. We will probably take two days to do this walk.

The point where we return to the Calder has a number of small cascades and potential campsites so we may spend a final night there or we may do the short walk back to the vehicle and begin the drive back to Mount Elizabeth for the flight back to Kununurra if the Isdell River trip scheduled to follow this is running. If not, we will drive.

If you would like to see photos of this walk, go to the Photo Gallery page on our website and click onto "The Charnley River."

Terrain and difficulty.

Overall Level 3.

Climate Level 2. Average daytime max 30-32°, average nighttime min 14-16°. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.

Terrain Section 1: Level 2. Although there are some rough parts, there is a substantial amount of flat, easy walking.

Section 2: Level 3. This trip has a bit of everything. Lots of rock hopping and scrambling, flat rock, boulders, sand, thick scrub, open woodland and almost anything else you can name. Some days will be long and fairly hard but we there will be short, easy ones as well.

Vegetation Level 2-3. Vegetation can vary dramatically from year to year. This may make the trip easier or harder than we expect. While we were there in August 2001, a major fire came through on the south side of the gorge. This made the walking easier in 2002. At this time of year, the spear grass has finished seeding and dried out. It may be necessary to push through thick spinifex in some places.

Hours Level 2-3. Generally 4-6 hours. The first full day's walk is very long and may take 8 hours not counting breaks. On some days, you need carry your pack for only a couple of hours after which you can rest or explore without packs.

Packs	Pack weight - level 4. You need to carry 13 days food. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent. Pack float (section 2). All but one of those on the 2002 trip chose to float their packs for a short distance rather than climb out of the gorge. Come prepared if you would like to do this. (The climb was faster but more strenuous.) There was also an optional swim of up to one km with daypacks on the last day in the gorge.
Art	We visit a large number of art sites. Many are in a style we haven't found elsewhere.
Campsites	Mix of sand and rock ledges. Most sites are excellent. You are unlikely to see anyone else at any of the campsites.
Swims	Good pools at almost every campsite and lunch spot.
Lowlights	The long, rough drive and out (and in if we drive both ways). Carrying food for two weeks.
Highlights	Beautiful gorge scenery. Perfect weather. Great swimming holes. Aboriginal art sites. Exploring the side creeks without a pack.
Wildlife	You see a variety of birds along the river and have a good chance of spotting freshwater crocodiles. You might see big crocs in the tidal section of the river we visit on a day walk. You are unlikely to see many large land animals.
Fishing	Excellent along the Charnley.
Maps.	The 1: 50 000 Artesian Range covers most of the Charnley walk. We will probably do small amounts on Munja as well.

Notes.

The flights at the beginning and end of this trip depend on our connecting trips. If either doesn't run, we will drive in one direction. If neither runs, we will drive both ways.

Make sure you keep a water bottle with you during the drives as it is unlikely to be easy to get into your pack. If we have to drive to or from Kununurra, keep some money with you as well as it may be possible to buy cold drinks.

Where we have two vehicles, one or more of the clients normally drives one of them. Due to the extremely rugged nature of the Munja Track, we cannot allow anyone who has not had extensive 4WD experience to drive these sections. This may mean limiting the number of participants or having the guide drive across the rough section and walk back to take the second vehicle through.

Some of our largest costs are fixed. Rather than charge a high price which would cover us for four people, we prefer to offer the trip at a reasonable price with a surcharge for a group of four.

Insects. We found that the flies were more of a nuisance than normal in 2002. Those who had fly veils were glad they had brought them. On the other hand, there were so few mosquitos that some members of the group never bothered to set up their tents or mosquito nets.

Crocodiles and swimming. The 2002 group saw one large estuarine (saltwater) crocodile in the tidal area near the end of the Charnley. None of our groups has seen any further upstream. They all saw numerous freshwater crocs, usually a good indication that the large and dangerous ones are not present. However, there is no barrier to estuarine crocs moving upstream along the Charnley below major waterfalls. We recommend that you restrict your swims to side creeks and small pools unless your guide tells you otherwise.

Itinerary: Charnley Explorer

Note 1 Day 0 is the day before departure.

Note 2 This itinerary is subject to change

Day 0 Travel to Kununurra. There are daily air and bus services between Kununurra and Perth and Darwin. Connections to the eastern states are normally made through Darwin. Pre-trip meeting for everyone doing the first section, 6.30 p.m., Beer Garden, Hotel Kununurra. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance. **Note.** If Air North changes their timetable so that their flight from Darwin arrives after 6 p.m., we may delay the start of the pre-trip meeting.

Day 1 Pick up from your accommodation in Kununurra provided you have given us the address at least a week before departure or have made other arrangements at the pre-trip meeting. If you are unable to notify us where you are staying, the pick up is from in front of the Kununurra Visitors Centre possibly as early as 7 a.m. Fly to Pantijan and drive to Brockman River. Walk to the Calder and spend the afternoon exploring the lower Calder.

Day 2 Walk to the Charnley.

Day 3 Day walk to the tidal area on the Charnley.

Day 4-12 Walking along the Charnley and exploring the side creeks.

Day 13 Begin drive to Mount Elizabeth.

Day 14 Finish drive to Mount Elizabeth where we camp the final night if catching a flight the next day. Or continue driving toward Kununurra if we have to drive the whole way.

Day 15 Early morning flight to Kununurra, or finish drive, probably arriving in time to make connections to Darwin that day. Contact us to be sure if you wish to make a same day connection.

Important Note **Airnorth**, the only airline currently operating into Kununurra uses some relatively small aircraft which have a baggage allowance of only 13 kg. Unless special arrangements have been made, if you are flying to Kununurra and your baggage weighs more than 13 kg, it may not get on the plane with you. (This would be very unusual but it is possible.) Contact Regional Link for more details. Phone: 1800 627474 or (08) 8920 4000; Fax: (08) 8920 4095; email: airnorth@regionallink.com.au **Qantas Link** cancelled their peak season direct flights to and from Perth in late 2006. Call 131313 to see if they are running again.