

Durack River Explorer: July 12-25, 2009

We dreamed about this trip for years. We flew over the Durack again and again, each time seeing it from a slightly different angle. We've stared down at magnificent cliffs and huge pools and tried to figure out a practical, not too expensive way of getting there. We finally did it in 2005 and again in 2008.

We found a boat that could take us from Wyndham to the mouth of the Durack and then quite a distance upstream. We got dropped off in a tidal area but a short, reasonably easy walk from there got us to a great view point overlooking the fresh water below. Even this close to the tidal zone, we could see only freshwater crocs and one of our big safety concerns immediately disappeared.

Our exact drop off time and place depend on the tides. Kimberley tides are huge. In 2005, we were dropped off early in the morning well up the river. In 2008, we got further still. We change the date every year to get the best possible tide, but, even so, we can't be 100% sure exactly where we'll get dropped off. We can, however, be sure that it won't be far from where we were dropped in previous years.

The best way to describe some of what follows is to quote from the notes I made at the time. "We continued on top, generally quite easy and flat, stopping for an occasional view, until we dropped down to the river level. Very rough scramble going down. We cut cross country, still mostly west until we reached the river. Round river stones were the most difficult terrain we'd encountered to this point. Very slow." Slow and strenuous – the Durack walk contains some of the most difficult terrain we traverse on any of our trips. It also contains some of the easiest – huge flat rock ledges that go on for kilometres at a time.

There is a relatively short but quite interesting side gorge that we'll do without packs as a half-day walk. It's slow going but there is a bit of Aboriginal art and it finishes at a large pool that doesn't show on the map.

On day 3 or 4 we should reach Nyia Creek, a smaller version of the Durack itself. Having now done some exploration, we may be able to add a bit more time here. We didn't check many places but we did find the largest single Aboriginal art site any of us had ever seen – a 250 m rock wall covered in paintings, some very faded, some as clear as if they'd been done yesterday. In 2008, we discovered a magic spot – a large pool below a small flowing cascade. The surrounding flat rock ledges will make a perfect camp for two nights as we continue our explorations.

From Nyia, we will cut across the plateau taking a short cut back to the Durack. Once again, it is worth quoting from my notes. "Almost straightforward to the top – but slow. Final zigzag just below the top to find the notch that took us all the way. As per the map, the 'top' wasn't the TOP. We walked along a flat, then climbed, then flat, then climb, eventually reaching the real plateau. We walked on to the edge of the plateau where we had a rest. Found an animal track of some sort that took us some distance. Had another rest, not long after which we came to an area swarming with birds. Lots of small 1-2m grevilleas, some in flower, some not. Many small acacias in bloom; a few larger 4-5 m trees I didn't recognise. It was too pleasant to miss, so we sat down for ten minutes and listened to and watched the birds before pressing on to the edge of the plateau, great views of the Durack. We dropped down a level to a small creek, joining it near where it dropped over a small waterfall. To here it had been easy. Dropping down was less so. We had to contour toward the downstream (north) edge and then zig zag our way down. Not too hard, but not easy either. A very short walk from where we reached the bottom brought us to some small to medium paperbarks next to a pool – good shade for lunch."

This says is all – easy walking, hard walking, and always time to stop and enjoy anything that seems particularly nice.

We will revisit the best places that we found in 2005 and 2008, drop out some of the less interesting ones and explore some spots we didn't have time to visit on the first trips. We will finish with a walk from the river out to the Gibb River Road where we can get picked up by bus or 4WD for the return to Kununurra.

Explorer trips are the least structured and most adventurous of those we offer during the dry season. They are not endurance tests. They are intended to be run at a reasonably leisurely pace so that we can have a really good look at the areas we choose. It is, however, likely that there will be some long days when it will be necessary to cover a considerable distance. Those taking part will need to be fit enough to do this.

This will be only our second trip to the Durack. If you wish to be among the first people to explore a particular area, then this could be for you. If you want to know exactly where you're going to be and exactly what you'll be doing each day, save this until we've made a few more visits.

Terrain and Difficulty

Overall	Level 3-4
Climate	Level 2. Average daytime max 30°C (86°F), average nighttime min 12-14°C (63-66°F). It has, however, been known to drop to near freezing. Generally low humidity. Rain very unlikely.
Terrain	Level 2-5. On our first trip we had everything from huge rock slabs where the walking couldn't have been easier to short, steep climbs and long stretches of rounded river stones where you needed to concentrate on every step for long distances.
Vegetation	Level 2-4. Can vary from year to year depending on when last burnt. It is likely that you will spend some time pushing through some fairly thick scrub or grass. 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	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 two week's food. You need a sleeping bag but are unlikely to need a tent.
Art	Completely unknown.
Campsites	We expect most to be on sand and rock ledges. We cannot be sure until we get there. You are very unlikely to see anyone else at most of the campsites. You may not see anyone else at any of them.
Swims	Many good pools. Many opportunities for swimming each day. Crocodiles could be a danger in some pools. Ask your guide before getting in the water.
Lowlights	Carrying two weeks food.
Highlights	Great scenery. Exploring the unknown.
Wildlife	You see a variety of birds along the river and have a good chance of spotting freshwater crocodiles. You may see large crocs in the lower part of the Durack.
Fishing	In 2008, we had fresh fish 12 out of 13 nights. If you bring a line, we suspect that it will be just as good this year. If you do bring a line, bring a reasonably strong one. The fishermen on our 2008 trip had a number of fish snap their lines.

Maps The 1:100 000 Pentecost covers most of the trip; a short section at the end is on Beatrice.
The 1:50 000 Durack covers most of the trip but we expect to spend several days on the Warambur map as well. On our 2005 trip, we also did short sections on Mount Lawley, Mosquito Hills and Bindoola Creek. If the tides are completely wrong, we might have to begin the trip on the False Mount Cockburn map.

Itinerary: Durack River 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, 6.00 p.m., outdoor area, Kimberley Croc Backpackers. **This meeting is important.** If you cannot make the meeting, please advise us well in advance.

Day 1 Very early morning 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 4.30 a.m.

Bus to Wyndham and boat to the start of the walk. Begin walk. Bush camp.

Day 2-13 Bush camping, carrying full packs most days. Day walks without full packs could be possible. Depends on what we find.

Day 14 Walk out to Gibb River Road for pick up. Drive back to Kununurra. Drop off at your accommodation, late afternoon or early evening.

Important Note **Regional Link** (formerly Air North), the only airline currently operating into Kununurra uses relatively small and has 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.