Australia has some world class camping destinations, and the Gibb River Road in the northern part of Western Australia is a prime example of this. Located in the Kimberley, the Gibb River Road is a spectacular 4WD track that attracts visitors from all over the globe.
The track covers an ancient, largely untouched landscape full of beautiful water holes, huge canyons and incredible walking trails. Camping is exquisite across a variety of places including stations, national parks and wilderness sanctuaries. Home to some of the most diverse and prolific animals and plants known to man, it's an experience you are sure to remember for years to come.

Location

You'll find the Gibb River Road in the north-eastern part of Western Australia, starting just out of Derby and ending at the junction between Wyndham and Kununurra. It's several hundred kilometres inland from the coast, in a roughly parallel arrangement.

Located in the northeastern part of WA, the Gibb River Road is ready for adventure. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Length

The base track length is 660km from start to finish, but you won't see much by just doing that. The locations to visit, explore and camp are all off the Gibb River Road, and an average trip would be 1000 – 1800km total, depending on what you want to see. Most attractions are 20 – 50km one way off the main track, with some like Mornington Wilderness Park and Mitchell Falls even further.

Start and finish points

You can drive the Gibb River Road in either direction (north to south or south to north), and when combined with the Great Northern Highway, can do a loop around and back to your start point. This would be starting at Derby and heading up the Gibb River Road to Wyndham or Kununurra, then down the highway to the Bungle Bungles and back to Derby (or Broome). Obviously, you can do this in reverse, depending on whether you are coming from the north or the south.

The view over the river at Mornington. Photo: Aaron Schubert

About the area

The Gibb River Road almost cuts the Kimberley in half and is well known for breathtaking natural beauty, big stations that run cattle and incredible wildlife. A large majority of the land is privately owned by stations, with the rest dedicated to national parks, conservation areas and tourist attractions.

How long do you need?

The beauty of this track is you can easily adjust your itinerary based on how much of it you'll want to see. As a minimum, you should allow at least a week. Two weeks is better and with anything around 16 – 20 days being the ultimate length. You can spend much longer exploring the less common parts of the Gibb River Road – it's entirely up to you!

Overrun with natural beauty, the Gibb River Road is also great for spotting some native wildlife. Photo: Aaron Schubert

What is there to see?

In terms of natural beauty, prepare to be awestruck by massive gorges, thundering waterfalls, crystal clear pools, hot springs, beautiful plants and animals and plenty of river crossings. The Kimberley is massively shaped by water, and in the dry season expect to see everything lush and green, with plenty of activity going on.

Is a 4WD a must?

I'm going to say yes! It has been done in 2WD vehicles, but it's not worth the risk. In terms of 4WDing, there's nothing too extreme, with the exception of a couple of water crossings. A bit of clearance and some decent tyres are about all you need, but it's the durability of the vehicle that really matters.

The corrugations can be terrible, and this is where a 4WD comes into its own. Every year, the track causes plenty of mechanical and electrical damage to vehicles. A 4WD is substantially better built and less likely to have issues! You must have light truck tyres that are reputable, or you can expect to be going through several tyres.

You'll probably want to take the 4WD to be on the safe side. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Can you take a camper trailer or caravan?

In recent years, camper trailers and caravans have become hugely popular, and you'll see them being towed all over the place. For the majority of the track, you will be fine towing a well-built camper trailer or caravan. However, taking massive caravans on the track is not a good idea.

The road out to Mitchell Falls and Kalumbaru is one of the roughest, and I would not take anything but a top quality camper trailer out there. Caravans are completely out of the question. The Bungle Bungles also only allows single axle trailers, so bigger caravans are not an option either.

Where should you visit?

There is a massive list of places to visit and camp at along the Gibb River Road, but these would be the most common, and popular:

Windjana Gorge

Windjana is the first gorge coming from Derby end and is located relatively close to Tunnel Creek. It's home to one of the biggest populations of freshwater crocodiles that are easily seen by tourists and is truly a beautiful place to begin your adventure.
The walk to the gorge is short and easy, with good camping facilities (flushing toilets, running water and solar showers) – they're a fantastic backdrop as the sun goes down!

The walk to Windjana Gorge. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Tunnel Creek

If you are keen on caves, this one is fantastic. It needs a bit of care and effort to enter and exit the tunnel, but it's sure worth it. Bring old shoes as you'll have to walk through water… and a quality head torch too!

Bell Gorge

Bell Gorge is the next gorge along the Gibb River Road and is accessed by camping at Silent Grove. The first part of the walk down is relatively straight forward, with the last climb down to the bottom of the gorge a bit more challenging. Swimming is fantastic here, and the gorge is magnificent!

The walk to the magnificent Bell Gorge. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Mornington Wilderness Park

Mornington is a conservation park that is absolutely worth a stop. Home to some of the most scarcely seen flora and fauna, it's a must do for anyone who is keen on nature. Their gorges are fantastic, and the 90km drive off the Gibb River Road is absolutely worth the trek – it's stunning! Camping facilities are good, with flushing toilets, running water and solar showers.

Mornington Wilderness Park is worth checking out, especially for nature lovers. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Manning Gorge

Pay your access fees at Mount Barnett, and head down to Manning Gorge. Pull yourself across the river in a little tinny and then walk to the gorge – you'll have an absolute ball! Camping at Manning is great, with the river nearby and a caretaker on site at all times. Flushing toilets and showers are set up for your convenience.

A trip to Manning Gorge is worth it, just to get out on the water! Photo: Aaron Schubert

Mount Elizabeth

As a working cattle station, Mount Elizabeth is home to two fantastic gorges, and has a massive array of local wildlife like wallabies and birds that walk around your tents! Again, hot showers and flushing toilets are available, and camping under the trees is breathtaking.

A good camping spot, Mt. Elizabeth cattle station is worth a stop. Photo: Aaron Schubert

El Questro

El Questro has been marketed as the heart of the Kimberley, and in reality, it does a great job of reflecting what the Gibb River Road has to offer. There are hot springs, several gorges to explore and a miniature community complete with bar, restaurant and convenience store. It is busy though so don't get shocked when you drive in and see 50 + 4WD's!
Camping options vary from semi-permanent tents to powered sites on grass and bush camps further away from the main settlement.

A very popular destination for 4WD's, El Questro shows what the Kimberly has to offer. Photo: Aaron Schubert

Things to consider before going

You'll be travelling some decent distances on the Gibb River Road, and petrol/diesel is only available at Derby, Imintji (diesel only), Mount Barnett, Drysdale, El Questro and Wyndham/Kununurra. Fresh water is available at many of the stops, but make sure you have plenty with you just in case.
Some campsites need to be pre-booked so don't expect to arrive and get a site as you might be unpleasantly surprised. The weather is usually warm and comfortable during the day and ranges from 25 to 35 degrees. However, it can also get cold at night – we saw temperatures of 1 and 2 degrees on a couple of nights!
Food is available (at a cost) at the same places you can buy fuel, but you'll want to take most of it with you! Take spare parts for your 4WD, tools and two spare tyres if possible.

Tours

If you don't have a 4WD or the camping gear, a tour is a perfect solution. A number of companies offer these with everything supplied. Check out Kimberley Adventures and Adventure Wild for a start.

Make sure you prepare by booking your campsite in advance. Photo: Aaron Schubert

The best camping

Our favourite campsite was probably at El Questro, where we booked a private, riverside camp at $22 (at the time of writing) per person per night. We had plenty of shade, the river a

few metres from our tent, no-one in sight, a toilet nearby and only a few minutes' drive into the settlement for showers. It was quiet, peaceful and relaxing.

Add the Gibb River Road to your bucket list

In terms of adventure and camping, the Gibb River Road certainly tops the list of places we've been to. The natural beauty is nothing short of mind-boggling, and the camping is comfortable and spectacular. If you haven't been to the Gibb River Road, add it to the bucket list!

Have you travelled along the Gibb River Road? Let us know in the comments below.