

# AN EXTRAORDINARY DESERT ADVENTURE

Words and images: Emma George

There are road trips and then there are extraordinary experiences! Tackling the West Australian desert with three young kids may sound crazy, but exploring the Gary Junction Road and Karlamilyi (Rudall River) National Park is something we were really excited about.

We'd been on the road for months, conquering Cape York, the Gulf and Arnhem Land, but my husband, Ashley, and I, with our three young boys in tow wanted one last adventure before heading home to Perth.

Deserts are dangerous places, so months were spent planning this trip, making sure we had enough food and water for five days, permits, spares, and repair kits for the car and camper as well as safety procedures, a satellite phone, EPIRB, accessible fire extinguisher, first aid and a nightly call-home regime.

After our Nissan Patrol's major service in Alice Springs, we were confident enough to face the 2000 kilometres of dirt through parts of the Gibson, Little Sandy and Big Sandy deserts.

Also, to navigate one of the iconic roads built in the 1960s by Len Beadell, the explorer that bulldozed most of the roads through the Western Desert such as the Gunbarrel Highway and Sandy Blight Junction Road.

Being October, things were beginning to heat up, but we were horrified when the car started to heat up too! When we hit the dirt, the temperature soared past 100 degrees and we had no other option than to switch off the airconditioning and wind down the windows. Wind and dust were flying through the car and with the noise I could barely hear the kids in the back let alone see them. How ironic, just when you need airconditioning is the one time it can't be used!

Travelling for us is all about the adventure and this was just beginning. Instead of dull, flat sandy desert it was breathtakingly beautiful and full of life. After the summer rains, the country was a patchwork of spinifex, shrubs, low lying trees, wild flowers and Sturt Desert peas. Stunning.

Beadell, throughout his pioneering days way before GPS, had left markers along the tracks

giving travellers distances to nearest towns and roads. Some of these markers we found, many others had been souvenired unfortunately.

The markers became our challenge so we'd know exactly what to look for. One was the milestone of the North Territory and Western Australian border – finally back in our home state of WA, but more remote than ever and not a car to be seen all day.

We rolled out our map of Australia on the red dirt in the middle of the road showing the kids exactly where we were, where we'd been and where we were going. Our next stop was to refuel at Kiwirrkurra, a small Aboriginal town and one of the most remote communities in the world.

## Clockwise from top left:

❖ Spinifex can be lethal if it catches on fire under your car. ❖ The iron-rich rock hills provided a great look out over our campsite. ❖ Burnt out trucks and cars are a constant reminder that deserts are rough on vehicles and dangerous places if you are not well prepared. ❖ The Gibson is rich in reptiles. ❖ Wild camels are a feral pest. ❖ The wildflowers in the desert had to be seen to be believed. We were fortunate to observe such a harsh environment in full bloom.

A wave of sadness engulfed me as we drove in. This is a community of hardship and poverty. Our boys had trouble understanding that people lived in these conditions and I felt ashamed that I'd been complaining about a lack of airconditioning when these people suffer through scorching summers with nothing more than a tent for a house.

We soon found the general store and looked for someone to open the fuel pump. No self service here! We'd arrived well before closing, but it seemed Kiwirrkurra is serviced from Alice Springs and they run on Northern Territory time. The remotest part of the world and no fuel! Luckily for us the store operator was a good bloke and let us fill our car up.

The local kids crowded around smiling and saying hello. A happy, gorgeous bunch of kids who showed us their art and around their community centre where we looked at some of their work, but I was distracted by the sparse amount of old toys, clothing and equipment.

We have visited many Aboriginal communities on our travels, but this one was different; maybe because it was so remote. Our children never go without and this was a real eye-opener for them and me. Seeing how these children survived, my boys realised how lucky they were.

Once refuelled we climbed back into the dusty Patrol and came upon Beadell's old ration truck down the road. Apparently it caught on fire in 1960 when they were working on the road and the stories are legendary about Beadell being hit by a pot of exploding stew and pea soup and how he shot a hole in the boiling water tank behind the cabin and made a cup of tea!

Finding suitable camp spots in the desert is a challenge because there's not much shelter, but this night was an exception. I had heard Jupiter's Well was a good place to stop and we pushed on to arrive before dark.

As the sun set we found the vegetation became shrubbier and saw larger trees in the

distance. Before long we turned into the well and were happy to find fellow travellers. On chatting, we discovered that most of them were planning to tackle the Wapet Road and Kidson Track north to the coast at Eighty Mile Beach.

As we set up camp, the kids couldn't resist getting under the water pump and playing in the mud. And, while I was happily thinking that I didn't have to ration the water that night, there was a loud bang; thunder boomed from above; the heavens opened up and lightning danced along the desert sands.

We had been on the road for three months and it had only rained one day. A thunderstorm in the desert is a real treat – what a thrill – imagine the smell of the wet dirt and fresh foliage. It was extraordinary as we'd been breathing dust every inch of the way.

Once the kids were in bed we studied the map searching for the next place to camp and, not having too many choices, aimed for

Desert Queens Baths in Rudall River about 700 kilometres.

Fuel being a priority we hoped to get some from the store in Kunawarritji before we headed to Newman. Stopping at another Beadell marker, I called the Kunawarritji store on the satellite phone to let them know we'd be arriving. The last thing we wanted was to miss the store and have to wait two nights until it opened again Monday morning. The store manager met us at the bowser and it was lucky that we already had fuel in the tank because this was the most expensive diesel of our trip at \$3.20/litre!

We went into their wonderful airconditioned store and I could have stayed forever! What a treat to find a shop with ice-cream so we all indulged and I told the kids they could have anything they wanted, but didn't realise the store owners would offer them one of their cute puppies! 'Food only,' I quickly added. As it turned out every town offered us a puppy







and we could have returned home with a truck load of them!

Another day's driving in the heat and dust without the airconditioner and we finally arrived at Rudall River. The kids were hungry so we stopped to cook a snag and then they went crazy rolling down the red dunes. As we ate, we sat spellbound and admired another spectacular desert sunset. We then attempted to wash the kids and settled them back into their car seats. It was pitch black as we negotiated the slopes and slowly rock hopped along a windy track into Desert Queen Baths. It was now 10.00 pm and we set up camp in the dark hoping we'd chosen a good location.

I love driving at night as it's always a surprise in the morning to open the tent and look outside! The scene took my breath away. What I saw was beyond all expectations; a natural pool fringed by trees and enclosed by stunning iron-rich red cliffs. A true oasis in the middle of the desert.

We felt like the first explorers discovering this spot because we'd not seen another tourist in the park. The older boys went rock climbing in the red hills whilst the younger boys and I lazed in the shade and admired the beauty of our oasis.

I tried to put the youngest one down for a day sleep doing my best to create a Coolgardie safe using two battery powered fans and a wet blanket over his portacot. Being October it was getting hotter every day and the only solution to the heat was to hit the road and aim for the coast.

It was a shame to leave Rudall River, but we decided to return and explore it during the cooler months. We were just about finished our desert journey and, what should have been a straightforward trip to the Talawana Track, soon became our biggest challenge.

My husband had the great idea of being a bit more adventurous and taking a slight 'short cut' to save a few kilometres. We inspected the start of the track, which didn't even have a name and it was then I should have put my foot down. I should have known better, but I didn't want to dampen hubby's enthusiasm, so I reluctantly agreed to give it a go.

Soon the spinifex closed in around us on this narrow road and Ashley was doing his best rally driver impersonation as he swerved bushes, taking side tracks when the road fell away, all the time trying to keep the car's momentum up in the soft sand. I bit my tongue and was hanging on for dear life but after five kilometres of twisting, barely visible track – there was no going back.

Stopping several times to remove the needle-like grass from the undercarriage of the car and avoid risk of fire, we were actually worried and revisited our safety plan – Ashley with the fire extinguisher at his feet and me with the satellite phone on my lap. Ready to unbuckle the kids at the first hint of danger we had no choice but to keep going as there was still fifteen kilometres of nightmare track to go.

The car began to sink into the sand and then sank up to the running boards. Full of adrenaline, I jumped out, grabbed the shovel and stared digging whilst Ashley let down all the tyres further and shovelled like a crazy digging dog all the while promising that if he had to shovel all night, disconnect the camper and winch us out he would get us out and we'd be saved!

The kids started to laugh at the frenzied spectacle of their parents shovelling as if possessed, and we all started to laugh regardless of our predicament. Running through my mind was the worst case scenario, but in reality we could set up camp and call for help, and we had enough food and water for almost a week.

Many attempts later, the car finally dislodged itself and, hot and bedraggled, we limped our way up the escarpment onto rocky ground as the sun was setting.

As the night closed in and we were exhausted, we had to find a campsite. My wish was granted forthwith as the ridge flattened out to reveal a campsite overlooking the brilliant evening desert sands and the stunning red desert below. The stars were shining brighter tonight than ever before and we agreed that this final evening in the magnificent Western Australian desert was a fitting last evening to an extraordinary adventure. ❖

## RUDALL RIVER HISTORY

The Rudall River was named by Frank Hann after the surveyor and explorer William Frederick Rudall (pronounced Roo-dal, with stress on the second syllable). To the Aboriginal people who live in this remote desert region, it is called Karlamilyi, and the name of the park was changed to acknowledge this in 2008.

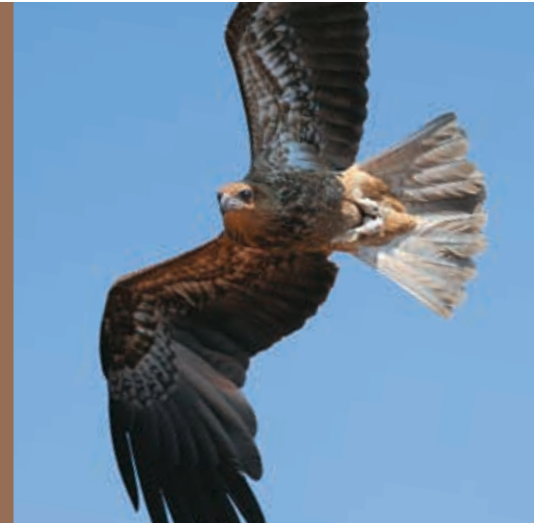
These desert-dwelling Aborigines belong to the Warnman, Gardutjarra, Mandjildjarra and Ngulibardu language groups. The Warnman ranged from the headwaters of Karlamilyi (Rudall River), south to about the 23rd parallel, east to the Canning Stock Route and north to take in Lakes Dora, Blanche, George and Auld.

The western desert people were one of the last in Australia to be affected by European encroachment. It was not until the late 1800s that explorers began crossing this region. From 1872–74, Colonel Peter Egerton Warburton crossed the western deserts, north of Rudall River, on his journey from Alice Springs to Roebourne. It was during this journey that he incorrectly fixed the position of Joanna Spring, a mistake that partly contributed to the deaths of two men from the Calvert Expedition of 1896, which passed east of the area now covered by the park.

The first European explorations of the Rudall River area came in 1896–97, when surveyor William Frederick Rudall led a party of men in search of George Jones and Charles Wells, the missing men from the Calvert Expedition.

Someone else who was in the area at about the same time was Frank H Hann. Hann was a versatile and wide-ranging prospector, surveyor and explorer who was investigating the area for stockgrazing. Hann, then about 60 years old, entered the Broadhurst Range, just north of the park, on 31 May, 1897. He continued south to the river, then north-east to Lake Misery (later renamed Lake Dora by Rudall after his fiancée Dora Miller). He tried his hand prospecting for gold near Mt Eva before heading south to the McKay Range and then westwards. As he approached the area near Hanging Rock, and was running short of water, he saw smoke in the distance. He followed the smoke and 'bumped into' Rudall and his search party in a place later named Meeting Gorge.

(Extract from [www.dec.wa.gov.au](http://www.dec.wa.gov.au))



### Clockwise from left:

❖ The impressive dry Lake Auld gave us an excuse to let the car cool down. ❖ Summer rains had brought the desert alive with birds of prey such as this whistling kite. ❖ The Gibson is rich in reptiles.



## FACT FILE



**Getting there** – The Gary Junction Road traverses almost 600 km predominantly through WA and is commonly accessed from Alice Springs or Marble Bar. Karlamilyi National Park is 260 km east of Newman and, at 1.5 million hectares, is Australia's largest and probably its most remote national park.

**When to go** – July and August are the best months. Avoid the desert during summer as it is dangerously hot and winter nights can be cold.

**Where to camp** – Jupiter's Well, Desert Queen Baths, Watrara Pool, Tjingkulatjatjarra Pool.

**Preparation** – Prepare well before you embark on a trip through the desert. You need to have a reliable and well serviced 4WD vehicle, dependable communication equipment, maps, GPS, sufficient food and water and ensure someone has your full itinerary. Research exactly where you are going, speak with people about the current conditions and know where you can buy fuel, what permits you require, where you can access water and possible campsites.

**Further information** – Visit [www.dec.wa.gov.au](http://www.dec.wa.gov.au) and search 'karlamilyi'.



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Trips are not just about what you see and where you go, but the experiences that stay with you forever. When we returned to Perth we wanted to do something for the children we met in Kiwirrkurra and the surrounding communities.

Through our kids' school and playgroup we filled a pallet and, with much thanks to ABC Transport and WA Freight Group, we arranged transport of much-needed clothing and boxes of presents for the Aboriginal children who often don't receive anything for Christmas and hopefully put a few smiles on those beautiful children's faces.