

Paddling in Paradise – Why We Return Each Year

Go Wild Canoe Tours on the Ord River, Western Australia

By Jacque Hagan

A thousand million years ago in the geologic time of the Protozoic, the gorges of the Kimberley in the North of Western Australia were formed. Create that time in your imagination with a canoe trip down the Ord River!

Starting at the dam wall at Lake Argyle, 70km from the town of Kununurra, you can paddle and drift through ancient gorges, be deafened by the calls of birds and smelly bats, experience the magic of tropical forests, paddle down little sun dappled creeks and visit a river crocodile basking in the sun plus, catch all the fish you need for dinner.

Best of all, you don't need a guide. You can determine your own pace following the river as it flows downstream.

WHAT THIS TRIP ENTAILS

Maka at Gowild Adventures supplies the canoe and associated equipment. This trip is suitable for the novice canoeist although a certain degree of physical fitness is needed. The standard trip is 3 days, paddling about 22km on days 1 and 3 and day 2 only 8km. There are three campsite options for overnighing. Each is a basic bush camp with sleeping platforms, picnic table, fireplace, BBQ and drop toilet.

WHY WE ENJOY THIS STYLE OF SLOW TRAVEL

For many people, life in the 21st century is hectic and chaotic with a need to juggle competing deadlines, filled with electronic stimulation over which we have little control. An opportunity to escape from the connected world is difficult to find. In the isolation of the upper reaches of the Ord River, we see the occasional boat during the middle of the day and sometimes other canoeists join us to overnight at the Camp.

Every day is predictably unpredictable and just drifts away as we fish and paddle and relax. We must catch fish for dinner as we only bring fruit and vegetables with us. Thus, fishing is our major activity. With one of us alternately, paddling and the other trawling, we have our daily exercise. We catch catfish and "sooty grunters". In the heat of the afternoon, we laze around camp reading a real book. Since it is dark at 5:15pm, in the late afternoon, we create a recipe for that night's fish and prepare our dinner. We light tea light candles that we bring from home and in the resultant soft glow listen to the wildlife settling for the evening as we enjoy our fish and congratulate ourselves on how fortunate we are to be here.

WHY WE RETURN EACH YEAR

Our first Kimberley adventure was in 2008, trekking in the Admiralty Gulf. The guide mentioned the Gowild canoe trip so off paddling we went. Our reaction - great adventure, too short. We have come back every year since. Ten days is the perfect timing for us.

We return each August because essentially the experience of isolation has not changed much in 13 years. It is still warm in Kununurra and cold in the South. The camps are a little more comfortable and we still meet eclectic canoers who arrive late in the day and set off early next morning. We love catching, preparing and eating fish and the catfish and sooty grunters are as plentiful as ever.

After so many years, we know the river and its moods. Each year we delight in rounding the bend into Carlton Gorge. We are nearly at Coolimon Camp where our first day's paddle will end. Around

4.15pm, the last hour of daylight, the sun begins to sink lower and lower and the far hills become a lilac colour. The cliff above Pelican Rock becomes golden and glows in the fading sunlight. With the late afternoon sun tinging the rocky outcrops orange above the gorge, the contours look three dimensional and could be mistaken for manmade castle ruins.

The dawn chorus begins about 5.30am just as there is a touch of light in the sky. Lying in our mossie dome, we can see the sun coming over the horizon and colouring the cliffs. Screeching cockatoos fly over.

Nights are starry and bright-there is no light pollution. In our mossie dome, we see the night sky travel from one horizon to the other, hear the splash of river creatures and the scrambling of small animals. Some nights we hear the mournful howl of dingoes.

For the past three years, at the very far end of Coolimon Creek, amongst the sticks and reeds and waterlilies where only a canoe can pass, there lives a one and a half metre freshwater croc. He lies with his body on a little mud bank and his chin in the sun. We can almost touch him. He doesn't respond to us at all – he has few visitors.

For these experiences, we return again and again to this river we love.

OUR CHANGING VIEW OF KUNUNURRA TOWN

Initially, we arrived in Kununurra Town the night before our canoe trip and flew out the morning we returned. In those days, holidays were limited so we chose to maximise our time up river. Nevertheless, we began to learn about the joys and the challenges facing people who live in the town as we met people out on the river who live and work in Kununurra. Eventually, we made local friends and were able to holiday more and work less. Last year we bought a houseboat business with Maka and Carol from Gowild called "kimberleyhouseboats". Now after "roughing it" for ten days, we can enjoy the 5-star luxury of our boat.

We are offering packages to Gowild Canoe adventurers to combine a canoe trip with a finale on a luxury houseboat. Actually, if people just want the luxury part, we can provide that too. It sleeps six people and has everything for enjoying the isolation of the river in comfort. There are two fishing kayaks so you can paddle out there and catch your fish to BBQ. If this is too strenuous, there is a freezer and a fridge for store bought food and plenty of eskies to keep the drinks cold.

The upper reaches of the Ord River are so special and however you choose to travel it, you will have a wonderful experience.

A FAVOURITE CATFISH RECIPE

Thai Green Curried Catfish Parcel

For two packets

- Cook ½ cup of rice (more if hungry)
- Skin and catfish and cut into 8cm lengths
- Prepare 2 foil envelopes with a large piece of foil folded and folded tightly on 2 sides
- Open out the envelope and spoon rice onto the bottom
- Place fish fillets on top of rice
- Mix together a small can coconut milk, 2+ tablespoons of Thai green curry paste, a tablespoon of water, a squirt of lime and a bit of fish sauce.
- Spoon the mix into each packet. Make sure there is enough liquid as it will be turned into steam as it cooks. You may need to add more water.
- Seal up parcel tightly and place on the coals of your campfire or on the BBQ and cook 15 minutes.