

The Great Top Road

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Travel Australia's north from Broome to Cairns.

Driving and camping along Australia's longest driving route, the Savannah Way, is an adventure that is within anyone's reach.

While much of the road is unsealed and there are some challenging water courses to pass through along the way, it is a road trip that is almost incomparable in its diversity.

This 3700km touring route runs the breadth of Australia's north, from Broome to Cairns, and was once known by drovers as 'the great top road'. In an ideal world, it should be undertaken without any time constraints. There are lovely camping spots that beg to be lingered at, five World Heritage Areas and 15 national parks to explore, as well as many small attractions – snake handling shows, fossicking for gemstones, a ride on the Savannahlander train, and local museums to name just a few – along the way.

But without unlimited time on our side, we set out to drive the eastern half of the Savannah Way, starting in Darwin in a hired 4WD from Britz and heading to Cairns, with a few small diversions off the main touring route here and there.

We joined the Savannah Way at Katherine, 355km south of Darwin, heading east to Mataranka – where the best camping is at the oddly-named Territory Manor Caravan Park – and on to Butterfly Springs in Limmen National Park, where the campsites are adjacent to a lovely swimming hole.

The Roper River Road took us along the track of explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, past wetlands teeming with lilies and birdlife, and onto the Nathan River Road.

From here, it is another 117km to Borroloola, a good refuelling stop. Our overnight camp 100km further on is at Frank Shadforth's Seven Emu Station. Bought by Frank's father in 1953, this was the first Aboriginal-owned cattle station in the Northern Territory and the bush campsites perch on a cliff-top overlooking the Robinson River. Camping is only available here during the Dry, and facilities are limited to a bush drop-toilet, the ultimate "loo with a view", no door necessary.

Main Photo: Savannah Way watercourse.
1: Butterfly Springs National Park, NT.



After crossing the border into Queensland, a highlight on the road is Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park, just south of the Savannah Way. There are two options for camping near Lawn Hill Gorge: Adel's Grove, which has tent and caravan sites as well as cabins, or the national park campground which has 20 sites with toilets and cold showers (make sure you book well in advance between Easter and October).

After a hot day on the road, the perfect antidote is to rent a kayak and slowly paddle up the gorge, between its towering red sandstone walls, to the idyllic Indari Falls. It's the perfect spot for cooling off.

The Boodjamulla camps are good bases for visiting the Riversleigh Fossil Field, about 60km away. This World Heritage-listed mammal fossil site dates back about 25 million years. The 800 metre fossil trail takes about an hour and there is an interpretive centre to help you understand what you are seeing.

Over the next couple of hundred kilometres, there are a couple of great bush

pubs to stop off at – Gregory Downs, sitting alone on the Wills Developmental Road, and Burketown, which boasts the oldest pub in the Gulf. At the gate of the Gregory Downs Hotel, a local offers some advice on the state of the road, which is often badly corrugated. "Be careful," he warns. "Got two flat tyres on the next stretch in the past week." As it turns out, we only have one puncture over the whole 3200km trip.

A 70km side trip from Normanton brings us to Karumba, Australia's barramundi and prawn fishing capital, right on the Gulf of Carpentaria. After setting up camp at the popular Karumba Point Sunset Caravan Park, we head across the road to watch the sun go down from the Sunset Tavern where delectable mud crabs and seafood are on the menu.

Another natural attraction that shouldn't be missed as you head east is the hidden oasis of Cobbold Gorge, on the Terry family's Robin Hood cattle station. Access to the gorge is by guided tour only, but this is a great overnight stop. The camping ground has good facilities including a restaurant and a Savannah Guides

station. Cruise through the gorge on electric boats, silently gliding through a landscape of ancient sandstone, while you spot birdlife and the occasional freshwater crocodile.

Undara National Park, just 320km from Cairns, is also a major attraction, offering guided tours of the world's longest lava tube system. Undara Experience offers a range of tours, including sunset wildlife spotting (the lava tubes are home to colonies of microbats), and campsites. A restaurant and bar are part of the complex, and be sure not to miss the bush breakfast where you may need to guard your bacon from the watchful kookaburras!

The final 700km from Cairns to Normanton is sealed road, but despite that, the dust of the road seems to cling fast and as you arrive at the end of the Savannah Way you will certainly look forward to washing it away. But the memories that driving across this vast continent have created will stay with you forever.

1: Kayaking in Boodjamulla National Park.



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1: Undara lava tubes.
2: Tudor Manor camping, Mataranka, NT.

FACT FILE

Getting there

The Savannah Way runs for 3700km from Broome to Cairns, via the towns of Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Kununurra, Timber Creek, Katherine, Mataranka, Borroloola, Normanton, and Mareeba. Two routes can be followed. It is possible to do the stretches from Broome to Roper Bar (about 1900km) and from Normanton to Cairns (700km) on sealed road. The alternate route offers much more unsealed road, including the Gibb River Road in Western Australia. From Borroloola to Normanton (700km) the road is almost all unsealed. www.savannahway.com.au

Britz rents 4WD vehicles suitable for the drive, and will also provide camping gear for an extra fee – www.britz.com.au

When to go

The best time to travel the Savannah Way is in the Dry (April to October). During the wet or green season some roads may be impassable so check road conditions with local visitor centres or Queensland Transport and Main Roads – Ph 131 940 www.131940.qld.gov.au

Where to camp

Territory Manor Caravan Park – Ph (08) 8975 4516 www.matarankamotel.com

Butterfly Springs, Limmen National Park – www.nt.gov.au

Seven Emu Station – Ph (08) 8975 9904 www.sevenemustation.com.au

Cobbold Gorge – Ph (07) 4062 5470 or 1800 669 922 www.cobboldgorge.com.au

Karumba Point Sunset Caravan Park – Ph (07) 4745 9277 www.sunsetcp.com.au

Undara National Park – Ph (07) 4097 1900 or 1800 990 992 www.undara.com.au

Further information

Tourism Queensland – www.queenslandholidays.com.au

Tourism NT – www.travelnt.com

Savannah Way – www.savannahway.com.au

