



KALBARRI

take a walk on the wild side

by Rhianna King and Rory Chapple

Kalbarri National Park has long been one of Western Australia's favourite national parks. Its rugged river gorges and stunning coastline provides opportunities for hiking, photography, nature watching, abseiling, swimming, rafting and canoeing, and wildflower spotting. And now, a \$24 million redevelopment of the park, including the construction of the spectacular Kalbarri Skywalk, is set to provide improved access and even more reason for visitors to travel to the area and spend time in the local community.





As you round the path from the newly developed carpark near The Loop in Kalbarri National Park, through the stand of jacksonia and wattle trees, a break through the trees reveals a glimpse of the gorge and a fleeting preview into what lies ahead. Then, a little further on, the trees part, much like curtains opening to reveal a stage, and the spectacular vista across the Murchison River and surrounding gorge opens out in front of you. It's absolutely breathtaking. But this is just the beginning; a short walk to the edge of the gorge and onto one of the skywalks that jut out over the seasonal river beneath you, is an exhilarating way to experience this magnificent landscape.

WALKING ON AIR

The Kalbarri Skywalk comprises two cantilevered lookouts. Skywalk 1 extends

25 metres out over the edge of the gorge, while Skywalk 2 stretches 17 metres beyond the edge. Both structures are shaped like giant capital 'A's, which provide spectacular vantage points from a variety of angles. The deck of each skywalk is made from fibreglass-reinforced plastic mesh that visitors can see through and feel the breeze rising from the gorge and river 100 metres beneath them.

The new facility has been designed with access for all in mind (see also 'Access to more, for all' on page 12). The path from the carpark is flat and on the same level as the skywalks, so people with prams and wheelchairs can access and enjoy the extraordinary views. And the skywalk precinct has been designed to include an air-conditioned kiosk, where visitors can find a cold drink and some respite from the heat; as well as

wheelchair-accessible toilets and shaded areas.

In addition, visitors can now drive anywhere in the park without needing a four-wheel drive as all roads are now sealed and suitable to two-wheel-drive

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Above left and inset left Detail of artworks inspired by Nanda women Colleen and Mauretta Drage and Kayla Hampton.

Photos – Nicole Nelson/DBCA

Inset far left The main skywalk lookout during installation.

Photo – Dermot Boyle/Bocol Constructions

Background Sandstone texture at The Loop.

Photo – Rory Chapple/DBCA

Above Seventy-two tonnes of weathering steel cantilevered more than 25 metres out from the cliff edge.

Photo – Dermot Boyle/Bocol Constructions



vehicles. The park's walking tracks range from longer, challenging hikes to short strolls catering to people of all abilities. The path from the lookout to the river at Z Bend is rocky and steep, and there are stairs on the walk to Nature's Window, but the new works have created a much wider range of opportunities across the park to cater to different abilities.

NUTS AND BOLTS

In blustery conditions the wind whips around and through the base of each skywalk, but they feel (and are) substantial underfoot. The steel skywalk lookout structures are constructed from large weathering steel box beams. Each skywalk is bolted to a pair of sleeve plates, weighing 10.4 tonne for Skywalk 1 and 7.8 tonne for Skywalk 2. These plates are attached to massive concrete footings, buried in large

slots in the 400-million-year-old sandstone and anchored 10 metres deep into the rock. During the project, more than 1000 tonnes of sandstone was excavated to install the concrete footings, which has been repurposed in the landscaping to create steps, seats and artistic elements.

The lookouts were prefabricated in Perth and were 'trial erected' before they were transported north. Skywalk 1 was completed in eight segments and transported on six semi-trailers and Skywalk 2 was completed in five segments and transported on three semi-trailers.

Designing, developing and installing the skywalk has involved an army of people. Geraldton-based architectural firm Eastman Poletti Sherwood Architects designed the attraction, while Terpkos Engineering was the lead structural engineer. Perth-based Bocol Constructions was the head contractor for the construction and installation of the lookouts. Geraldton-based building company GBSC Yurra was the head contractor for the café, shade shelters and toilets and worked with DBCA landscape architect Ben Liddelow to realise the landscaping for the area. Staff from Geraldton Natural Limestone have worked tirelessly from the beginning of the project excavating the sandstone and then painstakingly repurposing the rock to create terraces, steps and other features. In total, more than 150 people, one third from the Midwest Region, worked on the project.

DRAWING A CROWD

Kalbarri National Park is located 570 kilometres (6.5 hours' drive) north of Perth. The park envelops the town it shares its name with, and plays a key role in attracting tourists to the area.

Prior to the redevelopment, there was only a small lookout at the skywalk location and access to the site and the nearby Nature's Window and Z Bend was via an unsealed and often corrugated road that was not suited to coaches, rental cars or nervous drivers.

However, since work began renewing the park's infrastructure, all of the park's unsealed roads to the gorge sites have been sealed (more than 32 kilometres) and the number of visits to the park has more than tripled. And, while the final tallies are yet to be tabled, it appears visitors are spending longer, and more of their precious tourist dollars, in Kalbarri and other towns in the greater Midwest region.

ANCIENT LAND, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

For thousands of years, the Nanda people have called the area now known as Kalbarri National Park home. They believe that a mythological Dreamtime serpent – the Beemarra – slithered down the Murchison River towards the coast, creating the landscape around her. She emerged at a site called Nunginjay Spring near the coast but was frightened by the sound of the thundering waves, so retreated through the hills to the river.

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Above One of the six prefabricated segments being lifted into place during installation.
Photo – DBCA

Above right Artist impression of the completed skywalk site.



Discover more about the Kalbarri Skywalk

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.





Above Indigenous connection to the land has been artistically incorporated.
 Photo – Annette Sellers/Northampton Old School Community Initiative

Below Visitors look out over the Murchison River.
 Photo – Rory Chapple/DBCA



The Nanda people have been involved throughout the design and development of the skywalk, which has been called 'kaju yatka', derived from the Nanda words kaju for 'sky' and yatka 'to walk'. As part of the project, DBCA secured funding to employ two Aboriginal rangers in a full-time capacity for two years. These rangers – Nanda men – have since become permanent employees and help greatly to manage the park and its increasing number of visitors. In addition, 10 Nanda people were appointed to the Nanda Interpretation Advisory Group to provide advice on the cultural interpretation of the skywalk site. The relationship between Nanda people and park managers has grown stronger through time and Nanda people now have greater opportunity to connect with their lands in and around the national park. Further opportunities for Nanda employment and business development include offering cultural experiences in the park.

Culture has been extensively incorporated into the interpretation for the site. The artwork of Nanda women

Colleen and Mauretta Drage and Kayla Hampton has been woven into the site's landscaping. Artworks include a series of tall metal poles that create a 'forest' of message sticks, carved depictions of local animals and plants in the sandstone seating. The Beemarra has been artistically recreated into the access paths and a "Coming Together" art piece features large steel hands inlayed into the path, surrounded by a welcome statement.

PLENTY MORE TO EXPLORE

While the skywalk precinct is set to become a major drawcard for visitors, there are also new facilities at Z Bend and Meanarra Hill, including new toilets, shade shelters, paths and sealed carparks ready for visitors.

With these attractions, and improved access to the park for a variety of users, there's more reason than ever for people to visit Kalbarri National Park and enjoy the spectacular sites of the whole Midwest Region.

The Kalbarri Skywalk officially opens in early April 2020.



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For more information about Kalbarri National Park, visit exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au.