

Journey into the heart of the Bungle Bungle Range

photos and text by Janine Guenther



Adventure out

There are a few places in the world that are so charismatic, so unrivalled, so extraordinary and so hauntingly beautiful that words can't do justice to describe them – they simply take your breath away and one of these places is the Piccaninny Gorge in the Purnululu World Heritage Area.



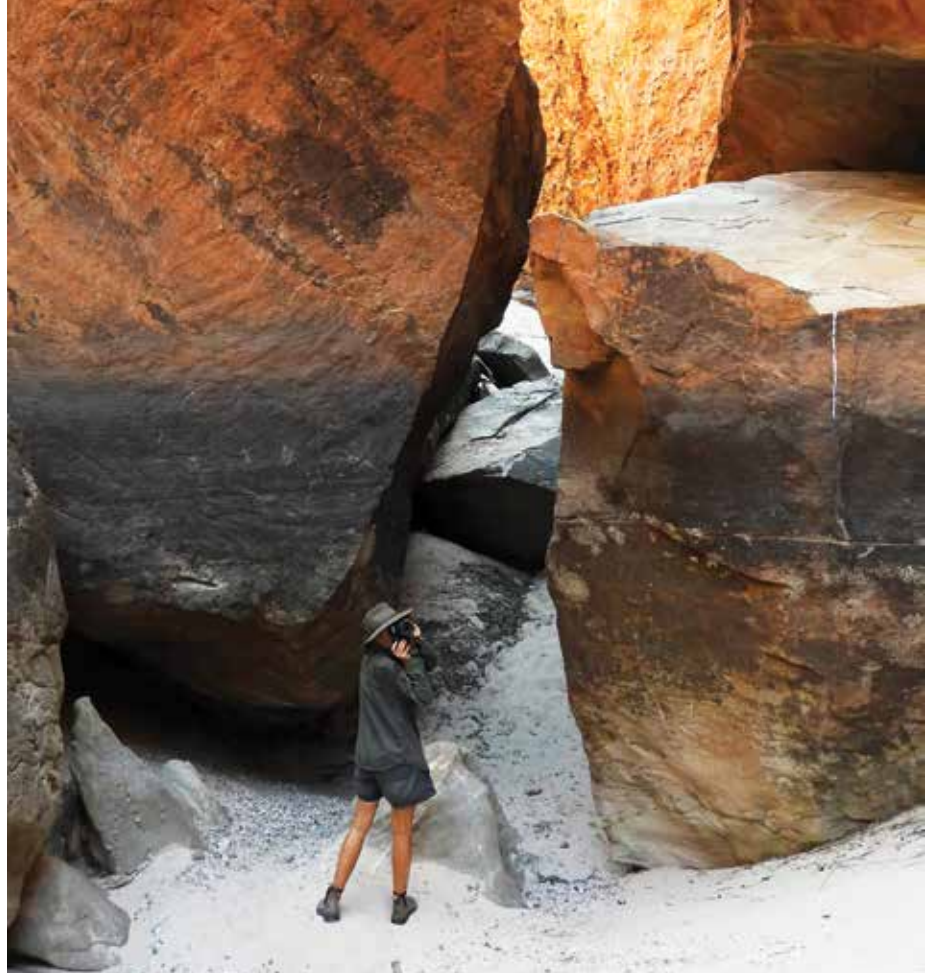
The majestic gorge, which leads into the heart of the Bungle Bungle Range, certainly took my breath away – quite literally – because the only way to explore the massive gorge system is on foot on the Class 5 Piccaninny Creek Trek, a hike over more than 40 kilometres.

Marching over the ancient rock, my breathing was certainly heavy. It was hot, my back was aching, and my neck muscles, not used to the constant pull of the heavy backpack, had started hurting three hours ago when I left the Piccaninny carpark – leaving behind a world, that in the face of nature’s imposing grandeur, soon vanished into insignificance.

Surprisingly, despite all my huffing and puffing, it was my uhing and ahing in awe and amazement that echoed from the otherwise silent rock walls – silent but not unforthcoming because inscribed in the walls is an amazing story that started more than 360 million years ago.

At that time sand and gravel, carried by ancient river systems, accumulated here, then got buried under younger sediments and compressed into sandstone and conglomerate. Thanks to some violent movements in the earth’s crust, resulting in a tectonic uplift, the Bungle Bungle Range was set free about 300 million years ago. Another uplift, occurring 20 million years ago, allowed weathering and erosion to apply their final touch and create today’s intricate maze of steep-sided gorges, beehive shaped towers and narrow chasms.

The Bungle Bungle Range is, no doubt, one of nature’s wonderlands – declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations



Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 17 years ago, gazetted as a national park 38 years ago and home to Aboriginal people for at least 50,000 years.

The imposing massif and the surrounding plains are the traditional homeland of the local Aboriginal people. Testimonials of their long connection with the land have survived to this day in many places in the park. Among these are shelters, rock art galleries and burial grounds.

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bush tucker in the form of berries, seeds, yams, reptiles, fish and mammals of all sizes.

My menu for the next two days of hiking was looking quite meagre in comparison and was restricted to the food and water I was carrying on my back. As this amount was limited, I had the best intentions to keep a sensible balance between pressing forward to get to the end of the gorge and taking time to enjoy the scenery. Well, it didn’t take long for the ‘balance idea’ to be discarded.

There was no way I could close my eyes to nature’s splendor. The creek bed with its dramatic rock formations, sculptured cataracts and intriguing ‘pavements’ (from bizarre patterns to solidified chocolate) was as captivating as the monumental sandstone domes and walls bordering it. Stopping for photos or simply pausing in admiration became as compulsive as waving away the friendly flies and wiping off the sweat that persistently trickled down my forehead into my eyes.

By midday, I finally reached the entrance to the actual gorge known as the Elbow – aptly named because it is here



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Main Massive sandstone domes and towering rock dwarf the hiker.

Inset Holes and crevices provide safe shelter for tree snakes.

Above Pitch black rock, white sand and a ‘glowing’ amber wall in the gorge.

Left Natural ‘pavement’ made from rocks in the Piccaninny Creek bed.

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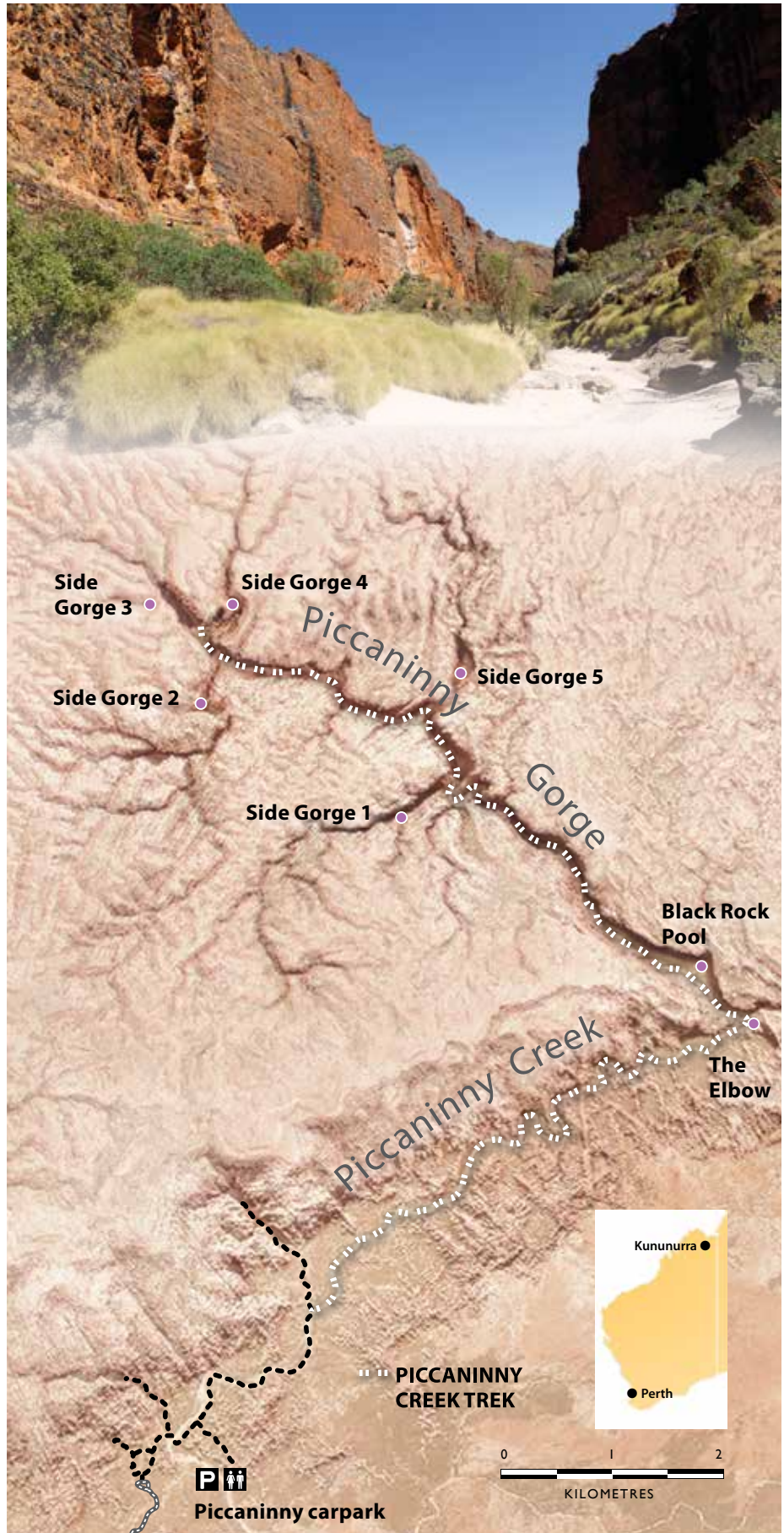
Above Dramatic colour contrasts in the gorge.

Above right The imposing mass of an ancient river system.

where the creek makes a 90 degree bend and instead of continuing along the edge of the range, heads right towards its heart.

For lunch, I had planned to reach the first water hole called Black Rock Pool. To get there turned out to be an adventure in its own right. Big rock boulders strewn along the creek that lead to the water hole, provided an almost insurmountable obstacle for a person carrying a heavy backpack which swayed from one side of my back to the other while clambering over and around the boulders.

Was it worth the effort? Yes, yes, and yes – embraced on three sides by towering rock walls and decorated with livistona palms (*Livistona victoriae*) and impressive rock boulders, this water hole was a jewel. It also featured a shady white beach onto which I enjoyed my lunch until I got interrupted by the sight of a tree snake (*Dendrelaphis punctulatus*).



“The biggest challenge in future will be to keep the balance between making some attractions accessible for tourists and preserving others, such as the Piccaninny Gorge. Only by limiting visitor numbers can these places be enjoyed in a respectful way.”



In fascination I watched the golden-coloured reptile climbing up a rock wall. The snake was not my only companion during lunch. A small flock of double-barred finches (*Taeniopygia bichenovii*) settled down for a drink only two metres away from me at the water's edge; a little friarbird (*Philemon citreogularis*) croaked from one of the palm trees and two crows (*Corvus orru*) arrived to check out my potential for leaving food scraps.

By the time I finished lunch and had a good look around, I had to discard another idea of mine, namely reaching the end of the main gorge that day. I could easily tell by the long shadows surrounding me that it was too late to continue.

For various reasons, I normally avoid camping right next to a waterhole but even that good intention got discarded because the sandy beach provided the only levelled area. So out came the tent and in complete silence I watched the gorge become engulfed in a warm blanket of darkness. A butcherbird (*Cracticus torquatus*) provided the icing on the cake of a perfect day by settling down in a tree nearby and raising its clear voice for the evening entertainment. I couldn't have asked for more.

In the morning, the crows impatiently saw me off, eager to scrutinise my campsite, but I had to disappoint them because I didn't leave anything but footprints.

Above Janine's exclusive camp on the white beach of Black Rock Pool.

Above right Impressive cataracts in the Piccaninny Creek bed.

After my return to the main gorge I dropped my backpack behind some rocks and swapped it for a small bag in which I put some water and lunch. Knowing I only had a few hours left on my trip, instead of turning left and back to the carpark I went right, further up the gorge to soak in the scenery and enjoy the peaceful harmony. It might sound selfish, but some places can't be shared with too many people; part of their attraction is that they are still reasonably untouched and can be enjoyed alone and in respectful silence.

Unfortunately, the sun didn't seem to share my enthusiasm and need for frequent stops. Instead it moved relentlessly across the dome of the sky and announced far too soon that it was time for me to turn around.

It was past sunset when I arrived back at the carpark. Opening the door of my Landcruiser, I re-entered a world that had fallen into pleasant oblivion during my hike while the rocky wonderland I just left behind, will, no doubt, always be in my memory.

Do it yourself

Piccaninny Gorge has no marked track and no defined endpoint so hikers must rely on their own navigational skills to complete the walk. The 20 kilometre return walk to the gorge entrance (the Elbow) from the carpark requires an overnight stop.

Exploring the entire gorge system can add up to more than 40 kilometres including the side gorges and 'fingers'.

Where is it? The Bungle Bungle Range in Purnululu National Park is 300 kilometres south of Kununurra

Getting there: The park can be accessed by plane, helicopter or high-clearance four-wheel drive vehicles with low-range gears, and only single-axle high-clearance camper trailers and caravans are permitted.

Staying safe: It is recommend to call ahead to Parks and Wildlife Service Kununurra office (08) 9168 4200 to confirm hikers are currently being permitted in the park. Hikers must register at the visitor centre before embarking on a hike through the gorge. Personal locator beacons are essential and available for hire from the visitor centre.

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