

By Chris Scott

HIGH & DRY

Chris Scott returns to Western Australia, this time to track the remote Fitzroy River in lightweight packrafts.

Following our brilliant run around Shark Bay in 2006, in 2011 Jeff, and I headed into the Kimberley in the far north of WA for an 80-mile run down the wild Fitzroy River. Located just 17° south of the equator, during a big wet season the Fitzroy becomes Australia's highest volume river, although by September we were expecting a string of pools requiring tiring portages. For that reason we chose three-kilo packrafts, light enough to roll up and carry if necessary. If we hit trouble there were nearby cattle station tracks and most importantly, the menace from 20-foot saltwater crocodiles was much reduced this far upriver. We'd see plenty of smaller freshwater crocs, but unprovoked they're no more dangerous than lizards, feral bulls or snakes, though we carried thick canvas 'snake gaiters' for walking in long grass.



FITZROY RIVER

At Fitzroy Crossing,

the only town for 150 miles in either direction, we dumped the van and took a short flight north over the hills to an isolated wilderness camp. Once the noisy Cessna was airborne Jeff gave me a thumbs up. The previous Wet had been broken all records and 1,000 feet below there was a lot more water than we expected so late in the dry season.

Next morning we were dropped off by river some 15 miles from Dimond Gorge. Here the Fitzroy

sliced through the King Leopold Ranges before meandering 60 miles to Geikie Gorge, a day from Fitzroy Crossing. In between there was nothing; we carried food for five days plus whatever we could catch.

Out on the water my Alpaca Yak was a superbly taught and responsive packraft. Jeff was in a vaguely similar £20 pool toy, a 'slackraft' with all the rigidity of a lilo.



Disposable slackraft versus expensive packraft; let the trial begin...



Jeff in his £20 'slackraft'
With all the rigidity of a lilo

Chris in his expensive Alpaca Yak
Superbly taught and responsive packraft

Vs

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hiding who knows what!

We set off along a deep, tree-lined pool but soon came to our first rock bar. Tramping in the mid-morning heat with maximum loads and boats on our heads underlined how effortless it was to paddle, although maybe not in a flaccid slackraft. Before us stretched a long pool where Jeff battled a headwind for hours, trying various paddling permutations. Nothing could shift the PVC toy at a satisfying speed.

Mile by mile the spinifex-clad hills crept by until we finally called it a day on a sandbar and tucked into the first of our dried bag meals followed by several cups of tea. By 6.30 it was dark and Jeff had already passed out after admitting, "This is going to be the hardest thing I've ever done."

At 5am it is light enough to get stuck into our first full day on the river. Jeff chose to walk the three miles to Dimond Gorge while I paddled, occasionally dragging the Alpaca through shallow rapids. We rendezvoused around ten and fought another headwind where the Fitzroy cuts dramatically into the ridge. A couple of hours beyond lay the Gap marking the southern limit of the King Leopold Ranges. The ochre sandstone cliffs became grey granite rubble and at the Gap we clambered onto a ledge and knocked back a litre of soup and a litre of orange drink while Jeff cast a handline, without luck.

Beyond the Gap, the Fitzroy weaved across the baking savannah, obscured by its corridor of thick trees hiding who knows what! Sure enough, the flow soon disappeared into a huge rock pile and dense woodland. Shouldering our packs, we staggering up and over the boulders, boats on our head. An hour later I was parched from the effort and croaked to Jeff, 'Let's camp at the end of the next pool.' We'd put in an 11-hour day of just thirteen miles and were beat.

Another bag meal, lashings of tea and Jeff was out by six – a personal best. As the stars lit up, out on the billabong crocs chased the fish and bats dashed overhead while I potted around, before squeezing into my tiny K-Mart tent to grab a mozzie-free night.

Up again with the light, we were expecting more ankle-twisting portages. Little did we know this would be one of our best days on the Fitzroy. Soon we entered an area of rocky outcrops and knotted rapids where freshies basked on sandy banks or dozed submerged, close to our feet. As the day progressed we paddled lazily or towed our rafts over sandy shallows, as effortless as walking a dog. At times the main channel got blocked by flood debris, diverting the flow into the fringe canopy of trees. Here, shaded from the sweltering exterior, we were ensconced in a benign riverine underworld where blue-winged kookaburras squawked, lanky-necked egrets stalked the pools and yard-long water monitors licked the air. After the previous day's effort this was more like it.



A day later, soon after mid-morning ‘smoko’ I came across a deposit of alluvial gold, sparkling in the shallows. Using a plastic bin lid I’d found earlier, Jeff panned the sediment and we soon had some colour. There certainly was gold in the Kimberley and the 2011 flood had clearly exposed riches beyond our wildest dreams. Then, like so many heat-struck prospectors, we came to our senses. ‘Fools’ Gold?’ ‘No fools around here mate’ we chuckled.

Ankle-deep wades led to pandanus-lined pools, but were often preceded by exhausting, hip-deep quicksands. Elsewhere log jams or jumpy cattle

hampered progress, but the ever-present Kimberley soundtrack of squawks, whistles, warbles and chirps filled the air. At one point the thick aroma of urea choked the air; up ahead a huge colony of brown bats clung from the river gums, lifting with a rowdy shriek as we slowly paddled by.

In the heat and pitiless UV, Jeff’s PVC cheapie was softening like tar and picked up another flat. Fixed in a jiffy we pressed on, squeezing under roots or over fallen logs, and a one point scrambling up the steep banks to dodge a cranky bull.



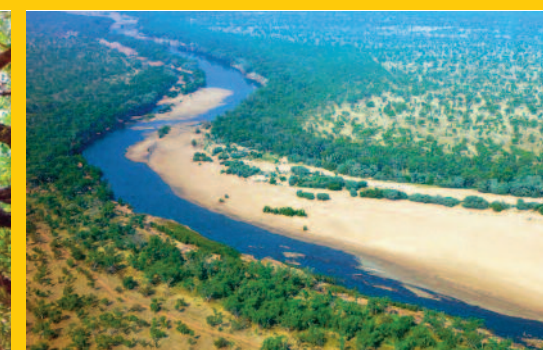
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Dimond Gorge



Above: Jeff panning the sediment.



An hour from sunset another huge sandbank deflected the flow into a knot of flood-mangled timber. With cowpats and bat shit all around, it wasn’t a great spot but we were done in. According to the map we were close to the Big Bend which led to Geikie Gorge. Fifteen miles – it had been another tough day but we were getting to grips with Fitzroy pack boating. Jeff prepared a delicious garlic damper on the embers and we were out like lights.

Mid-morning Day Five we turned Big Bend and spied the Geikie Ranges in the distance. Though the road bridge was still 25 miles away, it marked the beginning of the final leg. The rock changed again to limestone and as we picked our way through some gnarly rapids Jeff’s floor got snagged. It was smoko time anyway, so while the water boiled he made another repair.



Soon we'd be entering Geikie Gorge National Park where, as you'd expect in rule-clad WA, private boating was restricted in favour of tour boat cruises and camping was banned outright. Paddling down from the Leopolds was unheard of, but we'd not been able to inform the ranger beforehand, so were expecting a bollocking. From the plane we'd seen that the river passed the gorge in a deep green channel. For me in the nippy Alpaca that was great news, for Jeff it wasn't.

We rocked up onto a slither of an island for lunch and I offloaded the Yak for a quick blast, skimming across the water like a pebble. "Have a go, Jeff." He did and of course, loved it. "I shouldn't have done that. I really shouldn't have done that," he realised. It made getting back in his insufferable pool toy all the more galling.

As we entered the main gorge the blaring commentary from a tour boat bounced off the walls, scoured by 40-foot-high tide marks from the annual flood. We'd been spotted for sure; they'll be waiting for us downriver, hands on their hips. We decided we'd deal with that when it came; it's not like we were pissed and shooting at crocs while honing around on jet skis.

Without the protecting tree canopy, the full heat of the 40°C afternoon bore down on us. The river was always cooler, but with weary arms, Jeff set off across a sandbank by way of a rest. Half an hour later he flopped back into his boat, clobbered by the radiated heat. I hitched him up and we set off along the Geikie's famous East Wall where eons of flooding had carved the former subsea reef into scalloped and fluted forms.

Gliding under overhangs and nosing into caves, we were enjoying a break in the pace when up ahead a babe in a red kayak came into view. As we got close she started chuckling.

"Good ON-ya guys!"

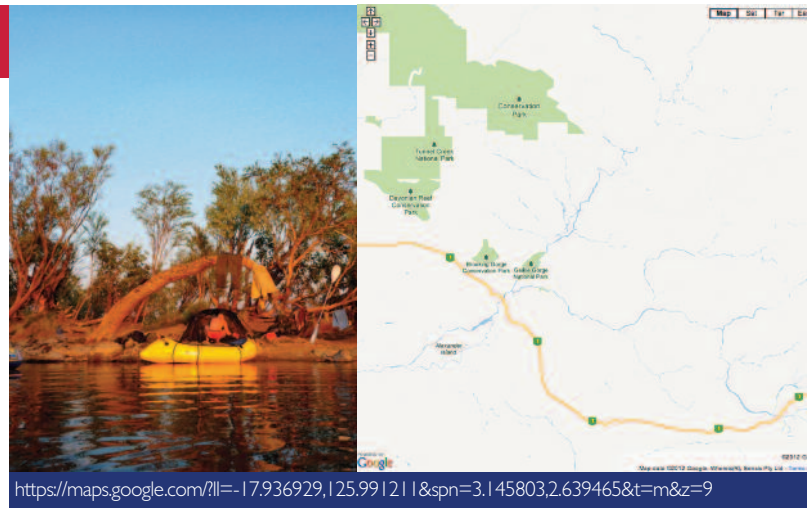
She said as we filled her in on our adventure, something she'd wanted to do herself

"I hope you're not laughing at us" I said with a stern grin. It was Ingrid, the Cool Ranger in her Scupper Pro sit-on-top kayak, the only person north of the 26th parallel remotely impressed by our achievement. "Good ON-ya guys!" She said as we filled her in on our adventure, something she'd wanted to do herself. Ingrid confided that a big sandbank a couple miles ahead was out of the park – we could camp there.

We'd slipped through Geikie without a getting a ticket and the end was now in sight, but Jeff had well and truly had it with his slackcraft and talked about walking to town. By dawn he'd come to his senses; he'd nursed his bloated paddling pool for nearly a week, past sleeping crocs and charging bulls, over boulder fields and under fallen trees, patching it as he went. Yesterday had been a slog, but he knew he had to see it through to the road bridge.

Ingrid, the Cool Ranger in her Scupper Pro sit-on-top kayak

INFORMATION



<https://maps.google.com/?ll=-17.936929,125.991211&spn=3.145803,2.639465&t=m&z=9>

Weather: Western Australia has a number of climatic zones due to its enormous size. In the north-west, heavy rains mark the summer 'wet' season, although the interior is mostly dry with high summer temperatures; while the southwest has mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Perth's rainfall is highest between May and September. February is usually the hottest month of the year, averaging temperatures of 31°C. A sea breeze called 'The Fremantle Doctor', blows from the south-west providing relief from the heat. Winters are relatively cool and wet with temperatures of around 18°C.

Money: Australia's national currency is the Australian dollar which comes in denominations of \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 notes.

Australia



Visas: Unless you are an Australian or New Zealand citizen, you will need a visa to enter Australia. New Zealand passport holders can apply for a visa upon arrival in the country. All other passport holders must apply for a visa before leaving home. You can apply for a range of visas, including tourist visas and working holiday visas, at your nearest Australian Consulate. You can also apply for certain types of visas online.

There are important things you should know before applying for, or being granted, an Australian visa. These include applying for the right type of visa, application requirements, your obligations while in Australia and the importance of complying with visa conditions.

For more detailed information visit the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship website.

Population: The 2011 population of Australia is estimated at approximately 21,766,711 people. Most of the population (83% in 1996) live within 50 km of the coast and concentrated mainly in the large coastal cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide.

Animals: Our unique animals are one of the many reasons people visit our country. Australia has more than 378 mammal species, 828 bird species, 4000 fish species, 300 species of lizards, 140 snake species, two crocodile species and around 50 types of marine mammal.

More than 80 per cent of our plants, mammals, reptiles and frogs are unique to Australia and are found no-where else. Some of our best-known animals are the kangaroo, koala, echidna, dingo, platypus, wallaby and wombat.

Surf and water safety: Australia's popular beaches are usually patrolled by volunteer lifesavers from October to April and red and yellow flags mark the safest area for swimming. For information about marine stingers and crocodile safety read the Queensland Government website.

Language: Australia's official language is English. However, being a multicultural nation with a significant migrant population, there is also a tremendous diversity of languages and cultures.

Electricity: Our electrical current is 220 – 240 volts, AC 50Hz. The Australian three-pin power outlet is different from some other countries, so you may need an adaptor.

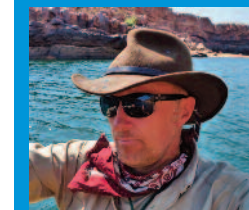
And so at 6am we set off separately for the final 13-mile leg which I figured I'd complete by noon, collect the van and meet Jeff back at the bridge. With nothing to lose I went for it, but by ten miles I was fading. The familiar cycle of headwinds, quicksands, log jams and enervating heat took its toll as iridescent green jabiru storks carved the sultry airwaves. There were a lot more roos down here too, but what about that bridge?

Finally there it was, less than a mile away. Triple-trailer road trains hammered across, oblivious to the tiny raft below, its paddler up to his knees again in quicksand.

Presently a shadow passed overhead, but it wasn't a fallen river gum or a rustling cadjeput; it was the bridge on Highway 1 which ringed the entire continent of Australia. Worn out and parched, I crawled up the steep bank, rolled up the Alpacka and headed for town.

Information:

Alpacka Rafts are available from: www.alpackaraft.com or in Europe at: www.packrafting-store.de

**Chris Scott's IK&P blog**

is packed with valuable packrafting info

and helpful suggestions at: <http://apaddleinmypack.wordpress.com/packrafts/>

other AUSTRALIAN STORIES



Walking with sharks

By Chris Scott

Chris Scott asked "Why doesn't anyone paddle around Shark Bay, Jeff? It seems ideal for beginners like us."

"Name puts them off I reckon," he replied. "It's famous for big Tiger sharks; National Geographic made a documentary there once."

"Oh really?" I said. "I thought it was just a name..."

I had just flown in to Perth, Western Australia (WA) from London and together with Jeff's girlfriend Sharon we'd hit the road for the 1,000km drive to Shark Bay.

To read further visit:

<http://www.thepaddler.co.uk/expaustraliasharks.html>