

## **BAPTISM OF FIRE (A KIMBERLEY BUSH-WALK)**

On 1 June 2005, Victoria Jackson, geologist and bush-walker, told the Kimberley Society about her experiences as a first time walker in the North Kimberley. She started the talk by showing a map of the route travelled from the cave where Bradshaw sighted the first Bradshaw (Gwion Gwion) figures, down Garimbu Creek to the Roe and Moran Rivers, and across the plateau to the Mitchell Falls. This summary relates Victoria's account as if it were taken from her diary.

Originally we were to be a group of eight, but Dick Hewitt and his friend Martin Cole thought our trip would be a bit boring, and so chose a more challenging route. I would still be walking out from that one I think! Our members were Bryan Smith, leader, Nell Iliffe, on her 4th trip, David Cameron, a veteran bush walker, Michael Johnson, an Englishman and a great walker, Ian Jackson, my husband, and myself. A particular focus of our journey was to visit the historic site where Joseph Bradshaw first found the exquisite Bradshaw Paintings. The site was too far away from the Mitchell Plateau for us to walk from in 10 days, so Bryan Smith, our leader, arranged for a helicopter to drop us in, to spend a little time at the site, then get us dropped to the start point of our walk. The Gorges in this area were steep and tight, so the walk turned out to be a little more difficult than was at first anticipated. Several of the gorges were impassable so we had to go around them. With others, a lot of climbing was required.

The journey begins with a helicopter ride to the first campsite, which was the Bradshaw site. We saw, as shown in the many photos accompanying the account, tassel, clothes peg and stick figures as well as a great range of more recent Wandjina and animal art, something that looked like a mythical being, and clawed hands.

**On Day 2** we were at Garimbu Falls, an incredibly beautiful place and a great campsite. We experienced our first "peppermint foot bath" this evening after sipping Nell's green ant tea cocktails. David carried a canvas foot-bath for the entire trip, and treated sore feet in the evenings.

The original plan was to find a way down these cliffs surrounding the falls and follow the Garimbu Creek to the Roe River. However, Bryan conceded that these were impassable so we had to take the long route the next day and go around the ridges.

As this was our first real day of walking, and Ian and my first Kimberley experience, we actually didn't believe that Bryan anticipated negotiating these cliffs in the first place. When we realized that he was serious, you can imagine the huge sigh of

relief we breathed when he announced that we didn't have long enough ropes to drop the packs that distance!

We went back up creek a way and traversed the ridge and came across some stone circles, continued on, and, almost at the top of the ridge, came across a stone overhang that had a "ship" painted under it. Over the ridge, first fall of the trip was mine and I did the classic turtle on its back when I misjudged a step down a rock. We then met an almost dry, narrow creek bed with remnant rain forest. Although it was pretty and a haven for birds, it was quite difficult to travel down as the forest encroached on it, and it was strewn with loose, irregular-shaped boulders and tree branches.

At the end of what seemed like a very long day, we found a camp-site near the junction of this creek and the Garimbu. We named it Morning Star because a resplendent Venus crept over the eastern ridge early in the morning, with a visible waning moon sinking over the western ridge.

**Day 4.** Still on the Garimbu with ceremonial standing stone on the ridge top. It was breathtaking scenery looking back from where we had come. A most serious threat for us was never knowing if there were any rapids or waterfalls between us and the tidal reaches of the Roe River that salt water crocodiles could not negotiate. So, from this point until we left the Moran and headed for the plateau country, a good measure of caution was exercised when near deep pools.

**Camp 3 on Day 5. Victoria's Relief.** The name of this campsite had nothing to do with ablutions! By now I was wondering how I would make the rest of the journey if it was all to be as challenging as the past few days. Bryan "promised" that the gorge country would open up ahead for a less difficult journey. Wishful thinking I'm afraid! David was such an optimist. He kept on saying that it will get easier round the corner. I thought that he knew what he was talking about and hung on his every word for the first couple of days. More rock paintings of a female crocodile laying her eggs.

The second pack drop occurred at the junction of the Roe. This is where Dave lost his cheap plastic cup, which, attached to the outside of his pack, smashed on rocks. It has taken us 3.5 days to reach this junction. By this time, I think we have all figured out that we are not going to make it back to the Mitchell Falls campsite on schedule, and to start budgeting for yet another helicopter flight.

**Camp 4. Anticipation on Day 6.** I'm still anticipating an easier road ahead! The strata in the sandstones here are quite thick and don't offer the same ease of

climbing as the sandstones of thinner strata. By the time we got here, we were all well versed in helping each other with bum pushes, leg ups, pull ups and bum slides!

**Day 7. We meet the Moran; Dingo's Lair to Trapdoor.** We all enjoyed the spectacular scenery at the junction of the Roe and Moran Rivers. We walked around to the lowest point of the headland so as not to have to climb down the cliff face, but the descent was still extremely steep and lined with slippery spinifex grass and crumbling and loose rocks from the top of the spur to the river bed. Bryan managed a dip in a shallow pool, but the rest of us just tried to shade ourselves from the sun and rest! Wary of crocodiles, we helped each other across the river to continue our journey.

**Day 7. Approaching Trapdoor Camp.** This is a particularly beautiful gorge. We were looking for footprints on the other side that would indicate that Dick and Martin had passed by but no luck. Those we did see weren't theirs.

**Camp 6. Day 8 at Trapdoor.** We named this camp Trapdoor after we left it behind. By now, we were used to thinking the way ahead would be a bit harder than anticipated. This morning was no exception. Our intrepid Englishman took off downstream a few minutes ahead of the rest to see if we could pass through the gorge. Well, foot access dead-ended within about 500m and initially we thought we might have to retreat and go around again, adding yet further time to our journey. We persevered and, after doing belly crawls under narrow ledges, found a spot where, with great exertion, we could help each other scale the face of the gorge and continue forwards.

**Day 8. Lost Camera Break.** While Michael was busy assisting the rest of us scale the cliff, he put his camera on the ground. About half an hour later, he discovered that he had left it behind. Michael retraced his steps and, fortunately, found his camera while the rest of us took a welcome break at this picturesque spot. We were on our way to a waterfall on a tributary of the Moran, then to head upstream to plateau country and down to the Mitchell River. But we missed our turn off, ignoring the "tributary" which was a snaky, thin watercourse with some muddy patches full of feral bull footprints. When we took a GPS reading, it was obvious that we had taken the wrong path. But what a beautiful lunch spot. We had the usual confrontation with a wild bull, Michael in particular, trying to photograph it.

**Day 8. Camp 7 of Skillion and Boab.** It was getting late in the afternoon, and we kept moving forward looking for a suitable campsite. We had been a bit spoiled with camps along the way, but this was the best we could do this night. Most of us had a pretty uncomfortable night trying not to slide down the slope into the creek. We

stuffed boots and clothes under the down slope side of our bedrolls to make an almost level surface to sleep on.

**Day 9. Waterlily lunch.** We were cutting across country to connect with the Mitchell River, and were on the plateau. We spotted a few broilgas, water monitors and a snake along the way and walked through fields of flowers to get to this pretty spot for lunch. The water here was really cold, and there was a patch of water lilies in the creek, but only one flower.

**Camp 8. Frog song Day 10.** This is our last camp and challenges our first to win best prize. The creek cascaded down to a big pool, making a natural spa. There was a natural amphitheatre for a fireplace with perfectly placed ledges for our seating around the fire. The frogs sang all night, but it was a real song, not a croak, and it was a wonderful sound to go to sleep with.

**Last Lunch at Mitchell River on Day 10.** Finally, we reached the Mitchell and by this time we were three days behind schedule. Had things gone to plan, we would have been back at Mitchell Plateau campsite by now. The trip had been quite arduous and we were all pretty tired by this time. The Mitchell was a bit of a disappointment as there was lots of evidence of feral bulls, the water looked pretty foul and there were lots of mosquitoes, flies and green ants around. Bryan called Captain Tim on the Sat. phone and I wasn't shy about being the first to be ferried back to base! Tim did a loop so that we could get some pictures of the falls though it was not directly in our flight path. It had taken us nine days to travel 62 km.

Bryan Smith was the trip organizer and a great trek leader. We certainly appreciate all he did for us. Nell Iliffe's friendship and Kimberley experience was a great comfort. Dave Cameron rolled up with every conceivable medicine and antidote known to man. With the omnipresent threat of Dave administering a Staminade enema, no one dared complain about being dehydrated! Michael Johnson was truly a great walker. He learnt his skills in the highlands of Scotland. He sustained an injury by stamping on a branch to break it up for the fire. Instead, it flipped up and nearly broke his nose! Ian Jackson went to battle with a big slab of rock. It was a couple of meters square and about 15cm thick. Several others had walked on it and it didn't move. As Ian stepped off it, it slid off its resting place. Luckily it wedged between two other rocks that created a gap in which was Ian's leg. Had it not stopped, it surely would have trapped him. Me, I couldn't have survived without anti-inflammatory drugs and a lot of help from the others.

Both groups reunited at the Mitchell Plateau campground. On reflection, the best part of the trip was the rock art and the scenery and the worst part having to jump from one high rock to another and crying in fear!

When we got back to the plateau, most of the group walked down to the falls and there, floating down the river replete with packs, were Dick and Martin. Their adventure is another story again.

Transcribed and edited by *Daphne Choules Edinger*