



Lava tubes, cascading hot springs, hidden gorges, historical relics and a unique railmotor — **BRIDGET MARTIN** finds diversions aplenty between Cairns and Normanton.



>> sampling the savannah way

Pat beamed as she leaned across the crowded counter of the Croydon General Store and Museum. She obviously loved it when tourists asked stupid questions.

But we had a complicated arrangement with a train driver the following day and didn't want to get it wrong. We wanted to take the historic Gullflander train from Croydon to Normanton, 150km to the west, but didn't want to leave our car behind. A solution was quickly presented. One person drives to the halfway point, Blackbull, where they swap with the train passenger.

"Is Blackbull easy to spot?" my husband had asked. "Well," twinkled Pat, "it's the only building between here and Normanton." We should have realised that. After all, no buildings had interrupted the 150km stretch from Georgetown to Croydon and there had been little by way of habitation in the 92km between Georgetown and Mt Surprise.

There is a lot of Outback along the Savannah Way, which stretches across the top of Australia from Cairns to Broome. Our focus was the Gulf Savannah region, that bit of Queensland east of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Having zigzagged up the rainforested coastal ranges, the road suddenly ran straight through a sparse woodland of wiry, drought-resistant trees with wizened, crevassed, black bark, thin leaves and tough names like ironwood and stringybark. Between them, the pinnacles of termite mounds spiked the landscape, a sparse, yellowed grass struggling to clothe the red earth. From time to time, an unexpected movement broke our trance, as covens of black crows rose to reveal the well-picked carcass of a road kill.

There is a lot of this along the Savannah Way but, like a necklace strung across the top of Australia, it is strung with a series of gems, unexpected surprises for the traveller who is willing to seek them out. At Undara, ancient hollow lava flows have created damp and mysterious tunnels which we explored with a knowledgeable Savannah Guide — a member of a growing organisation devoted to excellence in the presentation of the region's highlights to visitors.

Live volcanic action awaited us just a little further on, at Tallaroo Hot Springs, where superheated water bubbles up from the earth to cascade down a series of terraces — and finally into a man-made



way

far left: Slowly down the river: Cobbold Gorge is an unexpected gem, an electric boat explores the sculpted ravine.
above, from left: Down the tubes: Undara lava tubes, created 200,000 years ago, prove fascinating. Leftovers: Relics from the past are abundant in Croydon. Ready for a chat: Pat Wilson presides over the Croydon General Store. Hear ye, hear ye: Chris Weirman loves to share his passion for Croydon's past. Stationed: Driver Ken and assistant Patrick in Normanton Railway Station. PICTURES: LINCOLN FOWLER

swimming pool, in which we soaked our weary bones. Further west, a 90km side trek from Georgetown brought us to another Savannah Guide enterprise — Cobbold Gorge. This was a completely unexpected treat, a slow and silent trip in an electric boat which squeezes between 30m sculpted sandstone cliffs, through a ravine inhabited by a healthy population of freshwater crocs.

Towns are few and far between on the Savannah Way and would be even fewer had not the barely visible speckles of precious metal led to the gold rushes of the late 19th century.

Croydon, once the centre for a population of more than 30,000, is now inhabited by 250 residents, justifiably proud of their numerous heritage buildings. For just \$5, you can join local legend and Savannah Guide Chris Weirman for a tour of the town.

For Chris, the town of 30,000 still exists. A simple hole in the pavement was once the foundation of one of the 36 hotels, long ago ravaged by fire. His passion for the town's history kept him talking well after the sun was preparing for another spectacular nose-dive into the horizon.

Pat's General Store in Croydon has a very special charm, not least because it has resisted the supermarket trend. Functioning since 1894, its dual function as General Store and Museum seems entirely appropriate. Thirty thousand people left a lot of rubbish behind, and every town along the route has its museum stuffed with old glass bottles, Chinese coins, ancient steam irons, faded photos of more populous times and rusting tools of obscure function. The Croydon Museum has a chaotic appeal all its own.

Next day, the Gullflander railmotor rattled out of Croydon, with yet another Savannah Guide, Ken Millard, at the helm. While carting supplies to remote cattle stations, Ken prides himself on keeping his passengers informed not only about the history of the area and its railway (it had to be built with metal sleepers instead of timber ones to foil the termites) but also plants and animals along the way.

By early afternoon we pulled into Normanton Railway Station, a Victorian relic. Car and train passenger reunited and we left the Savannah Way for the final 72km to Karumba, on the shores of the Gulf. We were already looking forward to the return journey.

>> fact file

getting there: Cairns to Normanton (710km), is sealed all the way.

The Gullflander train travels from Normanton to Croydon every Wednesday, returning on Thursday. Shorter trips and charters are available. Call Normanton Station (07) 4745 1391 or Cairns Travel Centre on 1800 620 324.

Visit Undara and Cobbold Gorge on detours from the Savannahlander train, leaving Cairns on Wednesdays.

tours: Accommodation, camping and tours at Undara; Ph: 1800 990 992; www.undara-experience.com.au

Tallaroo Hot Springs, Ph: (07) 4062 1221.

Cobbold Gorge camping and tours Ph: (07) 4062 5470; www.cobboldgorge.com.au

For Croydon tours call (07) 4745 6125 or (07) 4745 6185.

Savannah Guide enterprises see www.savannah-guides.com.au or Ph: (07) 4031 7933.

Wilderness Challenge, a Savannah Guide enterprise, visits most sites. Ph: (07) 4055 6504; www.wilderness-challenge.com.au

contact: Gulf Savannah Development, Ph: (07) 4031 1631; or visit the website: www.gulf-savannah.com.au