



# Coast to Gulf the rail way

**Bridget Martin** visits lava tubes and hidden gorges on a trip of discovery across the top of Australia.

**T**he shopkeeper beams as she leans across the crowded counter of the Croydon General Store and Museum. She obviously loves it when tourists ask stupid questions.

But we have a complicated arrangement with a train driver the following day and don't want to get it wrong. We want to take the historic Gulflander train from Croydon to Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

We want to board the train about 150 kilometres west of Croydon, but don't want to leave our car behind. A solution has been suggested. One person drives to the halfway point, Blackbull, where they swap with the train passenger. "Is Blackbull easy to spot?" my husband asks.

"Well," comes the reply, "it's the only building between here and Normanton." We should have realised that. After all, no buildings interrupted the 150km stretch from Georgetown to Croydon and there was 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 right across the top of Australia, from Cairns to Broome. Our focus is the Gulf Savannah region, that bit of Queensland east of the Gulf.

After zigzagging up the rainforested coastal ranges, the road suddenly runs straight, through a sparse woodland of wiry, drought-resistant trees with wizened, crevassed, black bark,

thin leaves and tough names such as ironwood and stringybark. Between them, the pinnacles of termite mounds spike the landscape. Sparse, yellow grass struggles to clothe the red earth. From time to time, an unexpected movement breaks our trance, as covens of black crows rise to reveal a well-picked road kill.

There is a lot of this along the Savannah Way but, like a necklace stretching 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 Volcanic National Park, ancient hollow lava flows have created damp and mysterious tunnels which we explore with a knowledgeable Savannah Guide - a member of a growing organisation devoted to excellence in the presentation of the region's highlights.

Further west, a 90km side trek

from Georgetown brings us to another Savannah Guide enterprise. Cobbold Gorge is a completely unexpected treat, a slow and silent trip in an electric boat that squeezes between 30-metre 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, peppering the rocks of the region, 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 people, justifiably proud of their numerous heritage buildings. For just \$5.50 you can join local legend and Savannah Guide Chris Weirman for a tour of the town.

For Weirman, the town of 30,000 still exists. A simple hole in the footpath was once the foundation of one of the 36 hotels, long ago ravaged by fire. He knows the whole story. The well-preserved courthouse was the scene of many a drama. For Weirman, it is as if they happened yesterday.

His passion for the town's history keeps him talking well after the swarms of screeching galahs have gathered to roost and the sun is preparing for another spectacular nose-dive into the horizon. The General Store in Croydon has a very special charm, not least because it has resisted the supermarket trend.

Trading 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. There is no clear distinction between shop and museum. A vast and very ancient safe within the shop turns out to contain postcards; in the museum we find a box of fresh tomatoes.

Next day, the Gulflander railmotor rattles out of Croydon. Carting supplies to remote cattle stations along the track, Dan, the driver, prides himself on keeping his passengers informed not only about the history of the area and its railway (the sleepers are metal rather than timber to foil the termites) but also the plants and animals along the way. Frequently, he brings the train to a grinding, screeching halt to show us a bowerbird's bower, a colony of flying foxes, an abandoned gold mine ... he knows every inch of his track.

In the early afternoon we pull into Normanton railway station, a Victorian relic. Having successfully swapped at Blackbull, my husband and I are safely reunited and, our journey at an end, we head off to catch the sunset splashdown over the Gulf of Carpentaria.



## Destination Savannah Way

The Gulf Developmental Section of road, Cairns to Normanton (710km), is sealed all the way. Visit Undara and Cobbold Gorge on detours from the Savannahlander train which goes as far as Forsayth (near Georgetown) and leaves Cairns on Wednesdays; phone 1800 620 324.

Wilderness Challenge, a Savannah Guide enterprise, visits most of these sites. Phone: (07) 4035 4488. More: [www.wilderness-challenge.com.au](http://www.wilderness-challenge.com.au)

### Accommodation

Accommodation, camping and tours are available at Undara. Information phone 1800 990 992. More: [www.undara.com.au](http://www.undara.com.au).

Cobbold Gorge has a campsite. A variety of transport and tour options is available. Phone (07) 4062 5470. More: [www.cobboldgorge.com.au](http://www.cobboldgorge.com.au)

### Tours

To book a tour of Croydon phone (07) 4745 6125; e-mail: [croydoninfo@bigpond.com](mailto:croydoninfo@bigpond.com). The Gulflander train travels from Normanton to Croydon every Wednesday returning on Thursday. Shorter trips and charters are available. Call Normanton Station on (07) 4745 1391 or Cairns Travel Centre on 1800 620 324.

### More information

For more about Savannah Guide enterprises, see [www.savannah-guides.com.au](http://www.savannah-guides.com.au) or phone (08) 8985 3890.

Far horizons ... (clockwise from above) the view from the Constance Range, the Gulflander train, boating in Cobbold Gorge and wallabies in the grass on the Savannah Way. Photos: Courtesy Wilderness Challenge. Map: Robert Parkinson

