

GO WILD IN THE PILBARA

Rich in resources, and richer in scenery, **Cathy Finch** finds the Pilbara does 'big' like nowhere else.

THE FIRST TIME I flew into Western Australia's Pilbara area I was young, adventurous and contemplating a move to this remote location from the polished desks of Canberra. I considered myself well-travelled and up for a challenge, but no countryside here nor overseas had prepared me for the landscape 1,600 kilometres north of Perth.

As the wide open expanses changed from crisp golden browns to deep rich reds beneath our plane, oceans of rock purged

upward from the earth, rising in what resembled man-made mounds of rubble – rough, remote and somewhat surreal.

I felt like I'd landed on the moon.

A world away from suburbia, the Pilbara has since become a popular place to travel, not for white-sand beaches and palm trees, but for an intriguing insight into a unique landscape. This mining area is the powerhouse of our economy.

Today, driving over hours of long, lonely roads to Port Hedland, the arid

scenery is still dramatically punctuated with fields of striking wildflowers and flocks of green budgies that spiral from tree to tree. Wedge-tailed eagles hover above roadkill and emus amble over barren soil.

Even after all this time, my first impression of the modern port is that it's small and underwhelming... until I emerge from an old-fashioned milk bar in the main street to see a 300 metres long tanker sail past the end of the road. ▶



You don't get that in Canberra.

Initially built as a township to service the needs of the local pastoral industry, the discovery of iron ore in the 1960s changed Port Hedland's focus to mining. It has grown to be the world's largest bulk export terminal, and one of the largest iron ore loading ports in the world.

With industry normally tucked away with little public access, here I wander down to the end of Wedge Street where the narrow entrance to the harbour filters past my picnic table. Feasting on fish and chips, seagulls flutter and squawk above as I sit and watch one of the world's largest and busiest working harbours go about its day.

Massive ships glide through the channel, accompanied by a fleet of tug boats helping to push, pull and manoeuvre their bulk on and off berths. They negotiate a huge tidal range that sometimes exceeds six metres. A wander along the Esplanade's 'interpretive walk' provides added information about the port's history.

There's no disputing everything up here is on the far end of a scale that starts

at 'big' and stretches to 'colossal'. To really get close to the action, it is worth booking a guided tour of the BHP Billiton Iron Ore facility. Even the trains up here are an attraction, stacked high with iron ore and reaching over two and a half kilometres in length. Visiting train-spotters are regularly seen hanging over the rails of the Redbank Bridge as the ore makes its way from the mines near Newman to the port, bound for foreign lands.

Salt is also big business, and the harvesting and extracting of seawater using the evaporative power of the sun and wind has been going on here for more than 40 years. The Dampier Salt farm makes an iconic picture at sunset as the white stockpiles reflect in a series of ponds, a contrast against the fiery Pilbara earth.

Back at the harbour I watch the ship loaders move through their operations as darkness falls on a harbour that still doesn't sleep. Instead, it crackles with electricity and the movement of conveyors, equipment, ships and their rich cargo.

There is much wealth to be found in the Pilbara's massive resource industry,



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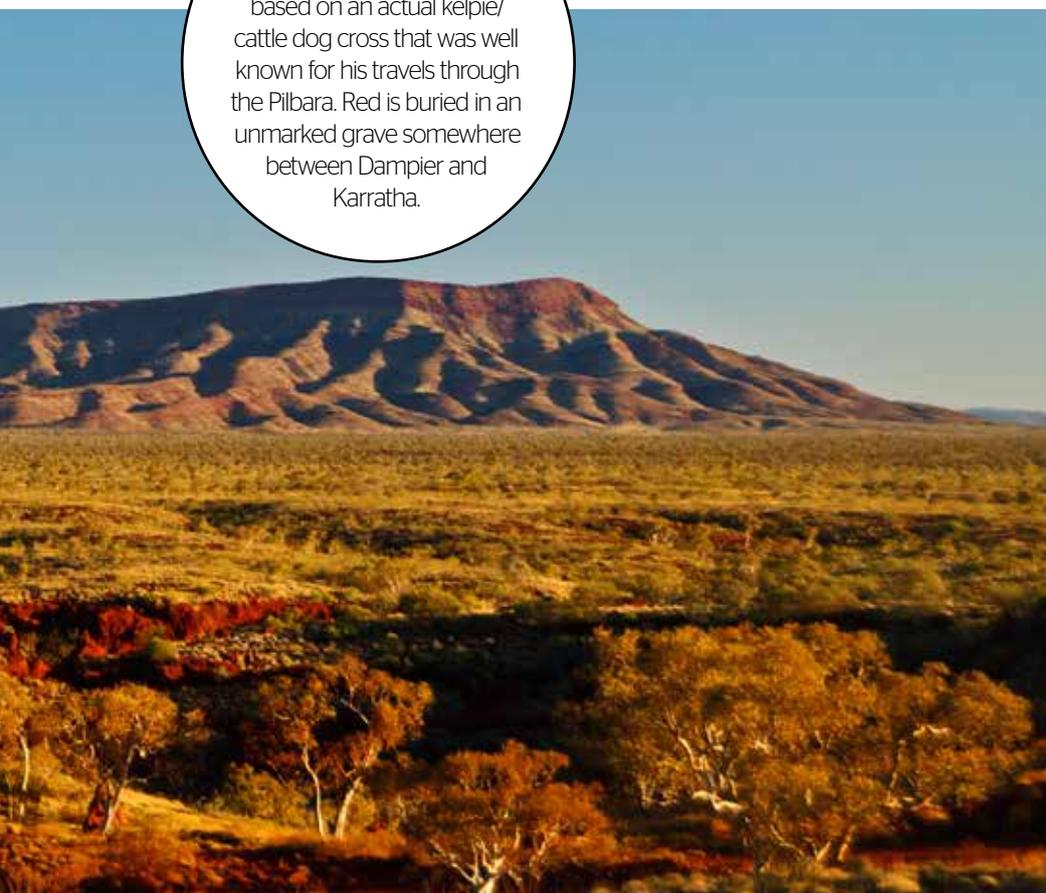
Clockwise from top left: The bright Sturt's desert pea flower; there is prolific rock art in the Pilbara; vast spaces and rocky outcrops are iconic of the Pilbara; spinifex pigeons in the area.





FAST FACT

The movie *Red Dog* was based on an actual kelpie/cattle dog cross that was well known for his travels through the Pilbara. Red is buried in an unmarked grave somewhere between Dampier and Karratha.



but the area is also rich in Indigenous and European history, pristine nature reserves and surprisingly abundant wildlife.

A few hours' drive south, the Murujuga, or Burrup Peninsula, which means 'Hip Bone Sticking Out' in the Ngarluma/Yaburara language, contains some of the earth's oldest rock formations. Housing tens of thousands of ancient etchings, it is also said to comprise more rock art than anywhere else on the planet.

Engulfed by a 2.5 billion year-old landscape, wandering over rocky knolls and mounds, I marvel at endless engraved motifs in the form of animals and their tracks, figures of varying shapes and forms and different types of fauna. There is a bit of climbing involved, but most are accessible with a moderate level of fitness.

Perched nearby on the shores of King Bay, the tiny township of Dampier acts not only as a port for the mining and salt industries, but a base for travellers keen to explore the Dampier Archipelago. Its 42 islands host a hugely diverse marine ecosystem, and are a popular spot for fishing, crabbing and turtle nesting. It's also perfect for boaties seeking a lonely island to drop a line and sleep under the stars. I'm lucky enough to join friends on a fishing trip that brings home plenty of fresh, sweet coral trout for dinner, but there are a number of deep-sea fishing charters on offer for travellers not pulling a boat.

Adjoining the port of Dampier, Karratha is a major town offering modern services and the largest shopping centre in the Pilbara. Here I restock before making my way south over some (at times, rough) dirt roads to access one of our country's most stunning national parks.

Made up of a series of plunging gorges etched through the scorched red rock over billions of years, Karijini National Park is packed with crystal clear pools, waterfalls and adventure walks. Each and every gorge offers a unique experience, accessible sometimes just 50m from a car park. For the more adventurous, enlist a guide, who will supply ropes ◀

and climbing equipment. Massive escarpments rise out of the flat valleys while in other areas, the landscape appears normal until you gaze down into the earth's crevices, seemingly cracked like egg shells.

This area deserves several days to properly explore and I manage to add in a little bit of 'glamping' to my stay. I move from my open swag below a wide expanse of stars to a deluxe eco tent at Karijini Eco Retreat, the only upmarket accommodation in the park. Scattered amid the Pilbara's ancient crust, a selection of permanent tents perch beside the stark white trunks of snappy gum trees and create an oasis in the midst of a wild landscape. I was visited by spinifex pigeons, geckos, goannas and dragons, although I didn't welcome everyone at my doorstep; in the morning, I emerged to the long body of a python slipping away from the dining area. After all, you've got to draw the line somewhere in the soil.

From mining to fishing, rock art to iron ore, gorges and waterfalls to salt stockpiles and pools, the Pilbara presents a backdrop like you have never experienced before. 📍



This image and below: A waterfall cascades into a pool in Karijini National Park; Karijini Eco Retreat.



Round-up

GET THERE

The Pilbara is located approximately 1,600km north of Perth. The region covers roughly 500,000 square kilometres. Airnorth operates regular services from Darwin and Broome, book at airnorth.com.au.

STAY

The Esplanade Hotel,
Port Hedland
www.theesplanadeporthedland.com.au

Karijini Eco Retreat
karijiniecoretreat.com.au

EAT

The Port Hedland Yacht Club,
Sutherland St, Port Hedland
phyc.com.au

MORE INFO

visitporthedland.com
pilbaracoast.com