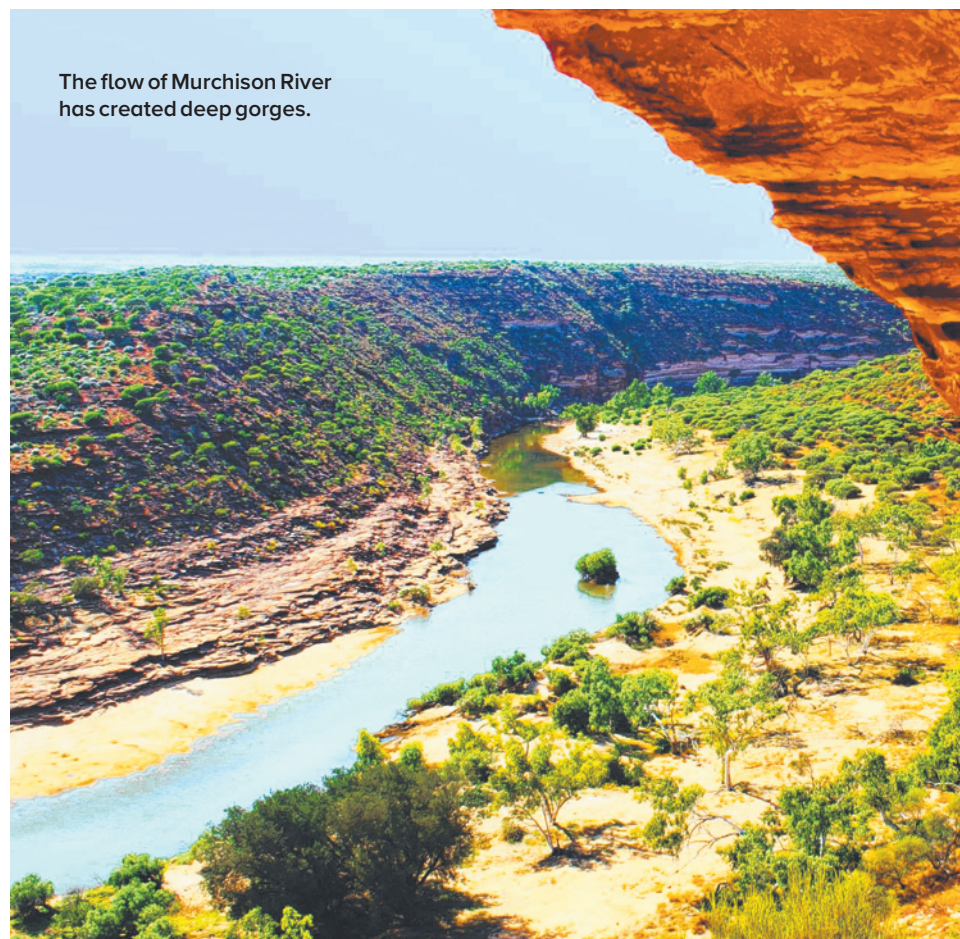


Memories of Kalbarri are hard to beat

From the road to the stage, this '90s adventure has it all



The flow of Murchison River has created deep gorges.

Cameron Wilson

IN 1995, I MOVED FROM SYDNEY to Perth to attend Murdoch University. On arrival, having never been to Perth before, I discovered that my fantasy of getting around on a bicycle was just that, a fantasy. The city was all freeways, and I would have to buy a car. In hindsight, picking a 1979 four-speed manual Holden Torana UC was genius. But the truth is, it cost \$1000 to buy and I had \$1000 to spend.

Most university holidays I can remember, my mate Campbell and I would load the gear – tennis racquets, golf clubs, surf fins, fishing clobber, a couple of guitars – into the Torana and drive north. Our destination was always the same: Kalbarri, 570km from Perth, a six-hour drive.

The selection of cassette tapes was above reproach: Cold Chisel, Midnight Oil, Bruce Springsteen, Paul Kelly, Jeff Buckley, Radiohead. Never was there a more apropos moment to plunk in a tape of The Triffids album *Born Sandy Devotional*, and get lost in the desert desolation of this Perth band and its signature song, *Wide Open Road*. If you know the song, you know what I mean. If you don't, for shame.

Even now, I believe what saved Kalbarri from a garish Big Roadside Attraction and hordes of incidental tourists was, you had to intend on going there. From Perth, it was Highway One north to Coral Bay, Broome and beyond. For Kalbarri, you turned off the highway on to Route 354. Or you didn't.

Campbell and I invariably did. We would stay at the backpackers, play golf and tennis free on the sly (poverty-stricken students, remember), bodysurf at Jake's Corner, or throw a line in off the rocks. And splurge on a Big River Ranch horseshide, fording the Murchison River before a wild gallop as the horses headed for home.

And there was Finlay's Fish Barbecue. Back then, anyone with a guitar and an inflated sense of self-esteem could show up, play a few tunes, and eat for free. We had the guitars, and most likely the inflated sense. Between sporting hi-jinx, Murchison

BETWEEN SPORTING HI-JINX, MURCHISON GORGE AND SOME EPIC BODYSURFS, IT'S HARD TO SAY WHAT WAS OUR KALBARRI HIGHLIGHT

Gorge and some epic bodysurfs, it's hard to say what was our Kalbarri highlight. But a free seafood barbecue, in exchange for warbling a few Paul Kelly and John Mellencamp songs, seemed like the deal of a lifetime.

These days Finlay's has its own microbrewery, apparently making "Pale Ale, IPA, Lager, Wheat Beer and a beautiful Stout". What a world. We might never have left. And this from their website in 2020: "If you are a talented performer and interested in performing at Finlay's please send an email..." The implication is that you send a showcase video link, but I'm guessing a phone call before the road trip, chuck an old six-string in the back, and a free seafood barbecue awaits.

It's speculation of course, but I fancy that 1979 Torana is still on the road too. Repainted canary yellow perhaps, chugging along South Terrace in Fremantle, doing a slow drive-by for the punters.

In any case, I'm tempted to give Campbell a shout – I reckon he might be in. finlayskalbarri.com.au, bigriverranch.net

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