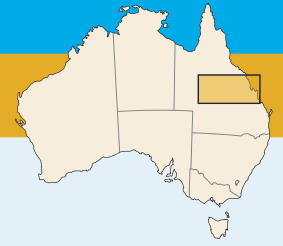


Your great Australian journey starts here

CENTRAL QUEENSLAND GEMS

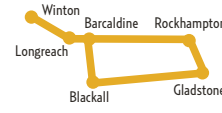


Length: 8–14 days Fly/drive option: Rockhampton

Waltz through some of Australia's greatest legends as you venture from Rockhampton onto the vast Mitchell grass plains of the central Queensland outback. Here you'll find a land that inspired our unofficial national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*, and the creation of Qantas and the Australian Labor Party. You'll experience a true-blue slice of outback Australia as you wander among the footprints of a dinosaur stampede, uncover a gem or opal, and blow the froth off a couple in pubs that have as much character as they do beer.

Central Queensland Gems – Travel Times

Route	Distance	Duration
Rockhampton – Barcaldine	579 km	7hrs 40mins
Barcaldine – Longreach	107 km	1hr 20mins
Longreach – Winton	179 km	3hrs 20mins
Barcaldine – Blackall	106 km	1hr 20mins
Blackall – Gladstone	712 km	9hrs 30mins
Gladstone – Rockhampton	107 km	1hr 30mins



Travel tip

Some roads and tracks off the main driving route in this area may become impassable when wet. Check with locals or the RACQ if unsure.

Those wanting to extend this trip could consider travelling on from Winton to Cloncurry and Mount Isa, or heading north to Hughenden and Richmond.

Websites

- www.queenslandholidays.com.au/destinations/outback
- www.destinationlongreach.com.au
- www.experiencewinton.com.au
- www.dinosaurtrackways.com.au
- www.capricorn tourism.com.au

A to B Rockhampton to Emerald

The drive begins at Rockhampton (www.rockhampton.qld.gov.au/articleDetail.asp) and you don't have to travel far to find a couple of great attractions. The **Rockhampton City Art Gallery** has major works from Australian artists.

North of town are the Capricorn Caves (www.capricorncaves.com.au), where you can tour through Cathedral Cave to the enormous Cathedral Cavern. The acoustics are perfect for the carols by candlelight service held there each year. Around Christmas time (December and January), you can also witness the Summer Solstice Light Spectacle, when the midday sun beams through a shaft to light a cavern 14 m below ground. The adventurous can **abseil** through the shaft or take a wild **caving tour**.

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Cathedral cave

At nearby **Mount Etna Caves National Park** (www.epa.qld.gov.au), rangers run dusk tours from December to February to view the thousands of little bent-wing bats fly out from a cave to feed, rushing past you as you stand at the entrance.

If you think you might miss the **beach** during this drive, have a final fix at Yeppoon, about 40 km from Rockhampton. Leave Rockhampton on the Capricorn Highway and soon you'll be able to **fossick** for your own 'thunder eggs' – 120-million-year-old-rocks with gem centres – at Mount Hay. While here, you can also tour the Aradon pewter factory (www.aradon.com.au).

Out of Dingo, home to the world dingo trap-throwing contest (and an associated race meeting) each July, it's worth detouring the short distance into **Blackdown Tableland National Park** (www.epa.qld.gov.au), with its sandstone escarpments rising direct from the plain, and an array of waterfalls; the drive onto the plateau is steep and winding, and unsuitable for caravans.

As the names Emerald, Sapphire and nearby Rubyvale suggest, you're about to enter the gemfields, where gems are regularly found. There are a number of **fossicking parks**, where you can poke around for your own. **Fossicking licences** are available from the Big Sapphire in Anakie (www.bigsapphire.com.au). If you'd rather admire gems than dig for them, Gemfest (www.gemfest.com.au) is held in Anakie each August.

There's also plenty of black gold – coal – north of Emerald at Clermont, where the Blair Athol Mine works Australia's largest seam of thermal coal. Free tours run on Tuesdays and Fridays (www.queenslandholidays.com.au).

B to **C** Emerald to Longreach

Cross through the Drummond Range as you motor west to Jericho (www.jericho.qld.gov.au/visitors/index.shtml), where there's a monthly **film screening** at perhaps the world's smallest drive-in, which can fit just 36 cars.

Ahead, Barcaldine (www.barcaldine.qld.gov.au/visitors/index.shtml) is famed as the site of the 1891 shearers' strike (which ultimately led to the creation of the Australian Labor Party). The ghost gum known as the Tree of Knowledge (which died in 2006) is the spot where the strike leaders met. The Australian Workers Heritage Centre (www.australianworkersheritagecentre.com.au) recounts the strike, and has tributes to working men and women.

While in Barcaldine you can also enjoy a classic bit of **cinema** in the canvas seats at the Radio Theatre, and nibble on damper and sip billy tea at Mad Mick's Funny Farm.

It's an hour's drive across to Longreach from Barcaldine, but you can break the journey in tiny Ilfracombe at the renovated Wellshot Hotel, a landmark here since the 1880s.

Longreach (www.longreach.net.au) is both the birthplace of QANTAS and the home of



Stockman's Hall of Fame

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the **Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame & Outback Heritage Centre** (www.outbackheritage.com.au), which is a comprehensive tribute to stockmen, explorers and other outback pioneers. At the **QANTAS Founders Outback Museum** (www.qfom.com.au), tour a fully equipped Boeing 747.

C to D Longreach to Winton and surrounds

Continue deeper into the outback, across the yellow Mitchell grass plains, as you journey on to Winton (www.experiencewinton.com.au), where it's worth setting up base for a few days and exploring the many attractions beyond.

About 140 km north-west of town is Combo Waterhole, said to be the billabong in 'Banjo' Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda*. There's another noted waterhole of sorts in nearby Kynuna, with the Blue Heeler Hotel, a bush pub classic. If you're still thirsty – it gets hot out here – there's an even more famous pub at McKinlay: the Walkabout Creek Hotel gained its fame after starring in *Crocodile Dundee*.

South from Winton, history takes on dinosaur proportions at the Lark Quarry Conservation Park (www.dinosaurtrackways.com.au), site of the world's only recorded **dinosaur stampede**. Hundreds of reptilian footprints are preserved in the rock.

Further south still is the turn-off for the virtual ghost town of Opalton, where you can **noodle for opals**. Information can be gleaned from the Opalton Outpost, the only building in town. The roads to Lark Quarry and Opalton are unsealed, so check on road conditions in Winton.

In Winton itself there's plenty to see and do. The town's tourist centrepiece is the **Waltzing Matilda Centre** (www.matildacentre.com.au), complete with indoor billabong and a wealth of information about the origins of the famed bush poem. Visit the North Gregory Hotel, where *Waltzing Matilda* had its first public reading in 1895. Behind the hotel is the unusual Arno's Wall, constructed using everything from motorbikes to sewing machines.

Revisit **dinosaurs** at the National Trust-listed Corfield and Fitzmaurice Store, where there's a diorama of the Lark Quarry dinosaur stampede and information about Elliot, Australia's largest dinosaur, found near Winton just a few years ago.

Relax afterwards by catching a film at the open-air Royal Theatre.



Lark Quarry

D to E Winton to Carnarvon Gorge

Return along the Matilda Highway as far as Barcaldine, turning south towards Blackall (www.blackall.qld.gov.au), where the bronze statue of Jackie Howe highlights one of the town's great claims to fame. It was near here, on Alice Downs station, that



Blackall Woolscur



Carnarvon Gorge

the legendary Howe shore a world-record 321 sheep in seven hours 40 minutes with hand shears. You can learn more about Howe at the New Universal Garden Centre and Gallery.

While in town, visit the Blackall Woolscour, the last remaining steam-driven woolscour in the country, and see the black stump – the phrase “beyond the black stump” supposedly derives from here.

Continue southwards to Tambo (www.tambo.qld.gov.au) and turn onto the marked Wilderness Way. The good-quality dirt road skirts the Salvator Rosa section of **Carnarvon National Park** (www.epa.qld.gov.au). **4WDers** can get to this section of the park, where you’ll find the spring-fed Nogoia River and Louisa Creek, and fantastical rock formations such as Spyglass Peak.

At Springsure (www.bauhinia.qld.gov.au), set amid sunflower farms, you can’t help but notice Mt Zamia and Virgin rock, the latter named for a supposed resemblance to the Virgin Mary. Drive to the top of Mt Zamia for **great views**, while a drive along Springsure Creek may even result in a koala sighting.

Roll south through Rolleston to reach Carnarvon Gorge (www.epa.qld.gov.au), one of central Queensland’s greatest natural features, a deep gash in the earth with white sandstone walls up to 200 m high. The gorge can be explored along 21 km of **walking tracks**, which visit its pockets of rainforest, **rock-art sites**, profuse wildlife (including platypus) and botanical treasures such as king ferns and enormous cycads. **Camping** is available in the national park only during the Queensland school holidays (excluding the summer holidays), but you can stay just outside the park at stylish Carnarvon Gorge Wilderness Lodge (www.carnarvon-gorge.com) or Takarakka Bush Resort (www.takarokka.com.au). The resort also has camping.

E to A Carnarvon Gorge to Rockhampton

Return to Rolleston, turning east on the Dawson Highway, through delightfully named Banana, to Biloela (www.biloela.com), where it’s worth checking out the exhibitions at The SILO for an insight into the region’s primary industries.

Head back to the coast near the busy port town of Gladstone (www.gladstoneholidays.info), turning north towards Rockhampton. It’s worth detouring into the charming mining town of Mount Morgan (www.mountmorgan.com). The ‘mount’ has been mined to become one of the largest artificial holes on earth. Tour the mine site with TMC Tours (www.tmctours.com.au), before concluding the drive back in Rockhampton. ■



Rockhampton