

finding yourself in the great south-west



Road trips don't come any more vivid or memorable than a journey through the USA's most seminal desert landscape.

STORY | PHOTOS KIM WILDMAN

'DEAD END. GPSs are wrong!' blares the giant billboard in the front of our rental car. "I told you the GPS was leading us in the wrong direction," I snap at my parents, impatiently brandishing the road map I'd picked up at the airport.

The last time I remember going on vacation with my parents was when I was 10, packed into the back of the Holden station wagon along with my three siblings for a road-trip down the Pacific Highway to see our relatives in Melbourne. Fast forward some 30 years and here I am in the back of a rental car an hour outside Albuquerque, USA, wondering 'what am I doing?'

We'd both visited the States before, but never together and never to the South-West. An invitation to a friend's wedding in Santa Fe, New Mexico, however, soon inspired a Griswold-esque, two week, cross-country family road-trip taking in some of the South-West's greatest natural sights.

After a weekend of wedding festivities, we briefly detoured south to marvel at the oddity that is UFO-obsessed Roswell and explore the gleaming snow-white dunes of White Sands National Monument, before finding ourselves back in Albuquerque joining America's legendary Route 66 for our own rock 'n' roll journey west across New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada to Las Vegas. As we set off I can't help but hum, 'Get your kicks on Route 66'.

Crossing into Arizona, we divert north to Monument Valley. Straddling the

“
We watch mesmerized
as the layers of red
rocks intensified and
then dissolved into soft
lavenders and misty
blues as the sun set.”

Utah/Arizona border, it looms large in Wild West road-trip fantasies with the towering flame-red sandstone buttes and spires serving as the Technicolor cinematic setting for countless Hollywood films, from John Ford's 1956 classic western *The Searchers* to *Forrest Gump* and *Thelma and Louise*. Yet no matter how many times I had seen them on film, as the monolithic buttes appeared on the horizon I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Entering the valley we self-drive the 27 km rutted red dirt road passing enormous rocks bearing names such as Elephant Butte, Three Sisters and Totem Pole. The highlight of the circuit – at least for Dad and I – was John Ford's Point, a rocky outcrop that offers a spectacular view of the northern half of the valley which played a starring role in many of his movies. Excitedly, Dad and I walk to the viewpoint, draw our cameras and shoot the Wild West of our imaginations.

From Monument Valley, we head south-east to the Grand Canyon. One of the seven natural wonders of the world, the gaping 1.6 km deep canyon swathes its way 446 km across northern Arizona. Sitting on the edge of the rim, looking out over the vast chasm, we watch mesmerized as the layers of red rocks intensified and then dissolved into soft lavenders and misty blues as the sun set.

That night we bunk down in Williams, a railroad town on Route 66 full of

MAIN IMAGE: GRAND CANYON AT SUNSET. ROUTE 66 SIGN, ARIZONA. RIVIERA, LAS VEGAS. STRINGS OF CHILLI, NEW MEXICO.



nostalgic old-style diners and fading motels with wonderful neon signs, and tuck into a delicious juicy steak at Rod's Steak House. Back out on the street, music spills from a rustic Wild West themed bar, enticing us in. Taking a seat around an outdoor campfire, Mum and I wait as Dad disappears inside the bar's swinging saloon doors to order us a drink. He soon returns with two beers for himself and I and a wine for Mum unwittingly served in a glass jar.

"I can't drink out of that," she cries indignantly. "Wine's served in a wine glass, not a jam jar!" "They didn't have wine glasses in the Wild West," I try to appease her, stifling a laugh.

Next morning as we're loading the car, Mum produces the jam jar from the inside her handbag. Dad and I stop mid-packing and look at her aghast. "No-one at home will believe I had to drink wine from a jam jar, so I had to take it," she smiles sardonically, hopping into the front passenger's seat.

From Williams, we continue along Route 66 to Kingman before turning north to Las Vegas. While the city attracts thousands of visitors each

year eager to strike their luck (the average tourist apparently loses US\$500 gambling in Vegas), after the raw beauty of the South-West, the cavernous casinos with their blinking neon lights seem excessive. So I save my money and seek refuge from the monotonous 'ka-ching' of the slot machines in our room.

Two days later, as we let the GPS guide us through the confusion of Vegas' highways and motorways to the airport, I am suddenly sad our family road-trip has come to an end. While we had taken many wrong turns on our journey as we had done throughout our parent-child relationship, in spite of our arguments along the way, what we did find was a new respect for each other.

How to get there: Qantas (13 1313 or visit www.qantas.com.au) offers connecting flights from Brisbane to Las Vegas, Nevada, via Auckland and Los Angeles. United Airlines runs regular domestic flights from Las Vegas to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Avis (www.avis.com) and Hertz (www.hertz.com) both have offices in Albuquerque International Airport.

TRAVEL OFFER: GROUP ESCORTED TOUR

22 Day Highlights of USA and Niagara Falls will take you from the bright lights of Broadway in New York and the spectacular Niagara Falls in Canada, to Yellowstone and Bryce Canyon national parks, the Grand Canyon and along Route 66 to Las Vegas. Continue on to the West Coast to experience the glamour of Hollywood, finishing up in San Francisco. From \$3354 per person twin share, departing June 7, 2012. Refer to page 3 for more details and talk to our award winning consultants on 1300 888 449 or email travel@racq.com.au.

MAIN IMAGE: WESTERN RIM OF THE GRAND CANYON. HIGHWAY SUNSET, ARIZONA. CLASSIC DINER, NEW MEXICO. JOHN FORD'S POINT, MONUMENT VALLEY, UTAH/ARIZONA. CIRCUS CIRCUS CASINO, LAS VEGAS.

Escape completely® on the Dawn Princess®



15 night Sydney to Honolulu

Tonga, Western Samoa and Hawaiian Islands
Your 15 night cruise holiday departing 13 April 12 visits Tonga, Western Samoa and the Hawaiian ports of Hilo, Maui, Kauai and Honolulu.

Enquire about other cruising options available:
20 nights Honolulu to Sydney – 27 April 12
35 nights round trip from Sydney – 13 April 12[^]

BONUS offer: Up to \$150pp onboard credit[^]

15 nights from **\$1,998***
per person twin share
Interior Stateroom
No credit card fees

15 night Northern Explorer

North Queensland, Northern Territory, Bali and Western Australia

Your 15 night cruise holiday departing 30 May 12 includes delicious and fresh main meals, spacious accommodation and welcoming service with no tipping required.

BONUS offer: Up to \$75 pp onboard credit+

Enquire about the reverse sailing:
17 nights Fremantle to Sydney – 10 July 12

15 nights from **\$2,299***
per person twin share
Interior Stateroom
No credit card fees



Contact your travel team directly on **1300 188 184**
travel@racq.com.au



* Terms and conditions apply – Rates are in AUD, based on lead categories per person twin share, inclusive of discounts, taxes, charges and GST. Offers are subject to availability at time of booking. Prices are correct at time of print but are subject to changes and may be withdrawn without notice. Fares available after this date may be higher but may also be lower. Valid for new bookings only. Princess Cruises has limited staterooms which are available at these fares. [^] Up to \$150pp onboard credit is based on 35 night Roundtrip Cruise from Sydney and is awarded to the first 2 passengers in a cabin only, aged 13 years and over. +Up to \$75pp onboard credit is based on 15 night Northern Explorer and is awarded to the first 2 passengers in a cabin only, aged 13 years and over. Please see princess.com.au for full terms and conditions which passengers will be bound by. Onboard Credit may not be applicable on all voyages. Carnival plc trading as Princess Cruises. ABN 23 107 998 443. 2TA 5580.



2012 KIMBERLEY WILDERNESS ADVENTURES

NEW BROCHURE OUT NOW!

- THE KIMBERLEY SPECIALISTS**
- ✓ Number one in the Kimberley
 - ✓ Over 40 years experience in the region
 - ✓ Local Kimberley Based Operations
 - ✓ Our partnership with local Indigenous groups allows access to Aboriginal land
 - ✓ Small Group – Max. 20 passengers
 - ✓ Custom Designed 4WD vehicles
 - ✓ Hearty hot breakfasts, healthy lunches and freshly prepared dinners with a complimentary glass of wine

Helicopter flight over Mitchell Plateau included

Discover Australia's newest National Heritage listed region with the number one operator in the Kimberley – APT Kimberley Wilderness Adventures. With 89 departures and over 40 years experience in the region, APT's knowledge of the area and the relationships we've established with the people of the Kimberley are unparalleled. APT has invested over \$20 million to build an exclusive network of wilderness lodges on Aboriginal land in close proximity to the many highlights of the region allowing for a more in-depth and leisurely paced adventure.

SAVE up to **\$500*** per couple

KIMBERLEY COMPLETE – OUR MOST POPULAR TOUR

13 DAYS FROM \$7,145* per person, twin share.

Travel from Broome on our most popular small group 4WD adventure through the Kimberley, return to Broome. Includes: Exclusive! Stay 6 nights at APT's 3 Wilderness Lodges • 2 nights at Bungle Bungle, Mitchell Falls & Bell Gorge Wilderness Lodge • Explore Mitchell Plateau • Guided walk to view rarely seen Bradshaw (Gwion) & Wandjina Aboriginal art on Mitchell Plateau • 2 nights at Drysdale River Station – a working cattle station • Ord River Wildlife Cruise • El Questro Station • All attractions & entry fees • 35 freshly prepared meals
Ask about our 15 Day 4WD Adventure from Broome to Darwin including Mitchell Falls and Arnhem Land.



Relaxed touring – more 2 night stays with APT

Contact your travel team directly on **1300 888 449**
travel@racq.com.au



*Conditions apply. Price is per person twin share and land only. 13 and 15 day tour offer – Save price of \$500 per couple is valid on selected April – June and September – October 2012 departures. Book by 31 January 2012 unless sold out prior. Prices shown are inclusive of highlighted date savings. See APT's Kimberley Wilderness Adventures 2012 brochure for full itineraries. Australian Pacific Touring Pty Ltd ABN 44 004 684 619 Lic. No. 30112 MKT9807