

# Know your off-season

Ready to gamble on the weather? Consult local experts first, writes Tara Wells

**A** surging Carnarvon Creek has swallowed the walking track's stepping stones by 7am the morning after the storm. A National Parks ranger declares it by 8am: either evacuate by vehicle now or remain in the gorge for at least three more days from last rainfall. We skedaddle 1300km back to Sydney, Carnarvon Gorge's remnant rainforest and ancient fan palms unseen. We'd gambled on the low season and lost.

Around the world, more travellers are holidaying out of peak season, lured by savings on accommodation, flights and vehicle rental, and the joy of sharing their destination with fewer people. But the off-season in many places is just that for good reason. Many low seasons are dictated by tropical cyclones, hurricanes and extreme heat or cold. Understanding what is driving the off-season is crucial, as is deferring to specialist knowledge. Experts know, for example, which Caribbean islands skew safer during hurricane season, and that the Yasawas stay drier during Fiji's wet season.

My family had originally planned to visit the inland Queensland oasis in its mid-year peak season, when the weather is cooler and drier, but our chosen campground was unexpectedly closed. Our second attempt was sparked by a lull in work and school life – and it was easier to rent a motorhome outside of school holidays.

Carnarvon Gorge guide Michelle Whitehouse from Australian Nature Guides tries to prepare me. "Daytime highs are already hitting 35-40C. There's also a greater chance of afternoon storms so starting a bushwalk at first light is a must." But with the inflated confidence of travellers who have braved wintry Europe in a heater-less motorhome, we ignore the awkward timing with a commitment to set the alarm clock earlier and drink more water. Bolting up via the inland route, the road shimmers in heat 10C above recent averages.

Checking into Big4 Carnarvon Gorge Holiday Park, manager Linda Te Wharau alerts us to the coming storm. Our two-wheel, six-berth van had easily crossed dry creek beds on this final stretch of sealed road but, she warns, rain funnels into the gorge. Floods come fast and linger for days, swelling creeks and making roads and walking tracks impassable. Depending on rainfall levels, it's up to Queensland National Parks to announce an optional evacuation.

Although floods cut our trip short, the defining unpleasantness was extreme heat.



**From above: Carnarvon Gorge in inland Queensland; the writer's husband observes a flood-swollen creek in the gorge; outback roads can quickly go from dry to impassable.**



Cold taps in caravan parks gushed with warm water, air-conditioning struggled against the road's fiery heat rising through the floor. A Queensland government preparedness site says the state is "experiencing an increase in the frequency and duration of heatwaves".

Despite these risks, Queensland Country Tourism CEO Peter Homan says the popularity of off-peak travel has increased due to the rise of air-conditioned and self-sufficient caravans, vehicles equipped with long-range fuel and water tanks and sales staff more familiar with outback conditions. The combination

has led to more informed and better prepared holiday-makers. Homan advises turning to local experts, such as local councils with road-by-road familiarity, for on-the-ground intel that could affect an off-season trip.

Citing a localised flooding event in the state's channel country, he says: "Everyone thought the whole outback was under water. People still jumped in their caravans in Melbourne or Sydney but they hugged the coastline instead of coming up the middle (of Queensland), even though the flooding was only in a certain area."

But next time, I'll try for peak season.