

17 Read this true story that is based on events that occurred in the Kimberley region of Western Australia in 2006.

Lost in the outback

Abstract

Every year thousands of overseas tourists flock to the Australian outback in search of adventure. Yet many are ill prepared for the dangers of these remote regions and put themselves at risk of harrowing experiences. In fact, some have even died and those who survive have remarkable tales to tell.

One of these stories is about two German tourists, who travelled to the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia, in 2006. Here many of the roads are dirt. In the dry season they are rough, dusty and full of potholes. After the torrential rain and flooding of the wet season, most are impassable. The region is sparsely inhabited by pastoralists and Aborigines and travellers can drive through the region for days without seeing a person.

The German tourists ventured into this country along the isolated Duncan Highway south of Halls Creek in a rental two-wheel drive campervan. It was already the wet season and just days before their trip a Category 4 cyclone had ripped along the northern coastline turning dirt roads into quagmires and creeks into flooded crossings.

Only 100 kilometres from Halls Creek the men crashed their small campervan when they hit a pothole in the middle of a flooded creek. The van was partly submerged in the water and had almost overturned. They were devastated but hopeful about getting help because, luckily, they had brought a warning beacon with them. However, they had been advised not to set it off unless they were in a dire emergency.

Although tourists are strictly advised to stay with their vehicles in these situations, these travellers did not heed the warning. Hans, the elder of the two, set off into the bush to find help taking only a litre of water and the emergency warning beacon. Not long after he left the vehicle he became completely disoriented and with no compass or maps, had no idea in which direction he was headed.

"I left my friend with the car," he said later, "and tried to find a farm to get help but I walked for about 30 kilometres and found nothing." When night fell, panic took over and he began to fear for his life. "All I could hear were wild pigs and dingoes howling. My hair was standing on end. I couldn't sleep." The next morning he tried to retrace his steps back to the stranded vehicle but could not. He had also run out of water and there was not a creek in sight. It was then he knew he was in trouble. This was a real emergency.

It was then that he finally activated his emergency beacon. The electronic signal was picked up by emergency services in Canberra and a search plane was sent to find the vehicle. The search area was so enormous that a small vehicle could easily have been missed by search and rescue teams. Luckily for these men the rescue plane found the campervan and Hans – who was actually only a few kilometres from the car – within a few hours. Suffering severe sunburn and badly blistered feet, the men praised the emergency authorities for their rescue.

However, Sergeant Tom Stafford from the Kununurra Police says he is totally fed up with tourists who haven't done their homework before travelling into the outback. "The pair should never have left the bitumen during the wet season," he complained. "They didn't notify anyone where they were going and if we hadn't found them, there would have been very little chance they would have stumbled across a pastoral station. There are only two homesteads in the whole of that huge area."