

Are you interested in getting out and exploring Far North Queensland with your 4wd? Read on and I'll share some of my favourite driving destinations in the Sunshine State!

Without a doubt, one of the best parts of driving holidays is meeting good Aussie characters along the way. The area that best typifies this from my travels is the stretch of road between Townsville and Mt Isa in Far North Queensland. I spent about six months straight in this region as a 20-year-old, working for a geophysics company searching for gold and copper.

1. Townsville



Burdekin River in the dry season

I remember the first time I flew into Townsville – I was blown away at how big it was. I had thought it would be a town of only 10,000 people or so, but in reality, it is a bustling metropolis of 185,000 people! There are great hotels, motels, and bed and breakfasts along The Strand, a long stretch of road running along the foreshore. The foreshore precinct is very clean and tidy, as are the beaches, but be careful when swimming as there are plenty of stinging jellyfish that inhabit the waters.

The nightlife is pretty wild due to the high student and tourist population, and there are plenty of pubs to quench your thirst. But for me, the real adventure starts when you make your way out of town along the Flinders Highway.



About 115km out of Townsville you will cross the Burdekin River – an amazing site in full flood.

2. Charters Towers

Shortly after crossing the Burdekin, you reach Charters Towers. It really starts to feel like station country now as the main street is dominated by dusty red 'Cruiser traybacks and hats. Big hats. There is probably not much to explore around the town, but it's a pleasant place and there are several nice pubs like The Enterprise, situated at the intersection of Gill Street and the train line. Of course, the advantage of being in station country is the steak, glorious steak!



Doyathinktheysauras...?

3. Hughenden

Next stop after Charters Towers is Hughenden. Situated approximately 385km from Townsville, Hughenden is probably a good spot to stop for the night. It's an interesting town with a nice main street and an interesting history dating back to the time of famous cattleman, Ernest Henry, who is generally considered to have opened up the district after taking the first pastoral lease in the area. Take the time to walk up the main street and check out the dinosaur fossils. Apparently, the most famous was the 'Doyathinktheysauras'!



Also located on the main street, and something I can personally recommend is FJ Holden's Cafe. They do a mean burger and have some great 1950s memorabilia.

4. Richmond

Just down the road, and next stop on the tour is Richmond. It's just 115km away, and now you will start to notice the terrain flatten out a bit and become less scrubby. If you're feeling sad about leaving behind the dinosaurs at Hughenden, you needn't worry as Richmond has a statue of its own!



He didn't eat enough at lunch

Richmond is a great town with some real characters. Spend an afternoon or evening at the Federal Hotel, with its wide sweeping veranda and huge front bar, and meet the locals. Or perhaps wander down to the Mud Hut - another pub oozing character. Both have accommodation and meals, and at genuine 1970s prices too!

If you're interested in fossicking, there are some areas north of town on the Richmond to Woolgar Road that locals talk about as being prospective.



The sign on the road from Richmond to Woolgar... Confusing, much?

But if you're heading out that way, make sure you take a GPS or map as this is the sign you are confronted with on your way out of town (pictured left).

The photo looks a bit strange because it's taken at night, but you can see that there are plenty of places to get lost out there. At the time this photo was taken, I was part of a four-man geophysics team headed to Woolgar Goldmine. I don't know why we were travelling through the night, but I remember being glad to arrive at the camp.

5. Cloncurry

When you've finished exploring Richmond, hit the road for Julia Creek and Cloncurry.



This is an example of the type of country you can find if you want to go exploring the back roads of the region.

Cloncurry is approximately 285km from Richmond with Julia Creek roughly half way in between, however, it's mainly just an old staging post and today there are only a few shops and a stock and station agent. Cloncurry however, is a different kettle of fish with a nightlife you wouldn't believe...

The town was founded in 1876 after the discovery of Copper by Ernest Henry and was laid out by the same surveyor who had laid down the plans for Hughenden. The discovery of copper caused a rush of people to the area. Henry described this in a letter to his mother: "When I first made the discovery of copper in this district there was not a white man within a hundred miles and great tracts of country lay in every direction, unpopulated save by a few tribes of savages. At the present moment, it would be difficult to find a patch of available land that has not been secured by squatters." The exploration work carried out by these early pioneers led to the discovery of the Great Australian Mine and the town thrived. These days the miners still pile into the pubs in the evenings to quench a hard earned thirst, and there are three to choose from. My personal favourite is The Post Office. Good cheap meals with

great service and atmosphere. Most pubs seem to have a healthy number of backpackers working behind the bar which seems to add something to the feel of the place.



One of the entrants in the ute muster.

If you are lucky enough to be in town in early August you are in for a treat as the annual Cloncurry Merry Muster is held. There is entertainment for the whole family with concerts, street parades, a ute muster and of course the rodeo action.

Accommodation in the town is abundant, and I would highly recommend the Wagon Wheel Motel, which also has excellent meals. The main street has a Woolworths and a variety of speciality shops to stock up on supplies. Contact the Wagon Wheel Motel on **07 4742 1866** or email them at **reception@thewagonwheelmotel.com.au**.

From Cloncurry, you can either keep heading west to Mt Isa and beyond or take the road south to Winton and the Stockman's Hall of Fame at Longreach. The interior of Far North Queensland has some amazing scenery and fantastic stories to tell, all built on a rich history of early pioneering, cattle, copper and gold. The people you meet along the way are truly salt of the earth; I can't wait to go back!