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FAMILY ROAD TRIP · 20 DAYS ONE WAY

Brisbane to Cairns 20-Day Family Road Trip

Reef, rainforest, whales and crocs — the great Queensland coast at kid-pace.

Brisbane → Sunshine Coast → Hervey Bay → Bundaberg → Yeppoon → Mackay → Airlie Beach → Townsville → Mission Beach → Cairns → Port Douglas

This Brisbane to Cairns family campervan itinerary heads north up the Bruce Highway at a pace built for kids: short driving days, two-night stops wherever possible, and a kid-friendly holiday park every night. Trim days to suit: the trip compresses comfortably to two weeks by shortening the longer stays.

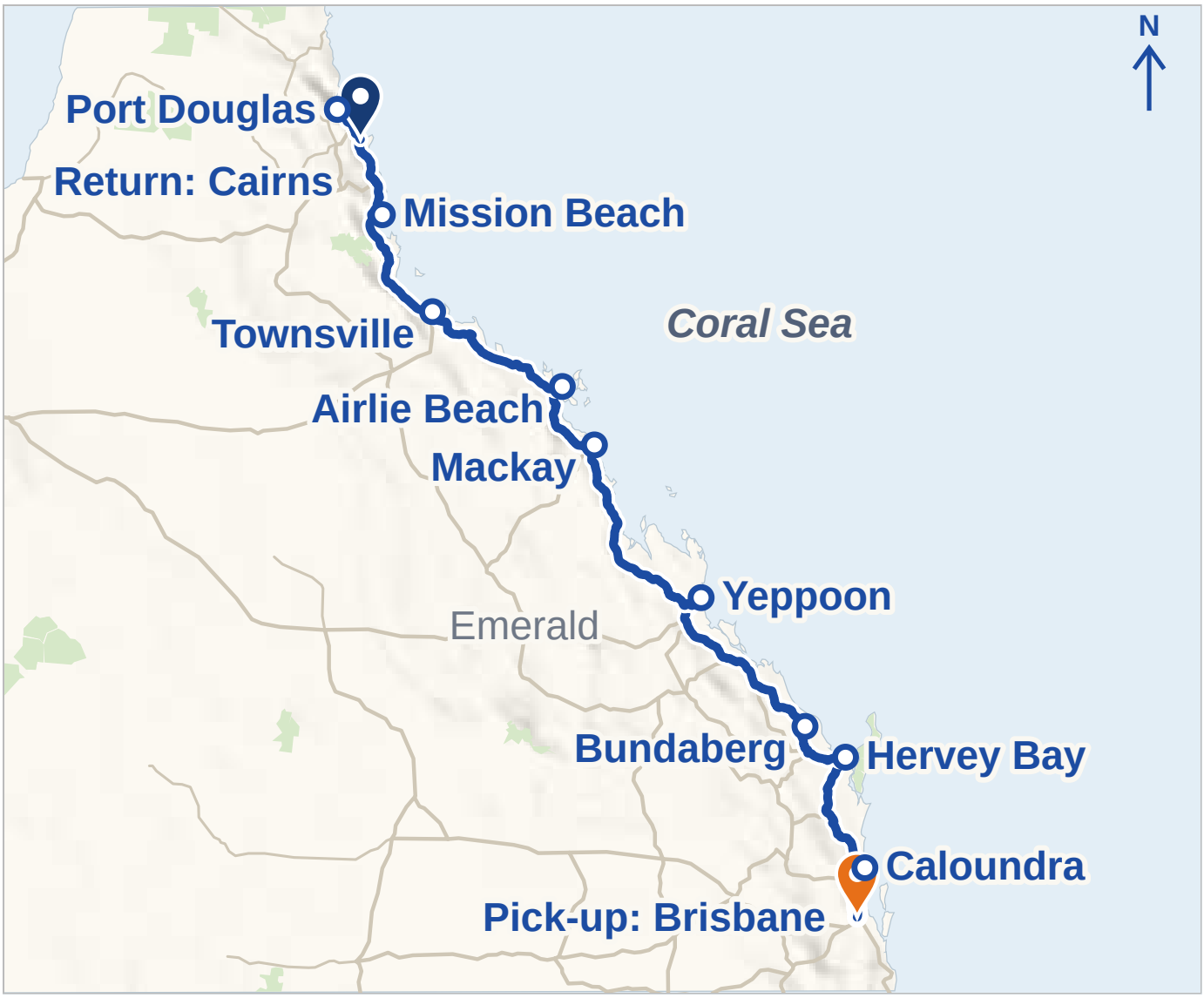
DISTANCE	DAYS	ROUTE	DRIVING TIME
About 2,075 km	20 days / 19 nights	One way, Brisbane to Cairns and Port Douglas	About 35 h by campervan

LONGEST DRIVE	VEHICLE	BEST TIME
365 km, Yeppoon to Mackay	4–6 berth family motorhome	May–Oct for dry weather and whales

This trip crosses the Country of the Jagera, Turrbal, Kabi Kabi, Butchulla, Darumbal, Yuwibara, Wulgurukaba, Bindal, Djiru, Yirrganydji, Eastern Kuku Yalanji and other First Nations peoples. Traditional Custodians



Magnetic Island, day 14 · Illustrative image



Outing from a base

Planning overview, not navigation. Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors · coastline Natural Earth · relief Terrain Tiles (Geoscience Australia, SRTM).

Each day's drive shows its own distance, with the running total beside it. Drive times are campervan times, which include a buffer for a loaded motorhome; add more with young kids and rest stops.

Every overnight is a BIG4 or family holiday park with a pool or playground. Season trade-off: winter from June to October gives the best weather up north, whale season and calmer reef days. Mon Repos turtle encounters near Bundaberg run November to March, which is also peak wet-season heat and reef stinger season further north.

Special caution and planning should be taken when travelling in remote areas to ensure sufficient provisions, fuel and prescribed medicines are carried. Weather conditions can make sealed roads impassable particularly during the northern wet season.

BEFORE YOU BOOK

Hiring a campervan for this trip

One way to Cairns

Apollo, Britz, Maui and Mighty charge a one-way fee between Brisbane and Cairns: $200, or $205 for pick-ups from 1 April 2027. The fee

Family pacing tip

The two-night blocks are the point of this route. If you need to shorten the trip, trim a night from Bundaberg, Yeppoon, Airlie Beach, Townsville

is in the total we quote: compare totals, not daily rates. More on one-way fees.

Your route
All rental vendors in Australia have restrictions on where their vehicles can be taken, so discuss your planned route with the rental company when you pick up. Get the rental company's permission before taking the vehicle somewhere it restricts. If you take it there without permission, you may lose your excess reduction and be fully responsible for any damage. You may also have to pay for towing and recovery, and for damage to other people's property. See road restrictions and when you are fully responsible.

or Port Douglas before removing the big kid-friendly rest days altogether.

Picking up in Brisbane

Most Brisbane branches are in the northern suburbs between Northgate and Eagle Farm, close to Brisbane Airport, and Apollo, Britz, Maui, Maui Elite, Mighty and Mighty Lite share one branch on Nudgee Road, Northgate (Brisbane branches). Check-in includes a walkthrough of the vehicle, so allow about an hour, and collect your vehicle at least an hour before the branch closes.

Branches are usually open from about 9am to 3pm and busiest from 9am to 10am, so pick up in the morning to reach your first stop in daylight (choosing a pick-up time). Do the online check-in beforehand, bring the documents you need, and if you're flying in, see picking up after a flight. More on picking up your campervan. Branch addresses and hours: Brisbane branches.

DAYS 1–4

Days 1–4: Sunshine Coast & Hervey Bay

DRIVE

92 km from Brisbane | **about 1 h 30 min** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 1

Brisbane to Sunshine Coast

PICK-UP

Morning

Collect the van and start the trip the easy way: drop the kids at Bluey's World (https://www.queensland.com/au/en/things-to-do/events/p-6567b0bb9b908c433bbd5fa7-blueys-world) at Northshore Hamilton while one parent handles the walk-through at the branch. It's open until February 2028; check its opening days before you plan around it.

Afternoon

Point the van north to the Sunshine Coast. Settle in, let everyone claim a bunk, and hit the pool.

Stay — 2 nights — BIG4 Caloundra Waterfront (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/sunshine-coast/caloundra-waterfront-holiday-park) — heated lagoon pool with waterslides, toddler splash area, jump mat and pedal karts; walk to the beach. Around 20 minutes from Australia Zoo.

CALOUNDRA BASE · FULL DAY One outing from Caloundra

DAY 2

Australia Zoo

2 NIGHTS

Australia Zoo

A full day at Australia Zoo (https://www.australiazoo.com.au/) at Beerwah — crocs, koalas and the Wildlife Warriors show in the Crocoseum. Go early, plan your loop around show times, and leave the splash area for last to burn off the final reserves before heading back to camp.

Stay — BIG4 Caloundra Waterfront, night 2 of 2.

DRIVE

220 km from Caloundra | **about 3 h 30 min** by campervan

Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 3

Sunshine Coast to Hervey Bay, via Gympie

On the way

Break the drive at Gympie with a ride on the Mary Valley Rattler (https://www.maryvalleyrattler.com.au/) heritage train. It usually runs Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, so time the day around it, then push on to Hervey Bay for the evening.

Evening

Stay — 2 nights — BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Hervey Bay (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/fraser-coast-south-burnett/ingenia-holidays-hervey-bay) — resort pool and playground beside Torquay Lakes, a short stroll to the beach.

HERVEY BAY BASE · HALF-DAY CRUISE

DAY 4

Hervey Bay whales and beach

2 NIGHTS

July–October — In whale season, take a half-day whale-watching cruise (https://www.queensland.com/au/en/places-to-see/destinations/fraser-coast/hervey-bay) on the calm waters of Platypus Bay; the shorter trip suits little ones best. Out of season, swap in the Esplanade, Urangan Pier and the Botanic Gardens.

Stay — BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Hervey Bay, night 2 of 2.

DAYS 5–9: Bundaberg & the Capricorn Coast

DRIVE

125 km from Hervey Bay | **about 2 h** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 5

Hervey Bay to Bundaberg

A short hop to your reef-and-turtle base for the next three nights. Spend the afternoon on the farm: the kids can hand-feed rescued animals on the Splitters Farm (https://www.splittersfarm.com.au/) tour.

Stay — 3 nights — Splitters Farm (https://www.splittersfarm.com.au/), Sharon — a working farm and rescue sanctuary with a caravan park, 10 minutes north of Bundaberg. A change-up from the BIG4s the kids will love.

BUNDABERG BASE · FULL DAY

DAY 6

Lady Musgrave reef day

3 NIGHTS

Tour — A full day out to the Southern Great Barrier Reef with the Lady Musgrave Experience (https://ladymusgraveexperience.com.au/). The tour departs Bundaberg Port Marina at Burnett Heads and visits a reef pontoon with snorkelling, glass-bottom boat trips and a coral cay. Whales are often seen on the crossing from July to October.

Stay — Splitters Farm, night 2 of 3.

BUNDABERG BASE · ABOUT 30 KM OF LOCAL DRIVING

DAY 7

Bargara and Mon Repos turtles

A relaxed day at the Bargara beaches and rock pools. If you're travelling November to March, book the ranger-guided turtle encounter at Mon Repos (https://www.queensland.com/au/en/places-to-see/experiences/nature-and-wildlife/turtles/mon-repos-where-to-see-turtles-queensland) this evening to see nesting turtles or hatchlings make their dash to the sea. Bookings are essential.

Season note — The turtle encounters are a summer/wet-season experience, while this itinerary's best overall weather window is usually the dry season. Choose the season around the wildlife experience your family most wants.

Stay — Splitters Farm, night 3 of 3.

DRIVE

330 km from Bundaberg | **about 5 h 30 min** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 8

Bundaberg to Yeppoon

A longer driving day up to the Capricorn Coast. Share out the back-seat jobs, plan a lunch stop, and arrive at Yeppoon in time for a swim at the foreshore lagoon or the park pool.

Stay — 2 nights

NRMA Capricorn Yeppoon Holiday Park (https://www.nrmaparksandresorts.com.au/capricorn-yeppoon/) (formerly BIG4 Capricorn Palms), Mulambin Beach — water slide, jumping pillow, pedal carts and open-air cinema; walk to the beach. Current listings show two pools and a playground, so check which facilities are running before you book.

YEPPOON BASE · 2–3 HRS **One outing from Yeppoon**

DAY 9

Koorana Crocodile Farm

2 NIGHTS

Koorana Crocodile Farm

Head out to Koorana Crocodile Farm (https://www.queensland.com/au/en/things-to-do/attractions/p-56b25e79aeeeaaf773cf0b6f-koorana-crocodile-farm) for the 10.30am guided tour — brave kids can hold a small croc — then return to Yeppoon for an afternoon on the beach. A gentle day before tomorrow's big drive.

Stay NRMA Capricorn Yeppoon Holiday Park, night 2 of 2.

DAYS 10–14

Days 10–14: Mackay, the Whitsundays & Townsville

DRIVE

365 km from Yeppoon | **about 6 h** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 10

Yeppoon to Mackay

LONGEST DRIVE

The longest leg of the trip, so an early start helps. Settle in north of Mackay at Blacks Beach. Worth a dawn detour the next morning: the wallabies on the sand at sunrise at nearby Cape Hillsborough.

Long-drive day

Plan fuel, snacks and a proper lunch stop before you leave Yeppoon. This is the day to keep expectations simple: drive, arrive, swim, sleep.

Stay — 1 night

BIG4 Mackay Blacks Beach (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/mackay/mackay-blacks-beach-holiday-park) — beachfront, with a pool and splash pad to unwind after the drive.

DRIVE

160 km from Mackay | **about 2 h 40 min** by campervan

Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 11

Mackay to Airlie Beach

A short drive into the Whitsundays. Spend the afternoon in the resort's waterpark and lagoon — exactly the reward the kids have earned after a couple of bigger days.

Stay — 2 nights

BIG4 Adventure Whitsunday (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/whitsunday/adventure-whitsunday-resort), Airlie Beach — lagoon pool and waterpark, and most reef tours pick up from here.

AIRLIE BEACH BASE · FULL DAY

DAY 12

Whitsundays reef day

2 NIGHTS

Head out to the reef and islands. Pick the fastest boat you can for the crossing: a raft-style or speedy catamaran tour means more snorkel time and fewer queasy tummies. Whitehaven Beach is a kid-pleaser if it's on the route.

Book ahead:
For younger children, ask tour companies about travel time, shade, flotation devices and wet-season stinger-suit requirements before booking.

Stay

BIG4 Adventure Whitsunday, night 2 of 2.

DRIVE

275 km from Airlie Beach | **about 4 h 30 min** by campervan | Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 13

Airlie Beach to Townsville

North to Townsville. Arrive in time for a late-afternoon swim at the Strand's rock pool and water play park, or settle in at the park pool.

Stay — 2 nights

BIG4 Townsville Gateway (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/townsville-surrounds/townsville-gateway-holiday-park) — pool and jumping pillow, handy to the Magnetic Island ferry.

LEAVE THE VAN AT THE PARK

DAY 14

Magnetic Island

2 NIGHTS

Leave the van at the park and walk onto the ferry for a day on Magnetic Island: koalas on the Forts Walk, calm bays for snorkelling, and a hire car or island bus to get around.

Easy logistics

Going as foot passengers means you avoid taking the motorhome onto the ferry. Pack swimmers, hats, reef-safe sunscreen and water bottles for the day.

Stay

BIG4 Townsville Gateway, night 2 of 2.

DAYS 15–20

Days 15–20: The tropics, Cairns & Port Douglas

DRIVE

230 km from Townsville | **about 3 h 45 min** by campervan

Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 15

Townsville to Mission Beach

Into the tropics proper, where the rainforest meets the reef. Spend the afternoon on the long sandy beach and keep an eye out for the resident cassowaries that wander through the park.

Stay — 1 night

BIG4 Tasman Holiday Parks – South Mission Beach (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/tropical-north/tasman-holiday-parks-south-mission-beach) — beachfront, with a pool, playground and games room.

DRIVE

145 km from Mission Beach | **about 2 h 30 min** by campervan

Via **Bruce Highway**

DAY 16

Mission Beach to Cairns

An easy run up to Cairns, with a swim stop at Babinda Boulders or Josephine Falls on the way. Check conditions before swimming. Settle in at your tropical base for the next two nights.

Swimming safety

Only swim where conditions and local signage say it is safe. Waterfalls and boulder pools can change quickly after rain.

Stay — 2 nights

BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Cairns Coconut (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/tropical-north/ingenia-holidays-cairns-coconut) — an award-winning family resort with a splash park, waterslides, mini golf and jumping pillows, 7 minutes from the city.

CAIRNS BASE · FULL DAY One outing from Cairns

DAY 17

Kuranda and the Tablelands

2 NIGHTS

Kuranda

Tour from town · Kuranda Scenic Railway and Skyrail, booked separately

Do Kuranda (https://www.skyrail.com.au/) as a loop: Scenic Rail up through the gorge, Skyrail rainforest cableway back down, or vice versa, with the village, butterfly sanctuary and koala gardens in between. Add an Atherton Tablelands waterfall circuit if you have the energy.

Make it easier

Book the train/Skyrail combination ahead and keep the day focused. Add the Tablelands only if everyone still has energy after Kuranda.

Stay BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Cairns Coconut, night 2 of 2.

DRIVE

67 km from Cairns | **about 1 h 20 min** by campervan

Via **Captain Cook Highway**

DAY 18

Cairns to Port Douglas

A short, scenic coastal drive north. Break it at Hartley's Crocodile Adventures or Mossman Gorge, then spend the afternoon in the park's waterpark. Two nights here to finish on a high.

Stay — 2 nights BIG4 Port Douglas Glengarry (https://www.big4.com.au/caravan-parks/qld/tropical-north/port-douglas-glengarry-holiday-park) — six-slide waterpark, lagoon pool and jumping pillow, between the reef and the Daintree.

PORT DOUGLAS BASE · FULL DAY

DAY 19

Outer Great Barrier Reef

2 NIGHTS

The grand finale is a full-day cruise to the outer ribbon reefs off Port Douglas, calmer and more vivid than the inner sites. Most reef tours have pontoons or semi-submersibles so non-swimmers and little ones can still see the coral.

Reef booking tip
For mixed swimming abilities, choose tours with pontoons, semi-submersibles or glass-bottom boat options so every family member can see the reef.

Stay BIG4 Port Douglas Glengarry, night 2 of 2.

DRIVE

66 km from Port Douglas | **about 1 h 20 min** by campervan

Via **Captain Cook Highway**

DAY 20

Port Douglas to Cairns drop-off

RETURN

An easy drive back to Cairns to return the van and fly home — full of stories. Allow time before your flight for fuel, cleaning and the drop-off at the branch, and aim for a mid-to-late departure so the last morning isn't a rush.

Returning in Cairns

Leave more time than you think for packing, refuelling, emptying waste tanks where required and the return process at the branch. Return the toilet cassette and grey-water tank emptied. Apollo, Britz, Maui, Maui Elite, Mighty and Mighty Lite charge $299 a tank if you don't. Their Drop and Go Pack includes emptying in Cairns (returning the van in Cairns).

Most branches take vans back until about 3pm to 3.30pm, so plan your last drive to arrive early (choosing a drop-off time). If you're running late, call the branch (late returns). More on returning your campervan. Branch addresses and hours: Cairns branches.

ANOTHER WAY TO DO IT

Short on time?

Our 10-day Brisbane to Cairns itinerary drives the same coast in half the time, with Noosa, Gladstone and Mission Beach as overnight stops.

Ready to roll? Pick up the keys in Brisbane and compare Brisbane campervan hire before you go. We provide our expertise and advice in an unbiased way to add value to your trip; you can trust our suggestions.

Traditional Custodians

Brisbane (Meanjin): Jagera and Turrbal peoples (Queensland Government, Office of the Queensland Parliamentary Counsel (https://www.oqpc.qld.gov.au/acknowledgement-country))

The Sunshine Coast: Kabi Kabi and Jinibara peoples (Sunshine Coast Council (https://www.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/living-and-community/first-nations-partnerships))

Hervey Bay and the Fraser Coast: Butchulla (Badtjala) to the east and Kabi Kabi (Gubbi Gubbi) to the west (Fraser Coast Regional Council (https://www.frasercoast.qld.gov.au/Site-Footer/Footer-Widgets/Acknowledgement-of-Country))

Bundaberg: Taribelang Bunda, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Bailai peoples (Bundaberg Regional Council (https://www.ourbundabergregion.com.au/acknowledgement-of-country))

Yeppoon and the Capricorn Coast: Darumbal, Woppaburra and Barada Kalbalbara Yetimarala peoples (Livingstone Shire Council (https://www.livingstone.qld.gov.au/Living-Here/My-Community/First-Peoples))

Mackay: Yuwibara (Yuwi) people (Mackay Regional Council (https://www.mackay.qld.gov.au/Community/Community-support))

Airlie Beach: Ngaro people around Airlie Beach and the islands, and Gia people around Proserpine (Whitsunday Regional Council (https://yoursay.whitsundayrc.qld.gov.au/australia-day-our-whitsunday-way-stallholders-entertainers))

Townsville and Magnetic Island: Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun, Bindal, Gugu Badhun and Nywaigi peoples (Townsville City Council (https://www.townsville.qld.gov.au/about-townsville/history-and-heritage/townsville-history/traditional-landowners))

Mission Beach: Mamu, Djiru, Girramay, Gulngay, Warrgamay, Jirrbal and Bandjin peoples (Cassowary Coast Regional Council (https://yoursay.cassowarycoast.qld.gov.au/eco-destination-certification))

Cairns: Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji, among the Traditional Custodians of the Cairns region (Cairns Regional Council (https://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/experience-cairns/facts-figures-history/first-peoples-history))

Port Douglas and the Douglas Shire: Eastern Kuku Yalanji and Yirrganydji peoples (Douglas Shire Council (https://douglas.qld.gov.au/download/council_meetings/meeting_agendas/5.4-Annual-Report-2021-2022.pdf))

Country boundaries are approximate, and some are shared or contested. These names follow local councils and park managers. The AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia (https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia) shows the wider picture.

Pay your respects to the Traditional Custodians of the land on which you are travelling, and to their Elders past, present and emerging. The Australian environment is fragile, so tread lightly: take only photos and leave only footprints.

DriveNow Disclaimer

DriveNow receives no money or commission for any holiday park, campground, hotel, restaurant, cafe, pub, tour or attraction named on this page. We include them because they suit a campervan trip, and we check them from time to time.

DriveNow's suggested itineraries help you plan your own trip. Distances and times are from mapped routes and are a guide only; campervan driving times are car times plus about 20%. Road conditions, closures, opening hours and prices change, so check them before you travel. Any reliance on this itinerary is at your own discretion.

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