Where to where you ask? Well, if you have a look about half way up the west coast of Cape York you will find them both. They are aboriginal communities joined by a 118-kilometre track, which provides the only access into the Mitchell-Alice Rivers National Park.

On making inquiries from both communities about permit requirements and the camping opportunities that might be available in the area, I received quite a surprise on two fronts. The first surprise was to be told that I didn’t need a permit to traverse the track as it was a gazetted road. Notwithstanding that the track is entirely on aboriginal land, it was confirmed from two sources that yes, it is definitely a gazetted road. The second surprise was to be told by the Kowanyama Community, that although they had a couple of camping areas available on a small river near the coast, all the sites had been booked out about six months prior to my inquiry. Apparently, the area is a favourite fishing spot, and many sites are booked year to year by keen fishermen.

Notwithstanding that, we were still quite welcome to visit, and were told that we might be able to use a camp site maintained by the Community on the banks of the Mitchell River on the boundary of Mitchell-Alice Rivers National Park.

So in early August, we found ourselves camped in a very nice little spot about 10 km north of Dunbar Station. Quite by coincidence this campsite was also on the banks of the Mitchell River. We had chosen the site on the basis that it offered the only camping on or near a reasonable watercourse, and the next day, we only had a trip of 102 km to access the Kowanyama Community. We anticipated arriving in Kowanyama at about morning-tea time, and would thus have most of the day to have a look at the area out near the coast, and to arrange our campsite for that evening.

Next day all went according to plan, and after reporting in to the Kowanyama Community Office, we soon found ourselves heading out to an area known as Topsy Camp. It’s about 35 km south west of the Community. The track out was reasonable, and passed through lightly wooded country. A couple of small billabongs were passed, and we stopped to look at some very unusual palm trees. As we got closer to Topsy Camp, the track became quite soft and sandy. Lunch was enjoyed on the banks of Topsy Creek (which was really a small river) at the first of the two Topsy Camp areas. The areas offer
reasonable, but sandy camping. Good size trees afford some shade, however there is no water available. All water must be brought in from the Community. “Tinnie” launching is available at the larger of the two areas, known as Topsy Two.

After lunch, we headed back the way we had come, and at an intersection in the track, turned north to head 14 kilometres up to what we understood was the Little Mitchell River. The difference in vegetation from the track out to Topsy Camp was quite striking. On this track, the country was very flat and open, with hardly a tree in sight. When we arrived at the river we found three community members fishing from its banks. They also had a small “tinnie” which they had towed out from Kowanyama, but they were having no success at all. After a short talk with them, we headed back in to the Community.

Due to the absence of some key personnel from the Ranger Office, it took us a little while to gain the necessary permit to camp at the Mitchell River site near the national park. However, with the assistance of an elder, the permit was provided and the $30 fee for the first night was paid over, and we were on our way. We experienced a little bit of difficulty in locating the right track out of the Community, but once we found it, it turned out to be in quite good condition.

Arriving at the banks of the very fast flowing Mitchell River with about two hours till sunset, we set up camp in quite a reasonable location, about 20 metres off the track, and then wandered down to have a look at, and walk the crossing.

On our side, there was a short single track, leading down to the River with a concrete pad at its end. Under the end of the pad the rounded side of a large log was visible. River water was washing fast along the bottom edge of the log. The log, which supported the end of the pad, had obviously been used as formwork for the concrete pour. There was about a 40 centimetre drop over the rounded side of the log into the river if one went straight ahead, followed by a series of metre deep, quite large rock holes. Straight ahead was definitely not the way to go!

However, if you kept hard over against the right bank there was about a 30 centimetre drop over the log onto a reasonably flat rock shelf, which provided a good shallow track, of only about 20 centimetres depth, in a big arc out to the right. Entry to the river though needed to be on a diagonal to the pad to ensure that you missed the deep holes straight ahead, and hugged the bank. On the other side, about 50 metres away, the exit was quite sandy, but wet, and very firm. This was definitely the way to go.

After flattening a very big, sharp and ugly spike sticking out of the log, we walked back to our campsite satisfied as to the direction we needed to take in the morning. On our way back we noticed a small black snake, laying on the track. Thankfully, it proved to be very dead. At that point, the only vehicle we had seen all day was the one belonging to the aboriginals out at the Little Mitchell River, discounting of course those parked at Topsy Camp and at the Kowanyama Community.

The sun was very close to setting, and we were enjoying a quiet cuppa in the cool of the late afternoon, when all of a sudden we heard a vehicle. The noise was coming from the direction of the river, so we quickly walked down to watch how this person traversed the crossing to confirm our own thoughts. An old 60 series, with three adults, and about half a dozen boisterous kids, was approaching the entry point on our side, from the right, in a big arc. They were obviously locals, so we felt pretty happy about the direction we had chosen for our crossing. Approaching the end of the pad, the driver stayed hard over to his left, right against the bank, and crawled up on a diagonal, over the log and up onto the concrete pad. The solid, rocky, river bottom was obviously providing very good traction.

A short conversation with them showed they had come from Pormpuraaw, after having been at some form of celebration all day, and were heading home to Kowanyama.

We cooked dinner, had a shower under the good old Twine, and at about 9:30 pm, went to bed. We had only been in bed for about 15 minutes, when we heard another vehicle. I got up to have a look, and could see lights approaching across the river. Again, this driver followed exactly the same path as the previous vehicle, but in the
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dark! Again, they proved to be locals. They must have been in a hurry, because they didn’t even bother to stop to say G’day. So, back to bed. Then, would you believe it, about 15 minutes later, we hear another vehicle. But this time I don’t bother to get up. This vehicle though is sounding a bit rough as it makes its way up on to the pad, and up the little track. It passes our camp site coughing and spluttering, and a few seconds later the engine stops altogether. Lots of noise as people get out and a bonnet opens. More noises, lots of jovial yelling and laughter, and then the engine fires back up again, a bonnet slams, doors slam, and they’re away.
The night was pitch black, the crossing was not an easy one, and we have had two vehicles cross so far, essentially in the middle of the night. But I guess that the track is simply the way home for the locals and they use it just like we use suburban roads! They must drive it regularly, as there was no hesitation from any of the drivers as to which direction to take. Thankfully, that was the end of our entertainment for the night.

Next morning it was our turn. We followed exactly the same line as the drivers of the previous night, and had no problems at all in dropping in to the river and making the crossing.
The track, even though it was simply two wheel ruts, was quite reasonable, and it didn’t take long to drive the 11 kilometres through the national park to the ford over the Alice River. This short track is the only public access route within the Mitchell-Alice Rivers National Park. The park is a relatively small one, and is triangular in shape. It sits with its apex on the confluence of the Mitchell and the Alice Rivers. Its boundaries follow the banks of both rivers to the southeast for about 45 kilometres. The base of the triangle runs northeast in a straight line from the bank of one river to the bank of the other, and passes beside Whisky Waterhole in the south east of the park.

The ford over the Alice River was dry, but quite wide, with a firm, sandy and stony base. A few stagnant pools lay on the right side of the crossing. Large paper barks stood guard on the banks, and in the riverbed. Evidence of past floods was hanging from the trees. About 100 metres past the top of the bank on the northern side of the Alice River a track takes off to the right. This is the short track, about 2 km, out to a campsite at the Old Koolatah Waterhole. Apparently, this particular campsite is not within the National Park, nor is it on aboriginal land.

As we made our way northwest, the track, though still only two wheel ruts, was generally quite good. There were a few areas of washouts, however whenever the washouts started to look too deep or difficult, then inevitably there was a side track or two. At times there were three and four sidetracks, and other tracks that appeared to be old mustering, yard or bore tracks. However, we found that as long as the particular track we were on was heading in a northwesterly direction, then eventually, they rejoined the main track.

We crossed firstly, the Mottle River, then an unnamed tributary of the Coleman River, and finally the Coleman River itself. The ford over the Mottle River was similar to the Alice River, firm but sandy and stony, with a few damp patches. There was a lot of water in the river a few hundred yards to the right of the crossing.
The Coleman River crossing was dry and quite wide. It was sandy in places, but very rocky in others. There was water in the river to the west of the crossing. Quite a few cows were standing lazily in the shade of the trees, and a few were in the river having a drink. On the northern bank of the river, the remains of an old gauging station were in evidence.

Continuing on, we passed a couple of very pretty billabongs. Around one, there were quite a few cattle, whilst the other was providing a haven for large numbers of water birds. Lotus lilies were in abundance on the placid surface of the water. The ducks were obviously having a feast on the plant life, ducking their heads to the bottom, their tails pointed to the sky, waggling quite furiously. A few cormorants were diving for fish, and a couple of the very big footed “Jesus” birds were wandering about on the lily pads, every now and then picking up good things to eat.

Continuing further, we crossed another tributary of the Coleman, then Malaman Creek twice, Lightning Creek, Ten Mile Creek, the Chapman River and Station Creek. All the crossings were dry, and in quite good condition. Just prior to crossing Station Creek, we found ourselves at a small intersection on the track. A locked gate blocked the way to the left, and a sign declared it to be the entry to a Correctional Services Facility.

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Shortly afterwards we found ourselves at a major track junction. Signs on the tracks declared that Kowanyama was 120 km back the way we had come, Pormpuraaw was 6 km to the left, and Musgrave was 210 km to the right.

We headed in to Pormpuraaw, and on the advice of some locals from Kowanyama, filled up at their bowsers at a very good price. We then drove the 500 metres or so out to the coast, and turned left down a sandy, but firm track, which about 2 km further on brought us out on to the banks of the Chapman River. This is one of two formal campsites maintained by the Pormpuraaw Community. A small, brightly painted building contains a shower and a toilet, and there was also a small shelter shed nearby. Otherwise the site was fairly open, with very little shade.

On the other side of the Chapman River, we could see three very large, saltwater crocodiles sunning themselves on the muddy riverbank. To the rear of the campsite there is a large wire fence, which is part of the perimeter of the Edward River Crocodile Farm. If you are lucky enough to be in Pormpuraaw on a Thursday morning, you can go to the Crocodile Farm and watch them feeding the crocs.

A fisherman and his wife were packing up their campsite (at the shelter shed) as we arrived. They had decided to move after finding that the big, wild crocs on the other side of the Chapman River were in the habit of crossing the river at night, climbing the banks, and making horrible noises at the wire fence. It seems the explanation was that they were trying to attract the females inside the Crocodile Farm. How they were going to overcome the restricting nature of the wire fence remains a mystery, but the fisherman and his wife had decided that it was definitely time to go.

We then drove back the 2 km and proceeded north along the coast for 7 kilometres to the second camp site maintained by the Community. This site is located on the banks of the Mungkan River. No crocodiles could be seen, but doubtless they were there.

Again, there was a brightly painted building containing a shower and toilet. However, where the facilities at the first campsite had town water laid on, a tank fed these. Similar to the other facility, it was reasonably clean. However, unlike the other campsite, this one contained a selection of reasonably pretty, shaded areas that would have made quite good campsites. We enjoyed lunch sitting under the shade of the trees enjoying the view over the Mungkan River and out into the Gulf.

After lunch, we drove back through the Community and headed out the 216 kilometres along a really good, well maintained road that brings you out beside the camping area at Musgrave Roadhouse. No permits are required to access either Kowanyama or Pormpuraaw Communities. If you want to camp at either of the two reasonably well maintained sites at Pormpuraaw, simply report in to the Community Office on your arrival. They are closed on weekends. Camping at either of these two sites will set you back about $30 per vehicle for the first night, and then around $5 per person per night thereafter. Fuel, and well-stocked supermarkets are available at both Communities. If you wish to camp at the Topsy Camp sites at Kowanyama, it is suggested that you ring and book at least in December/January for the following June/July/August period.

John Greig