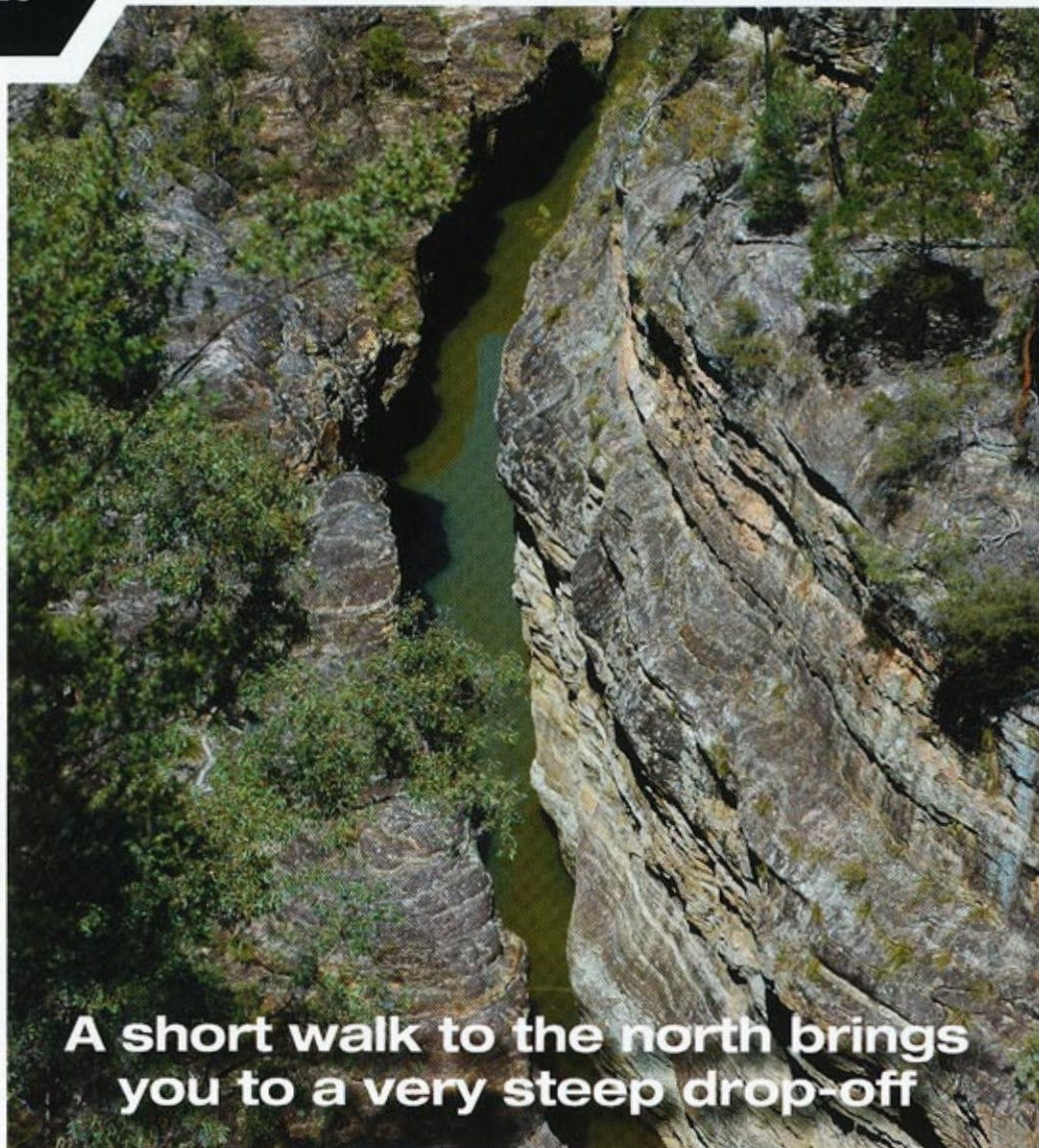






SCENES IN **SANDSTONE**

Plenty of 4X4 tracks, walking trails and stunning views make this central Queensland park a must-see, **ALLAN WHITING** writes



A short walk to the north brings you to a very steep drop-off

Expedition National Park is between Taroom and Rolleston in Central Queensland. The park straddles Expedition Range, which divides the basins of the Comet and Dawson rivers. It's the second-largest section of the central highland sandstone belt reserved for nature conservation.

The park was gazetted in 1953 and has been expanded to its current size of 104,000 hectares. Aboriginal tribal lands bordered on what is now Robinson Creek. Early explorer Ludwig Leichhardt named the creek in 1844, along with many other park features, after his exploration team members and supporters.

Expedition NP contrasts with the nearby Carnarvon Gorge NP in that the 4X4 access roads and walking tracks are at plateau level and the gorge highlights are viewed mainly from above, not below.

When you arrive at either of the camping areas in Expedition NP it's unclear what the park highlights are, because there are no visible cliffs or gorges.

The northern campsite, Spotted Gum, is a partly cleared area at the end of a dusty road and appears at first sight to be in flat, open woodland country. However, a short walk through the scrub to the north of the campsite brings you to the edge of a very steep drop-off into Glenhaughton Gully.

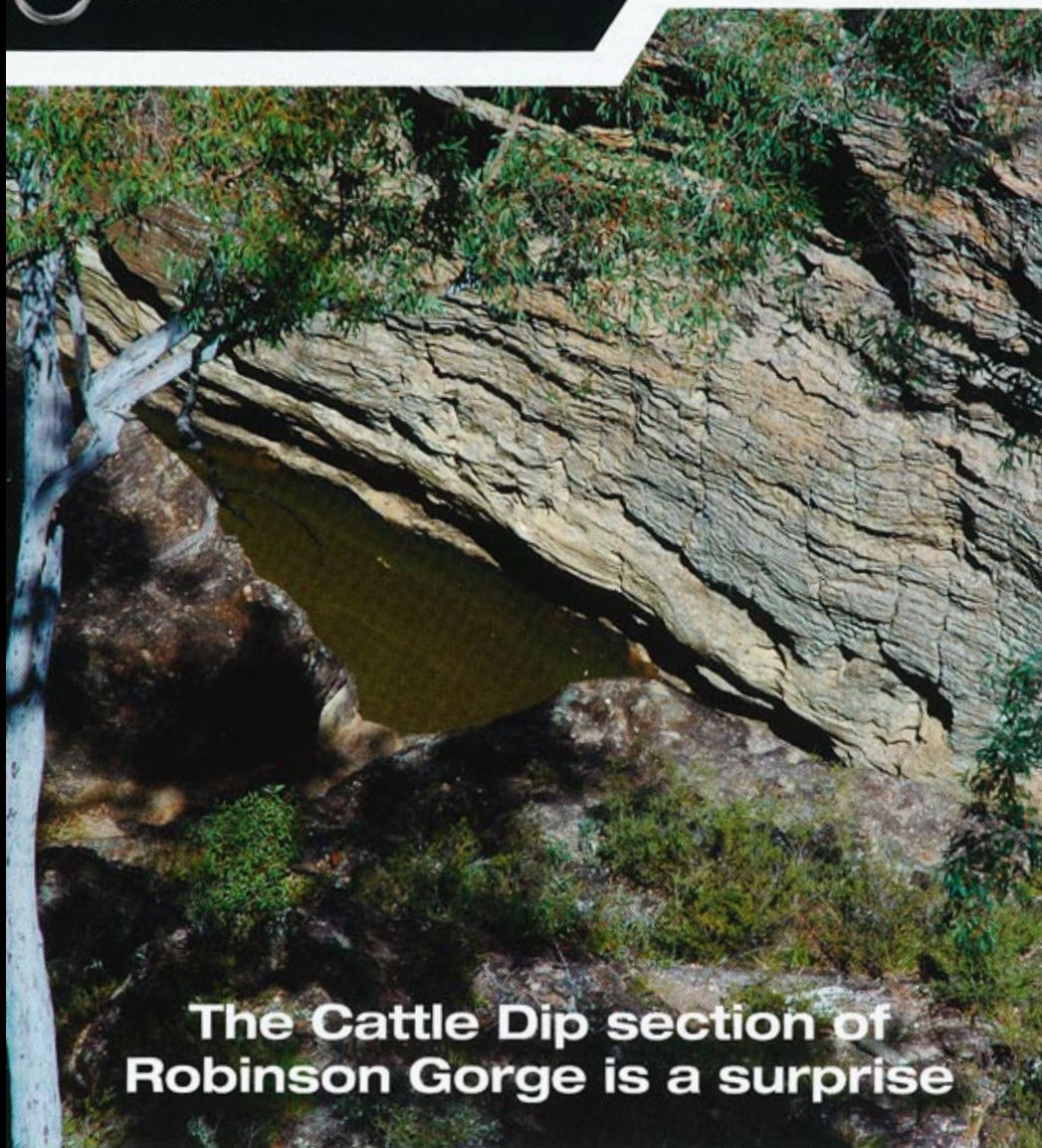
North-east of the campsite there's a crumbling track to the valley floor, marked at its entrance by an old, rusty oil drum. This descent is gradual, but traverses loose sandstone and requires some agility and skill. At the bottom of the climb there's a stone cairn, marking the return access-point.

It's also possible to climb down to the floor of Robinson Gorge from the more southern campsite at Starkvale Creek, after a level, 2km walk.

There's a rough track along the floor of Robinson Gorge to the sheer cliffs of the Cattle Dip part of the gorge, but it's a job for experienced bushwalkers. The gorge floor



Viewing spots without safety rails and crumbling sandstone means extreme caution is required (above)



The Cattle Dip section of Robinson Gorge is a surprise



trek is a two-day endeavour, so most Expedition NP visitors are content with a short excursion to the bottom and a plateau stroll to the cliff-top viewing area.

Another way of appreciating the surrounding country is walking Shepherds Peak trail that loops out and back from Starkvale Creek. It's a five-hour walk, or you can shorten the journey by driving to the Cattle Dip lookout carpark and walking to the peak and back from there.

The Cattle Dip section of Robinson Gorge is a surprise to all first-time visitors, because the name conjures up an image of a narrow, shallow pond that may once have been used by graziers. The reality is very different.

There's no hint of what's to come as you walk from the Cattle Dip carpark – 2.7km south of Starkvale Creek – because the track is reasonably level and the woodland seems to stretch as far as you can see.

That impression vanishes as the track snakes out of the scrub to a sudden cliff edge that falls vertically into the narrow bed of Robinson Creek. Across the tight valley a 100-metre-high cliff on the other side mirrors the one you're standing on.

The gorge runs for 12km between these sandstone cliffs and the lookout near Starkvale Creek campsite is at the northern end of this awesome sandstone groove.

At the bottom of this water-worn cleft is a 300-metre ribbon of permanent water and, where the gorge veers to the south in the distance, a sandy, tree-shaded beach.

Extreme caution is needed. There are no safety rails at viewing spots, or on descents into gorges and gullies; cliff edges appear without warning. The soft sandstone cliff edges easily crumble.

Children need to be strictly supervised when on walking tracks and should never be allowed to run ahead of the adults.

Despite a need for caution, Expedition National Park is an awesome spot. **4.4**



Trails in Expedition are not too taxing for a standard 4X4 like this Patrol (above); just one example of the glorious views over the park's gorge (left)