

Fingers Crossed

ACROSS AUSTRALIA



Grey Nomad Tales
by Lorraine Wise



PROUDLY SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL
BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION

Acknowledgements

I was aided and abetted in the production of this book by Mike, my loving husband and soul mate. I had the bright idea that a map of Australia at the beginning of each chapter, showing the track we took during that particular trip, would help readers see where and how far we travelled. Well, it was all too hard for me so I enlisted Mike's help and he did a fabulous job. Thank you, darling. Thank you also to Hema for allowing us to use their wonderful maps.

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Before my breast cancer was diagnosed, I worked at two private hospitals in Brisbane, one fully and one partly owned by the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. During that time I became acquainted with several of the nuns in that Order. One of those nuns, Sister Sponsa Gosciak, wrote to me following my surgery. It was such a comforting and supportive letter. Sr Sponsa continues to keep me in her prayers. I feel honoured and wish to thank her, from the bottom of my heart, for her unwavering support.

Finally, I thank my official editor, Alex Mitchell, without whose advice and suggestions I would have been struggling to bring this book together.

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by Lorraine Wise

Fingers Crossed Across Australia - Grey Nomad Tales
Author – Lorraine Wise

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Preface

No one will ever convince me that something other than stress brought on my cancer. I was coping with a very demanding job and my stress levels were through the roof. Early morning meetings, late evening meetings, no time to stop for lunch, week in and week out - it's not supposed to be like that! When I had started in the job some years before, I had loved it, every bit of it. Gradually though, more and more duties were added to my list and I started to hate going to work. I felt overwhelmed with jobs and deadlines. I became terrified I'd overlook something important and find myself in deep doo-doo. Eventually I called it quits and not long after, found out I had breast cancer. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

When the lump was found, my husband Mike and I were busy planning a guided four wheel drive camping trip across the centre of Australia. The lump was malignant though, and once it was removed we found ourselves taking a very different kind of trip: one that involved chemotherapy, radiotherapy, long-term medication and constant check-ups. The future was uncertain. We found out there were no guarantees, as all who have had to confront their own mortality will know.

Those months and months of treatment were not an easy time for either of us. I had to face the possibility that I may soon die. At the same time I was praying that I would live long enough to see my grandchildren grow up. The day after I was released from hospital my darling grandson was born. He was number five.

Mike couldn't have been more supportive during my illness. He was wonderful, accompanying me to every one of my treatment sessions, but also worrying about the future. When I finally emerged from the last therapy session, hairless and weak, looking like death warmed up, we sat down and replanned that trip across Australia. My oncologist encouraged us to travel - he believed it would be therapeutic for us to keep busy and not have time to worry about the future.

Of course, he was right; worrying was definitely not going to help, so we consulted some financial gurus to see if we could afford to retire early and join the grey nomads. It was a stretch, but possible. We put our suburban Brisbane house on the market and went shopping for a caravan. It's truly amazing how your outlook on life changes with your circumstances. I would never have in a million years believed I could so easily give up my home base, my roots.

I wanted to make the most of the life I had left. Our bucket list wasn't long. Mike and I had always planned to travel before we died - Australia first and then other parts of the world. So we got on with it.

These days Mike and I are grey nomads with a passion for travel and fishing adventures. We have put this book together after much encouragement from family and friends who

were bombarded with our travel bulletins over the last eight years. That's how long we've been travelling—not all of the time, but a good part of it. During our adventures we have covered much of Australia, concentrating on faraway places in the belief we could do the closer bits in shorter bursts later.

Please travel with us as we work our way through most of Australia on our eight year journey.

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Introduction

I love books and am an avid reader. I wrote this book with the help of my husband Mike, hoping the stories would whet the appetite of grey nomads and perhaps motivate and inspire those who are thinking about becoming grey nomads. Those who have been touched by cancer may also get some pleasure from my eight year journey, free of that dreaded disease.

The stories are warts and all tales of our lives while travelling Australia in the eight years following the removal of my unwelcome visitor. To come out the other end of that life-threatening event fit and healthy is wonderful – fingers crossed, of course.

I would recommend this course of action to everyone - in fear of their lives or not. Australia is a fantastic place and you need to see it up close to experience it. My advice is get that bucket list out and do it. Never, never take your life for granted and make the most of every single moment.

Good reading.

Lorraine Wise

CHAPTER 1

A TAGALONG TRIP ACROSS THE MIDDLE



I

Diagnosis Malignant

It was early November 2003. I had not long left the job I had grown to hate and was temping until I could find another permanent position. I became a bit concerned about a stinging sensation I'd been experiencing off and on in my right breast. If I gave it a hard rub the stinging would stop. I was used to self-examination. When I was 26 or 27 I remember being scared witless when I found a bumpy lump in that same breast. I don't recall any fine needle biopsies but the cluster of cysts was removed anyway and test results showed them to be benign. Since then I have been a strong advocate of self-examination and know the landscape of both my breasts. The scar tissue from the previous lumpectomy was familiar and I couldn't find any changes, so I carried on, knowing I'd had a clear mammogram a couple of months before.

Between Christmas and New Year we had a two week holiday fishing the waters around Iluka, near Maclean on the far north coast of NSW. We drove north along the beach one day, to Jerusalem Creek in the Bundjalung National Park and had a lovely time walking the beach and casting into the gutters in the surf.



Fishing the Surf Beach at Iluka

On this beautiful day I became aware that the stinging had become more intense and a quick rub didn't make it go away. Lying in bed that night, I conducted a very careful examination of my breast and realised that there was a new, hard and unmoving bump in the deep and uneven scar tissue from the 20-something year old surgery. I could easily have missed it in the scar tissue.

Back home, sun kissed but very worried, I visited my doctor and a couple of days later received the results of the fine needle biopsy of the lump. Malignant. No one ever wants to hear that word.

Before we knew it I was in hospital and under the knife. The tumour tested positive for oestrogen and progesterone, which the professionals said was a plus because it meant the cancer was dependent on oestrogen and would not stray far from its food source. The pathologists also seemed happy that clear margins surrounded the infected tissue that had been removed.

Unfortunately the professionals got it wrong - the cancer had indeed decided to travel. A trace was found in one of the 15 lymph nodes the surgeon had taken out. Apparently 5,000 cancer cells can fit onto the head of a pin. For goodness sake, the head of a pin is tiny!

I was devastated to hear that there was no test available that could detect if the lymph glands had transported them to other parts of the body. Oh, no! That meant the risk of the cancer returning would always be present. What if there were no symptoms until it was too late? I couldn't bear thinking about it. To give me maximum protection available from further invasion, the medicos decided I would have the whole box and dice - chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormonal therapy.

I was still in hospital on Mike's birthday and he came into my room before lunch, carrying a little esky and sporting a big smile. He whipped a kilo of fine-looking cooked prawns and a bottle of white wine out of the esky with a flourish. Lots of loving hugs and kisses later, we celebrated as best we could.



A Bit Emotional

I left hospital in late January with an unknown future, feeling vulnerable and as helpless as my brand new, darling little grandson, who was born the very next day. And if you're wondering about the photo, I wasn't trying to suffocate him. I was a tiny bit emotional.

By the time the first chemo session took place I was tired of worrying about it, actually keen to get started and so glad that Mike was coming with me. The nurses in the day oncology unit were very good; although after that first visit they threatened they'd run for cover next time they saw me enter the room. My veins have never been easy to find and tend to hide from a needle. With one arm out of action as it was short of lymph nodes, finding veins in the one good arm was going to be a real problem for the nurses, with five more treatments to come.

The first few days after that initial infusion were really hard. I was extremely nauseous and, if I could eat at all, it was only to graze on little bits of dry Sao bikkies and sips of water. By the second week I was feeling a bit better and went shopping with family, only to find I couldn't cope with the air conditioning. My nose bled like crazy and I felt so cold it was ridiculous.

By the beginning of the third week, however, I managed to walk to the local pool and do eight laps of breast stroke. I was stuffed but I did it!

And that was the routine, every three weeks, for six treatments. First week horribly nauseous, second week a bit better, third week back to feeling good and swimming again – at least until winter approached.

My hair started to fall out in tufts a few days before the Leukaemia Foundation's 'Shave for a Cure' Day in mid March. The timing was perfect. We collected lots of sponsors from our fishing club, Mike's work and of course family and friends, and raised close to \$1,000. The shave was easy. Mike lined up with me, as did my niece and my stepdaughter. What a sight we must have been sitting in the coffee shop later with our bald heads.

After treatment number three I was not a pretty sight. I had a machine gun trail up my forearm, where two nurses and a doctor had five tries before they could find a vein and insert the cannula. It was a traumatic little bonus for the halfway mark in that awful regime. Poor Mike cringed each time they inserted a needle and poked around, only to come away with no blood.



The Pin Cushion

About then, Mike and I had long discussions about how best to proceed with our lives. Given my uncertain future and our desire to see Australia we consulted some financial gurus. Mike submitted his resignation, we put the house on the market and began looking for a caravan. We were determined to make the most of what time we had left together.

Time left to live was an all-consuming factor in my mind during those six or so months of chemo and radiotherapy. I cried a lot in the beginning, and kept telling myself 'you'll get through this, keep going, stay positive'. There were so many challenges. After each chemo session I had to jab a needle into my stomach and inject a chemical that would give my lazy white blood cells a good kick start. I never imagined I could do that, but after the first very nervous effort, it became a case of 'come on girl, you gotta do what you gotta do'.

I was very selfish when it came to spending time with my daughter Leisa and her children, my little grandchildren Abby and Finn. They lived close by and I couldn't get enough of those babies. It broke my heart to think I may not get to see them grow up. At the time, Ab was not yet two and Finn was a brand new bub and I loved them dearly. I wondered how I'd cope leaving them behind when we went off in the caravan. I really believe those

two little treasures played a big part in me developing a steely determination to survive.

Between hospital visits and on my good days Mike and I were busy. We rescheduled the booking we'd had for a tagalong trip across the middle of Australia. We paid a deposit on a Kedron van at a Caravan and Camping Show and were impressed that the demand for those caravans was so great that it would be six months before ours could be built and ready for collection. That suited us fine as the timing would fit with our return from the tagalong.

All was going well until we found out that White Hank, our Landcruiser, couldn't be upgraded to tow more than two and a half tonnes. We needed a vehicle that could tow over three tonnes and had to trade White Hank in for a newer Silver Hank. At the time we likened that decision to the trauma of having to put a baby up for adoption! Silver Hank had big shoes to fill and, of course, has since more than proved his worth. He became known as Hank the Tank, and is the other love of my life. I hope you get to love him, too.

Hank found himself wearing an improved you-beaut suspension, air bags, a long range fuel tank and a full set of new shoes. He was about to take us west through the middle of Australia.

|| From St George QLD, west across the desert to Carnarvon WA

It was mid September and just a couple of weeks after my last radiotherapy session. I wasn't feeling very robust but was looking forward to the 26 day tagalong journey we were about to undertake. At St George in southern Queensland, Mike and I joined 12 other people, mostly couples, plus the tour leader and a cook. The trip was fully catered; all we had to do was pitch our tent each day and provide our drinks and nibblies. We had a broad mix of eight vehicles including Toyota, Nissan, Holden, Ford and Mitsubishi, and just as diverse a mix of personalities.

My post-chemo hair was only a millimetre long and I felt very self-conscious, but no one paid much attention to my hair. It must have been obvious to the others that it was our first tagalong trip. When the convoy positions were allocated, we were sweep. What the hell was a sweep? We had no idea what was expected of us on that first day, but we listened and learned from those more experienced. We soon discovered that sweep was last vehicle in the convoy. Each day we rotated vehicle positions and our learning continued!

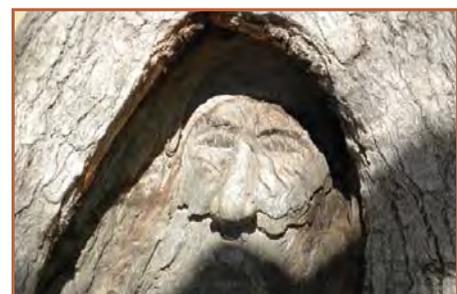
We'd been on camping trips, of course, but never into the deserts of the outback. As we made our way west, we left the bitumen at Cunnamulla and followed the Balonne Development Road to Noccundra. We set up camp that first night beside the Wilson River. Naturally, we had to have a beer in the Noccundra pub, established in 1882. The heritage listed stone hotel houses Noccundra's only residents, a permanent population of four at that time. The old doorways were for people so small, even I had to stoop to walk through, and I'm a shortarse.

On day two we took a track through some oil fields to Nappa Merrie, stopping for lunch at the Dig Tree, where provisions had been buried for Burke and Wills when they returned from the Gulf. Unfortunately they didn't find the stash and perished in the desert. Years later, a man called John Dickens carved Burke's face into a tree about 30 metres downstream of the Dig Tree. The face was still clearly visible. A short walk away was Burke's grave site on the bank of the Cooper Creek.

It was here that we had our first real hassle with flies. We all had veils on our hats but the flies were so thick it was hard to get our sandwiches to our mouths without ingesting at least one.



Camp at Noccundra



Face Tree

We crossed the border into South Australia and moved on to Innamincka. This tiny community was bustling with other touring 4WD vehicles, and boasted a pub, general store, National Parks office and a block of showers for travellers. A gold coin got you a minute or two of hot water, so we enjoyed a luxurious shower before continuing on to our camp in the Strzelecki Desert, where 16 of us sat around the campfire chatting. This tour was great for socialising!



Simpson Desert Track

Walker's Crossing over Cooper Creek is notorious for flooding, however it was dry and we crossed easily, travelling across red dunes and gibber plains till we joined the Birdsville Track. There we turned south, eventually coming to the Simpson Desert. The convoy stopped to see the first of several patches of small bivalve shells, bleached white by the hot sun and proof of a long gone inland sea.



The Convoy

On the Rig Road, which is simply a continuation of the minor tracks we'd been exploring, we meandered through massive salt lakes, over dunes 25 metres high and across clay pans, grasslands and colossal gibber plains that reached the horizon. It was a type of country we had never seen before and we were all in awe of it. That night we discussed the day over drinks around the campfire and marvelled at our million-star sky. Mike and I chatted with Jan and Brian, who were also from Brisbane and would become dear friends. Jan had also been visited by breast cancer several years before.

On day four we found ourselves gaping at a beautiful lone gum tree growing in stark isolation, far from its normal habitat. It remains a mystery how that tree managed to grow on an area of gravel beside the track, away from any visible source of water. In typical Aussie fashion, some dill had placed a fluffy toy koala up in the branches.

We had lots of fun traversing some very tricky dunes along the WAA line, one of the main tracks across the Simpson. It had been made by bulldozer and was called a line because it was fairly straight. Bouncing up and over the steep dunes, we suddenly heard on the two-way that there'd been a breakdown in our convoy. The bumpy road had been too much for the shock absorbers in Jan's sports bra! The rest of the women knew exactly what she was struggling with. We'd all been travelling along that road with our arms strategically folded across our chests.

It was around then that we encountered the first flourish of wildflowers. We couldn't believe our eyes, such an amazing display in the middle of nowhere. As we left the dunes behind we joined the French Line to Purnie Bore. The bore was originally drilled in search of oil and gas by the French Petroleum Company around 1963. It was there that

we set up camp and lined up to take advantage of the hot bore water for a wonderful cleansing shower.

Continuing west, we entered Witjira National Park, travelling through more massive gibber flats to Dalhousie Springs; an oasis in the outback. There we saw one of 70 square kilometres of different sized mound springs full of warm, fresh water all year round; an outbreak from the Great Artesian Basin. Many of our group enjoyed a short dip in the springs, along with plenty of others from the adjacent campground.

Not far from there were the ruins of Dalhousie Station homestead, sitting amongst date palms which would have been planted when the first pastoral lease for Dalhousie was taken up in the early 1870s. Now it was such a desolate place, but the homestead must have been magnificent in its time. In a clearing in the middle of the grove of palms we discovered a small spring, a cool refuge from the heat where we could imagine the family of the homestead relaxing during the scorching summer months.

We set up camp at Mt Dare, not far south of the Northern Territory border. In the 1870s this had been a major link in the construction of the Overland Telegraph. We found a pub, a store, a fuel stop complete with mechanic and a campground. Once again we were surprised by the number of campers at such a remote place.

On day six we crossed into the Northern Territory and made our way to the Lambert Centre, said to be the 'planimetric centre of gravity' of Australia, as opposed to the 'geographical centre'. Apparently this is when you measure the horizontal features with no regard to elevation, so the ruler went straight through the mountains, not over the top. OK, I got that. Whichever way you measured it, the centre of Australia was such a special treat, surrounded by sparse carpets of little yellow pompom wildflowers and native grevillea in full orange bloom.

We passed through the Indigenous community of Finke on our way to the spectacular Chambers Pillar, and



First Wildflowers



Homestead Remains



Pom Poms



Native Grevillea



A Beautiful Red Road



Chambers Pillar



Mulga Ant Nest

stopped for lunch by the side of the road, surrounded by the picturesque beauty of the red sand and the soft green foliage of the magnificent desert oaks.

We took the sidetrack to Chambers Pillar, stopping to look at a big herd of camels. They stared dolefully back at us, just as interested as we were. Chambers Pillar towered 40 metres above the plain and was first sighted by John McDouall Stuart in 1860. The solitary column formed by sandstone deposits and worn down over millions of years, created a striking backdrop for our camp. Through the night an eerie wind gusted through the camp. Everything was still and then you could hear it coming; the tent would shake as it passed, then all was quiet and still again.

We enjoyed a short and welcome break from the dirt when we turned onto the sealed Stuart Highway on our way to Kings Canyon. Before we knew it though, we were back on the dirt of Ernest Giles Road. It was worth it, with our first sighting of the wild and beautiful Sturt Desert Pea and the very distinctive home of the mulga ant. The mulga ant builds a barrier around the entry to its nest, so it actually looks like a circular dam wall. This is a tough ask when you consider how hard packed the red earth can get in the centre of Australia.

At Kings Canyon we found lots of tourists and enjoyed our first camp on green grass. We are no longer spring chickens and chose the cooler early morning to trek along the bottom trail, leaving the hard yakka to the younger and fitter. The early morning light was perfect for viewing the valley of cycads, eucalypts, a waterhole and huge chunks of sandstone that had fallen from the vertical cliff faces.



Mt Conner

Next we were off to Yulara, the accommodation centre next to Uluru, previously known as Ayers Rock. On the way we passed by Mt Conner, so cute way back in the distance. We could see why some people mistake him for Uluru, but he's too flat on top.



The Olgas

The sun was beating down when we arrived at Yulara, so we all decided to leave the explorations till next morning. Mike and I chose to wander amongst the Olgas, also known as Kata Tjuta, a truly breathtaking experience in more ways than one! Even with a 5.00am start we were dripping with perspiration by the time we made it back to Hank, our Toyota Landcruiser.

We drove around Uluru in the late afternoon, then

watched the rock glow a rich orange at sunset. An early start the next day saw us cross the border into Western Australia with magnificent mountain views along the Great Central Road to Giles Meteorological Station. It was there we found remnants of rockets fired from Woomera.

The late Len Beadell was a surveyor of some note who had been asked by the Government of the day to find an appropriate location for the Woomera rocket range. Once the location had been decided he and his tiny team had to create access roads, and went on to open up more than 2½ million kilometres of our outback deserts. His most famous road is the 1,600 kilometre Gunbarrel Highway.

We knew we were headed into some very remote country so we asked one of weather forecasters, we'll call him Nigel, what to expect for the next few days. We were happy with Nigel's forecast of a few scattered showers.

Soon enough, as we travelled the ambitiously named Heather Highway, a set of tyre tracks through the Gibson Desert, we drove into a severe storm. The track became a river and we were forced to stop and wait. As the rain cleared we found hail under the scrub. Fair dinkum – we had hail in the desert! We drove through a lot of water before eventually making it to dry land and the feeling that Nigel at the Giles Weather Station had questionable forecasting ability.

That night we stopped to camp, but didn't set up completely as another storm was brewing and the sky was very angry – dark and boiling. Storms didn't usually worry us, but this one was scary and ominous. Fortunately at the last minute it went around us but we're not likely to forget that sky, the experience, or Nigel.

It was still cloudy when we set out the next morning through a landscape dominated by spinifex, on to the Gunbarrel Highway, a bone jarring track full of corrugations and overhanging bushes that attacked the paintwork on the vehicles without mercy.



Giles Weather Station



Beadell Grader



After Storm on Heather Highway



Hailstones



Gun Barrel Highway



Spinifex



Wildflowers at Everard Junction

We stopped to climb Mt Beadell, with its plaque in memory of ‘the last true Australian explorer’, Len Beadell. His survey theodolite was part of the memorial, encased inside a metal mesh cage. Our tour leader told us Beadell would survey ahead of his team and signal his position with a mirror. The dozer driver then made a beeline for the mirror, followed by the grader and so on. Most of Beadell’s roads were straight, hence the name Gunbarrel.

After six hours of teeth-rattling corrugations and women travelling with their arms folded, we stopped at Everard Junction amongst patches of the tiniest, most delicate, dark pink flowers growing in the dry earth. There we found nothing but a post and a tin box containing a visitors’ book, which of course we all signed to prove we’d been there.

Next we arrived at Carnegie Station, a huge 370,000 hectare family-owned property. We pitched the tent on grass at the homestead and the next morning woke to a beautiful sunrise, with magpies singing and a rooster crowing.

Forward ho. The road had improved and the carpets of wildflowers growing on both sides blew us all away. Not long after we refuelled at Meekatharra, the Mitsubishi Pajero in front of us began swaying and eventually blew a tyre with an enormous bang. Pete and Julie got out of their car amid black smoke and the awful smell of burning rubber. We stopped and Mike grabbed the fire extinguisher just in case. When the wheel was cool enough to work on, the tyre was replaced and we moved on.



Murchison River

Then one of the vehicles up front reported via two-way that they’d hit a snake. To say I don’t like them is an understatement, but Mike does. He had to stop, and wanted to give it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Sadly, he was too late.

We pushed on, trying to stick to our tight schedule, past the Murchison River full of water and flanked by beautiful ghost gums. When we finally reached Mt Gould Station and set up camp by the old police station and lockup, we were all tired little vegemites. It was early to bed that night.



Mulla Mulla

We crossed the mostly dry Gascoyne River and veered north to look at Mt Augustus, a magnificent monocline said to be twice as big as Uluru. We walked to a spot

where the water ran down the mountain and caught in a waterhole. Access to the water was via a large horizontal crevice in the rock. The gap was tall enough for a human to slide through. The indigenous people have over time polished the bottom part of the gap in the rock by sliding back and forth through the crevice to get to the water. Rock wallabies also go there for water but must get cornered by dingoes, as we saw three lairs with skeletons in and around each one.



Gascoyne River

Wedge-tailed eagles blessed us with their presence as we headed through Gascoyne Junction to the Kennedy Range National Park. We left the vehicles to wander for awhile and spotted a group of mountain goats playing with scant regard for the mob who had just invaded their territory. The icing on the visual cake that day was a glorious wildflower garden at the base of the mountain range. There were hundreds of small plants with tiny white, yellow, pink and purple flowers.



Mt Augustus

We reached Carnarvon on the coast of WA only 14 days after leaving St George, and had a day to relax and enjoy the local seafood straight from the trawlers, accompanied by a few drops of WA's wonderful white wine. Mike and I agreed that we had got more than our money's worth from this journey.



Kennedy Range



Carnarvon WA, north to Exmouth then east across the desert and back home



Salt

With our batteries recharged, we headed north along the coast, passing huge salt flats along the way. In the distance we could see a ship being loaded with the locally mined salt at Cape Cuvier. The rugged coastline was spectacular and powerful waves were forcing air and water up through several blowholes. Little rock pools around the blowholes were full of salt, and like kids we had to have a taste – it was very salty.



Blowholes

Our next stop was the cairn built in memory of the sailors lost on the HMAS Sydney in 1941, then we headed north, stopped only by the Pajero playing up again and totally destroying another tyre.

Our guide took us onto a private 4WD track that followed the coastline north through Ningaloo Station where there were kangaroos and emus galore. I got out for a good close-up photo of an emu and later some of

the group travelling behind us had the hide to say they saw it chase me back to the car! I said they were being silly; we both happened to be going in the same direction. Honestly though, I didn't know I could run so fast.

Cape Range National Park is a wonderful part of the country, with crystal clear water and the Ningaloo Reef very close to shore. No one on the tour will ever forget our tent peg naming ceremony as we set up camp that evening at Vlaming Head. Every time Mike tried to hammer a peg into the tough ground, it bent and he lost his cool. The tent pegs' names all began with the letter 'f'.

On to Exmouth for fuel and a good coffee. Crowding the sky around us were many huge antennae which the locals said were a combined Australian/USA military communications base. We soon came to Charles Knife Gorge, which we thought was a miniature version of the Grand Canyon.

I loved our next camp, House Creek, with its beautiful ghost gums and little patches of green grass struggling to survive against the odds. As we made camp I noticed some of our group dawdling over erecting their tents and wondered why. When Mike and I had decided on a great little site and started unpacking our gear, those who had been idle went to work – as far away from us as possible. I was perturbed and asked them why

at beer o'clock. No one held back; they'd had enough of Mike's snoring keeping them awake at night. We all had a good chuckle and determined that the tour leader and Mike were a bad influence on each other. Both were fond of a few drops of Bundy Rum and sometimes had a few more drops than they should. The more rum Mike drank, the louder he snored. Luckily I was either tired or just used to the noise; it didn't keep me awake, although he did often get a dig in the ribs when he got too loud.

On day 18, we left the highway for Karijini National Park in the Pilbara. The heat meant we only attempted the shorter walks, but these were extraordinary, to the picturesque Dales Gorge and Fortescue Falls with multicoloured cliffs, hanging green ferns and glistening little cascades. We added this to our growing list of places to return to 'one day'.



House Creek

The Pajero wrecked another tyre on our way in to the mining town of Mt Newman, where all the vehicles were booked in for a service. We took a tour of the huge Mt Whaleback mine while waiting for the cars to be given the all-clear, then on to the Great Sandy Desert we went. (Insert photo 32 Mt Whaleback Mine)



Mt Whaleback Mine

Lots of corrugations, soft patches and badly cambered corners made for interesting travel along the Talawana Track to our next campsite, which was simply a high spot in the flat terrain usually used when wet weather makes the road impassable.



Talawana Track

Then, on Day 20, after 200 more unforgiving kilometres of teeth rattling, bone jarring corrugations, we moved on to the Canning Stock Route. It dates back to 1906 when surveyor Alfred Canning was charged with creating a path across four of Australia's remote and arid deserts to drive cattle from the Kimberley to the southern markets. Over ten years, using only camel power, he dug nearly 50 wells along the 1700 kilometre route to keep the stock watered.

Today, the track is still rough, but instead of riding the many camels we saw along the way, we had lots of fun getting through the deep sand and up and over the dunes in our 4WDs. At Well 26 we tried to draw water the way the drovers did, but found it very hard work. Raising sufficient water for a mob of several hundred cattle would have been a long and tiring task for the men who used the Canning.

Sitting around the campfire at Well 30 that night, surrounded by the old and beautiful bloodwood trees, we competed to see who could spot the most falling stars. Many wishes were made before bedtime and I made the most of mine. Please, I don't want to die.



Dunes along Canning



Jenkins Track



Jupiters Well



Quarry Campsite



West McDonnell Ranges

Please let me win this battle. Please, let me live to love my husband and my family. Please allow me to watch my grandchildren grow up. And on I went.

There was much discussion at breakfast about the overnight visit to the camp by a group of camels. We had been woken by rumbling, gurgling growls as they wandered through the tents towards the well, making campers a tad nervous that they could be trampled at any moment. Once the camels had decided the tents were of no consequence, they got on with making loud and boisterous love, turning the campers close by into unintentional voyeurs who told us of the weird sounds the mating camels made. Others just rollicked in the soft, loose sand. The next morning hoof prints, fresh dung and large indentations in the sand were evidence of their midnight party.

The next day we passed the partying camels on our way to refuel at an indigenous community, where we paid around one third above the market value for petrol. From there it was on to the Jenkins Track, although we were hard pressed to find any track at all, so luckily the guide knew where he was going and provided reassurance that we were headed the right way.

Both rear shock absorbers on the Pajero were stuffed and Pete struggled to keep the vehicle under control, so we travelled very slowly through Jupiter's Well to our next campsite in an abandoned quarry. For some inexplicable reason I felt very safe there. The quarry earned its place as my second favourite campsite.

Just a bit further down the road we stopped to help an indigenous man whose car had a flat battery. There were several other indigenous people sitting under a tree by the road. Mike had jumper leads and got the car started. The man then asked for water, so we gave him some. Next he asked for a satellite phone, but we didn't have one. He asked us to pump up his spare tyre, which we did. Then we said we had to go, before he could think of something else he wanted us to do. By then several of the convoy had caught up, as we always travelled about a kilometre apart to avoid the dust.

We headed in to Alice Springs through the West MacDonnell Ranges - breathtaking country and worthy of unhurried exploration.

After several days of bush camps, we were all keen to find a grassy tent site and have a nice hot shower in Alice Springs. The Pajero left us for repairs and Julie and Pete decided to make their own way back to Brisbane once the repairs were done. The group had a free morning, so Mike and I did the tourist thing and wandered the shops, then took a tour of the old Telegraph Station before meeting up with the others to set up camp at Gem Tree. The caravan park attracted fossickers interested in gems such as zircon and garnets, and offered equipment hire, tours and even grading, cutting and setting gems into jewellery. We put Gem Tree on our to-do list for another day.

Jan arrived at beer o'clock with plastic bags tied over her shoes. She was not happy, as the campsite she and Brian had been allocated was full of prickles. Those prickles had found their way into the tent and tucked themselves into places where they weren't welcome. Gem Tree is definitely not on Jan's to-do list. Luckily she had bought a book of Australian verse in Alice Springs, so after dinner, when we weren't picking prickles out of her clothes, we chose a funny poem from the book and took it in turns to read.



Prickle prevention at Gem Tree

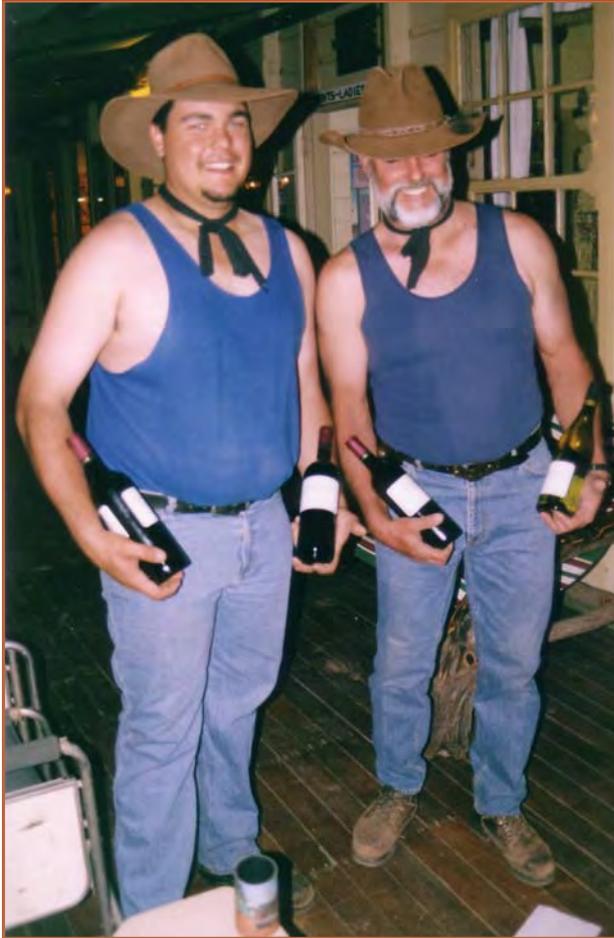
Day 24 was way too long, starting with a look at the gem fields, then driving through harsh and barren land dotted with termite mounds to cross the Queensland border by mid afternoon. Then we ploughed through miles upon miles of bull dust along the Donohue Highway to Boulia, where we were keen to make it to the pub before the dinners finished at 8pm. After hurriedly throwing up the tents we made it by the skin of our teeth. Sleep came easy that night.

After the rush to get there, the next morning we found that the fuel bowsers at Boulia were out of order, so we were going nowhere till they were fixed. Some of us took advantage of the extra time to visit the Min Min light presentation. The Min Min light is an unidentified light that can follow travellers for long distances around Boulia. It generally travels about a metre from the ground and is shaped like a football or watermelon. Creepy.



Guest at the Pub

After lunch we set off on the narrow but sealed Kennedy Development Way to the Middleton Pub, the only building amongst miles of country as flat as a pancake. The pub was run by a young couple who made us all welcome. They were looking after two orphans - a very cute little joey and a young camel whose mothers had been killed on the road.



Dressing Up?

The itinerary for that night called for a 'formal' evening on the pub verandah and it was such fun. We all dressed in our best!

Where had the days gone? After a big, cholesterol packed brekkie the next morning we swapped addresses and started to make our own way home. Mike and I hightailed it to Augathella and stayed at the pub, but after four weeks of sleeping a couple of inches off the ground, the soft mattress was strangely uncomfortable and sleep was elusive. We made it home to Brisbane the next day, tired, but well and truly hooked on travelling our fabulous country while we could.

CHAPTER 2

OUR FIRST TRIP AS GREY NOMADS



1 *Emotions running high*

Emotional? Well, yes, I was emotional in a sad way when we sold the house we loved in Brisbane and yes I was emotional in an excited way when we later took possession of our beautiful Milo, a new 5.6 metre Kedron caravan. The name Milo has nothing at all to do with any chocolate flavoured milk drink. 'Mi' = the first two letters of Mike and 'Lo' = the first two letters of Lorraine. Easy. Milo is our Kedron Caravan and Milo Too is our tinny. Oh, and Milo is also our nickname. There you have it.

Milo was to be our home into the future. That was, of course, as long as I stayed well and we could live with each other in such a confined space! We thought we'd better put it to the test before going anywhere, so we settled for a three month trial at the Bongaree van park on Bribie Island.

During those three months I bounced between being excited about our travel plans and being distressed at having to leave my children and grandchildren. It was a terrible time, full of 'what ifs'. Thankfully, my children were very supportive and encouraging and the little ones were too young to understand what was happening.

Our trial stay in Milo revealed no major dramas with living in a confined space, however we did have concerns about Mike's hip. Not a cancer scare, but terrible arthritic pain. He

ended up having surgery that the orthopod called 'hip resurfacing' and came home with a big piece of metal in his body. Some weeks and lots of exercise later he was declared fit enough to travel, so we packed up and nervously left Bribie Island. Of course we were nervous and I defy anyone who is so very new at the grey nomad game not to be nervous, but we were also very excited because we were joining the many other more experienced nomads on the road. That was early March and the beginning of autumn.

Our first real journey was a short one – to Evans Head, a small holiday and fishing destination south of Ballina on the far north coast of New South Wales, about three hours drive from Bribie. The large Kedron Owners Group had organised a fun weekend there and we wanted to participate. It was exhilarating to see the rows and rows of Kedron vans in the park. We learned a lot that weekend from some very experienced, off the beaten track travellers and no one had a bad word to say about their Kedron. There were some real rascals among them and Mike and I looked forward to meeting them again along the track.



The name Milo

|| Griffith, Menindee Lakes, Broken Hill

We worked our way down to Canberra, spending time with rellies as we went and noting how the drought was affecting the landscape. We drove through Yass, a town set in beautiful countryside on the Yass River and boasting magnificent architecture dating back to 1840. Did you know that this district was home to Banjo Patterson? I was given a book of his wonderful poems many years ago and it included a photo of him; a very handsome young solicitor in his day.



Wallendbeen Milestone Sculptures

That night we camped at Wallendbeen, in wheat, sheep and cattle country. We woke to a magical sunrise and a cold 8°, but it didn't take long for a beautiful, crisp, clear day to emerge. The wheat had been harvested and the huge paddocks were full of stubble waiting for those ever-hungry sheep.



Wise Bros Flour in Griffith

In the information centre in Griffith we found a calico bag of Special Household Flour from Wise Bros Pty Ltd, Narrandera, sitting in the middle of an agricultural display. Mike was very pleased; it brought back lots of memories for him. His father's family the Wises established the flour mill in Narrandera and the first four years of Mike's working life were spent at that mill.

A wine tour is a must in this area, so we started with Piromit, where at 10am we sailed happily through the tastings and found the best chateau cardboard ever - a 20 litre cask of very smooth dry red. Yep, 20 litres, but not for much longer, as workplace health and safety restrictions would see the cartons downsized to 15 litres. The cask of red was caravan friendly, too! It sat neatly over the wheel arch, under the table. We would become one of their regular customers and collect our box of wine from post offices all over Australia.

As we continued our wine tour we bought a couple of bottles of a delicious Pinot Grigio for later on. Next was the McWilliams establishment, then down a driveway lined with heavily laden olive trees into another well-known winery to complete the tour.

Travelling along brown and dusty roads in Black Stump country we were surprised to arrive at Hillston to find it quite green. Apparently there's an artesian basin beneath



Chateau Cardboard Hanwood



Hillston Golf Club



Gypsum out of Hillston



Sculptures in the Living Desert



Sturt Desert Pea



Story Poles

the town which also irrigates a massive 350 hectare orange orchard on the outskirts. The Hillston Golf Course, however, looked like it had never ever seen a blade of grass.

Somewhere in the middle of bumping up and down between Ivanhoe and Menindee, we stopped and trespassed on private property to look at an old rail loading point for gypsum. Gypsum is a mineral used, among other things, for turning clay into usable soil. It was the gypsum sparkling in the sun that had attracted our attention. We got sprung strolling amongst the scattered pile and I felt very guilty when the young property owner turned up in his ute to check we weren't in need of help.

Outside Broken Hill we saw five magnificent wedge-tailed eagles, some feasting on road kill and some gracefully soaring the skies. Their majestic display was a fitting lead-up to the Sculpture Symposium: 12 magnificent sandstone sculptures standing in a circle on top of a hill in an area known as the Living Desert.

While we were in that neck of the woods we also walked the trails of the Flora and Fauna Sanctuary, marvelling at the spectacular Sturt Desert Peas and a display of mulga humpies and story poles carved from River Red Gum, which would have been used by the original indigenous occupants of the area.

Next day we drove to the top of the huge mullock heap that overlooked the city of Broken Hill and wandered through the miners' memorial. We found that journey very confronting; there was a list of the names of every employee who had died on site and how each of them had died. Woh!

Then we braved an underground tour of one of the old mines. The lift took us down 425 feet and our guide, a retired miner and a bit of a larrikin, entertained us for more than two hours. Another retired miner, a mineral artist, ran the mining museum where he used crushed minerals of every hue imaginable and glue instead of paint to create incredible diverse artworks.

On Easter Monday we packed a bag and, leaving the van behind, headed for an overnight stay in an underground B&B in the opal mining town of White Cliffs, near Wilcannia.

Wilcannia, oh dear. It was hard to believe that it was once known as the Queen City of the West, an important inland port and transport hub in the days of the paddle-steamer. We found a very different place; a town with a very much uncared for appearance. We did see some beautiful old sandstone buildings, but many had been abandoned, windows broken and boarded up. We had a quick lunch at the café and left feeling quite sad.

The road to White Cliffs had only recently been sealed and was easy going. We checked into our accommodation and were wide-eyed as we were shown to our room. It was part of a real opal mine, with the walls rendered and painted white, so different to anything we had ever seen before. What a fabulous place.

After settling in, we drove into the older opal fields and came upon a young man washing stones that he had drilled up. For some reason he'd decided the best place to dig was on the road! Once he was done he'd refill the hole he'd dug and move a bit further along the road. He showed us some opal he had found earlier but asked us not to tell anyone in town. It was Easter Monday and everyone else was having a holiday, so he didn't want any of the other local miners to know he'd found some opal under this little piece of road - he wanted to keep the road all to himself. Cut throat old world, this opal mining business.

Staying 'mum' while we enjoyed a cool beer at the pub, we then went home to prepare our contribution to a shared dinner with our fellow guests, members of an Irish Band. I was very careless with the cabbage slicer and took the top off my finger, but nobody complained about the extra protein in the coleslaw and we all had a lovely evening jamming with the musicians after dinner.

One of the owners, Jo, had had a mole removed from her heel a week or so before and it needed to be checked, so next morning we both trotted off to the little two-bed Royal Flying Doctor Service hospital to have our wounds dressed. Jo got a real scare when she saw that her wound was swollen and bloodless. She had been on her feet too much and had not rested. Jo hadn't had it easy running a B&B with her husband away and no extra help over Easter.



Humpies



B&B in White Cliffs



Opal Miner in the middle of the road



Pro Hart Gallery

So we became ‘outback helpers’ and stayed for a week to help out. It was a wonderful experience being housekeepers and odd job bods, and we could have gone on longer, except for my cancer medication. We had packed only enough pills for an overnight stay. Jo managed to get hold of some of the medication I needed, but I was too new at coping with a question mark over my life to take risks, be they real or perceived. I was getting more and more worried, so despite her protests, when Jo’s husband returned we had to leave. I felt bad leaving her, but the need to resume my proper medication regime was overwhelming.

Back in Broken Hill I recovered my medication and then could relax to visit the art galleries of Pro Hart and Jack Absalom, where we drooled over the perfect use of colour and settled for a few postcards.

We went to look at Silverton, that outback ghost town that isn’t really a ghost town. It has been the scene of more than 140 movies and commercials, including Mad Max II; Priscilla Queen of the Desert and XXXX beer ads. It was briefly a centre for lead silver zinc ore, and today is a picturesque cluster of buildings, including a museum in the restored gaol, some art galleries and artists’ studios and the celebrated Silverton Hotel, where we enjoyed a beer and a pie for lunch.

Once our mail arrived we left Broken Hill and crossed into South Australia at Cockburn. The quarantine inspectors gave us a hard time, confiscating much of our fruit and vegetables, which was a hard lesson for a couple of new nomads. We had not been warned there was a possibility that this may happen, although we thought Broken Hill and Cockburn were in the same fruit fly zone and we would be okay – obviously not!



Silverton Hotel

III Flinders Ranges, Oodnadatta Track

First stop in South Australia was the steam train town of Peterborough. Steam trains were the lifeblood of Peterborough for 110 years, then they became the major tourist attraction, with the information centre based inside an old carriage. Quaint.

Out of Hawker we drove the tracks of the Flinders Ranges National Park. Those ranges really are spectacular, with plenty of sightings of wallabies, kangaroos, emus, parrots and eagles. The river gums were magnificent; no wonder the artist Hans Heysen went there often to paint his famous gum trees. We drove almost to Blinman to see the 'Great Wall of China', a rock formation that actually does resemble the real thing.



Great Wall near Blinman

After lunch we tackled the Jarvis Hill lookout trail. The mud map said 260 metres to the lookout. It didn't mention that those 260 metres were vertical. It was really tough going; we had to make like mountain goats to get there and goats were the only wildlife we saw. Hot and sweaty, we couldn't wait to return to Hawker and the pub for a nice cold beer. We grumbled to the bar flies, who simply laughed. They'd heard it all before.



Flinders Range

Undeterred, next we tackled an eight kilometre walk to Wilpena Pound, and along the way saw a yellow-footed rock-wallaby and some beautiful king parrots. I was a cheapskate and had talked Mike out of spending a lot of money to see the special landscape from the air. I reckon Wilpena Pound is a giant, flopped soufflé. You know, tall and beautiful on the outside, sunken in the middle.



Wilpena Pound, here we come!

Driving back to camp we came across two wallabies beside the road; we slowed and pulled up. We thought the fact that they didn't move was strange. Even stranger they were ignoring us. Then we noticed they were standing next to the prone body of a third wallaby that had obviously been hit by a car. They looked like they were mourning. Do they have the capacity to do that? We continued on, feeling guilty that someone like us had killed their mate.

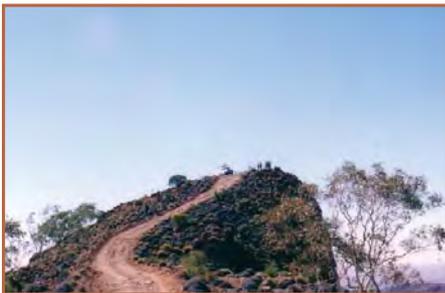
That evening as we relaxed at camp, we watched rain fall from the clouds, but only a few drops made it all the way to the ground; the rest evaporated on the way down. Now that's something we definitely hadn't seen before and, no, we weren't drunk!

Next day we hooked up and hit the road again. We saw lots of emus between Hawker and Leigh Creek - home to the workers at South Australia's only operating coal mine. On the highway we drove past the enormous open cut mine. Copley was quaint and had much appeal so we lunched at the Quandong Café and Bush Bakery. The quandong is a bush tucker fruit from a native tree. We shared a delicious quandong smoothie and a quandong pie that we found a little chewy.

Back on the dirt we headed 120 kilometres east to Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, through arid, gibber landscape all the way. It seemed to take forever to get there and when we finally did arrive, we were very surprised to see possibly 100 tourists in such an isolated place.



Arkaroola in the Flinders Ranges



Sillers Lookout

The following day we spent four and a half hours on a 4WD tour you could only call extreme. Experienced drivers took 14 of us on a 42 kilometre hair-raising journey to the depths of an ancient sea bed then up and across the narrow peaks of the most rugged mountains in the north Flinders Ranges. The tour stopped on the tiny, narrow top of Sillers Lookout, where we all got out, stretched our legs and had tea and lamingtons. It felt as if we were on top of the world. We enjoyed fabulous views of the dry salt bed of Lake Frome on the horizon and, with the help of our guides pointing us in the right direction, we could also make out the site of the Beverley Uranium Mine. The return trip was just as hairy; we were hanging on for dear life. When we were all safely back at base, however, we agreed the experience had been a lot of fun.

Armed with yet another mud map we did a couple of self-drive discovery tours and felt very adventurous. Want to know the best part? I navigated and wasn't in trouble for getting us lost – not even once. Next morning we got up very early and drove to one of the waterholes we had found the day before in the hope of seeing some yellow-footed rock wallabies having their morning drink. It was worth the effort and such a treat. We watched them for quite a while until they sensed our presence and very quickly rock-hopped away

Arkaroola has its own astronomical observatory and one night we went star hopping with the resident astronomer. Did you know that the brightest pointer to the Southern Cross is actually two stars? True. We saw them. It was also great to look at Saturn and her rings and Jupiter with four of her moons.

From Arkaroola we travelled to Marree, a tiny town at the junction of the Birdsville and Oodnadatta Tracks. We arrived at about 3.30pm, got out of an air conditioned vehicle and found the temperature was 38°. Dripping in perspiration, we checked into the Drivers

Rest Caravan Park owned by Eric Oldfield, who used to be boss drover on the Great Outback Cattle Drive. He was a very nice man, who told us he'd retired from droving and introduced us to his best friend, Bonnie, a beautiful red Kelpie.



Marree Pub

Milo was set up in no time flat and, red faced and a lather of sweat even after a cool shower, we escaped to the very friendly pub for a real cold beer. We were only there for about five minutes and another couple hurried in, commenting about how damned hot it was outside. We sat in air conditioned comfort and swapped stories all afternoon. Peter and Lyn were from Melbourne on holiday and were looking forward to the day they could retire and join us and other nomads on the road. The afternoon flew by so quickly we found ourselves staying for dinner together at the pub.

From Marree, we took the Oodnadatta Track to Oodnadatta. The road is also called 'The Old Ghan Heritage Trail' because the road follows the old railway line. The dirt road wasn't too bad, although we only got to Alberrie Creek, about 50 kilometres from Marree, before we found a German couple broken down and waiting for a tow truck. They'd been warned and were prepared for a four hour wait. We have no idea why anyone would want to take a 2WD vehicle on to that road – pretty silly, but maybe they'd been led to believe it was OK. We'd previously met some young backpackers with the unrealistic expectation that they could see the Opera House, Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef in one day. Didn't do their homework did they?



Start of Oodnadatta Track

We stopped and started all the way to William Creek, there was such a lot to see. After we left the German couple, we came to 'Sculpture Park'. Big, big sculptures made of all sorts of strange and stupid things. We liked the dog, which was a railway water tank with the body of a car welded on for the dog's head. From a distance you could even believe it really was a giant dog.



Sculpture Park on Ood. Track

Further along we turned off to see the mound springs. There were many soda-encrusted springs in the region as we were at the bottom edge of the Great Artesian Basin. The best one was Bubbler, which was bubbling away nicely on the day we visited.

Down the road a ways was Strangways Ruins, which was once a village on a hill of springs. Wandering through the rubble, we were glad we hadn't been born back then. Life was so tough. We found two gravestones; one



Mound Spring



Strangways Ruins



Grave at Strangways

for a young woman who had been bitten by a snake and the other was for a young man who had died of typhoid.

We made it to William Creek and refuelled. The walls and ceiling of the pub were covered in T-shirts, caps, and bras. It was hard to find a space for anything more. There was not much else to William Creek; the tiny community has a resident population of 12 when Lake Eyre is dry; however it gets quite busy when there's water around. Tour operators set up camp and tourists flock there for an aerial view of the lake.

We continued on to Algebuckina, another once-upon-a-time railway station, where we camped beside the old railway bridge. The flies were thick and sticky until sundown and the pesky little devils drove us nuts, even with our hats and fly veils. We were going to light

a campfire, but changed our minds and escaped inside Milo for a gas-fuelled dinner instead.

Oodnadatta is a small but very busy community. We stopped for a morning cuppa in the Pink Roadhouse, an establishment that dominates the town of about 180 people. Members of the family who operate the roadhouse were very helpful and suggested we take an alternate and more interesting route out to the Stuart Highway and see the Painted Desert. Gosh, we were so glad we did. A painted desert it really was; the multicoloured escarpments were spectacular.

As we pulled into the lookout to enjoy the scenery and take some happy snaps, we stopped beside another 2WD vehicle that shouldn't have been there. The young German occupants were very glad to see us as they had a puncture. They'd bought a car second hand to tour Australia for six months, however, they found that the jack didn't work and the wheel spanner was the wrong size. The shonky people who do this should be held accountable for the lives that could be lost as a result of their negligence. Those kids were lucky Mike was able to come to the rescue. They followed as we drove off, but we worried about them all the way to the Cadney Roadhouse on the highway. We were able to relax when they finally turned up as we were eating lunch.

Our overnight stop that day was at Marla, where the Oodnadatta Track rejoins the highway and where we would have emerged from Oodnadatta had we taken the normal route. We'd not long checked into the van park when Peter and Lyn pulled up beside us; the couple we met in the pub at Marree. It was a beautiful afternoon so we didn't feel the need to go to the pub to cool off, instead, they joined us later for beer o'clock. We'd decided to make a beeline for Alice Springs next day so went to bed earlier than the norm. It would be a long trek.



Pink Roadhouse



Painted Desert



William Creek Hotel

IV

Stuart Highway, Alice Springs, West MacDonnell Ranges, Elsey NP, Katherine and Daly River

We crossed the border into the Northern Territory mid-morning and lunched at Stuart's Well, a tiny community by the Stuart Highway, which is famous for its pet dingo, Dinky. Dinky sings. He was rescued as a pup during a dingo cull and became the family pet. One day when one of the daughters was practising on the piano, Dinky started to sing along. While he doesn't stay in tune, he certainly keeps the beat and, given the opportunity, he loves to stomp up and down on the keyboard and make his own music. How is that for free lunchtime entertainment?

We drove into Alice tired, with Hank and Milo covered in red dust. We had an autumn spring clean next day and quickly returned to beautiful, then left Milo behind and headed 130 kilometres west of Alice to start our trek through some of the gorges, gaps and waterholes in the West MacDonnell Ranges. These were the beautiful sights we saw on our tagalong trip last year and didn't have time to explore.

We walked the tracks in Ormiston Gorge; a breathtakingly beautiful ravine with sheer red cliff walls and a permanent waterhole where several young tourists were taking a dip when we walked past.

The Ochre Pits were a colourful outcrop of ochre in the deep, vertical bank of a sandy creek, where traditional indigenous people came to collect varying shades of pigment for painting and body decoration.



Ormiston Gorge



Ochre Pits

Serpentine Gorge was a bit different. The lookout was a hard slog up and up and up to the top of the range, but when we got there the view of that narrow and winding gorge was worth the effort. Thank goodness, the trek back down was not as difficult.

Ellery Creek Big Hole is a large permanent waterhole framed by high red cliffs. The water, is apparently always extremely cold. We were hot and sweaty so Mike braved it and was glad he did. Cooled him off big time, but he didn't stay in long! I'm not good with cold water; I like to be on it, not in it. The best I could do was to dip my toes.

After all that walking we decided to have a quiet day back in the Alice to recover. The morning started out with a free brekkie, courtesy of the caravan park

owners. The pancake crew created yummy pancakes and we had a choice of toppings, plus tea and coffee. We were even allowed seconds! The free brekkie was a special treat that we hadn't encountered before, so it was greatly appreciated.

A visit to the Desert Park was a must. Did I say we were going to have a quiet day? We walked and walked and walked. It was different to climbing through gorges, though. The park showcased plants, animals and birdlife from three different desert habitats. The aviaries were wonderful and we spent a lot of time watching the birds. The nocturnal house was also excellent as was the free flying birds of prey feature. We had an unplanned bonus when some untrained wedge-tailed eagles gatecrashed the show. They wanted to fight over territorial rights and took on the trained eagle from the park. It was amazing to see them put their wings back and dive bomb their opposition. It reminded us of free falling sky divers aiming for their position in an aerial formation. Fortunately, this practice is mostly bluff and no one gets hurt. The home eagle won, by the way.

Off we went again, more gorges. From Hermannsburg we took a drive along the dry sandy bed of one of the world's oldest rivers, the Finke. We were heading for the Finke Gorge National Park with its stunning Palm Valley and enjoyed every second of our 4WD experience to get there. The five kilometre walk through the magnificent valley of palm trees, water holes and sandstone formations was also fabulous.



Finke Gorge National Park

Then it was back to Hermannsburg, birthplace of the artist Albert Namatjira, who painted beautiful gum trees. The town is situated on the site of an old mission station established by German Lutherans in 1877. The indigenous community was given freehold title to the land in 1982. We had lunch at the shop before heading for our next destination.



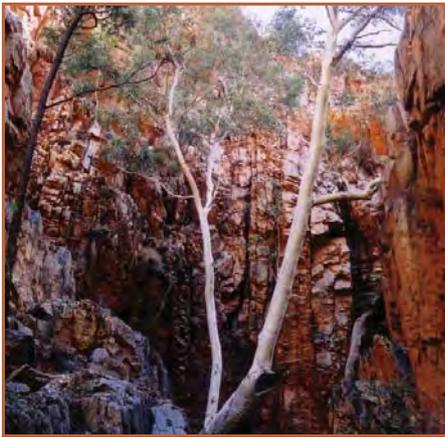
Near Hermannsburg

It took us 15 minutes to walk through a very pretty gully lush with ferns, gums and cycads to reach Standley Chasm, a very narrow crevice with sheer walls. It was amazing stuff, and we were lucky enough to have a close encounter with a black-footed wallaby.



Standley Chasm

Simpsons Gap, only 18 kilometres west of Alice, is a picturesque break in the mountain range and its permanent waterhole was very inviting. The Gap is renowned for its colony of black-footed wallabies, however, our timing was off and we didn't see any. By then we were too tired to care and glad that that was the last of the West MacDonnell gorges we had wanted to see.



Simpsons Gap



Devil's Marbles

After a visit to the Royal Flying Doctor Service next morning, we were on the road again, heading north on the Stuart Highway, away from Alice Springs. We crossed the Tropic of Capricorn and lunched at the Barrow Creek Pub which is infamous because of the part the pub played in the Peter Falconio disappearance. We were dying to ask the publican about that experience, but resisted. He wasn't very friendly and was probably sick to death of travellers asking him the question that was on our lips.

Then we passed Wycliffe Well, famous for UFO sightings, spaceship murals and not so little statues of green men by the road. We kept going and reached the Devil's Marbles in time for our afternoon cuppa. There were so many more marbles than we expected and they were very impressive. I had read that indigenous people believed they were the eggs of the Rainbow Serpent. What on earth will we do if one day those eggs all hatch? I don't even want to think about all those snakes, even if they are pretty colours.

We pushed on to Tennant Creek, the site of Australia's last gold rush. We had covered 520 kilometres that day but the road was easy. Neither of us felt like cooking dinner, so we caught a courtesy bus to the Tennant Creek Memorial Club for dinner, and won ourselves a \$50 meat voucher in the Friday night raffles.

Armed with our \$50 of meat, we continued north next morning. Renner Springs Desert Hotel looked inviting, so we pulled in for a coffee. Resident population of ten, Renner Springs was named after Dr Renner who cared for the men working on the overland telegraph line.

Our destination was the Daly Waters Pub. We stayed in the pub's caravan park for one night, and oh! what a night it was. There was entertainment every night of the week during the tourist season and it sounded simple enough: a man and his guitar, playing a few tunes and sharing a few stories. He wore a stupid hat shaped like the pub. Every now and then our entertainer would talk about the 'wild eagle show' to come.



Daly Waters Pub

Eventually, he handed the mike over to a young budding performer while he went to fetch the eagles. Back he came with a pair of the dumbest eagles you've ever seen. They were Chinese Silky bantam chickens, both sitting on the roof of the pub hat looking ridiculous. Through the rest of the songs they sat, not moving. The more you looked, the more you laughed. It was a wonderful and relaxing evening.

Sunday morning was Anzac Day, and we aimed for Katherine but changed our minds. Not far south of Mataranka is Elsey National Park. We were looking through the brochures and read that Elsey was well known for stunning bush walks and great fishing. The magic word - fishing! We weren't at a dawn service or an Anzac Day parade that year; we were camped in the bush and put our tinny in the water for the first time since leaving home.



The Chook Man and Me

It was very hot so we took a swim in the river to cool off. There were three pontoons at the swimming hole and other campers were in the water. I suppose we were wimps but even though we were assured there were only freshwater crocs in that part of the Roper River, we didn't stay in long.

In two days we caught three barramundi. There were huge fish in that colony, well over a metre long and our gear proved way too light, so we did lose some lures. The number of birds in the park surprised us. Whenever we would see a new and more beautiful bird we would rush to the bird book trying to put a name to the description. We weren't very good at it but hoped we'd improve with time. We did manage to identify the rainbow bee eater, a beautiful little bird that flew around us along the river and at the boat ramp. The bird lived up to its name, with multicoloured feathers topped of by a black tail. What made it unique was two long wire-like feathers with a blob at the end that poked out of that black tail.



Mataranka Falls

Before brekkie next morning we walked to Mataranka Falls, an 8.2 kilometre return journey. The falls were small but striking and the walk was easy most of the time. There were colourful little butterflies everywhere.



Our first Barra at Elsey NP

On returning to camp, we noticed that another rig exactly like ours had taken up residence. Same brand of caravan, same silver Landcruiser, tinny on top. We introduced ourselves and shared a meal with Ken and Dawn from Hervey Bay. That meal included our barramundi and their prawns. Although we didn't know it at the time, that was the beginning of a long and solid friendship.

When we arrived at Elsey we had no idea what to expect. We had wild donkeys ee-awing us to sleep at night and a huge flock of sulphur-crested cockatoos visiting dusk and dawn, loudly squawking hullo. We saw black cockatoos, forest kingfishers and laughed at the hopping habits of the dark grey apostlebirds. We also saw four feral pigs wandering along the riverbank as we fished. It was a truly wonderful place although a tad too hot at that time.



Flood Level at Katherine 1998



Nitmiluk National Park

Katherine turned out to be cooler. We found a grassy, peaceful site beneath a shady tree. Early morning next day we walked to Springvale Homestead beside the Katherine River. This was the oldest original homestead in the Top End, established in 1879 and restored after the huge flood that came up to its roof in 1998.

The Country Music Muster was on in Katherine that weekend so, after our six kilometre walk, we drove into town and undid all that good exercise by pigging out on bacon and egg sandwiches to the sound of live country music.

It was the first of May already! After a long breakfast with the bush poets we got adventurous and went helicopter dreaming over Katherine Gorge. We'd taken the cruise tour several years before, so the helicopter flight showed us a different perspective. What a

fabulous trip it was, in a cute little four seater chopper over eight of the 13 gorges. We had an uninterrupted view of the captivating landscape in Nitmiluk National Park and could even see Katherine 29 kilometres away.

Next we took a guided tour of 200 metres of the Cutta Cutta caves, a series of tropical limestone caverns connected by narrow passages. As we moved along, we were quietly remembering that mites go up and tites go down. A cluster of ghost bats were trying to sleep under the glare of the guide's torch and the non-stop flashing of the digital cameras. All in all a very interesting visit.



Cutta Cutta Caves

Beer o'clock came around and we planned where to go next – Daly River. Our departure in the morning was very smooth as we had finally started to develop a routine which made us quicker at hitching the van to the car. 40 kilometres up the highway we took the turn off to Edith Falls, part of Nitmiluk National Park. There was a very large swimming hole surrounded by lush green foliage and fed by small cascading falls and there were a few people in swimming. It would be a great place for families with kids.



Edith Falls

You know how cattle behave when they're thirsty and get their first sniff of water? There's no stopping them. That's how Mike was that day. Daly River or bust and bust it turned out to be. We got the tinny into the water but went nowhere. There was dirt in the fuel and a tiny hole in the weld where the side of the tinny meets the

floor. When we eventually got it all sorted and went fishing, we didn't even get a bite, let alone a hook up. We did, however, find six lures, five almost new, so the day wasn't a total waste. There was a lot of traffic on the water, as one barra fishing competition had already been held in the river and another was in progress.

We found the not-so-little fishy devils next day and Mike hooked up. I was ready with the landing net and he almost had the barra to the boat when, right before our eyes, a shark grabbed the fish's tail. No way were we going to lose that barra to a rotten shark. I conked it on the head with the landing net and I hope it still has a headache!

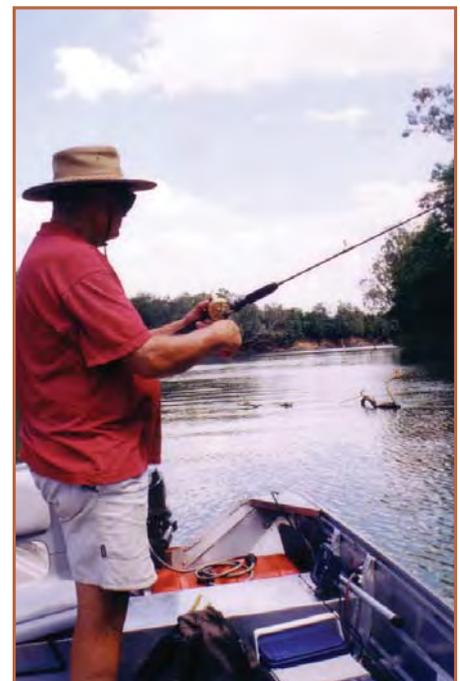
Up came the fish, bite marks and all. Mike had his barra from the Daly River, yeh! Or so we thought. The barra wasn't finished fighting though and effectively ended our fishing for the day, when off we went to the local Nauiyu Aboriginal Community clinic with one treble hook lodged firmly in one fisherman's finger. It took quite a bit of local anaesthetic, some bolt cutters, pliers and a few Panadol, but Humpty Dumpty was back together again.



Daly River Mooring

The nurse on duty had started a collection. The barra season barely begun and the clinic had removed at least half a dozen hooks already. Pliers and bolt cutters were part of their standard surgical kit.

A very quiet day followed. Mike spent the whole time flattening all the barbs on the treble hooks, sore finger and all. We stayed a few days more than we'd originally intended and had to stock up at the local shop. Phew, wouldn't do that again. It was a waste of time staying and we really should have known better. In the previous three weeks the Daly River had hosted two major fishing competitions and the barra had shut down. The professionals competing in the comps had given them a real thrashing, so who could blame them for going into hiding.



Fishing the Daly River

✓ Darwin

We were off to Darwin where we planned to spend several weeks fishing and crabbing. It took us a while to find the fishing spots but then we were fine. One day we were up a creek - with a paddle - casting lures around a rock bar and Mike hooked up a feisty mangrove jack. It weighed in at 1.5 kilograms - what a beauty! He was stoked. We caught a couple of nice golden snapper and three muddies to round off a great day in new surroundings.

When we took on Darwin Harbour though, we splurged on a guide to take us to the fish. The harbour was so big and we wouldn't have known where to start. That decision turned out to be a good move as we had a fabulous time landing over 30 fish. They were all plate size, bar one; I pulled in a 5 kilogram black jew. A lot of people in the caravan park ate fresh fish that night.



Dad and a Wirraway

Next, we visited the Aviation Heritage Centre. A massive B-52 Mitchell Bomber was stretched from one end of the building to the other, dwarfing every other aircraft there. It was positioned before the walls of the centre were erected. Among the many photographs displayed we actually found one of my Dad, who was a ground crew member in the Air Force, based in Darwin for some time during WWII. Boy-oh-boy, did that tug at the heart strings. Dad died lots of years ago, yep, of cancer.



Doctors Gully

The WWII oil tunnels presented us with another photo of Dad, this time with a Wirraway. How blessed was I? Not one but two photos, in his Air Force uniform, cap on the side of his head, looking splendid. We also drove down to Doctor's Gully where he worked on the Catalinas. There was little sign of any military base ever being there. It had become a tourist attraction, a gated

enclave where you can, for a price, hand feed pieces of bread to many different species of fish that shoal up in thousands in the shallow waters edge at high tide.

Our good friends Jan and Brian came to visit. You'll remember them from the tagalong trip. We had mud crab for dinner and partied till 10.00pm, which upset some camping neighbours who went to bed at eight. Tough - it wasn't our fault they went to bed early; 10 o'clock was the curfew. With our dear friends in tow we enjoyed the best of Darwin - some retail therapy in Casuarina Shopping Centre, pigging out on a delicious seafood buffet at Cullen Bay, strolling through the Smith Street city mall and Mindil Markets, even trying out the famous deckchair cinema.

On their last day Brian and Jan went to watch the jumping crocodiles in the East Alligator River and we towed Milo Too to Leaders Creek, near Gunn Point to catch some more crabs for their last meal with us.

With more than a little apprehension, Mike and I decided to go back to the museum. The displays are exceptional. Our favourites are the local fauna; Sweetheart, the big 5 metre croc and the Cyclone Tracy exhibit. You're probably wondering why we were apprehensive about returning to the museum, so let me tell you.

Mike and I worked for a while in South East Asia, based in Singapore for four years and in Vietnam for nearly a year. We were able to fly home at least once a year to see our family and friends. The flights were always via Darwin and we usually arranged it so we could stop over on the way, either coming home or going back, and enjoy a fishing adventure. What else?

On one of those stopovers we spent a few days fishing with a guide in the waters around Bathurst Island, a half-hour flight to the northwest of Darwin. We enjoyed very comfortable accommodation at a place called Barra Base.



Barra Base

We fished from sunrise to sunset and had a wonderful time, even though our lure fishing skills left something to be desired. You could say that Mike was on lure fishing 'P' plates and me, a brand new learner's permit. Mike caught the first fish, a flathead and we agreed we'd come a long way and at great expense to catch a flathead. Things did improve and eventually we caught barra, threadfin salmon, cod, golden snapper and mangrove jack. The fish all went back to tell their own story as we had no way of freezing them down for the flight to Singapore.



Nice Barra

When we returned to Darwin, we had one day left of our holidays, so we decided to hire a car and explore the city, then leave the car at the airport drop-off. I was a tad down in the dumps because I did not want to go back, although I was resigned to the fact that I really had no choice. We both found Singapore a great place to visit, but, as an expatriate resident, not such a great place to live.

We picked up the hire car and loaded our luggage. Oops, bad start, Mike locked the keys in the boot. Thankfully, Mr Hertz came to the rescue and it wasn't long before we were on our way. First stop was the museum and art gallery and, at least from a sightseeing

point of view, it would also be the last stop. The pain really set in when we came out to find the rear quarter window of our locked hire car smashed in.



Stolen Bag

No prize for guessing what we discovered next. Of course, the handbag which contained our passports, airline tickets, mobile phone, address book, cheque book, and our keys to the apartment in Singapore, was missing. We hadn't put it in the boot; we'd had simply hidden it under the luggage behind the passenger seat.

Mike went into the museum to call the police and I made a search of the immediate vicinity with no luck.

We reached the police station in the city after midday and the merry-go-round began. From there we delivered the car back to Hertz for a replacement, then went back to the police station because we'd forgotten to report the missing mobile phone. The police were great, assuring us that this was an almost daily occurrence and they were finding it very difficult to control. In fact, they said, the risk of being robbed was just as likely if we had parked right outside the police station.

The passport office in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was next and we were lucky to meet a very helpful man. He gave us the forms we needed to complete and sent us off to the Births, Deaths and Marriages section of the Office of the Registrar-General to try to arrange super-quick copies of our birth certificates. Once again, we met some wonderful people and were hopeful we still make our scheduled flight back to Singapore.

Then to Qantas to see what could be done about our airline tickets. The two legged, female dragon in the city office was so concerned with her ego and position of power that she completely missed the vibes coming from her much-stressed customers, who had been violated and were seeking a tiny thread of assistance from her. There is always one, isn't there!?

So, we running as fast as we could and time wasn't standing still. One of the passport office forms had to be verified by the police, we needed passport photographs, and needed to have the Singapore phone company disconnect the mobile. Oh, heck! We hot-footed it back to the passport office with the police signed 'Loss of Travel Document' form and \$300 later we waited for the birth certificate faxes from Sydney before our passports could be processed.

It was 3.15pm and we'd had no lunch, but a drink would have been good. By 4.00pm we had new provisional passports and headed back to Qantas city office. No, they would not issue new tickets, we had to go to the airport and challenge anyone who fronted up trying to use our original tickets. Thanks for nothing!

We headed to the airport. Qantas required their customers to check in at least one hour before departure and we made it by the skin of our teeth. Thankfully, members of the Qantas airport staff were very different to their city counterpart and were helpful and

understanding, plus they gave us the best economy seats on the plane.

While waiting in the Qantas lounge we phoned Hong Kong and left a message for our landlord asking him to arrange for a set of keys to our unit to be left with the apartment block security guards. We could only hope and pray all that would work out as we were due to land close to midnight. There was precious little time for food, but we managed some bikkies, cheese and a glass of something strong before the call came to board the plane.

That was a day we never wanted to repeat! The flight back was uneventful, but I did manage to beat Mike in a few games of gin rummy. The spare keys to our unit were waiting for us, thankfully, so we slept in a familiar bed that night.

Four days later, we received an email message from a man in Darwin. He and his son were walking a track not far from the museum and found my handbag. No airline tickets or mobile phone, but some of Mike's things was there, including his now useless passport. The thief kept only things that belonged to me: my passport, perfume, lipstick and two rolls of undeveloped holiday memories.

On our second visit to the museum, all the drama of that day came rushing back to us. So now you understand why we were a little apprehensive. When we left the museum we were very relieved to find Hank waiting patiently, safe and sound. Our good opinion of the exhibits in Darwin's museum and art gallery lived on.

After four weeks in and around Darwin, we were ready to move on.

Kakadu, Mary River, Crab Claw Island, Big Horse Creek

At the time Kakadu had the unfortunate nickname of Kakadon't. Our plan was not to avoid it altogether, but to stay at Cooina, a resort complex situated close to Yellow Waters Billabong. Before reaching the entry to the National Park we stopped at Beatrice Hill to look at the Window on the Wetlands visitor centre. Views of the surrounding Adelaide River wetlands were very interesting as were the displays of the birdlife and animal groups that the wetland supports. We spent quite some time appreciating and absorbing the information. Then the Ranger made a presentation and all visitors gathered around. It was all about the invasion of those horrible cane toads from Queensland and what Territorians were doing to stem the flow. Oops!



Road into Falls

We'd heard that the mozzies would carry us away in Kakadu and, sure enough, on our first night at Cooina we were swarmed. The fact that we had bathed ourselves in strong repellent didn't stop them; they landed on our clothes and stung us through the fabric! We beat a hasty retreat inside and from then on sprayed our clothes as well.



Hard Going to Jim Jim

There was a big pile of dead grass clippings near our van site. We were wondering about it when we noticed an indentation in the middle. We didn't have to wait long for an explanation. The very next morning we saw an old, grey grandmother dingo having a scratch and a stretch beside the pile of grass, only a few metres away. She saw us and left before we could get the camera. We didn't see her again, but the dint of her bed was warm to touch the following morning.



Jim Jim Falls

From Cooina we drove around 60 kilometres of gravel and sandy road to Jim Jim and Twin Falls and had lots of 4WD fun getting there. At Jim Jim, we found ourselves scrambling up, over and around gynomous boulders and big rocks to get from the car park to the falls. We wouldn't have wanted to be any older than we were! In fact, we came across a few grey nomads who had stopped halfway and were sitting, waiting for the rest of their group to return. Like us, they had no idea

the going would be so hard, but they had handed over money to unscrupulous tour guides for their tour.

To get to Twin Falls we had to tackle our first real watery creek crossing, but Hank took it in his stride. Then we enjoyed a slow and very enjoyable boat ride through the gorge leading to the falls. The water was so clear we could actually watch the barra and sooty grunter swimming around beneath us.

Both falls had water cascading beautifully over the escarpment and we were very glad we'd timed it so well. A waterfall without water can be a disappointment, especially when you work so hard to get there. As a result of all the exercise we had climbing gorges, scrambling over rocks and walking heritage trails that day, we did feel we'd done some good for our bodies. We certainly slept well.

We took the early morning cruise through Yellow Waters billabong, which was only a couple of minutes drive from the resort. In fact, the caravan park at the resort was so close to the billabong, at night we could hear the crocodiles barking. We boarded the boat as the sun came up and there were birds everywhere, crocs too. It was a magical experience. I love the lotus lilies and the way they follow the sun. That morning we got a bonus as we watched a jacana bird, standing on a lotus leaf with its overly large feet, show us how he could ride the wake of the passing boat like a real surfer. He never flinched.

We left Cooina and had a quick look at Jabiru, a town centre within the National Park, originally constructed in the 1980s to service families working in the uranium mine nearby. Our trip back towards Darwin along the Arnhem Highway was interrupted at the Mary River Crossing. Fishers will know that the Mary is one of those rivers where you just have to stop and catch a fish. We booked into the tourist park for a week, set up camp and went for a wonderful wander along the river bank and through the native bamboos.

The caretaker came by as we were winding Milo Too down from Hank's roof. He told us he wouldn't be putting a tinny that size into the river, he'd seen crocs in there the length of our caravan. Thanks pal. He was English, a self proclaimed soccer freak who barracked



Boatride to Falls



Twin Falls



Lilies



Barra from the Mary

for the All Blacks. Umm. He was an alright guy, really, just a bit confused, perhaps. Despite the advice, we put Milo Too in the river and did a 'getting to know you' tour. The crocodiles weren't interested in us. We each caught a good barra and were grateful because the water was cooling off and the barra are harder to tempt out of the snags when it's cold.

Still at the Mary, we were lucky enough to witness a very special sight. The Rajah Shelduck is a white-headed, black-backed and white-winged duck found in Northern Australia. Right before our eyes Mum and Dad took their six ducklings across the croc-infested river. Mum in front, Dad behind, kids in the middle. We held our breaths as they hurried across and were so relieved when they all scrambled up the steep bank to safety. The babies were absolutely gorgeous. As we tried to shield them a bit, they surfed the waves of the tinny into the shore and had a ball. Their parents were hovering nervously – just like us with our own offspring.



Mandurah Steel Post

We made our way back to Darwin, where we caught a Sea Cat ferry to Mandurah Beach Hotel, Darwin's only beach-side hotel resort, reconstructed after Cyclone Tracy wreaked havoc in 1974. A reminder of Tracy's strength in the shape of a very twisted length of steel girder from the original building, was mounted for all to see. It's not possible to imagine the ferocity of a wind that could bend a solid steel girder like it was a stick of liquorice.



Crab Claw Island

130 kilometres from Darwin is Crab Claw Island, on the south-west side of Bynoe Harbour. Crab Claw is usually part of the mainland and becomes an island only during king tides. The fishing village is a beautiful place, nestled on the waters edge. The water is clear and inviting but you wouldn't want to be in it, just on it.

We settled in to stay a few days and our first challenge was to catch some fish to bait the crab pots. Once that was done, we found a creek that looked promising, put out the pots, then went fishing. Time flew by that day and, although we didn't catch any fish, we brought home six big buck muddies. Next day six more big crabs came home and so did six black bream and fingermark.



Crab from Crab Claw

My Mike, with all those muddies, had crab on toast for brekkie, crab sandwiches for lunch and chilli crab for dinner, but don't feel sorry for him. He loves mud crab and never seems to tire of it. As providence would have it, we found a way to successfully freeze crabmeat and that was a good thing because we caught another five big

bucks before we called it quits and pulled the pots out of the water. We take the flesh from the cooked crabs and pack it into a container, cover the meat with very salty water, seal and freeze. We thaw it in the fridge and squeeze the excess water out before using.

We got used to Crab Claw's huge seven metre tides and having to drag Milo Too back into the water after finding her high and dry on a regular basis. If we could have stayed on, we would have, but the place was booked out for school holidays. Remember Ken and Dawn in the rig like ours at Elsey National Park? Well, we came across them again at Crab Claw and every day, at beer o'clock we'd all congregate with our drinks and nibbles and compare notes. They were great times.



Milo Too High and Dry

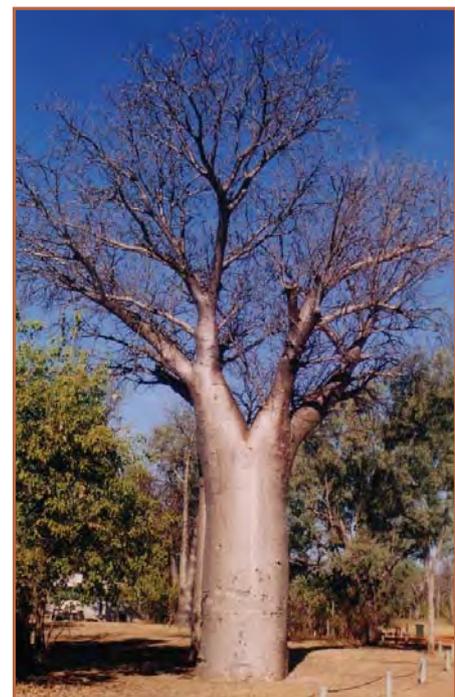
Eventually we had to go back to Darwin to collect our mail and check the emails, as there had been no service at Crab Claw. That all sorted, we headed south. On the way to Katherine and the turn-off to Kununurra, we passed a mob of feral donkeys right beside the highway. It was the last thing we expected to see. Later we found out that donkey teams were used in East Kimberley in the 1800s to pull the carts loaded with wool bails to the wharfs. When they were of no further use they were released to breed in the wild, like the camels.

That day we made it only as far as Katherine, but what a shock to the system that overnight stay was. We'd become so used to sleeping with only the sheet over us we were caught unprepared for the drop in night-time temperature. It fell to 9°. Brrrrrrr. 3.00am found us scrambling for blankets, trackies and bed socks, all tucked away in the back corners of cupboards and under beds.

Westward ho! Well, more like south-west along the Victoria Highway. Big, red, rocky escarpments started to appear near Victoria River. They were part of Stokes Range that runs through Gregory National Park. As we approached Timber Creek hundreds of boab trees appeared. Because it was winter they'd lost all their leaves.

Our destination was a National Park campground, 10 kilometres out of town, called Big Horse Creek, beside the Victoria River. We were surprised to find so many people there, we got the last available site when we arrived at 3.00pm.

Everyone who was heading west was cooking up a feast, trying to use up their veggies. In a day or two we were to cross the Western Australia border and no one



Boab at Big Horse

wanted to have quarantine inspectors confiscate good fruit and vegetables. At Big Horse Creek we were allowed to have an open fire, so the chainsaw had worked its little heart out until we filled the back of Hank with enough dry firewood for our stay. A camp fire and a million stars, what more could you want?

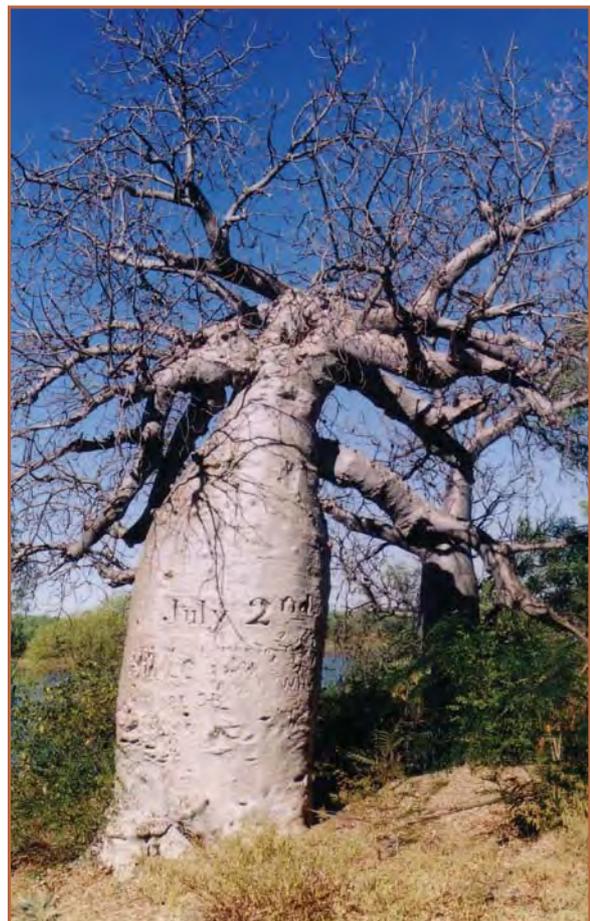
A pied butcherbird and two juvenile kookaburras blessed us with their presence each day we were there. We identified a grey-crowned babbler that sat still long enough for us to find him in the book! Of course, the forever present galahs and little corellas screeched and squawked, just to remind us they were there.

On the adventure trail, we headed into the National Park and took the 4WD track into Limestone Gorge. The terrain was challenging when we neared the gorge, lots and lots of broken rock and we suspected that not many travellers continued past that point. There was an amazing boab tree by the road which must have been very, very old. Its gnarled trunk was evidence of the many challenges it had faced. Interestingly, that tree had not lost all of its leaves. We walked the trail which revealed Limestone Gorge's rugged beauty; it was not quite as difficult as some trails we had encountered in other gorges.

Our next stop in the park was at the Gregory Tree, another very, very old boab, bare but still magnificent, where explorer Augustus Gregory set up the base camp for his North Australia Expedition. He carved the expedition's departure and return dates in the boab back in 1855/56.



Track to Limestone Gorge



Gregory Tree

VII

Kununurra, Spring Creek Station and home

When we left Big Horse Creek and made our way to Western Australia, we jagged a happy quarantine officer and breezed through the border inspection. A few minutes later we approached Kununurra, one of the youngest towns in Oz. It was developed in the 1960s as the service centre for the Ord River Irrigation Scheme and has a population of about 6,000.

We chose a beautiful spot to stay in town for a week. The caravan park was right by Kununurra Lake. It was so peaceful to sit by the water at beer o'clock and watch the setting sun. While we were sitting there on our first afternoon, eight little crimson finches landed within a few metres of us and happily munched on grass seed. Perfect.

There were lots of touristy things to do there. A drive through town brought us to Kelly's Knob, a lookout that shows the expanse of agricultural land, mainly growing sugar cane, made possible by the irrigation scheme. Of course, we had to stop off at The Hoochery for a sample of Ord River Rum, didn't we? Their rum cake and coffee was absolutely yum. The distillery can produce 1000 bottles of spirit per week. Apart from the rum, they produce a liqueur, ouzo and a corn whiskey. We weren't that adventurous; the cake was enough.

Next day we took a cruise down 55 kilometres of the Ord River between the diversion dam at Kununurra and the Ord Dam at Lake Argyle. It is a stunning river system and we enjoyed a wonderful day on the water with much wildlife and beautiful scenery.

The Ord River Dam is an enormous earthen wall with rock cover. When completed in 1972 it created the huge Lake Argyle. We were told that 19 Sydney Harbours would fit in the lake at that time. At the dam we hopped on a coach and visited the Durack family homestead, Argyle Downs, which had been moved, piece by piece, to its present location. The rest of the original property remains at the bottom of Lake Argyle. We wandered through the rooms of the homestead and



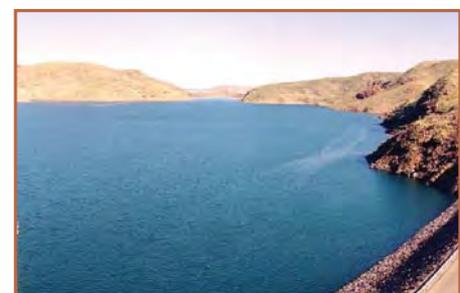
Sunset in Kununurra



Trip down Ord River



Dam Wall



Lake Argyle from Dam Wall



*Relocated Durack Family
Homestead*

read the history, but the highlight for us was watching a great bowerbird in the busy process of setting up his bower in the garden, ignoring us completely. That was a special treat.



Bowerbird

To work up an appetite for lunch next day we walked the trails in the small Mirima National Park not far outside Kununurra. Its weathered sandstone ranges are said to be 350 million years old and a small version of the Bungle Bungles. We were impressed and looked forward to seeing the big brother.



Mirima National Park

We visited the Zebra Rock Gallery that specialises in cutting and polishing this unique sedimentary rock. The rock is very attractive with patterns of dark red bands and spots contrasting with a creamy background. The clever craftsmen on site have produced some beautiful work that was well and truly far too expensive for our tiny budget. I mention it because the only known deposits of Zebra Rock in the world have been found near Kununurra.



Ivanhoe Crossing

Our next bit of excitement was the Ivanhoe Crossing, a concrete causeway over the Lower Ord River. It was originally part of the main road from Wyndham to Darwin, before Kununurra was established. Since the start of the Ord River Irrigation Area, the river has flowed across the causeway all year round. The crossing becomes impassable during the wet season when water levels are much higher. Mike and Hank took it in their stride, although I felt nervous. The water turned out to be only about 50cm deep. Mike had so much fun we did it all again next day and that time we both enjoyed it.



Prison Tree

We visited Wyndham with its safe port harbour, which handled live cattle shipments to SE Asia and exports raw sugar and molasses produced in the Ord Irrigation Area. Then we continued 22 kilometres west along the King River Road to the Prison Tree. It's a big hollow boab, estimated to be between two and four thousand years old. It was used by early police patrols as an overnight lock-up. We felt sorry for the poor policeman who would have had to stay awake all night, as it was certainly not a very secure prison.

Making our way back towards Kununurra, we took a gravel alternate route via Marlgu Billabong which is a special place for bird lovers. We found it a very tranquil and relaxing place with a boardwalk and viewing area. It was amazing to us that we could actually put names to a good many of the birds there. Surprise, surprise, we seemed to be learning and not brain dead after all. Retirement's a good thing.



Part Lake Argyle from floatplane

We promised ourselves before heading out on this trip that we would fly over the Bungle Bungles if we did nothing else. How extravagant! We chose a floatplane, so we could experience the thrill of a water take-off and landing. Once aloft we enjoyed a fabulous view of the enormous agricultural development around Kununurra. We flew over Lake Kununurra, over the Carr Boyd Ranges and on to Lake Argyle, which is a whopping 70 kilometres long. Whew, that is some lake!



Bungle Bungles

Then we saw those wonderful, strange rock formations, and they were spectacular. We circled lots of rounded rock towers, followed the many, many chasms, enjoying every minute. The striped beehive domes were wonderful. They're made up of two-toned layers of sandstone, and utterly beautiful.

Mike was up front sitting beside our pilot, who switched the controls to him as soon as we left the Bungle Bungles. Mike later admitted it had been a real adrenalin rush and he'd enjoyed himself immensely. The other woman on board told me before we left Kununurra that she had never been in a little plane before. She was very nervous. She was sitting in front of me and coping well until the pilot handed control of the plane to Mike. I watched her grip the seat so hard her knuckles turned white, poor thing. She did seem to relax a little when the pilot resumed control. All along she never said a word. Aah, the inner power and strength of women – deny it if you can!



Mike in Charge

Of course, we had to fly past the Argyle Diamond Mine, Australia's only major diamond producer. High quality diamonds have been recovered from this open cut mine since 1985. At the time, it was thought that underground mining would commence at Argyle. It was quite a sight from the air, very neatly developed. We were so glad we splurged on that flight.



Argyle Diamond Mine



Horses

Then we left Kununurra, backtracking across the Northern Territory border to Duncan Road which we travelled south for more than a hundred kilometres, ending up back in WA at Spring Creek Station. We were going to stay a few weeks to help out the owners, Mike and Jane.

Spring Creek Station has a special place in our hearts. Mike and Jane are genuine outback Aussies with a deep love of horses and cattle, and they were developing top lines of both.



Bull

Some time ago, after we'd helped out at White Cliffs, we had registered with a group called Outback Helpers. This organisation provides an opportunity for people like us to experience life in outback Oz and afford people like Mike and Jane an opportunity to enjoy a little company and a little respite from trying to do everything themselves.

The property was bigger than we expected, although we were told it was small compared to others in the area. It's 45 kilometres long and, on average, 35 kilometres wide. That's almost 160,000 hectares or 400,000 acres. There were 7,000 head of cattle scattered over the property and 30 horses.

At the time, Mike and Jane's two children, William and Sally, were eight and six respectively. Their ponies were Scarlet, heavy in foal, and Tinsel. There were nine brown chooks, no roosters, two dogs and a cat.

David and Libby, both true blue Aussies, were permanent staff. Martin, Tom and Steffi were backpackers from Europe, there on working visas. Martin and Steffi were German, while Tom was a Pom. The Germans seemed to be making a better fist of it than Tom! None of these five people were more than 22 years old.

By 1.30pm on the day we arrived, we were down at the yards helping to draft the bulls and the clean skins from the stock mustered earlier in the day. Some of the bulls were magnificent creatures, Brahman and mean. From then on it was all go, with Mike in the stockyards and me in the kitchen.



Mustering Kelly's Bush

Kelly's Bush was the biggest paddock to muster and it took two days and an overnight camp to bring the stock home. We were considered too green yet to be of any real assistance, so instead we drove one of the utes out to meet the team on the second day, armed with their lunch. When we found them it was just like watching an old cowboy movie. Move 'em on, head 'em up, head 'em up, move 'em on.

A poor little calf was exhausted and separated from her mother, so we had to bring her home in the back of the ute. The guys tied her legs, but she panicked so much, she kept escaping the ties and jumping out. That happened several times and it was pure luck that she didn't hurt herself. I climbed in the back with her and bumped around all the way home, making soothing noises and stroking her forehead. She calmed right down and relaxed her head on my leg. I ended up with a back ache, a sore bum and slobbery jeans, but it was worth it, my heart was full.



My Scared Little Calf

Mike, the boss, is a helicopter pilot and did a lot of mustering from the air in his little yellow chopper. At the time he had clocked up 9000 hours. Once Mike got the herd moving in the little chopper, the rest was done on horseback.



Mike's Helicopter

Then there was a halt in the muster proceedings so the family and permanent staff could compete in the Kununurra Show. Our job was to stay home and feed the animals. Mike coped well with the tractor and the bale of hay he had to load up and drop off for the weaners. The competitors returned late at night, exhausted, but weighed down with the trophies and ribbons they'd won.

We had a day off and took advantage by driving to the Negri River, a tributary of the mighty Ord which forms the western boundary of the Station. The soft sandy silt along the bank was testimony to the flooding that occurs during the Wet. The clear water was very shallow, but still home to lots of fish, mostly black bream and catfish.

There are so many catfish in Lake Argyle that a lucrative commercial fishing industry has developed. However, until the name was changed, people would not buy the fillets. The catch is now marketed as silver cobbler and selling well. In Lake Argyle they grow to an impressive 40kg. Because of this, there is also a growing recreational charter fishing business on the lake, targeting the big ones.



Feeding the Weaners

We had a lovely afternoon by the Negri River. We found a pile of feathers belonging to a plains turkey, or Australian bustard, a big, solid bird that is regularly hunted by the local indigenous population. There were three indigenous communities within the borders of the station.



The Negri River

On the way back we stopped to watch seven or eight black cockatoos perched in a tree by the road. Of course,



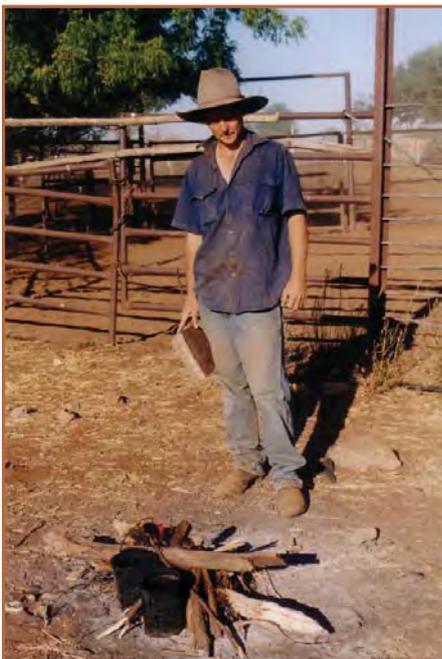
Red Tailed Cockies



Mike and Jimmy



The Chooks



Boiling the Billy

they wouldn't let us get close enough to take a good photo. Off they went, the boys fanning their bright red tails and the girls their striped, yellow-orangey ones. They congregated in their dozens in one of the northern paddocks on the station and it was great to see them in such large numbers.

Mike's first time on a horse for many years came soon enough. It was only six months after his hip surgery and boss Mike was a tad nervous about letting the old codger with the dicky hip ride one of his horses. He and Jane reckoned if Mike really could ride, he'd be handy to have around, so they allocated a quiet horse and crossed their fingers.

Jimmy, the horse, was not fond of hard work. That day the team transferred 600 weaner steers from the yards to a paddock nearby. Mike and Jimmy never broke into a canter! Mike had no problems at all, either with riding or from his hip, and enjoyed the experience enormously.

My kitchen duties weren't very exciting, but they were certainly full-on. Breakfast time, which I didn't have to be involved in, could start anywhere between 4.00 and 5.30am. Smoko at 9.00am was a big affair, then lunch at noon, smoko 3.00pm and dinner at 6.00pm, another big spread. The children had to be fed half an hour before the adults and they were typical kids – they didn't like this, they hated that. It's been a long time since I cooked cakes and biscuits, but those young workers gobbled 'em up as quick as I could make 'em. Our days were long and our nights short, but at least we had no trouble getting to sleep.

I became quite close to the girls in the chook pen. They'd cluck cluck for me after lunch, cuddling close to the door of the pen, waiting to be let out for a few hours. Near sundown they'd gather outside the kitchen, cluck clucking again, waiting for me to take them home. Like the pied piper, they'd follow me and my bucket of scraps, all nine of them, back to the pen.

One day, Mike and I both worked in the yards, opening and closing slide gates on the race, feeding 150 Brahman

cows to the vet – one at a time – for spaying. Some of the older girls were very stubborn and mean-spirited creatures and given half a chance, they'd break every bone in your body. We came home covered in dust and weary, but enjoyed our day immensely.

Then it was time for the Kununurra Rodeo, 150 kilometres away, 100 of those on dirt road. It was a great weekend away and once again there were more ribbons for the family collection.



Waiting for a Hard Earned Cuppa

When mustering resumed, my Mike was much more involved in the process as some of the backpackers had left. One day he and Jane were riding with a herd of cattle in the northern part of the property and they watched a hundred or so brolgas circling them, waiting for the herd to pass so they could land.

Before we knew it the road train was due. We all had a very early start and a full-on morning. Some of the Brahman cattle weighed between 750 kilos and one tonne, and we watched several leap over the two metre rails in the stockyard, seemingly without much effort and certainly no run-up. If we hadn't seen it there is no way we would have believed they could so easily leap over those rails.

Mike became quite good at handling the Brahman, at least those that didn't jump the fence. His communication with the cattle consisted of – he, he, ha, ha, haw, haw, ho, ho. The cattle seemed to know what he was saying. Up the race they went, into the road train, no problem.



The Kids

In the five weeks we'd been there, we participated in the whole cycle of the mustering process at outback station level. While helping the vet with his sterilisation process, a calf was born in the yard; his mother had been spayed 30 minutes before. Both mother and child did very well.

We assisted where we could with the mustering, drafting, branding, castrating, ear marking, needling, weaning, and feeding. When it came to really handling the Brahman and Brahman-Shorthorn cross cattle, we left it to the experts. Handling these beasts required people of alert mind, supreme dexterity, plus an expert hand with a stockwhip. My Mike stayed well clear, and managed to narrowly escape flying hooves and charging horns on several occasions.

On our last weekend, we each had a ride in the little two seater helicopter. No doors, but a good seat belt! It was fabulous. There was such a feeling of freedom. Then it was time for us both to fly home for medical checks and a granny fix, plus I had to have a mammogram and



Mustering

ultrasound, Mike a post-operative check on his hip. We parked Hank and Milo on the property to wait for our return.



Mike and the Family

We didn't expect to be in Brisbane for more than three weeks. I got the thumbs up for the next six months; but Mike got a different answer. He had a staphylococcus infection in his new hip and had to have urgent major surgery. We found it hard to believe. He had been so well and the hip had performed beautifully.

The infection had apparently remained dormant since the operation which, we were told, is not unusual. A pink mark the size of a five cent coin and a twinge now and then were the only signs he had that something may be wrong. His surgeon was as upset as we were. He opened the wound and had to dislocate the hip to clean out the gunk. Odds were 100:1 that Mike would get an infection from the initial operation. Wonderful! If we were going to win something why couldn't it have been Lotto?

The diagnosis was staphylococcus lugdunensis, a nasty little bug that loves metal prostheses and can be difficult to kill as it has the ability to form some sort of protective shield. Treatment was a torrid regime of three different antibiotics – two oral and one intravenous. After two weeks in hospital Mike was discharged to receive daily visits from a home nursing service for several more weeks. The problem was our home was nearly 4,000 kilometres away at Spring Creek. Thank goodness a very good mate, Mark, from our deep sea fishing days, agreed to fly to Kununurra with me to bring Hank and Milo back to Brisbane.



The Road Train Awaits

Mark and I left Brissie at 9.30pm with Virgin Blue, sharing the flight with 25 AFL footballers on their end-of-season trip. So much for any hope of sleep! Those guys loudly worked their way through all the booze on board. Some were playing poker and as we left Brisbane we were hearing bets of \$1, which gradually increased with alcohol induced recklessness to an amazing \$50. We arrived in Darwin at 1.00am.

We had to cool our heels in Darwin until 6.30pm that day. Then, because we crossed into a different time zone in WA, we arrived in Kununurra before we'd left Darwin. Jane and little Sally met us at the airport. We travelled the last 150 kilometres and fell into bed at 10.00pm. I was up for brekkie at 4.00am to say goodbye to the gang who were off to work. Libby, the 22 year old head stockman – I refuse to say stockperson – wanted to leg rope me to a chair so I couldn't leave so soon, but Mark had taken time off work to help us and we were on the road by 7.30am. We travelled nearly 700 kilometres that first day and camped by the road in a rest area south of Mataranka. I have to do; I know he'll forgive me. Mark snores worse than Mike! He slept in his swag beside Milo and it took me quite a while to tune him out and go to sleep.

Chapter 2

The second night we camped at Camooweal and the third night at the Barcaldine Showgrounds. That evening, Mark took his swag on to the oval and tried to put some distance between us. Bless him, I could still hear him snoring. Then we had a very long trip to Brisbane arriving at 8.00pm, totally stuffed. The trip was hassle free except for the price of petrol! I wouldn't like to do it that fast again, though.

Thankfully, Mike's treatment worked. The final blood test made the microbiologist smile and, let me tell you, that was no easy feat. Although we weren't out of the woods yet, Mike was able to get rid of the intravenous drip and concentrate on the oral pills.

The upside of such a very long treatment regime was that we were around for an early family Christmas and for the birth of another little miracle, our sixth grandchild.



Mike and Me

CHAPTER 3

OUR TOUR OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



I

A Family Fix on the Way

We were moving on with our big nomadic adventure, this time through Western Australia. But first we headed south, to catch up with my sister and her family in Lismore.

We had always had a close relationship. A couple of years earlier my nephew Jason turned 21, and Mike and I were invited to the party. I was as bald as a badger from chemo, so we went shopping for a wig. I thought it looked OK, but I didn't trust it to stay in place. At the party I spent the whole time worrying that the wretched thing had moved. I would have been far more relaxed if I'd simply worn a scarf.

In his speech Jason thanked his aunty for coming to his party and I was bowled over. He didn't explain to his audience why that was so special to him, but he put down the microphone, came to where I sat and gave me the biggest hug. It was so unexpected and so very moving. Can you imagine a big strapping 21 year old doing that with dozens of his macho mates looking on? I felt so honoured. After I wiped the tears from my eyes, I asked Mike, "Did the wig move? I can't stand it! It's going to the Cancer Council first chance we get."

That was only one week before my sixth and final treatment, so I'd had two weeks to get over the fifth one and was feeling pretty good. From the inside looking out, I was the old



Me and Sis

me, however, my staying power gave way that night at about 9.00pm. It had to be the earliest Mike had ever had to leave a party, poor dear. He didn't complain so I guess from the outside I was looking a bit of a mess. Of course, the absence of eyebrows and lashes wouldn't have helped.

Anyway, back to the story. After some quality time with my sister and her family, we said goodbye and hit the road. Next time though we'd prefer to give the New England Highway a miss. We felt like the little red steam engine, muttering "I think I can, I think I can." We huffed and puffed up and over the ranges all day.

First night out we camped at the peaceful and pretty Mother of Ducks Lagoon in Guyra, where the temperature dropped to 12°. Heavens above, it was the middle of summer!

Our second night away, in Moss Vale, was almost as cold, although that part of Australia is really beautiful. We did a little backtracking to Bowral next morning to see the Bradman Museum. It was the middle of the cricket season so we really couldn't miss that opportunity could we?

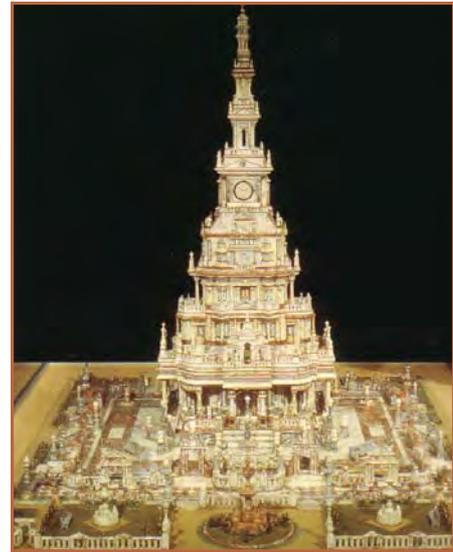
Thank goodness we left Milo in Moss Vale while we visited relatives in Albion Park as Macquarie Pass was a challenge, even without the van.

We had a wonderful overnight stay with another of my rellies; then we returned to Milo and carried on to Canberra and Mike's family. A few days later, having covered all the bases, we were headed for Narrandera, where Mike grew up.

||

Narrandera and Griffith, Burra, Port Germain, the Eyre Highway, Streaky Bay and the Nullarbor

At Gundagai we stopped for a morning tea break and found a most amazing exhibit at the information centre. In 1910, a man called Rusconi began constructing a miniature clock tower out of marble. He used almost 21,000 pieces of marble, collected from several parts of NSW, the smallest being 3mm square. There are 20 marble varieties, each a different colour. His lathe was built from an old sewing machine; he used ordinary mason's tools, and had no drawings of any kind to work from. The resulting tower, which is only 1.1 metres high and took 28 years to complete, is a masterpiece. It's an amazing structure; the marble pieces are so intricately fitted. There is no way to do it justice with words.



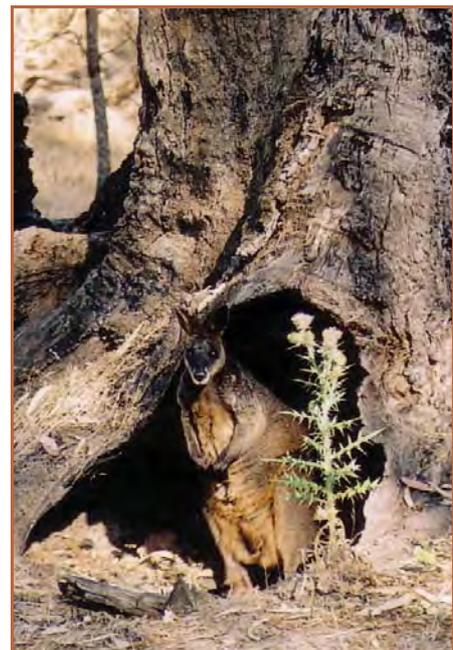
Marble Masterpiece

Our next stop was Junee, where, on New Year's Day, a carelessly thrown cigarette butt ignited a bushfire that came very close to town. How close was obvious as we entered the built up area. Mike visited the Junee railway station where his train used to stop for passengers to have breakfast when he was on his way home for holidays from boarding school in Sydney.

We arrived in Narrandera mid-afternoon to be greeted by a shaded temperature of 42°. Whew, we made a beeline for Lake Talbot, the local swimming complex, and stayed there until the sun went down. We weren't alone; the place was packed with locals escaping the heatwave.

The next morning was cooler. We strolled among the gum trees on the common where Mike rode horses as a boy. We said g'day to a friendly wallaby and sat for a while by the steep banks of the Murrumbidgee River.

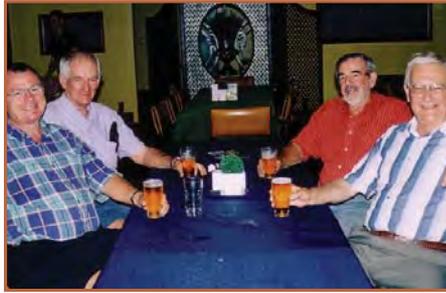
Then we took a tour of the Fisheries Centre and watched staff inject hormones into golden perch/yellowbelly to induce spawning. Every year the Centre releases over two million fingerlings into impoundments and small



Wallabies in the Common



Fisheries Centre



Down Memory Lane



Old Copper Mine

reservoirs all over Australia. The breeding programs involve four species of native fish – Murray cod, silver perch, golden perch and trout cod.

The museum in town was interesting and the volunteer on duty actually worked in the Narrandera flour mill way back when. He spoke affectionately of Mike's dad, who had passed away long before I'd met Mike. We took a quick trip to the Golf Club where his Dad was still listed as a Life Member, and then had dinner at the Murrumbidgee Pub with some of Mike's mates from his mischievous youth. Those guys were great company as they all strolled down memory lane, recalling several of their youthful escapades, some outrageous, some hilarious and some both.

We moved on to Griffith because we wanted to collect a couple of cartons of our favourite red wine from Dom at Piromit. Then we stopped at Hay for the night and on to Balranald via 130 kilometres of treeless plains, where there were more emus than sheep or cattle. Then we visited Mildura, flanked by citrus orchards and grapevines, before continuing on to South Australia.

We travelled through Renmark, Berri and Waikerie where we were blown away by some fabulous views of the Murray River with its sandstone cliffs and beautiful river gum trees. At the little town of Morgan,

we crossed the Murray on a small, pulley-driven ferry and continued on to Burra, a charming little town with a lot of history. In 1845 a shepherd discovered an outcrop of copper and six years later there were more than 5,000 people living in and around the area. 32 years on the mine closed after millions of pounds worth of metal had been produced. The town still had many attractive stone built cottages and was obviously very proud of its heritage. After travelling through the most peaceful and comforting, hay coloured, rolling landscape, we ended the day not far north of Port Pirie.

Sunday morning we drove through sleepy Port Pirie with its huge lead smelters and continued on to Port Germein, a small beachside town that was once a busy wheat loading centre. Port Germein had maintained its 1.5 kilometre long jetty which is very popular with holidaymakers who come to camp, fish and catch blue swimmer crabs. We felt exhilarated as we strolled along the jetty that clear and glorious morning, watching people pulling up their drop pots and seeing the number of crabs being caught. Port Germein was our kind of place.

It seemed to us that Port Augusta, like Port Pirie, took Sundays off, so we kept going

to the Eyre Highway and Iron Knob, the birthplace of BHP and Australia's steel industry. After 100 years of operation, mining ceased there in 1999. The town had a big past, but an uncertain future, although some mining had resumed. We drove around looking for something interesting to see and Marion was it. She's a huge electric shovel, her bucket capacity was 18 tons. Marion worked the mine for 16 years and dug a total of more than 24 million tons of ore. Very impressive, don't you think?

The small town of Kimba on the Eyre Highway is said to be situated halfway across Australia as the crow flies. Who were we to disagree? It is also the gateway to the Gawler Ranges that we intend to explore at a later date. We'd bypassed the Barossa Valley and lots of other interesting places, but it was always our intention to see Western Australia early on, figuring we could do the more easterly parts of our beautiful country in smaller chunks later.

We then headed for Ceduna and the road west, although we did detour to Streaky Bay, a town on the Eyre Peninsula south of Ceduna, for a couple of days rest from the road. We arrived to beautiful weather and camped right by the water. Our friendly neighbours told us we'd brought the good weather with us as there had been an inch of rain earlier in the day and 30 knot winds over the past few. We woke to a glorious morning, walked the jetty and wandered on the beach for a while. Not a clean beach, it was full of broken shell and weed. We found that the bay was very shallow and the tide retreated a long way so any boating was done around high tide.

A lot of the campers took advantage of the good weather, got in their tinnies and went fishing and crabbing. We toured to Scele Bay, the local swimming beach and found many people already there enjoying the pristine beach and the clear, sparkling water. We then headed for Point Labatt to see the colony of Australian sea lions. They live at the foot of the rugged cliffs on granite slabs that had been worn smooth by the constant wash of the ocean. Even though they



Iron Knob



Marion



Kimba



Jetty

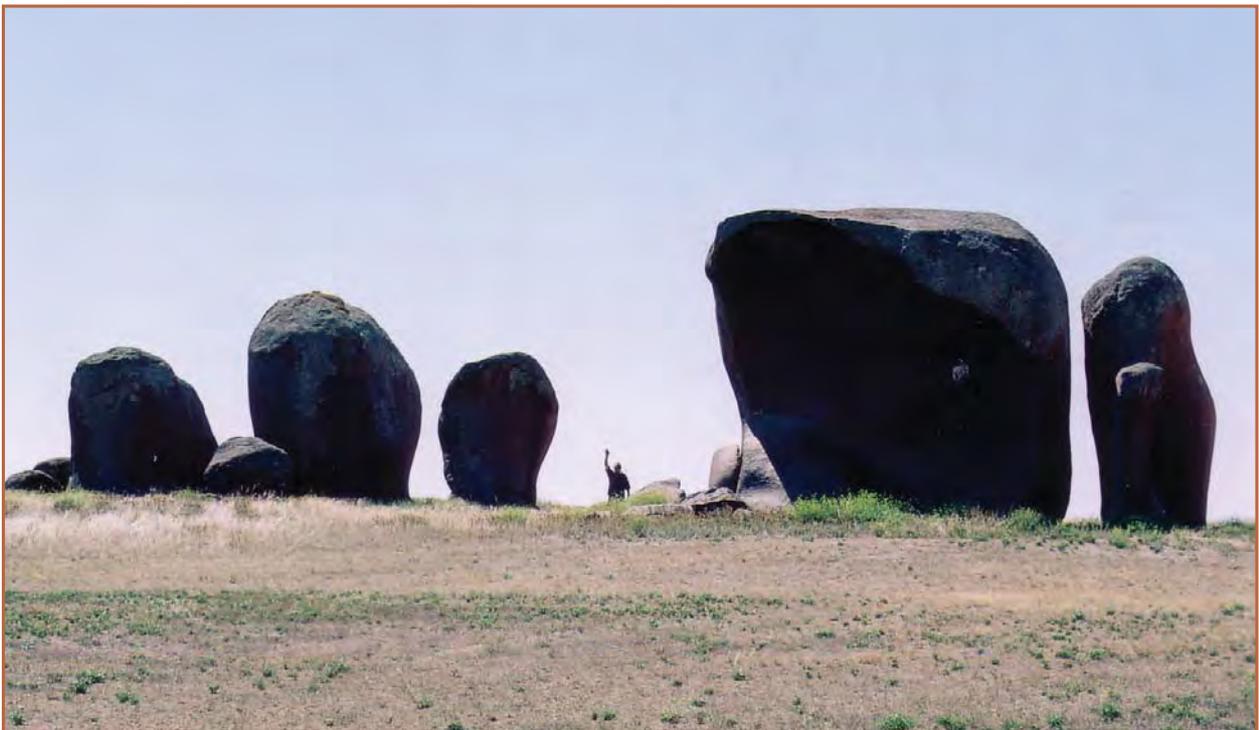


Scele Bay

weren't being very energetic, it was still a very special scene and we stood and watched them for ages.

Then we had a look at Murphy's haystacks a few kilometres down the road. These are ancient wind-worn, granite rocks said to be over 1500 million years old. They sure had smooth curves and were quite striking, even a little eerie.

On returning to the van park we found the other campers returning with their bag limit of crabs and King George whiting. Our neighbours gave us three crabs and they were very nice, thank you. We tore ourselves away from Streaky Bay and headed for Ceduna to take advantage of a tail wind across the Nullarbor. We promised each other we would come back.



Haystacks

III

The Nullarbor, the south coast and south-west corner of WA

We left Ceduna after lunch and began our trek across the Nullarbor. The last thing we expected to see as we travelled along was green grass. Amazingly, we even saw patches of little white wildflowers. Our overnight camp was at a scenic spot on the Great Australian Bight. The 200 kilometres of cliffs along the Bight dropped 90 metres straight down to the Southern Ocean, sometimes overhanging and that thought was very confronting. I was always hanging back and, like an old mother hen, telling Mike not to go too close to the edge.

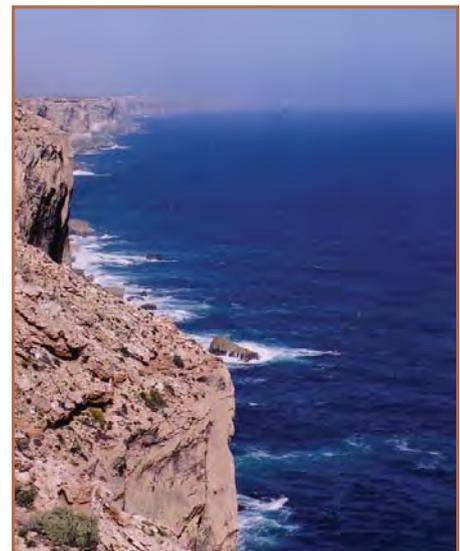
Experts believe the Nullarbor was created about 25 million years ago when it lifted out of the sea. No one could argue with that as there were sun bleached shells on the ground wherever we looked. The sun did not set until 9 o'clock that night. We thought we were pretty clever finding a camp that was a fair way off the highway but don't know what was loudest, the noise from the road trains or the howling of the wind that stayed with us all night.

We crossed into Western Australia next morning and jagged a female quarantine inspector who was most definitely trained by the one and only Mr Hitler. We'd carefully followed the Western Australian rules and cooked whatever veggies we had. With the few nectarines, peaches, oranges and apples we had left, we had made fruit salad. Now picture this. She opened the cupboards and moved stuff around to make sure I hadn't hidden anything, she checked out every shelf in the fridge, then finally picked up the fruit salad and took off the lid. She obviously couldn't find anything else to gripe about so she said, "I'll let you through this time, but next time you need two more fruits in the salad." Now how absurd is that? We laughed, but not until she was out of earshot!

Later, when we stopped for a break and a coffee at Cocklebidy, we noticed that the middle section of the Nullarbor was not so green. Cocklebidy – a cute



Once an Ocean



Coastline



WA Border

name for a motel in the middle of nowhere and a population of less than ten. Regardless of their isolation, they served up a very good mug of coffee.

After another tiny community called Caiguna, the road west runs straight for 145 kilometres. It is actually called Australia's longest straight stretch of sealed road and as you might imagine, a tad boring. When we reached Balladonia Roadhouse at mid afternoon, we decided to call it quits and headed to the bar for a cold beer. Balladonia's claim to fame is that in 1979 the area was showered with pieces of the first US space station, Skylab, as it fell to earth. Otherwise the local landscape is desert scrub and heathland.



Esperance

Next morning we faced the last 192 kilometres to Norseman, a gold mining town at the end of the Nullarbor. Yeh, we'd crossed it and we even got a certificate from the information centre to say so. In its mining heyday, Norseman produced millions of ounces of gold. To a lesser extent, mining and gem fossicking continue today. We pushed on and arrived in Esperance for lunch, planning to stay a few days at least. Wow!

The picture perfect scenery that met us was stunning; we were gob smacked by the white sandy beaches and the water that changed from translucent aqua to ultramarine. It was easy to see why Esperance was so popular with holidaymakers. It's a pretty town, with a population of nearly 9,000 and all the services and facilities you'd expect in a place that size.

Like all tourists to Esperance, we travelled the Great Ocean Drive, which took us through more fabulous beach and ocean scenery, past huge wind turbines at the two wind farms and then on to the famous Pink Lake. The water definitely had a pinkish hue, which



Pink Lake

is apparently caused by salt tolerant algae. There were solar ponds at one end of the lake where table salt was being harvested for state-wide consumption.

Back in town we took a stroll along the old Tanker Jetty, now used for fishing. We couldn't quite believe that people were getting excited about catching a bucketful of 'Tommy Ruff' - they're herring, 15cm long at best. I suppose we're spoiled and take our subtropical climate and good quality fish for granted. At the fish cleaning table along the jetty we met Sammy the sea lion and two of his mates. The fishermen told us they visited twice a day for the scraps and that Sammy was an icon in Esperance.



Sammy

A couple of days later we decided to go deep sea fishing. Woo-hoo! It was so long since we'd been. We had strolled past a fishing tackle shop and seen a

poster in the window advertising a deep sea trip on the Southern Spirit, and couldn't resist the temptation. The big day dawned with less than ideal weather, but we'd been in worse during our many years as members of a deep sea fishing club. When all the fishers had arrived at the meeting point the skipper, knowing we would be facing a rough sea and big swells, offered everyone pills for seasickness. Mike doesn't need them and I'd already taken some because I do get seasick. That trip brought a couple of the big, tough, macho guys back to reality. No, they weren't sissies; they didn't need any damned seasick pills. Yet, not long after, there they were, retching and retching, then lying on the deck hoping to die. What a waste of hard earned money.

Mike and I had a fabulous day, reeling in 20 fish between us. There were red and pink snapper, swallowtail and trevally. The heaviest was 4 kg, most were around 2.5. Mike even had a double hook-up, both pink snapper and both about 2.5 kgs. He was a very happy man. We needed a deep sea fishing fix and came home pleased as punch, grinning from ear to ear. We paid for it the next day though, the old muscles were complaining heaps.

It was time to move on and we spent a few days at a windy Lucky Bay in Cape Le Grand National Park, about 50 kilometres east of Esperance. There we found more enchanting blue water. We dipped our toes as we strolled around the bay to where a splendid sailing ship lay at anchor. Later we got adventurous and trekked along a narrow path through the heath to a huge rock ledge that looked down on a secluded cove. The only way to get there would have been by boat and, like big kids, we were imagining pirates and a cave full of treasure.

On Mike's birthday we explored Rossiter Bay, Hellfire Bay and Thistle Cove – all lovely beaches within the National Park. At Thistle Cove we found the whistling rock. It was so eerie to stand and listen to the curved rock sing so beautifully, thanks to the wind.

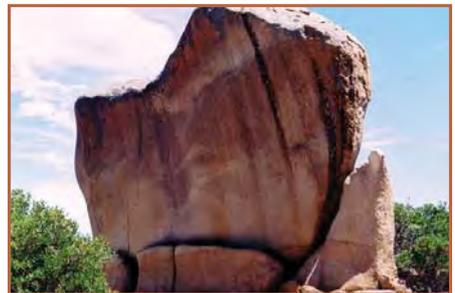
Then we were off again, this time to Stokes Inlet in Stokes National Park, 80 kilometres west of Esperance where we spent three days pretty much on our own. No fishing because the inlet was blocked by a sand bar



Fish



Lucky Bay



Whistling Rock



Stokes NP



In Stokes NP



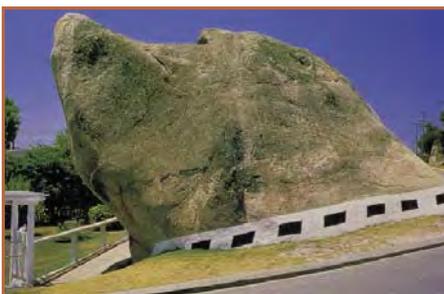
Paperbark in Stokes



Hopetoun Sandbank



Hakea in Fitzgerald NP



Dog Rock

and there was nothing in the lake worth catching so we went exploring, beachcombing and muckin' about in the tinny. It was wonderful, wandering along the isolated beach, just the two of us. Even the unsettled weather couldn't spoil that part of our stay, but we had to move on – Western Australia is a big, big state.

From Ravensthorpe we turned south to Hopetoun, a small place with a bright future as nickel mining had recommenced in the area and houses were springing up by the dozen. The weather was still overcast, cold and windy, so Hank took us exploring into the neighbouring Fitzgerald River National Park. Wildflower season may have been over but there were lots of pretty flowering shrubs in the park. I was particularly taken with the very unusual Royal Hakea, which I'd never seen before, but there were also lots of banksias, eucalypt and mallee shrubs putting on a beautiful show in the heath.

One night was enough in Hopetoun, so we moved on and had an easy run to Albany. The weather was improving and the sun felt good enough for us to book in for a week. There are 30,000 lucky people living in Albany; it's a superb place. The town centre faces Princess Royal Harbour which is a huge, protected expanse of water at the edge of the massive King George Sound. We stayed 3.5 kilometres east, at Emu Beach. Our first job was to restock the pantry and search out the hospital for Mike's monthly blood test to make sure that awful infection was indeed gone. In town we turned a corner and came face to face with a big granite rock by the side of the road that looked, for all the world, like the head of a dog. It even had a painted collar. We shopped at the Dog Rock Shopping Centre and agreed that Albany was a town with a sense of humour.

More cold weather arrived and the locals told us it was the coldest summer they could remember. We braved the breeze and took a sheltered water cruise, on Albany's only riverboat, and what a fabulous experience that was. The captain had been conducting the cruise, pretty much daily, for six years and in that time had managed to train some of the wildlife – with food, of course.

We were welcomed aboard the Kalgan Queen by Perch, the pelican who could no longer fly. When rescued a few years before, she was in a very bad way, all wrapped up in fishing line, one leg and wing damaged, starving to death. She had regained good health and worked for her living by welcoming the passengers on board. Perch did her job very well. There were two other members of the welcoming committee. Sammy the fur seal was a real show-off with his big eyes and beautiful coat. Ray, the giant black ray, swam by very gracefully a few times before we cast off.



Perch

Out in Oyster Harbour, the captain whistled up two white-bellied sea eagles – Swoop and Star. On cue, they each came alongside to pick up the herring he'd thrown overboard. We got to see those magnificent birds, close up, on the wing.

We listened to stories about the adventures of the early explorers, and viewed the wild oysters and mussel beds. We even got to taste some mussels, straight out of the water and into the pan. Mike was rapt. From there we went up river and visited a boutique winery called Montgomery Hill. After tasting their four whites and four reds we rolled back down the hill, in a bus, for a lunch of billy tea and herb damper. Yum. We needed the damper to soak up the alcohol.

On the return journey our captain whistled to Kitty, a beautiful whistling kite. She came and claimed her treat. Then as we left the river and entered the bay, we met Percy, another rescued pelican. Percy was not as badly injured as Perch. While he was recuperating the captain taught him to dance. Today, the captain said to the bird, "Dance for me, Percy" and the bird, sitting in the water, immediately did two or three circles. This happened several times and his reward, of course, was a juicy herring. You know what's wonderful about all this? Those birds were free. They didn't have to play the game if they didn't want to, herring or no herring.

In the afternoon we visited the old gaol, museum and a wonderful full-sized replica of the brig, Amity. In 1826 Amity brought the first European settlers to Albany. There were 23 convicts, a few militia, the captain and crew. There is no doubt about it; the people of Albany, the oldest town in Western Australia, have worked hard to preserve their history.



Amity

Another piece of Albany's heritage is Whale World. It's located on the site of Australia's last commercial whaling station, which closed in 1978, ending 100 years of whaling in those waters. History certainly came alive there and we were amazed, on leaving, to find we'd been totally engrossed for five whole hours.



Old Whale Chaser



Torndirrup NP



Yummy Marron

On the way back to town, we drove into Torndirrup National Park to see the Blowholes. These are a series of small fissures in the granite, but they weren't spurting water into the air the day we went. The ocean was in a gentle mood and didn't have the energy. There was simply a lot of rumbling, hissing and air gusting up out of the holes. On the path back to Hank, we were privileged to see a small flock of the endangered white-tailed black cockatoos. They squawk a lot, just like their cousins, and didn't want their photos taken either.

Rock features called the Gap and Natural Bridge were also less spectacular for want of an angry sea. The Gap is a sheer chasm, 30 metres deep, into which the surf usually rushes. It was in no hurry that day. Same deal with the large rock that has been eroded by huge seas to form an arch called Natural Bridge. We did however notice a pair of boots, neatly sitting side by side on a

rock way down near the water's edge. We couldn't see anyone and hoped it was just an attention-grabbing Aussie prank.

On another day, armed with a bottle of cold white wine, we headed east a few kilometres out of Albany for lunch at the Marron Farm. Alive, marron are a pretty blue colour and look like giant yabbies or small crayfish. They're fatter and harder shelled than the yabbies we pump for bait back home. We enjoyed an entrée of sweet local yabbies and a main course of succulent barbecued marron. No kidding, the meal was delicious and unforgettable.



Two Peoples Bay



The Parrots

We had a look at Australia's first federal defence structure, the old Princess Royal Fortress, opened in 1893 and closed in 1956, now a wonderful military museum with lots of big guns and military equipment. We saw an underground magazine, torpedoes and artillery displays, a signal lookout, bunker and buildings full of memorabilia. Then we walked the nature reserve at Two People's Bay, about 35 kilometres out of town, discovering a pretty white beach edged with low granite rock. After rock hopping for a while and watching fishermen bring in some bream, we drove back to town and wandered through the bird park, where we enjoyed the antics of the many pretty parrots.

The wind farm 12 kilometres south west of Albany was amazing. There were 12 1800kW turbines sitting on

65 metre towers. Each turbine has three 35 metre long blades. They're sited 80 metres above the ocean. Their top speed is 22 revolutions per minute, or one revolution every three seconds. The day we visited they were at top speed. If the wind was any stronger, they would shut down, to save them from damage. They also have their own protection against lightning. Back then, the Albany turbines provided 75% of town power. With six more added in 2011, that figure has increased to 90%. Now wasn't that interesting?

Hank had a service to prepare for the next few thousand kilometres while we coped with a long, BYO seafood lunch at the Squid Shack. Absolutely scrumdiliumcious, and we'd found a very nice dry white wine made by Wise Wines from Eagle Bay in the Margaret River region to go with the food. Guess we'd be stopping by on the way to Perth.

We said goodbye to beautiful Albany and made our way to tall timber country via Denmark. Then we entered the 'Valley of the Giants' - sounded like a place in Jurassic Park, didn't it? Really it was a forest of unique Red Tingle trees that reached a height of 70 metres, with a massive trunk girth at ground level of 20 metres. The treetop walk had a 1 in 12 gradient so was said to be quite user friendly. The 60 metre long steel trusses were supported by steel pylons. Talk about scary! We reached a height of 40 metres and weaved through the crowns of the Tingle trees before descending back to ground level. It was an exhilarating experience.



The Base of Grandmother Tree

Our overnight camp was in Shannon National Park, not far off the highway, in the midst of an old growth karri forest. The timber town of Shannon was born in 1948 and died in 1970. It is now a bush camp site, and although it didn't have power when we were there, it did have a very good ablution block. There was also a volunteer camp host who kept an eye on things, especially the donkey, a wood fired hot water system that gave us hot water for the shower. It also was our first chance that trip to burn a bit of wood and have an outside barbie, which was wonderful. We woke to a very chilly 9° morning, rugged up and took one of the walking trails through the forest. What a fabulous way to start the day.

Down the road in Warren National Park, another old growth forest area, we visited the Bicentennial Tree, a fire lookout tree from the 1930s. Mike started up the 1" thick steel rods which were embedded in the huge tree like a spiral staircase. He got about five metres above the ground before his legs went to jelly. The lack of a safety rail worried him. A much younger Mike wouldn't have worried about that and neither would the fire wardens, who had to climb the tree on a regular basis.



Bicentennial Tree

At Pemberton we enjoyed a beer at the turn of the century pub with its façade of rammed earth and exposed beams of local timber. In 1913 timber mills were established in Pemberton to supply and cut half a million sleepers for the Trans-Australian Railway Line. Pemberton still had a large mill operating to provide much of Western Australia's timber requirements. We also noticed quite a few vineyards – after all, the south-west corner of Western Australia is wine country.

While we were in Pemberton we heard that our seventh grandchild had made his way into the world. What wonderful news! That made three girls and four boys – more than enough to dote on!

Before we left Pemberton next morning we drove to the Gloucester Tree. This is the oldest, the highest and most well known of the fire lookout trees in the south-western forests of the state. At last we had a clear, beautiful morning and the birds were out in force, looking for something to eat. They were in luck – seed was on sale at the entry kiosk. Two of the beautiful parrots we saw are only found in the south-west corner of Australia: the very colourful western rosella and the red capped parrot.

Our afternoon drive took us through green and majestic karri forests to Manjimup, past undulating landscape with agriculture, sheep and cattle to Bridgetown and back through the hardwood and softwood forests into Nannup. We decided to make Busselton our base for exploring the Margaret River region, and arrived to find a very tourist oriented town overlooking Geographe Bay. Busselton was protected from prevailing winds and boasted over 30 kilometres of beautiful white, sandy beaches – tourism is its life.

We heard a very sad story on the local radio. Remember Sammy the fur seal in Albany? His big eyes had welcomed us as we boarded the boat for a sheltered water cruise in the Kalgan Queen. One night, while Sammy was asleep in his favourite spot on shore, a maniac opened him up with a machete. That's the trouble when animals become familiar with people. They trust everyone and we're not all worthy of their trust. Authorities discovered that three young kangaroos had suffered a similar fate in the same area. The captain of the tour boat offered a \$1,000 reward if the culprit was caught, and the town increased that to \$5,000. We're not sure if it worked but we condemned the gutless perpetrators to hell.

We took a 40 kilometre Sunday drive to have lunch at Wise Winery and found the restaurant situated on a hill overlooking the clear waters of picturesque Eagle Bay, which



Wise Wines

is part of the majestic Geographe Bay. The food was excellent and the taste tests in the cellar that followed were even better. We bought two branded 'Wise' glasses and a couple of bottles of wine that blew our budget to smithereens. Budget? What budget?

Then we spent the afternoon exploring the Dunsborough and Cape Naturaliste area. We hiked to the cliffs via a

very pleasant and well-formed walking track to find absolutely stunning views of Geographe Bay which lies leeward of the cape, and so well protected from the wind.

We then drove to the windward side and found an amazing rocky outcrop called Canal Rocks. A thunderous and forceful ocean had pounded away at the granite and forged several paths from one side of the huge rock platform to the other, making canals as its name suggests. We stood and watched, rendered speechless at the power that had created such a spectacle.



Geographe Bay Canal Rocks

The following day we went crabbing and had yummy blue swimmer crab sandwiches for lunch. We then walked the Busselton Jetty. It's 1.8 kilometres long, built around 1850 for large ships to pick up timber for export. The seaward end of the jetty was cut off by fire some time in the past and remains separated, giving the seabirds a safe haven, of which they take full advantage. There were hundreds of all sizes, resting peacefully on their 'island'.



Oceans Meet

Busselton jetty was very popular with local people fishing for squid and herring. There were squid ink stains everywhere, but mostly concentrated near each of the jetty lights, which attracted the squid at night. They were also being caught during the day. We talked with a man cleaning three squid and several garfish. The squid were a good 45 cm long, not counting the tentacles. They were the largest squid we'd ever seen caught and they had such big eyes.

It was cold and windy the day we drove to Augusta and Cape Leeuwin, where the Southern and Indian Oceans meet. We wandered around the 100 year old working lighthouse and ventured as far as we dared across the granite rocks at the most south-westerly tip of our big and beautiful country. It was here that Mike tried to show me where the two oceans combined. "Can't you see the change in colour?" he asked me. Did he think I came down in the last shower?



Water Wheel

Not very far from the lighthouse is an old water wheel. At first sight it looked as if it was built from limestone, but no. It was built from timber in 1895 to supply water to the lighthouse. Over time, the limestone in the water had slowly coated the timber wheel.

The Jewel Cave, not far north of Augusta, is estimated to be half a million years old. We baulked at the entry price but paid up, deciding we would go to only one of the many limestone caves along that part of the west coast. Afterward we had no regrets

about the cost. This was an amazing cave, very heavily decorated with the most unusual limestone formations. Amongst the familiar stalactites and stalagmites, there were dense populations of intricate squiggly and straw-like stalactites. One was hanging an unbelievable six metres and a few even had large, gravity defying, teardrop shaped bulbs at the bottom.

We joined lots of tourists visiting the township of Margaret River, which reminded us of Maleny in the hinterland of Queensland's Sunshine Coast. They're both quaint and quirky villages. After lunch we had a look at Eagle Heritage Park, a tourist attraction and a rehab centre for sick, injured and orphaned birds of prey from all parts of Western Australia. It was much more interesting than we expected. We meandered a one kilometre long path looking at pairs of eagles, hawks and owls in bush style aviaries. Several birds were sitting on eggs.

We had never seen so many different owls. There were tawny frogmouths, and rufous, barking, southern boobook and the gorgeous barn owls. They're the cute ones with big white heart-shaped faces. The park covered 29 acres of natural bushland, seven set aside for hospital and rehabilitation. We reckoned it would be a beautiful place during wildflower season. There was a flying display with black kites. Mike got to put on a glove and have one sit on his arm.

Then we took our last tour of the Margaret River region and made sure we visited the two oldest wineries. We succumbed and bought a couple of bottles from each. We ventured into the Deer Farm and left a little later, armed with freshly made venison rissoles and sausages.

The Cheese Factory had us drooling over the brie. Our last stop for the day was an even more adventurous one. We went into Cape Lavender and tasted their lavender fudge, lavender humbugs and – get this – their lavender infused wines. We were surprised to find that it wasn't bad at all. It certainly freshened the palate.



Jewel Cave

IV

Wave Rock, Kalgoorlie and the Northern Goldfields, Wheat Belt and Perth

Remember Rogan Josh? No, not the Indian lamb curry, the racehorse. He won the Melbourne Cup in 1999. We had driven only 25 kilometres from Busselton when we arrived in the small town of Capel (say Kay-ple), where Rogan Josh retired. He was living in a very large paddock behind the local tavern. It was early, so we were very lucky to find someone who could take us to meet him and his Shetland buddy, Brownie. He was in a friendly mood and we got lots of nibbles and nuzzles from that magnificent looking horse. Rogan Josh and Brownie may have been chalk and cheese, but they were inseparable.



Rogan Josh

20 kilometres further on is Bunbury, a city of 28,000 people. It's located on a peninsula, so has lots of water, white sandy beaches and all things nautical. It's a major port and regional centre for the bottom corner of Western Australia. We didn't stay there, preferring to move into the countryside. Our first stop was Collie, a small town with a history of underground coal mining.

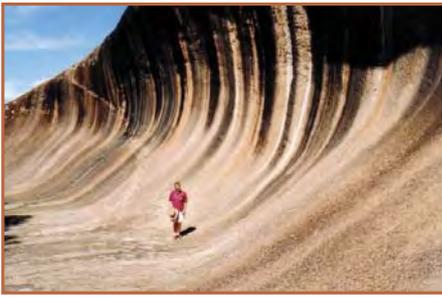


Williams

We toured a replicated coal mine and heard that Collie coal is flaky, steaming coal that does not burn as hot as the coking coal from the eastern states. Steaming coal is apparently less damaging to the coal miners. Its methane level is very low and its dust less harmful to the lungs. Mining was still going on outside town and we were told that China wants to import Collie coal. If China continues to look for steaming coal, the town of Collie is likely to be relocated in years to come as it sits smack in the middle of the coal seam.

We stayed overnight at Williams, a tiny town that long ago was an important stopping place for people travelling in their horse-drawn carriages. We moved on to the wheat belt town of Narrogin next morning. The visitor centre wasn't open so we drove on and decided to detour through Dryandra Woodland. We saw lots of kangaroos and stopped at 'Dryandra Village', a huge project undertaken by Western Australian Lions Clubs some years before. The aim was to establish self contained camp holiday accommodation for disadvantaged kids. It looked to be a fabulous place for kids to camp, disadvantaged or not.

Give or take a few tiny communities in between, it was 270 kilometres from Cuballing



Wave Rock

to Hyden and the famous Wave Rock. An awesome granite formation, the wave is over 100 metres long, reaches 15 metres high and is thought to be more than 2,700 million years old. It really did look like a huge wave about to break. We took a short walk from the wave to another rock formation called Hippo's Yawn. While not as special, it did resemble its name.



Barrier Fence

We left after a visit to the wildlife park on site and made our way about 50 kilometres north on the unsealed Southern Cross Road to the Rabbit Proof Fence. We camped that night by the side of the road, lit a fire and barbequed a nice piece of steak. The leaves of the salmon gum trees had a high, natural gloss and the next morning they glistened in the sunlight. Believe it or not, the whole canopy looked as if it was covered in fairy lights.

Another 100 kilometres of dirt road to the Great Eastern Highway and on we went through Coolgardie with its very wide streets, built way back when the camel trains needed a large turning circle. We arrived in Kalgoorlie on a wonderful mild afternoon and the only touristy thing we did was drive up to the Super Pit lookout. Wow, what a big hole.

The next morning it started raining and blowing a gale; it was so cold we had to drag out the jumpers and ugg boots. Rugged up, we went to the Prospectors and Miners Hall of Fame where we enjoyed the displays, an underground tour and a gold pour.



Result of the Gold Pour

Our underground guide was a retired miner and he talked about the old pub the miners used to go to after their shifts, via a shaft that actually surfaced in the bar. We drove across town to the Metropole to see the shaft. All true - there it was large as life, now covered with glass. This pub remained very much a miners' pub and the bar was full of tough talking men and women. To suggest we felt out of place would be an understatement. We had one very quick beer and skedaddled.



The Brothel

Who would ever have thought we'd be taking a tour of a working brothel? Not me, that's for sure. But we did. Questa Casa was the oldest operating brothel in Australia and one of three left in Kalgoorlie, officially at least. It had retained its original shop front and the madam conducted one tour a day. We listened to her talk about the rules of the past that made the existence

of the brothels possible and were shown through the bedrooms, each set up a little differently. She explained the outfits and the ‘toys’, and told us lots of stories, some of which seemed a little far fetched. I was relieved when the tour was over and very glad my own life experience was far removed from that of the ladies of the night.

Then we visited the Super Pit Shop in Boulder to pick up some information about that big hole. Mike was very impressed with the whole operation. At the time of our visit the pit was 3.2 kilometres long, 1.4 kilometres wide and 330 metres deep. Approximately 85 million tonnes of ore was mined per annum for a total yield of only 800,000 ounces of gold. I was amazed to learn that of eight huge haulage trucks carting up to 200 tonnes of ore per load, only one carried millable ore. The other seven headed for the waste dumps with low grade ore that was not worth processing. Oh, the value of gold!



Miner's Cottage



Cottage Gwalia

We spent three days checking out the working goldfields and the ghost towns to the north of Kalgoorlie. A lot of them are nothing more than a signpost. Approaching Leonora, the bustling railway hub for the goldfields, we came across the town of Gwalia. It's not really a ghost town as a handful of people still reside there. The Sons of Gwalia mine began in 1896 and closed in 1963, when the majority of residents packed up and left their cottages to find work at other mines in the region.

The people of Leonora saw tourism potential in the little abandoned and derelict miners' cottages. Several had been faithfully restored so that visitors could wander through and see how some mining families lived back then. Each little shack had its own personality and you did feel that someone had lived there, with a pocket hanky veggie garden and a few chooks. Walls, roofs and fences were made of corrugated iron, the floors were timber and the windows had hessian curtains but no glass.



Mine Manager's House

The Mine Manager's house wasn't made of corrugated iron, though. Part of it had been turned into bed and breakfast accommodation, while the rest had been maintained in its original form. We learned that the first mine manager was Herbert Hoover, later to become 31st President of the USA.

We headed north to the nickel mining town of Leinster, then west to Sandstone, where we stopped for a pie and



Mine



Salt Lake Wongan Hills

tomato sauce, purchased from the Post and Telegraph Office! Continuing further west where the scrub gave way to pastoral land, we found Mount Magnet, a small but very active gold mining settlement. Then south on the Great Northern Highway to Payne's Find (gold also) and lastly to the Mt Gibson rest stop.

Next morning we left the Northern Goldfields and entered the Wheat Belt. There were miles and miles of harvested fields. They were filled with sheep, polishing off every last bit of stubble. When we got to Wongan Hills, about 180 kilometres from Perth, we found valleys with lots of salt lakes. The farmers, undaunted, had simply planted their wheat around them.

We stopped for lunch at picturesque Toodyay, in the Avon Valley, a popular destination on Sundays for people from Perth and Fremantle. We visited an historic flour mill called Connors Mill that was built in 1870 and operated till 1917. The mill, now a tourist attraction, actually replicates the milling process of the time and with Mike's flour milling background, we couldn't have missed that.



We made it to Fremantle midafternoon, looking forward to a week in Perth and surrounds. Mike had been there before but it was all new to me. The Maritime Museum was very fancy with its modern design, sitting at the entrance to Fremantle Harbour. Submarine HMAS Ovens and Americas Cup winner Australia II were two of the museum's world-class exhibits. We really enjoyed the Shipwreck Museum. There was a room devoted to

the Batavia, a Dutch ship that sank off the Western Australian coast in 1629, which had been found in the 1960s. I found it very moving.

One day we caught the train into Perth. Halfway there two women boarded our carriage. They were having a very loud discussion about football, and continued at full volume as if there was no one else around. Mike and I wished they would stop, or at least quieten down a bit, but they kept going until they reached their station. As they stepped out onto the platform, the whole carriage erupted with the sound of people clapping. It was very amusing. Obviously, we weren't the only ones wishing they would keep their discussion to themselves.



City from water

After visiting the Perth Mint, we took a tram tour through the city and beautiful Kings Park, wandered a bit and then enjoyed a ferry ride home to Fremantle. While Perth is very pretty from the water, up close it's like any other big city with too many people.

We packed up again and headed north. We drove past

a very crowded Cottesloe Beach at 8.30 on a Sunday morning and there were people everywhere. We passed Sorrento, then Scarborough, where Mike stayed when he was in Perth with a team of junior rugby players in the mid to late '80s. He stayed at Alan Bond's Observation City Hotel, which was built to overlook the America's Cup race.



From Kings Park

✓ Moving up the Coast



Pinnacles Desert

Our first stop after leaving Perth was the Pinnacles Desert in Nambung National Park, not far outside Cervantes. We wandered, wide-eyed through thousands of limestone pillars, some jagged, some like tombstones, some tall, some short. They were standing in a real desert of every sandy hue imaginable and all that only a hop, skip and a jump from the coast.

We stayed overnight at Cervantes, a small but growing fishing and holiday town with a thriving crayfishing industry. The wind blew strong next morning so we kept moving north, taking the coast road to Jurien Bay, another holiday destination popular because of its safe swimming beach. Our next stop was Green Head where we found Dynamite Bay, a tiny protected beach that was very picturesque. We noticed a cray boat coming in and headed for the jetty. Sure enough, heaps and heaps of small, bucking lobsters were being crated and loaded into a waiting truck. We didn't get a chance to ask where the crays were heading.



Dynamite Bay

Driving through Greenough (say Gren-ock), we saw some river gum trees that had given way to the prevailing southerly winds. The trunks had bent at right angles a metre or so off the ground, and the trees were growing horizontally but they seemed to be flourishing. There was barely enough room under that canopy for the sheep to shelter from the heat.



Horizontal Gum

A little later we arrived in bustling Geraldton with its major port facilities and a large live lobster processing factory. We were having a look around when we were tooted by another vehicle. We were amazed to see a couple we'd met in the Northern Territory the year before. They were camped with Ken and Dawn, 25 kilometres up the road at Coronation Beach. We joined them and for four days we fished, swam, walked the beach, played board games, cards, and boule. The guys even had a game of marbles.

One day we caught enough tailor to cook up a big barbie dinner to share with six young backpackers and windsurfers from England and The Netherlands. They told us that Coronation Beach was very popular with overseas windsurfers, who have such a good

time they come back every year. They enjoyed the fish.

We arrived back in Geraldton too late to join a tour of the lobster factory. Instead, we bought ourselves some snorkelling gear to use further up the coast. Then, at the highest point of Mt Scott, we visited the memorial to HMAS Sydney. 645 sailors were lost in a battle with a German raider off the west coast in World War II. The stainless steel dome roof of the memorial is made of connecting seagulls, 645 of them, one for each man lost at sea. To make the site even more touching, there is a sculpture of a woman, shading her eyes, looking to sea. You could feel her, willing the ship to appear on the horizon.



Memorial to HMAS Sydney

We made our way back to Coronation Beach, where the six of us packed up and headed north for Horrocks Beach. At Horrocks it was more fishing, swimming, walking and playing games. Some of us snorkelled the close reefs for crays and found plenty, but they were all too small to keep. We played a six-handed game of cards called 'Oh, Shit', that took us five days, on and off, to complete. It was a marathon, but so much fun that no one wanted to quit.

Mike and I said goodbye to our friends and went to look at Port Gregory, a tiny cray fishing village with a big pink salt lake called Hutt Lagoon, not far outside of town. The colour in the lake is said to be due to a bacterium that gets trapped in the salt granules, called *Dunaliella salina*. The bacterium apparently provides a rich source of beta-carotene, and the salt is harvested nearby.

On to Kalbarri, a truly beautiful place sited where the Murchison River enters the Indian Ocean. At least, it would be beautiful again once the flood water receded and the colour of the river returned to blue. Kalbarri had experienced its worst ever flood, caused by the same cyclone that had reached us in Kalgoorlie. The water peaked a week before we arrived, stopping short of the main street. There are 2,000 permanent residents and tourism is big business.



Floodwaters at mouth of Murchison River

We enjoyed our visit to the Australian Parrot Breeding Centre, called Rainbow Jungle. The birds were all so pretty. I'm not sure how many we saw, but there are more than 60 different parrots in Australia and most of them are vibrantly coloured.

Not far outside town, when we were on our way to the National Park, a magnificent malleefowl crossed the road in front of Hank. We were so lucky as very few people get to see these rare, ground dwelling birds.



Natures Window in Kalbarri NP



Camp at Tamala Station



Playing Boule

from the water in Henry Freycinet Harbour. We caught good sized mackerel, flathead, parrot, sweetlip and, get this, 50-55cm pink snapper, all in a miserable two metres of water. Our fishing buddies back home wouldn't believe that.

On a day too windy for fishing, Hank took Mike and I to a pretty place called Monkey Mia for a look at the dolphins and the tourist resort that is very well known throughout Australia. While passing through Denham we visited the Church of England Church that had been built with blocks of locally mined shell. Those blocks of shell came from Shell Beach, south of town. What looked like snow white sand from a distance was actually made of shells, metres and metres deep.



Sunset



Hamelin Pool

They are turkey-like, grey with finely mottled tan, brown, black and white feathers on the back and wings. It certainly was our lucky day and a shame we hadn't bought a lotto ticket earlier.

We got some exercise treading the paths in Kalbarri National Park. The landscape was remarkable, with the huge, rugged cliffs of the west coastline and the gorges plunging a long way to the flooded river.

We left Kalbarri and drove to Shark Bay to rejoin our friends. We turned off Denham Road onto Useless Loop Road. 40 kilometres of dirt road later we turned into Tamala Station (pronounced Tar-mulla), a private working pastoral property, where Wagyu cattle were being bred for the lucrative Japanese market. We paid a pittance for the privilege of camping a stone's throw

20 kilometres south of Denham, Eagle Bluff overlooks a large area of shallows. They say that sharks, dugongs, rays and large fish are regular visitors, but we only saw a solitary shark. We blamed this on a cyclone that was due to cross the coast north of us within a few hours. Back at camp, that cyclone threw wind and rain our way as she progressed southward so we all spent the day holed up inside the vans, watching DVDs and reading.

There were no mosquitoes or sandflies at our campsite at Tamala, just a few red back spiders in the pit toilet. Thankfully, there were none on the toilet seat. We played boules every afternoon at beer o'clock and had heaps of fun - the girls won, of course.

We left Tamala Station a couple of days earlier than our

friends, visiting Hamelin Pool to see the stromatolites which are part of the Earth's evolutionary history. It is said that as the original stromatolite colonies expanded, they released more and more oxygen into the atmosphere, eventually raising the oxygen level to 20%, which led the way for air-breathing life forms to evolve. Which eventually, of course, led to us.



Handful of Shells

We also walked through the shell quarry, which is still used today for repairing and maintaining those buildings in the area made of shell bricks. I loved scooping up a handful and letting the tiny shells fall through my fingers.



At the Shell Quarry

We reached Carnarvon midafternoon and set up camp. While the clothes were washing, we raced off to the hospital for Mike's blood test. Later our friends caught up with us and the men undertook some maintenance on the vans. Mike checked the batteries, burning acid holes in his shirt and shorts! The grease gun clogged and just as suddenly unclogged, leaving both Mike and Ken covered with grease! Well, Dawn and I thought it was funny.

It was too far to travel from Carnarvon to the Cape Range National Park in one day, so we stayed overnight in Exmouth and headed out early next morning. We eventually made it to Osprey Bay in the National Park, one of the more picturesque camps along Ningaloo Reef where each campsite had space and privacy. We snatched a fabulous spot overlooking the ocean and spent days and days snorkelling the shallows of the reef at Oyster Stacks, South Mandu, Pilgrimanna and Osprey Bay.

We couldn't believe the wonderland we were seeing; there were so many fish, tiny to huge, iridescent and all colours of the rainbow. We met Nemo and his cousins and we even got up close and personal with some very big fish. The giant clams were awesome and the coral was amazing, so many different shapes and colours.



Greased up Guys

On our first day out fishing, we brought home some cod and red throat emperor. By the time we moved on we were sick of cod and emperor and had half a freezer full of fillets. Late one afternoon while we were enjoying a beer, we were visited by an echidna. Dawn and I touched his nose, rubbed his quills, and felt his feet. He was a gorgeous little guy and we were like inquisitive kids. He put up with it for a while and then



Echidna

decided he'd had enough of the old girls fondling him and headed for the bush.

We left the National Park to continue north, staying overnight in a rest stop beside the Yannarie River. There we watched lots of wild, yellow-green budgies and noticed how small they were compared to the domesticated version.

On our way to Onslow the landscape along the highway suddenly turned green, thanks to all the rain from the recent cyclones. Sturt Desert Pea plants were already covering the ground. That year, in the northern part of the state, the wildflower season would be outstanding, the wattle shrubs were bursting at the seams and the wild budgies were everywhere.

Onslow is 80 kilometres west of the highway. It had been badly beaten by the recent cyclones and its historical attraction, Old Onslow, was still closed to traffic. So we had a look around town, stayed overnight and then headed to 40 Mile Beach, 70 kilometres south of Karratha. There we rejoined Ken and Dawn, along with eight or nine other vans and camper trailers taking advantage of the fabulous accommodation, all at no cost as the caretaker wouldn't begin collecting fees for another week or so, when tourist the season officially started.

Milo was parked right beside the ocean, at the edge of a rocky shoreline and for several days we had such pleasure watching a wonderful manta ray come very close to shore to feed. Up and down, up and down it swam, in no hurry at all. At night we had to be careful not to step on the hermit crabs that visited in their droves, some the size of an egg. They'd come scratching around the damp ground under the vans for food.

We didn't fish much at 40 Mile with fillets still in the freezer, but the wind stopped us from putting the boats in anyway, so we drove around the tracks having a look at the scenery and found mangroves and a creek. We strolled along the firm mud flats, swishing a stick in the puddles and found a feisty big mud crab that was not impressed that his hidey hole had been invaded. He was the first of several muddies we caught at 40 Mile.



Painted Crays



Dampier Ship Loading

Ken went diving for crayfish and came back with four. They were called painted crays –their flesh was tough and not very flavoursome. However, we were glad that we had an opportunity to try them. Maybe a couple of bashes with the meat tenderiser would have helped. That's a trick we might use next time.

On our own again, Mike and I moved to Dampier, on the coast 20 kilometres from Karratha. Dampier was established in the 1960s by the mining company, Hamersley Iron, as a port for its iron ore operations. The port of Dampier was very busy, providing loading

facilities for iron ore, salt, liquefied natural gas and fertilisers.

On the way into Dampier there is a memorial to Red Dog, a cross between a Kelpie and a Blue Heeler, who arrived in Dampier with his family in 1971, but left home to become a wanderer.



Red Dog Memorial

Red Dog befriended a Hamersley Iron bus driver and would regularly accompany him on bus runs. The front seat of the bus, directly behind the driver, was reserved for this dog. He'd wait for the bus to come and bark when he wanted to get off. Having travelled often on the company buses, Red Dog had a lot of friends among the workers.



Cleaverville

One day a new driver, unaware of Red Dog's status, refused to let him on the bus. Hamersley Iron men walked out in protest and Red Dog was quickly given a bank account and made a member of the union. As a company man, he was entitled to ride the bus.

Red Dog had many friends and many places to call home in Dampier. When he died in 1979 the town erected a statue in his memory. How about that? His life has now been made into a movie. If you haven't seen it yet, a word of advice, take some tissues.

We did some serious four-wheel driving in the Burrup Peninsula. Hank climbed over some very rugged Pilbara landscape, to the top of Mount Burrup. The rocky outcrops around Dampier are red, not iron ore but granite.

Karratha is the regional centre for the iron ore and other major industries in the Pilbara. We stocked up at the shopping centre and moved on. A few kilometres up the road was the turnoff to another bush camp, Cleaverville, run by the same shire council as 40 Mile. Our intention was simply to have a look, but when we got there we decided to stay for the weekend. It was idyllic and again, we overlooked the ocean.

We walked the beach and at low tide had great fun wandering among the rock pools tormenting the little octopi – those without blue rings. All weekend a very happy little pied butcherbird entertained us with the most wonderful songs and it mimicked lots of other birds to perfection. Cleaverville got a big tick.

Roebourne was next and is the oldest surviving town between Geraldton and Darwin. Not far down the road was Cossack, a town with a sad tale to tell. Nestled at the mouth of the Harding River, this town was the first port in Western Australia's north-west and had a population of nearly 300 in the late 1800s. By 1900, however, the pearlers had raped the area and moved on



Sturt Desert Pea



Saltworks



At Cape Keraudren Boat Ramp

to Broome; the gold rush had diminished; and Cossack's waterways were silting up. When the port facilities were transferred to Point Samson, the town slowly died. The annual cyclone season added to its woes and by 1950 Cossack was totally abandoned. Now, Roebourne Shire Council is in the process of restoring the many fine stone buildings and Cossack will eventually attract more tourists. We stayed overnight at Point Samson, these days a fishing village with a small fleet of trawlers.

Port Hedland really was 'oresome', the whole town has a red blush caused by the iron ore dust. We watched the tugs escort a fully loaded ship out of the harbour and saw several others waiting to come in. Unlike its operations in Dampier, the salt works there were working full bore. Perhaps Hedland didn't get inundated with as much fresh water from recent cyclones.

We had only 180 odd kilometres to travel to Cape Keraudren at the southern end of 80 Mile Beach. We turned off the highway at Pardoo Roadhouse, hit the dirt and ventured a further 12 kilometres to the cape. We set up camp on a fabulous site near the boat ramp, overlooking the bay.

On our very first morning at low tide, dripping with insect repellent, we went wandering through the sloppy, muddy mangroves and, believe it or not, we found ourselves two big mud crabs. No guessing what we had for tea that night.

On day two we went beachcombing along the southern end of 80 Mile Beach. There were shells everywhere along the tide line, lots of them empty razor fish shells. They're the ones that bury themselves in the sand with their razor sharp tops protruding, waiting for the unwary to tread on them and cut their feet open. At the time we didn't know they were a sought-after delicacy. Anyway, two hours later our pockets were filled with beautiful shells and we'd had our exercise for the day.

Day three was ordinary and day four started with high winds, so we didn't launch the boat. We went for a walk along the foreshore instead, hoping to find some decent sized oysters. There were millions of oysters but all were very small. Mike managed to shuck a few and thought them delicious, but decided the risk of injury was too great. We wandered the shallows picking up lost hooks and sinkers. It was then that I fell on some slippery rocks and our very precious camera followed me. Bruised and embarrassed, I survived.

The caravan park at 80 Mile Beach, very popular with salmon fishermen, was our destination next day. With dozens of people fishing along the waterline, we spent the afternoon beachcombing instead. We then headed for Broome for a five-day rest. Hank needed a service, and so did the outboard motor. We needed to recharge our own batteries and Broome was the ideal place to do that. As we suspected, our SLR Nikon

didn't survive its salt water bath. My birthday present was a new camera and we both had to learn about digital technology. We couldn't put it off any longer.

Malcolm Douglas' crocodile farm was well worth a visit. It made us appreciate how quickly those monsters can move if they want to. I now sit further away from the edge of the tinny when I'm in croc country.

Of course, like every visitor to Broome we had to see the camel rides and sunset at Cable Beach. The camel rides were very popular and the official tourist season hadn't even started. There were four camel trains, each with eight to ten camels, and two riders per camel. They were all full. Neither of us was tempted to have a ride, but the procession was great to watch. There were dozens of 4WD vehicles on the beach, their owners sitting out in chairs, drinks in hand, waiting like us for the sunset. It didn't let us down – it was spectacular!

Gantheaume Point boasts some original, authenticated, dinosaur footprints that can be seen at low tide, however, the tide wasn't low enough when we went to look. We had to settle for a photo of a replica. Locals told us later that they only appear on negative tides, only a few times each year. It's a shame the tourist brochures don't 'fess up to that.

Have you heard of Broome's famous 'Staircase to the Moon'? It happens when a very low tide coincides with the rising of the full moon. We got to see the staircase at Roebuck Bay but weren't good enough with the new camera to capture the image. We fiddled around trying to work out how to turn off the flash and gave up. Oh, well, a picture from a brochure would have to do for the scrapbook.

Then we headed north to the Cape Leveque Road and Beagle Bay for a look at the internal decoration of the Sacred Heart Church. It had a beautiful pearl shell altar that was built in 1917 by the Pallotine monks, with assistance from the local indigenous people.

The road was awful but Hank and Milo coped well. We arrived at Middle Lagoon, 182 kilometres from



Camel Train



Cable Beach



Dinosaur Print



Beagle Bay Church



Altar

Broome, at about 1.30pm and were glad to stop. Middle Lagoon was a 20 hectare camping area on indigenous land, located at the edge of the crystal clear water of the Indian Ocean. We camped near the edge of the headland with a truly fabulous view. We walked the beach, rock hopped, fished, took photos, enjoyed our drinks at sunset and, later, sat and gazed at the stars. It was so peaceful we could have stayed for weeks.



One Arm Point

One morning we took Hank on even rougher road up to Cape Leveque. We paid \$10 for a permit to enter the dry indigenous community of One Arm Point on the east side of the cape. Our drive took us to a couple of pretty little beaches with white sand and rocky headlands. At the top of the cape we stood and watched the rapidly flowing tidal currents. We could see and sense their immense power.

While there, we also visited a new government-funded marine life hatchery project being undertaken by the local community. There were 20 or so large tanks with filters and very clear water in which were growing very healthy looking fish, and shells with edible flesh.

A little later we walked into the resort at Cape Leveque, which was part owned by the community we'd just left. We asked if we could go for a walk along the beach. Only if we purchased a permit, we were told, so we showed them our permit but that wasn't good enough, we had to buy another one. No thanks, we went back to Milo, safe and sound at Middle Lagoon.



Hatchery

We retraced our tracks to Broome, stocked up and backtracked again 130 odd kilometres south to Barn Hill Station, to catch up with Ken and Dawn. Our campsite once again overlooked the ocean and we had access to drinking quality water. Barn Hill is a working cattle station, with a caravan park by the ocean. Cattle wander around the vans at their leisure. Some of the campers were long term stayers and had been going there for many years. There was even a small bowling green near the 'shop', which sold frozen bread and vanilla ice creams. There were very few campers at Barn Hill who didn't like fishing. Some days there would be more than a dozen 4WD vehicles and trailers lined up on the beach, their owners out on the water.



Beach at Barn Hill

After a little hiccup with the waves and some good advice from the more experienced boaties, we

conquered the art of launching the tinny from the beach. We caught lots of good fish and one morning when the reef fish were sleeping, Mike latched on to a 10 kg northern bluefin tuna. It gave him a good arm stretch and an adrenalin rush.

Then it was time for my six month medical check so, scared stiff about the test results but with a granny-fix firmly in mind, Dawn and I flew home from Broome. The grandpas stayed behind to fish, cook fatty food and eat ice cream while they could get away with it.



Mike's Tuna

VI

Fishing the Kimberley by Boat, Horizontal Waterfall and more

You know, I haven't been able to conquer the apprehension I always feel leading up to my medical checks, but if I didn't have to go home for them, I wouldn't have seen my grandchildren. I did savour every waking hour of that ten-day granny fix. I also received good results from the mammogram and ultrasound and the oncologist gave me another six month tick. I will never forget that darling man's reaction to the trauma of my sixth and last chemo treatment. I think he was more upset than I was when he heard what had happened.

I was in good spirits when Mike and I arrived at the oncology unit that day. It was the last one, I was thinking, it would soon be over and there would be no more chemotherapy. I relaxed in the big black chair and waited for a nurse. When she arrived she commented about it being my last visit and how I must be looking forward to getting it over with. We went through the preparations. She tap, tap, tapped my arm looking for a vein and inserted the needle – nothing. She went and got a hot towel, placed it over my arm and waited. Tap, tap, tap, in goes the needle – nothing. My favourite nurse came and tried and tried – nothing. Then they called the young unit doctor who eventually turned up skiting that all would be OK, he'd never yet failed to find a vein. Well, he went off with his tail between his legs and I had nine or ten holes in my arm. Mike was feeling sick, having watched the fishing expeditions that all came up empty. We were sent home to return the next day and I'm sure you can imagine how devastated I felt at the time.

My favourite senior oncology nurse met us next morning, nervous but determined to find that vein. Mike and I held our breath. Thank goodness, the vein didn't run and hide and she pierced it on her first attempt. Finally, we were on our way to finishing with those awful drugs. For all of the following week, sick as I was, I was grateful for the cooler weather and the long sleeved shirts that covered the mass of bruises up my arm.

But that was all in the past. After Dawn and I returned to Broome and met the men, we parted company. Our friends went back to Barn Hill and Mike and I set out for Derby.



White Lightning

We had booked a five day Kimberley Adventure on the big nine metre tinny, White Lightning, skippered by owner, Greg. We were so lucky that Greg didn't call us and cancel. There were usually six passengers on his Kimberley trips, but four cancelled their booking at the last minute, so we had the boat to ourselves.

It was full moon which meant big, big tides and for the first few days there was up to 12 metres movement

between high tide and low. The tidal flow meant that even getting into the dinghy at the boat ramp had to be well planned and executed. Thank goodness our skipper knew his stuff.

The water in King Sound, already muddied by the big tidal movement, was whipped up by an easterly wind. We started out a little nervously, but we had a ball. First up we scored eight brown muddies from a couple of hours crabbing in Luggers Creek. These were smaller than the mud crabs we were used to, but just as tasty.

Leaving King Sound we passed through Cascade Bay and entered the Buccaneer Archipelago, which consists of up to 1000 rugged, sparsely vegetated islands populated by birds and snakes. There were many secluded, beautiful beaches.

A tidal range of up to 12 metres creates natural phenomena and we got to see some of those. We moved through a small channel into the Inland Sea and watched in awe at the many whirlpools being made by the swiftly flowing water. We were surrounded by them. Then we suddenly left the murky water behind and entered water that was crystal clear and turquoise, albeit still turbulent and full of whirlpools. A big crocodile was basking in the morning sun, aware of us but not really showing any interest. We weren't about to test our luck.

We found some calmer water in the Trent River and fished for no more than an hour. In that time we caught golden snapper, mangrove jack, black jew, estuary and rankin cod and a blue nosed salmon. Wow! In such a short time, we had heaps of quality fish to eat and found ourselves releasing as many as we kept.

Still in the Inland Sea, we motored back to a beautiful little island and anchored at 'Message in a Bottle' beach. Perched on a couple of rocks, we had lunch – mud crab and a cold beer. On the beach was a little cairn with a hole. In the hole was a big bottle containing heaps of messages, hence, the name of the beach. Leaving that magical little place we continued on to Hell's Gate. White Lightning danced her way through the swirling, turbulent water.

Next was Whirlpool Passage. Thankfully, the tide was slowing and preparing to change direction. Good timing, we thought as we motored past Cockatoo Island, where mining continued for high grade iron ore.



Muddy Water



Crocodile



Tidal Movement



Mike and Golden Snapper

Then we reached Yampi Sound, where we anchored in Myridi Bay and looked in wonder at the magnificent multicoloured cliffs. Our nights were spent in a double swag on the back deck of the boat, so we were able to appreciate all those amazing stars before we nodded off. Before brekkie next day we fished the mouth of Crocodile Creek and jagged parrot, spanish flag, cod and coral trout. We released all but the trout; the only place it was going was onto the barbeque.

After breakfast we motored to the upper reaches of Crocodile Creek to find a stainless steel ladder and waterfalls. Our skipper told us that mining employees on Cockatoo



Crocodile Creek Ladder

Island had built the ladder and the construction we were about to see. It was a place to escape from work for a little while. We climbed the ladder to find a covered campsite with a fireplace and barbeque plate; there was a sink and a tap bringing water from the rock pool. Ledges had been carved into the sandstone rock for seats. Hanging from the rafters of the roof were hundreds of memorabilia, like yacht names, bundy bottles with messages, thongs with visitors' names and dates, lots of stuff left by visitors who'd been before us.



Visitors' Stuff

Right beside that structure were three small waterfalls. We climbed to the top one which was well above the highest high tide mark and safe for Mike to have a swim. As we made our way back to the boat, we were farewelled by the resident crocodile and agreed this was a special piece of Kimberley landscape.



From the Top Waterfall

We headed off to Talbot Bay and the Horizontal Waterfall, another natural phenomenon caused by the big tidal movements, but now very commercialised. Boats were coming and going all the time; seaplanes were landing and taking off. It was good, but as the tourist season was just starting, too busy for our liking.

On the return trip, but still in Yampi Sound, we did some more fishing. Mike caught a four kilo fingermark. I hooked up a bronze whaler. We anchored for the night in sheltered water off Monument Beach, a pretty patch of white sand with cliffs all around. The beach is aptly named as it circles around a rock formation that looks exactly like a monumental statue.



Horizontal Waterfall

A very different experience awaited us the following day. We motored into Silver Gull Creek to visit a couple who had been squatting on government land for years.

In the early days of mining, the mining company found a natural spring for their water supply and that's where the squatters decided to settle. Travelling yachties and tour boats go in to replenish their water supply from the spring and visit the residents, who make jewellery and sell touristy stuff from a little shed. We joined the 'Squatters Arms Boat Club', \$1 of which goes to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. We had a wonderful dip in their swimming pool – a cement tank out back where the water temperature was 32°.

The man of the house had a big bushy beard and was a real character. He was very astute and we had quite a chat. His choice of clothing left little to the imagination. He wore nothing but budgie smuggler underpants and had a reputation, we were told, for farewelling his visitors with a moonie as they motored out of the creek and past his home. We got a wave, not a view of his bare bum when we left Silver Gull Creek, for which we were very grateful. As we headed back south through Margaret's Passage, we stopped at several patches of reef and had lots of fun flicking poppers at the trevally. The water was so clear we could see them and I, at least, was more than happy for the big, big ones to ignore the bait.

We had another fishing stop in Cone Bay but the current was so strong, no matter how heavy the sinker, we couldn't hold the bait on the bottom so it was back through Hell's Gate, then a long haul back to Derby.

We had a great time exploring the magnificent West Kimberley Coast. The round trip took us 600 kilometres and we enjoyed every bit of it.



Beautiful colours of the Kimberley



Eagle Rock



Squatters' Pool



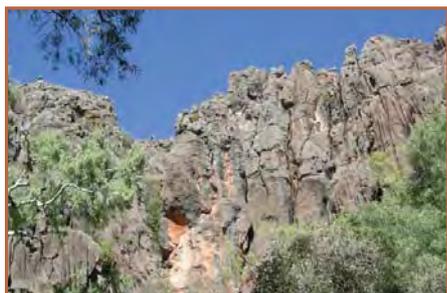
Mike's Trevally

VII

Gibb River Road and Spring Creek Station Revisited

The unsealed Gibb River Road is nearly 700 kilometres long. It links Derby to Wyndham and Kununurra. Our first destination was Tunnel Creek, a small creek that has carved a tunnel through the limestone reef of the Napier Range to form a cavern, 750 metres in length. With torches in hand and rock hoppers on our feet, we climbed through the entrance and braved the cold water that was about knee deep.

It was very dark and more than a bit scary but the torches revealed old, dry stalactites and a colony of resident bats. In the water we saw nothing larger than 15cm fish and cherabin (freshwater prawns), thank goodness. Halfway along we breathed easier as there was light ahead where the roof had caved in. Then it was back into the darkness for the remainder of the tunnel. At the other end we joined people who had preceded us and rested a while by a lovely, tree lined lagoon. Then we did the trip all over again in reverse.



Windjana

We stayed in the campground at a very picturesque Windjana Gorge that night. The Lennard River runs through the gorge for 3.5 kilometres and is flanked by 100 metre high, layered limestone walls.

We walked the seven kilometre track and found heaps of butterflies, birds and a colony of very noisy flying foxes. We stopped counting the freshwater crocodiles when we got to 76 and reckoned there were at least 100. Most were basking in the sun on the sand at the edge of the water. We walked to within about two metres of some and were happy to be totally ignored.



Freshies

Further along the Gibb, in King Leopold Conservation Park, we followed an eight kilometre detour into Lennard Gorge. The track in was slow going and so was the walking path to the gorge, but it was all worth the effort when we got there. As it was early in the dry season we found the most beautiful waterfall cascading into a deep and narrow canyon, so we sat and watched for a while before continuing on. We headed back to the Gibb and later unhitched Milo in the Silent Grove campground.



At Lennard Gorge

An afternoon trip to Bell Gorge was well worth scrambling over the rocky path to get there. We discovered a wide, magnificent waterfall surrounded by cliffs and a craggy

landscape. A photographer's paradise! One gentleman had lugged his very heavy looking camera and tripod all the way from the car park and he was clicking away merrily, as well. We were surprised to find dozens of other people at Bell Gorge. Most were swimming, some were even sunbaking.

Next morning, we awoke in Silent Grove to a cold 8° and the pitter-patter of tiny feet on the roof. A dozen great bowerbirds met us at the van door, waiting for something from us. So we broke up a couple of slices of bread and threw the pieces to them. The older birds wanted the lot. They got cranky, pranced, hunched up and danced around, then showed their purple patch. It was wonderful to watch. The great bowerbirds have a tuft of pretty purple feathers at the back of their neck that you'd never know was there until they are either excited or angry. Then those feathers spread out into a perfect, attention-seeking circle.

We left Silent Grove next day and made our way to Mornington Wilderness Camp, 88 kilometres south of the Gibb River Road. Mornington is a 3,000 square kilometre wildlife sanctuary. The first 30 odd kilometres weren't too bad, then we had corrugations, rocky patches and fairly ordinary road. We had no trouble with the creek crossings, which ranged from dry to knee deep.

We were welcomed at the Wilderness Camp with a flypast of a dozen red-tailed black cockatoos, a flock of galahs and a w-tailed eagle. When we checked in, we were astonished at the price per night for safari tents. Fortunately, we didn't need one. We considered our budget, stayed two nights and tried to make the most of the time we had.

Our first journey in the sanctuary was to Sir John Gorge, a massive canyon in the majestic King Leopold Ranges. Mike swam in the cool water while I sat on the bank, appreciating the tranquil scenery, eyes peeled for crocs.

The next day we drove 29 kilometres to Diamond Gorge for a quick look from the cliff, because you need a canoe to see it properly and they were booked out.



Bell Waterfall



Bell Gorge



Bowerbirds



Bowerbirds



Good Road In



Water Lily



Diamond Gorge



Mornington Scenery



Cadjeput Waterhole



Fitzroy Bluff

Along the track into the gorge we stopped at an interesting little creek with the most gorgeous waterlilies and were rewarded when we spotted a broga that promptly raised its wings, stomped and trumpeted in a very short dancing demonstration. The bird didn't stay around for any applause; it turned its back on us and wandered off into the long grass.

That same day we saw several Australian bustards and called into Cadjeput Waterhole. Lined with paperbarks, it proved popular with the beautiful little rainbow bee eaters. Mike had another refreshing dip in the cool, clear water.

Our 88 kilometre drive back to the Gibb River Road was much easier. During the previous three days the graders had smoothed out much of the road. No wonder grader drivers were very popular in that region. We couldn't understand why they didn't put a bit more effort into the Gibb itself.

With 450 kilometres of the Gibb done, we took the Kalumburu Road north for 60 kilometres and stopped for a break at Drysdale River Station. The dust swirled around us as we crawled slowly into the homestead area to check in. We tethered the 'wagon' in a circle already being formed by other travellers, and really appreciated the relaxing communal log fire later that night. As a bonus, every evening at beer o'clock flocks of tiny, long-tailed finches visited to feed on the grass seed around the vans, indifferent to any human beings present.

Drysdale is famous for its Kimberley Burger, so Mike decided he would have one for lunch. It must have been somewhere between 15 and 20 cms high on the plate, no kidding. He reckoned it was delicious and I must admit it did look great.

It was at Drysdale that we decided not to drive up to the Mitchell Plateau on more rough roads, but to take a scenic flight over the Mitchell Falls instead. It was well worth the money. We enjoyed a fabulous view of the Mitchell Plateau and Falls as well as the falls at Donkin Hill, which are largely unknown.

We flew over a massive stretch of water known as

Prince Frederick Harbour, and Mt Trafalgar with its huge, perpendicular cliffs. From St George Basin we followed Prince Regent River from its mouth to its headwaters. Halfway along the Prince Regent are the King Cascades where an American model was taken by a crocodile some years ago.

The pilot told us his version of the story. She was sitting on a very large boulder by the cascades at the time and was told by megaphone that there was a croc in the water and she should stay very still, help was on the way. Instead, she chose to dive into the water and swim for her life, thinking she could beat the croc to the boat. She had absolutely no idea of the speed those monsters can reach. While members of the crew were retrieving her body, the croc made two terrifying attempts to retrieve its catch before they reached the mother ship.

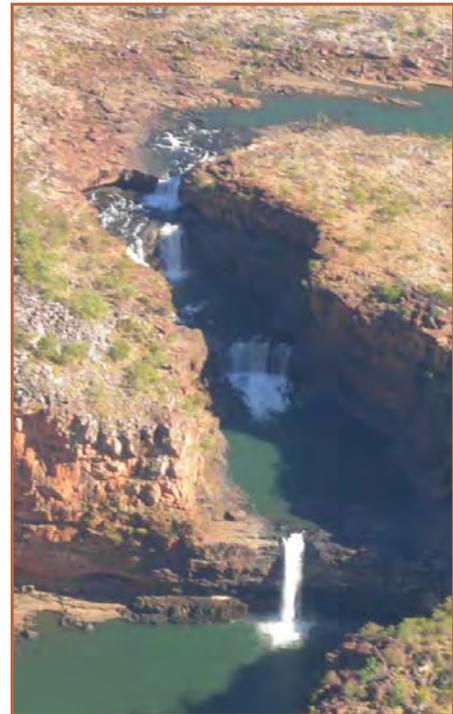
Back at base, Mike said he was keen to put the last 250 kilometres of the Gibb River Road behind us, so off we went at a not so cracking pace because that was simply impossible. The orange sandstone escarpments of the Cockburn Ranges seemed to be watching over us as we entered the infamous Pentecost River crossing. Water came up to Hank's step, but we had no problems at all and came out dry.

When we checked into El Questro Wilderness Camp we were both exhausted. We went to bed not long after dark, which is unknown for us, and got up early next morning to tackle the El Questro Gorge via a sandy 4WD track and deep creek crossings. We truly loved that walk, criss-crossing over the meandering creek lined with fig trees, ferns, bracken and fabulous palms, bordered by vertical red cliffs. It's a narrow, rainforest filled haven that was a real pleasure to explore.

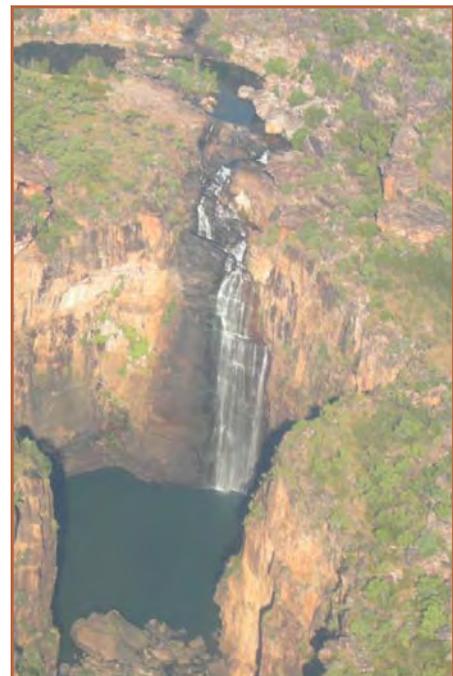
We were gorged out, but we couldn't ignore Emma Gorge. Emma was famous for her beauty and very popular before a cyclone tore through. El Questro Wilderness rangers had worked hard to revitalise Emma and while she was not as lush as El Questro Gorge, she did weave her own magic. The Turquoise Pool was clear and tranquil; 150 metres further on we reached a fabulous waterfall and a deep lagoon. Mike



Kimberley Burger



Mitchell Falls



Donkin Falls



Prince Frederick Harbour



Cockburn Range



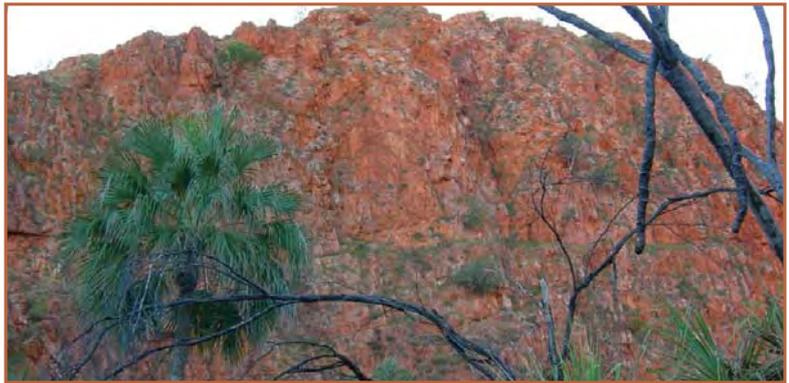
Mt. Trafalgar



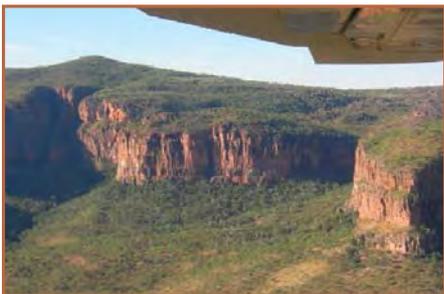
Crossing the Pentecost River



King Cascades



El Questro Gorge



Scene from the Air



Emma Gorge



Sunset at Kununurra

swam under the falls, but I know he didn't find the Phantom's cave because I didn't hear Devil bark once.

Finally, we reached the end of that nightmare road. On a positive note, though, we figured we had developed so much more confidence in our vehicle and our caravan. You wouldn't believe where we had to tow Milo in the last couple of weeks and we all came through unscathed. Apart from the road, we loved the places we'd gone and the sights we'd seen and treasured the experience.



Sunset at Kununurra

When we decided not to drive to Mitchell Plateau, it was mainly because Hank's two front tyres were getting a tad short on tread, having travelled 70,000 kilometres. Then about ten minutes after we reached the bitumen road to Kununurra we had our first ever blow-out and it wasn't either of the two tyres we'd worried about. My hero brought the rig to a stop after several hairy seconds of zigzagging down the road.

We found ourselves back in Kununurra at the same time as the year before and the weather was glorious. We had no intention of moving very far for a couple of weeks. We needed to recharge all the batteries, including our own.

Well rested, we decided to call in to see the team at Spring Creek Station. We left Kununurra loaded to the hilt with mail and stores that we'd collected to save the family a trip. Duncan Road had been graded recently, so we made good time and we revelled in the warm welcome we received. Even the dogs were happy to see us.

It was wishful thinking, though, to believe we could visit for only a couple of days. It seemed providential to Boss Mike that we should arrive when we did. Jane was leaving in a few days with the kids, William and Sally, to compete in the Kununurra, Katherine and Darwin Shows. She'd be away for three weeks and he was looking to us for company – talk about being put on the spot, huh? Yep, back I went to the kitchen and off my Mike went to the yards.

During our first week the German backpacker fell when her horse reared. She'd tried to make him walk through Spinifex, which is sharp and spiky, and the horse rebelled. Then Peewee, one of the ringers, re-injured his back, and another packed up and left because his love life had suddenly turned sour. Muster is the busiest time and there was no way we would leave Mike when he was in such a pickle. We liked him too much.

Mike had also looked for help from two ringers who used to work for him when he managed a big station near Halls Creek. They had so much respect for him



Me and the Dogs



Family at the Show



Smoko



Drafting



Tags and Needles



Skinning and Cutting



Take the Meat Home

they got leave passes from their current employer, brought a young rookie with them and drove more than 300 kilometres to work for a week at Spring Creek.

Boss Mike flew his chopper to each of the three indigenous communities within the vicinity of the station, but could find only one man interested in two weeks' work for pay. He was a nice young bloke.

One morning I got to leave the kitchen and take smoko to the troops at the yard and I stayed to watch a while. It was amazing to see how smoothly and quickly they were getting through the jobs with experienced stockmen on hand. The cattle were drafted, pregnancy tested, branded, tagged, dehorned and needled. My Mike was gate controller in the round yard and came home day after day caked in dust.

We started to run out of beef in the kitchen so the boss identified 'a killer' for the experienced blokes to slaughter. In no time flat, they shot the beast, skinned it, cut the meat, placed it on clean bags in the back of the ute and drove it home to hang on hooks in the cool room. I was sick of the sight of mince by the time I finished grinding and bagging it.

We got to leave when another outback helper couple arrived. They would stay until the rodeo, when things started to slow down on the property. I spent several days training the new cook and left knowing Boss Mike would be OK.

We headed south along Duncan Road towards Halls Creek. The further we went the more the gravel road deteriorated. After a gully full of ultra-fine bulldust had totally enveloped the rig, we bumped our way across bad corrugations into Halls Creek.

The parents of one of the ringers who came to help at Spring Creek made us feel very welcome and kindly allowed us to park Milo in their yard while we went camping for a couple of nights in the Bungle Bungles. We were very grateful as security was a huge problem in the area.

VIII

The Bungle Bungles, Marble Bar, Geikie, Wittenoom and Hamersley Gorges Karijini National Park

The 53 kilometre road from the highway into the campground in Purnululu National Park was unsealed and took us two challenging hours. The first part trekked through Mabel Downs Station, with lots of wet creek crossings, sharp curves and corrugations, balanced out with scenery that was both picturesque and interesting. We reached the park, found our site, and pitched the tent. We endured the company of lots of loudly squawking little corellas. There were no mozzies or many flies and that was probably because the nights were freezing. Talk about balls and brass monkeys!



Cold Nights

The striped, beehive shaped, sandstone domes were truly enchanting. They rose majestically from huge sandy plains that were almost totally covered in clumps of spinifex. Last year, before we had to go home for attention to Mike's hip, we took a flight over the Bungle Bungles and were enthralled. From the ground, the place was just as captivating.



Beehives

On our walk to Cathedral Gorge, we saw double-barred finches, sacred Ibis, little friarbirds, babbler and spinifex pigeons. We trekked through creek beds, tall grass, looming cliffs and saw evidence of the many waterfalls that must cascade down the rock faces during the Wet. The path opened into a huge sandstone amphitheatre that stopped us in our tracks. Mike couldn't help himself, he had to do the echo test. The acoustics were wonderful, of course.



Bower

On we went to a couple of lookouts and walked a section of the dry, eroded bedrock of Piccaninny Creek that winds around some spectacular beehive formations. By lunchtime we had reached Echidna Chasm and were rewarded with a magnificent 200 metre high chasm with multicolour hues lit up by the midday sun. Wow!



Amphitheatre



Echidna Chasm

The Bungle Bungles done, we headed back to Halls Creek and had reason to thank Purnululu Rangers for the rule that said ‘campers must take their rubbish with them.’ We couldn’t find the caravan key and were locked out. It wasn’t in the car, it wasn’t in our pockets and it wasn’t in my bag. He who shall remain nameless had picked it up with a handful of lolly papers and thrown it into the garbage bag. Thank goodness we still had the garbage bag.



Piccaninny Creek

We made it to Fitzroy Crossing and Geikie Gorge later that day. At last, a gorge that didn’t involve scrambling over rocks and kilometres long, hard walks. The \$20 boat tour was worth every cent. We heard how the gorge was carved out of an ancient reef system by the mighty Fitzroy River and saw dozens of freshwater crocs basking in the sun all the way along the gorge. The Fitzroy River floods during the Wet and some years it apparently becomes one of the largest rivers in the world.



Geikie Gorge

Dozens of tiny mud nests clung to the protected underside of the sandstone ledges in the steep cliff face. Tiny 12cm Fairy Martins flew around us, concerned for the safety of their babies. We were told they migrate from the south of Western Australia to nest at Geikie.



Jabiru

We continued on to Broome where we stocked up, collected mail and fixed a water pipe in the caravan. Then we headed south, and met up with Ken and Dawn who had remained at Barn Hill. On our way to free camp at the pretty and popular De Grey River rest area, west of Port Hedland, we noticed the Sturt Desert Peas flowering by the roadside.



Balancing Rock

Our destination next morning was Marble Bar, reputed to be Australia’s hottest town. After a wander through the relics of Comet Gold Mine, we visited the local swimming holes of Marble Bar and Chinaman Pools, then fossicked for some bits of jasper at the deposit site.

Looking at the map, we found a scenic drive that eventually connected with the Great Northern Highway. What the heck, we called it a short cut. 65 kilometres out of Marble Bar we went bush to camp at the abandoned

Spear Hill Tin Mine. Not much remained of the little town, only a few ruins and bits of rusty old mining equipment. It was an interesting stopover, however, as we wandered around the debris and rummaged about; like beachcombing without a beach.

Next morning, when the men had finished playing around with a rusty old mechanical shovel and stirring up a hive of native bees, we bush bashed our way back out to the road and continued on till we reached the highway.

We stopped at Auski Roadhouse in Munjina for lunch and then drove to Wittenoom, an old asbestos mining town. The mine was closed in 1966 and the WA government closed the town in 2006 because of the health risk to residents. Microscopic blue asbestos fibres are said to be present in the abandoned mine tailings and if disturbed and inhaled, the asbestos dust could cause cancer. At the time of our visit there were still eight residents who refused to leave. We met only one. She was the owner of the gem shop, information centre, post office and grocery store. Authorities had cut off the power and all but demolished the town – houses had been knocked down and buried somewhere nearby.

We parked the vans outside the abandoned Doc Holidays Café and had a look at Wittenoom Gorge next morning. It was a beautiful place and such a shame it had to be mined for blue asbestos. We read the warnings about health risks and heeded the advice to stay only a day. We were astonished to see so much asbestos fibre lying on the ground; It was everywhere we looked. We were even more amazed to see parents camping with children not far from the tailings sites. People were not supposed to camp there at all, but with kids? We thought that was very irresponsible.

On the way to Hamersley Gorge we travelled some rough but interesting road that wound through a very narrow Rio Tinto Gorge, where the bulldust was horrific and swallowed our rigs whole. Hamersley Gorge itself was small but pretty. It had no real walks, unless you were a mountain goat. There was a steep track to the pools, however, and the men swam in the cold water with lots of others who must have come



Sturt Desert Pea and Mulla Mulla



Marble Bar Swimming hole



Jasper



Track to Spear Hill



Old Shovel



Gem Shop



Wittenoom Gorge



Pretty Pool



Rio Tinto Dust



Tailings



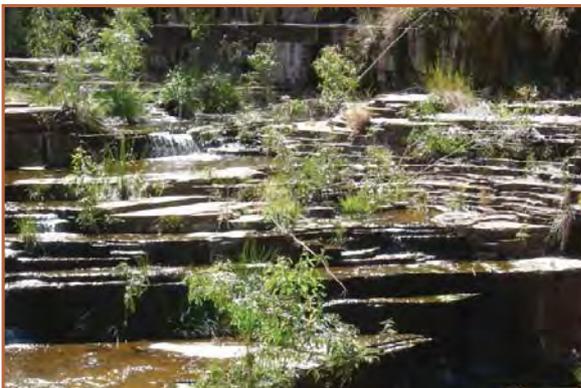
Hamersley Ranges



Forced Rock in the Gorge



Hamersley Gorge



Cascades



Dales Gorge



Blue Asbestos

from Tom Price for a Sunday drive and a dip. The colours of the Pilbara were on display – fiery reds, golden glows and the most beautiful blue skies.

We camped at Dales Campground in Karijini National Park. The next day we descended into Dales Gorge and made our way to Circular Pool where the men had a cool dip. It was a beautiful place with lush green fernery growing from the wet, vertical rock face, and there were many other people there enjoying the cold water.



Circular Pool

As we made our way back along the gorge, through tiny cascades and lovely green scenery, we noticed the veins of blue asbestos in the cliff face and wondered about the safety of this. Perhaps undisturbed it posed no threat.

On we went to Fortescue Falls and lots more people, then further to Fern Pool and again there were people everywhere. There we all braved the cold water, some stayed in longer than others, but at least it cooled us down for the trip back up the rock steps and along the cliff top to the vehicles.



A Tough Ask

In the campground, two very quiet dingos prowled by our vans each day. One was a beautiful specimen, a young male. The other was an older, very thin female that had suckled too many pups. They never stayed around long but we made sure we left nothing lying on the ground that might be of interest to them.



Fortescue Falls

After a day of recuperation we headed for Weano Gorge. We trekked through more narrow passages and across the top of high cliffs to Handrail Pool. We traversed a tricky rock path, thigh deep water and a very narrow passage with slippery rocks. We waded through the fast running water to a waterfall and a pool of freezing water almost totally surrounded by vertical cliffs. We returned without incident and agreed we'd all had an exhilarating morning.



Fern Pool

Gorged out again, we were all glad to move away from the red dirt and the 4 and 5^o mornings. We didn't go far, only to a 24 hour rest stop, tucked against the side of Mt Robinson, 90 odd kilometres south. No fire restrictions there, so we enjoyed a no nonsense barbeque and sat around the campfire warm as toast.



Weano Gorge



Lizard



Handrail

IX Search for Wildflowers



Mulla Mulla pompoms



Camp at Bilyuin

Our next night was in Newman, the home of Mt Whaleback iron ore mine. Our friends took a tour of the huge open cut mine but we'd done it before so we simply relaxed.

Our first two nights out of Newman were spent camping by the Gascoyne River. It was Zebra Finch heaven. There's nothing quite like relaxing by the campfire after dinner, sipping a port.

14 kilometres west of the Great Northern Highway and north of Meekathara is Bilyuin Pool, where we stayed for two nights. Although the wind blew cold, the days were lovely and clear. We saw 23 different species of birds, all nesting pairs, living around the billabong.

Beside Lake Nallan, north of Cue, we found a field of white everlasting daisies. At last! For a while we thought we were going to miss out altogether on the wildflowers. West of Cue was the two kilometre long monolithic Walga Rock. We camped there for a couple of nights, climbed the rock and enjoyed the panoramic views. We found some wonderful wildflowers, plus heaps of prickles that made my thongs feel like platform shoes.



Walga Rock

We had planned to stay at Coalstream Conservation Park, between Mullewa and Mingenew, hoping to see the best display of wildflowers. Unfortunately, the drought had visited that part of the country as well, and we were told the wildflowers would bloom late, if at all. Never mind, the birds were abundant. We found 28 species, nine of which we hadn't seen before.

We travelled via Mingenew to Three Springs where we unhitched the vans and spent the day touring the countryside, taking happy snaps of the few wildflowers we could find. We found the wreath flowers a few kilometres out of Perenjori and they were in full bloom. Wow, they certainly are special.



Wildflowers at the Rock



Native Fringe Lily



Pink everlastings



Wildflowers



X

Heading East, Temora Air Show, Lightning Ridge Bush Bash and home

We continued on from Three Springs alone, as our friends were heading for Perth. We moved south along the Midlands Way in the state's south west. 132 kilometres north of Perth we stopped at New Norcia, founded in 1846 by the Spanish Benedictine monks. New Norcia still operates as a monastery and visitors are welcome to join the monks at daily prayers. The architecture is very reminiscent of Spain.



Shingleback

Later that afternoon, the navigator (me) missed a turnoff and we found ourselves closer to Perth than we'd wanted to be. We knew I'd got something wrong when we crossed the Swan River and began driving through vineyards and pretty countryside. I was in the doghouse, but we coped with an overnight stay in suburban Midland. The next day was a long drive along the Great Eastern Highway towards Kalgoorlie. We pulled up 50 kilometres or so past the small town of Southern Cross, at a camp spot called Karalee Rock.



Dead Fence

Karalee Rock and dam are located near a former railway siding. They're all that remains of the old town of Karalee. It had an aqueduct that was built in 1897; a sluice to channel the water into the aqueduct and dam; and little stone walls that were built around the perimeter of the enormous rock outcrops to trap the run off when it rained. The stone walls resembled a miniature wall of China, about 40cm high and four kilometres long. The dam supplied water for the town and the steam trains.



Bunda Cliffs

One highlight as we travelled across the Nullarbor came at Bunda Cliffs. We pulled into the rest area and walked along the cliff face. In the ocean below we spotted a whale lazing about. That night we lit a fire and cooked dinner, but didn't stay outside long as the wind picked up.

As we were packing up next morning we couldn't believe our eyes when a man drove up, got out of his ute, walked over to the remains of our campfire, picked up our barbie rack and tent pole that had held up our light, and headed back to his vehicle with them.

Mike went out and confronted him. He said, “Yours, mate? Oh, thought someone left ‘em behind.” Yeh, right. He had to walk around Milo to get to the fireplace. Wouldn’t you think he could have checked with us first? Gee, some people are so brazen. He was probably hoping we were still asleep.

The only wildlife we encountered the entire trip across the plain were sleepy Stumpy Tailed or Shingleback Lizards. They were looking for warmth and dotted the bitumen for hundreds of kilometres. They like to live and travel alone, but return home to mate with the same partner every spring. Bet you didn’t know that. We didn’t either till we heard it on the radio while we were busy trying not to squish them on the road.



Mike and Sleepy Shingleback

Working our way east we took the opportunity to cross the Flinders Ranges through Horrocks Pass, named after John Horrocks who descended through the pass in 1846.

We made it to Mildura, Victoria before calling it a day, and crossed the Murray River into New South Wales next morning. Hank ate up the Sturt Highway kilometres until it started to rain near Griffith. The rain continued all the way to Canberra, where we caught up with family and visited Floriade, the annual flower show in Commonwealth Park.



Floriade Daffodils

We pulled up stumps very early and drove back along the Edward Barton Highway to Temora. Temora Aviation Museum hosts flying weekends, when a selection of their aircraft are flown for the entertainment of aircraft enthusiasts. We had a brilliant day and think everyone who has an opportunity should visit Temora on a flying weekend.

History certainly does come alive when the planes take to the sky. First we watched the oldest Tiger Moth still flying in Australia and a lovely silver Ryan STM S2 take off and do a couple of fly pasts. Then we watched a Wirraway, followed by the WWII Hudson lording it over the smaller Boomerang and Kittyhawk. A pair of skilled pilots put the museum’s two Spitfires through their paces, then the world’s only flying Gloster Meteor F8 strutted its stuff. A mock war scenario was played out with two Cessna 01s, a Cessna 02 and an ugly but amazing Dragonfly.

Tom Moon, a former world aerobatic champion, displayed his skills in his beautiful Extra. Mike was overwhelmed but I was nervous as the little Extra defied gravity many times. Finally, we spoke with the pilots and saw the planes up close. The day was topped off when we were allowed to put Milo in the aero club caravan park on site.



Boomerang



Spitfire Aircraft at Temora



Lachlan River Wildflowers



Lachlan River Wildflowers



Cookout in Bourke



Clydesdale

Temora is an agricultural community, but there's no doubt that the aviation museum has brought the town to life. The founder and president of the museum is David Lowy, a very skilled pilot, former Australian aerobatic champion and son of Frank Lowy, founder and chairman of Westfield. David flies in and out of Temora in his executive jet.

We took the road from Temora to Lake Cargelligo, all agricultural and pastoral land and camped beside the Lachlan River north of the weir so we could enjoy a river with lots of water. It was so peaceful we stayed two nights, among carpets of white daisies and yellow everlasting.

From Lake Cargelligo we continued on to Bourke next morning, where we stayed in Kidman Camp, a grassy park north of town. Two gorgeous Clydesdales lived there during the tourist season. While not busy taking people on covered wagon rides, they kept the grass short. Their owner was a bush poet who held camp cookouts each night so we went along, ate yummy food and were entertained with great tales.

While in Bourke we took a minibus tour of the colonial buildings in town, all beautifully restored and maintained, and the wharf area at the northern end of town. Near the wharf we watched a man start a fully restored 1923 Crossley, 2-cylinder, oil fuelled, stationary engine and were very impressed. It was huge, but ran so smoothly and made very little noise. Mike was so keen he went back a day or so later for a second demo.

Because of the low price offered to farmers for mandarins that season, some didn't bother to pick their fruit, so we were given a bag and invited to pick some from the trees for ourselves, which was a real and unexpected pleasure.

The landscape via Brewarrina and Walgett was very dry, although the Barwon River held plenty of water. There were emus galore and the chicks were gorgeous.

The opal mining town of Lightning Ridge surprised us as we were expecting something similar to White

Cliffs – just a general store, pub, school and post office. The Ridge, as it's fondly called, is actually a much larger town with a big bowling club, hotels, motels and supermarkets.

We planned to leave Milo behind and undertake the Lightning Ridge Police Bush Safari with our friends, Jan and Brian. It was a charity fund raising venture, with all monies going to various Lightning Ridge charities.

48 vehicles participated in a journey of over 4500 kilometres in 13 days. Lead and Sweep were always police vehicles. We had our own ambulance, two paramedics and a mechanic. The Lead would strategically place a 'pointing kangaroo' sign to guide the vehicles following. Sweep would collect them.

Day one we travelled from Lightning Ridge to Miles. We camped at the showground and much to Mike's annoyance the ground was dry and hard. Once again, the tent pegs all had a name starting with "f".

Day two we made it to Lake Maraboon or Fairbairn Dam. Because of the school holidays, our camp was a tad squished in the caravan park, but it was only one night so we all coped. The organisers managed to find room to hold yabby races after dinner and collected a few gold coins to add to the charity pot.

Day three was a big 700 kilometre drive to Greenvale. The "f" pegs were out again and it was touch and go whether we would continue on or turn around and go back to Milo. Most people were too tired to do anything after dinner, although some had a beer at the Three Rivers Hotel. Slim Dusty fans will know this pub from his song of the same name. Thankfully, it wasn't the pub with no beer!

Day four we stopped at Ravenshoe on the way to Atherton. Ravenshoe is the highest town in Queensland and its 920 metre elevation was put to good use by a well placed wind farm. Apparently the turbines generate enough electricity to supply more than 3,500 homes. The bakery makes great pies, too. Then, we detoured to Millaa Millaa to see waterfall circuit – a refreshing change from the dry country we'd been seeing on the way north.

Atherton showground was our camp for three nights and, thank goodness, the ground was soft and the tent pegs didn't bend. Next day we took a trip to the pretty Yungaburra



The Crossley



Participants



Thorpies Tent



At Fairbairn Dam



Falls



Tea House



Black Duck

Heritage Village which was nestled in a pocket of open rainforest with beautiful old buildings like the pub and its stained glass windows and Federation architecture. We drove to Lake Barrine, had lunch at the teahouse and took a short cruise on the lake. Welcome swallows and pacific black ducks shared our space on the boat and were as entertaining as our tour guide.

Down the road was the Curtain Fig Tree, Yungaburra's high profile tourist attraction. The strangler fig's original host tree toppled over but the strangler continued to grow and has developed a great curtain of roots.

We went to Kuranda the following day. It was an easy drive from Atherton and is surrounded by World Heritage listed wet tropics rainforest. The orchids were wonderful. The markets were full of arty, crafty stuff and souvenirs, not really our kind of gear. We opted for the Skyrail experience and enjoyed it immensely. The cableway is 7.5 kilometres long.

We left our gondola cabin at Barron Falls Station and strolled along the walkways to the three lookouts. Each showed a different and stunning view of the Barron River, the Gorge and the Barron Falls. Back on the cableway we continued high above the tree canopy towards Cairns and saw staghorns, elkhorns and huge basket ferns clinging to the tall trees.

At Red Peak Station, the highest point on the cableway, we got off again to walk the boardwalk through 160 species of rainforest plants. No, we didn't count them, that's what the pamphlet said. On again and over the top we descended towards the Caravonica Terminal, appreciating the magnificent view the ocean and coastal plain. On our return journey we simply sat back, relaxed and watched the rainforest canopy pass by below us.

On day seven the convoy headed for Mt Surprise. The last section of dirt from Almaden, however, left a lot to be desired. We arrived at the Road Kill Café, manned by members of the organising committee, who offered up a sausage sizzle lunch.

Road-weary, we reached a nine acre landscaped oasis at Bedrock Caravan Park in Mt Surprise and stayed two nights. Scheduled for the first of those two nights was a Hawaiian

theme evening, with males dressing as females and vice versa. We had a hilarious night with many of our travellers joining in.

The fossickers amongst us spent the next day digging for gems, and a couple of our friends found some worthy topaz. The second evening was a chat around the campfire, however it started a bit late for us and our beds were more inviting.

From Mt Surprise on day nine we made our way south to Hughenden. We checked out Porcupine Gorge, which is often referred to as 'Little Grand Canyon'. After setting up camp in the showground at Hughenden, we went into town and had a look at the well known Muttaborrasaurus skeleton and other fossils from the area, all housed in the Discovery Centre.

Day ten we made our way to Lake Dunn, via Muttaborra and Aramac. Some of us stopped along this road to look for fossils and agate in the wide graded verges, without success. On arriving at Lake Dunn, we paid our dues to the Road Kill Café, pitched the tent and put the opera house pots in the water for red claw. Then we sat at the edge of the lake with the cool water lapping at our ankles. We caught only a couple of red claw and gave them their freedom.

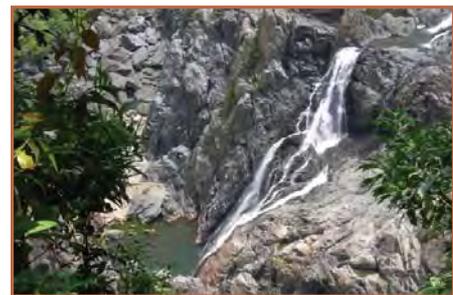
Next day on the way to Tambo we stopped at Blackall, checked out the Jacky Howe memorial and took a tour of the Wool Scour, which had been recently restored. The artesian bore on site had been operating since 1902 and water still flowed well at 50° plus. It was hot, hot, hot!

On we went to Tambo and a camp at the racetrack. That night was a 'T' themed Fancy Dress function. Mike went as Trauma, leaning on a tree branch crutch, wound up in bandages and a sling from the first aid kit. I borrowed one of Mike's white T-shirts, stuck 'qwerty' letters on it, grabbed a cardboard cylinder from an almost finished roll of alfoil, glued a piece of paper over it, pinned the roll to my cap and went as a Typewriter. Nobody was more surprised than me when I won.

On day twelve we camped at the Surat racecourse, which was fine until the flies found us. There were swarms of them and everyone scrambled for the fly veils. It was talent quest night and Mike and I both read poems, one hilarious and one a patriotic tear jerker. Jan



Curtain Fig



Barron Falls



Road Kill Café Sign



Hawaiian Night



Typewriter and Trauma

and Brian did a great job of the oldies version of 'Are you Lonesome Tonight'.

Day thirteen took us from Surat to Lightning Ridge. We had to pick up Milo, so we missed the Road Kill Café experience at the Hebel Hotel along the way. Milo was in storage at the police barracks and Simon, a very helpful young policeman babysat her in his back yard while we were away. We had no worries about security there.

We said goodbye to Jan and Brian, left Lightning Ridge and made our way east to Inverell. As we approached Moree there was a distinct change in the scenery, more grass, a green tinge, more healthy looking stock and crops. No doubt there had been some rain. That night we stayed in Inverell and then headed north next morning to Texas via Fishermen's Way. We decided we'd be back to that part of the world as we'd found lots of fishing spots and very welcoming little villages.

We continued north to Inglewood and east on the Cunningham Highway, through Warwick. We reached Brisbane at about 3.30pm and it took us an hour to cross the city to a van park in the northern suburb of Aspley. That was a very stressful hour in heavy traffic.

During the long hours of travel back to Brisbane Mike and I had some in-depth discussions about our future plans. Perhaps I would be OK. I was feeling good and

had started thinking that a place to call home would be nice. We broke open the piggy bank and spent our money on a house that I fell in love with at the southern end of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, near the Glasshouse Mountains.



Porcupine Gorge



Hebel Pub



Einaleigh Gorge

CHAPTER 4

HEADING FOR THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



|

Cameron Corner, Strzelecki and Birdsville Tracks, Diamantina National Park

Donnybrook, a tiny village on the banks of Pumicestone Passage, was about ten minutes drive from our beautiful new home at Beerburrum. Pumicestone Passage separates Bribie Island from the mainland. For three weeks we camped at Donnybrook with our friends, Ken and Dawn. We crabbed and threw cast nets for prawns. Our children and grandchildren came for sleepovers, and that trip to Donnybrook would become an annual event for both families. I know it seems silly to be camping ten minutes from home but it was easier as the prawns were around at low tide and the crab pots were checked at high tide. That's way too much trouble to be towing the tinny back and forth twice a day every day. We went home every few days to check the mail, mow the lawn, water the garden, etc.

After Donnybrook we only spent a couple of weeks at home before we set off again. With house sitters in place, we drove to Chinchilla, where we met up with Ken and Dawn. The four of us continued on to Muckadilla (don't you love that name?), where we camped free of charge in the community park, complete with showers and toilets. The luxury of



Lake

a free hot shower was an unexpected pleasure after a long day on the road.

Continuing west along the Warrego Highway, we camped on the banks of Lake Houdraman, not far from Quilpie. This lake is a tranquil expanse of water surrounded by big shady gum trees and growing clumps of gorgeous white water lilies. We spent the late afternoon enjoying beer o'clock by the lake, binoculars in hand, watching the birds.



Waterlilies

We were heading for Noccundra Water Hole by the Wilson River, where we joined more wandering friends. The fishermen were unable to catch a decent sized fish and the yabby pots snared only one miserable, but very large yabby, so it was sausages on the barbie for tea that night.



Yabby

A couple of days later, the 'gang of four' continued along the Cooper Development Road to Innamincka. We passed some big oil and gas operations along the way and saw loads of tankers and machinery. When we passed the last gas field, we hit the dirt again. We were amazed at how green the countryside was compared our last time trip through Innamincka, when it was dry and barren.



Innamincka

We stayed overnight on the Town Common beside a fast flowing Cooper Creek. Then we ventured onto the Bore Track through the Strzelecki Desert. For 160 kilometres we had it all. Wash outs, corrugations, dusty clay pans, deep sand and gibber plains, along with slippery red dunes, bulldust holes and, surprisingly, some areas of green grass. It was a challenging adventure that we all enjoyed very much. Best of all we didn't see another vehicle all day and the track was pristine, with no glass, plastic or aluminium to be seen.



Dig Tree

By early afternoon we had reached Cameron Corner, where the borders of Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia meet. Mike climbed the concrete stump and sat with his bum on three states. There we also checked out part of the longest fence in the world, initially built in the late 1800s to stop the spread of rabbits. Well, that didn't work and the fence was left

to deteriorate. Then, years later, when dingoes were moving from cattle country into New South Wales sheep farming land and helping themselves to lamb and mutton, the fence was restored. The 5,600 kilometre rabbit-proof fence was repaired and raised to two metres, effectively keeping the dogs at bay. I wouldn't like to be responsible for keeping that fence in good condition; what a lonely old job that would be.

With nobody around for miles, another lonely job would be manning the store/pub/fuel stop at the Corner, in Queensland, so we thought it would have been mean to leave without saying g'day and having a coldie. Apparently, it's not such a lonely job as rarely a day goes by, during reasonable weather, without a vehicle or two turning up, saying g'day and having a coldie.

The road between Cameron Corner and the Strzelecki Track was well established and easy. Up and over hundreds of big dunes we went, heading west across the clay pan until we found a campsite in the middle of nowhere, between Bollards Lagoon and Merty Merty Station.

We found that the Strzelecki Track itself was also well established; it was corrugated but better than we expected. Somewhere along the Track was a place called Montecollini Bore, where we stopped for a bite to eat. The bore was spewing hot water, but that didn't seem to worry the birds. We got our little bird book out and identified a Black-winged Stilt; a small bird with a long skinny beak and long skinny red legs. So it was naturally red, not red raw because it stood too long in the hot water.

Of course, that reminded me of my own red raw experience, didn't it? My body had barely recovered from chemo before radiation therapy began. It continued five days a week for six weeks. A week or so before that, I was required to attend the hospital for 'measuring up' so the big machine could zero in on the site of the cancer. I came out with five tattoos – tiny little pin pricks strategically placed. While the treatments were less traumatic than chemo and not



Face Tree



Wild Budgie



Along the Bore Track



Along the Bore Track



Along the Bore Track



Three States Meet



Mike



Pub/Store



Campsite



Kruse Truck

likely to make me glow in the dark, they did raise the temperature of my poor boob, and with each zap the temperature increased.

For six weeks we really had no life outside the radiotherapy appointments. There was a non-negotiable policy in place – we know because we queried it. There were no appointment times made in advance; each day, we were given a time for the next day's session. For six weeks it was impossible to plan anything in advance other than to make sure we had a good supply of soothing ointment. Towards the end, my breast was so sensitive I had stopped wearing a bra. The therapy finished and one very pink, burnt but not blistering boob, breathed a big sigh of relief. Now back to the story.

We refueled at Lyndhurst, where the Strzelecki Track started or finished, depending on which way you're travelling and then we drove towards Marree. Ken was leading that day and had just driven over the crest of a hill, when an old man emu raced at the vehicle deciding to head butt the front mudguard. He did a couple of somersaults, got up and raced off, leaving quite a ding in the vehicle and a cranky Ken wondering what he'd done to deserve that.

Marree is situated at one end of both the Birdsville and Oodnadatta Tracks and is home to one of the very old trucks driven by the legendary Birdsville Track mailman, Tom Kruse. We stopped there for a look and so the men could return to their youth and play in what was left of the old mail truck.

We turned north along the Birdsville Track and noticed a green tinge on the gibber and sand plains and dams that were full of water. The cattle we saw were all in great shape. Then, between Marree and Mungeranni, the UHF radios in both vehicles started to malfunction and every message was repeated back and forth at least once, like echoes. We put it down to a strange atmospheric phenomenon.

Mungerannie Hotel was 320 kilometres south of Birdsville, surrounded by the Sturt Stony, Tirari,

Simpson and Strzelecki Deserts. It was a fair dinkum oasis. The hotel nestled beside a wetland lagoon that was fed by an artesian bore. We set up camp and enjoyed a hot shower in soft, clean bore water.

About 100 kilometres north of Mungeranni we went bush for eight kilometres to see how much water covered the Warburton Creek Crossing. We agreed it would be quite a while before traffic could take that route into the Simpson Desert. We had crossed the Warburton at that same spot a few years before on our tagalong trip across the middle. Back then it was as dry as a bone, not a blade of grass to be seen for miles.

The Sturt Stony Desert was a challenge and took its toll on the vehicles. One of Milo's tyres bit the dust and Hank cracked an exhaust pipe and mounting. Ken and Dawn found their Cruiser's back window had been shattered and the van's brakes weren't working. The last 100 kilometres of the Birdsville Track, however, were like a highway and a very pleasant reprieve.

Birdsville itself had lots of new buildings, like the information centre, sports centre, town hall and an amazing geothermal power station. We had a drink in the famous pub, but didn't stay long as it was full to overflowing with Anzac Day revellers and two-up players. In any case, we had to concentrate on repairs and maintenance, so Hank spent some time with a local mechanic.

Our last job before we left Birdsville was to put a protective cover over Hank's rear window so it didn't suffer the same fate as Ken and Dawn's. We'd polished off one of the casks of red wine from Griffith and found the cardboard outer was a perfect fit, so we stuck it down with duct tape and off we went.

With his exhaust system back in good shape, Hank conquered Big Red. Big Red rises to 36.5 metres above sea level and is said to be the highest of more than 1100 sand dunes in the Simpson Desert. Wow! That's a lot of sand dunes. Mike did not find it an easy feat, though, as the vehicle was so loaded up and the tinny was still on top; he had to let the tyres down to 16lbs pressure before they made it up and over.



Start of Birdsville Track



Mungerannie Pub



Campsite



Another Kruse Mail Truck



Warburton Creek



Green Scene



Birdsville Pub



Big Red



Ibis



Dusty track

South of Bedouri we stopped at Eyre Creek, where thousands of pelicans come to breed each year. It was hard to believe we were in the outback and on the edge of the Simpson Desert. Behind the township of Bedouri is a lagoon. As we approached the levee, thousands of ibis took flight. When they got over their fright and returned to the lagoon we watched them for a while, then we backtracked to a dry Pidgeon Creek where we called it a day. We were on our way to Diamantina National Park.

Turning north from Monkira Station homestead next morning, we passed through Davenport Downs Station, comprising an amazing 1.5 million hectares. We entered the National Park and stayed two nights at Hunters Gorge campground. We caught yellowbelly in the Diamantina River but didn't expect them to be very palatable because the water was so murky. Turned out they were delicious.

We made our way to Boulia, known as the capital of the Channel Country, where we fuelled up and carried on towards Mount Isa. We camped at Peak Creek Rest Area and woke to find a red mark on Mike's hip scar. At first we hoped he'd been bitten by a mozzie in the pit toilets at the rest stop, but our hearts were heavy. We spent much of our first two days in Mount Isa in the waiting room at the hospital. As we sweated on the results of blood tests, the red mark developed into a blister.

Well, the doctor in Emergency at the hospital decided there was nothing to be done with the big blister on Mike's hip scar, it would heal itself. She refused to lance it and send a specimen off for testing as she said there was no evidence of infection. You have to believe them, right? They're the ones who know. Mike was happy because he wanted to make the most of this trip. Unfortunately, for me it was ringing alarm bells. The mark looked too much like the last time and I worried. Nevertheless, we carried on. On Mothers' Day we went to Lake Moondarra for a barbie lunch.

A couple of years earlier, Mike and I'd gone on a four kilometre walk for breast cancer research, called the Mothers' Day Fun Run. One of Australia's greatest track

and field athletes, Raelene Boyle, was there to lend her support. Between 1968 and 1982 Raelene won seven gold Commonwealth Games medals and three silver Olympic medals. She finished her running career with a gold medal in the 400 metre event at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982, and Mike was there to see it.

Thousands of people participated in the Fun Run. Some ran, more walked; they were all there for the cause. Raelene was walking with a group not far in front of Mike and me. She must have noticed my scarf and my lack of hair. After a little while, she dropped back to walk with us. Mike tried to engage her in a conversation about the Commonwealth Games in '82, but she wouldn't have a bar of it. My poor darling felt a bit rebuffed, but Raelene was focused on me. We chatted about my treatments and her experiences with the same dreaded disease. I remember she crossed her fingers and said, "I'm now eight years free of cancer." Before she moved on, she kissed my cheek for good luck. It was wonderful to think she really did care. We love her; she's a great and genuine Aussie.



Diamantina River



Cracked Riverbank



Yellowbelly



Barbie Lunch



Fun Run

|| Lawn Hill National Park The Savannah Way, Borroloola and King Ash Bay then home



Gregory Crossing



Cascades



In the Water



Canoes

170 kilometres out of Mount Isa we found the gravel road to Lawn Hill National Park. We crossed the O'Shanassy and Gregory Rivers, both full of clear shallow water. The Gregory River is a permanent, spring fed watercourse and very pleasing to the eye.

Riversleigh, the Australian Fossil Mammal Site, is a World Heritage Area and part of Lawn Hill National Park. It is said to provide an extensive insight into the region as it was 25 million years ago. We visited the only section open to the public and decided we were glad we hadn't chosen a career in paleontology. How anyone could identify a miniscule piece of bone from a specific mammal was way beyond us.

Moving right along, we continued our journey and arrived at Lawn Hill, renamed some years ago to Boodjamulla. We weren't allowed to camp in the National Park because vehicles were restricted to four metres and under in length. So we camped at Adel's Grove, a privately owned establishment. All caravans, bigger campervans and motor homes had to stay there and travel the nine kilometres back to the park each day.

Lawn Hill National Park is a beautiful place, lying on ancient sandstone. We walked the trail to the cascades and lolled around in the crystal clear water for ages. In the water with us were two young zoologists from Melbourne Zoo who were doing research on reptiles. They showed us a cute little turtle that had only been discovered a few years earlier. It was found in only two places in Australia, one of them being Lawn Hill.

One day we hired canoes and took a three hour trip up the gorge. The men didn't want any help paddling so Dawn and I put our paddles away. We relaxed and

enjoyed the ride. Our heroes had to swim under the waterfalls on the way back to cool off. The water was much too cold for the women. We all agreed that the upper gorge was quite spectacular with its big palms and tropical vegetation, and we were glad we'd spent the time exploring it.

Bird watching is another rewarding pastime at Lawn Hill. We spotted the rare and beautiful Purple-crowned Fairywren amongst the pandanus lining the gorge. We frequently saw the White-browed Robin that captured our hearts with its beauty and its distinctive high pitched song. We also often saw Crimson Finches. Mike and I felt that these tiny birds were perfection in miniature. The wild fig trees were loaded with ripening fruit and were a favourite of the Great Bowerbirds, the ones with the hidden purple patch on their heads.

We also met the Gilbert's Dragon, which is hardly a dragon. He's a little fellow with a gecko-like head and a very long tail, who carries on with a lot of paw waving. He's commonly called the Ta Ta Lizard and it was easy to see why. We got lots of ta ta waves as he sat there watching us.

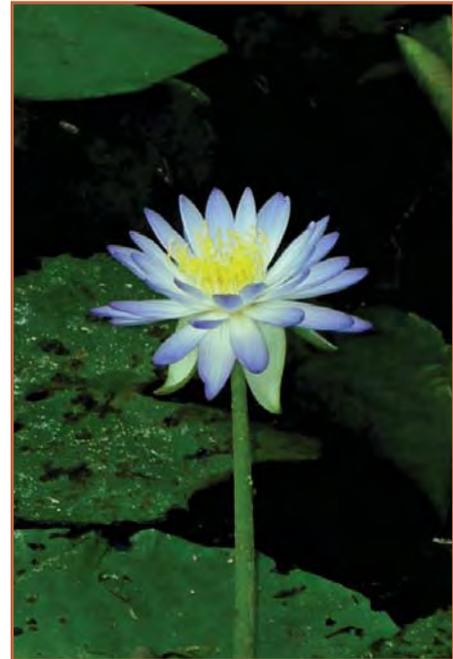
Then we moved on to Gregory Downs and camped by the river for the weekend, a few kilometres south of the tiny village. Unfortunately, there were no fish biting and no yabbies to be caught. We knew full well that this was the last swimming hole where we could be confident there were no snappy toms (crocodiles) around.

As night fell, we heard the sound of eight or more distinctive voices. We named them the Gregory River Mopoke Choir. Unfortunately, they only knew one song, and after a while it became a tad monotonous. We were very glad when their hunger pangs finally took over and they flew off to find something to eat.

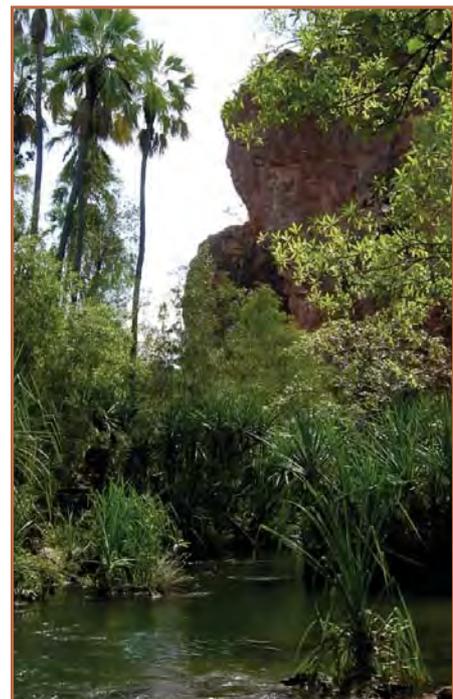
We had a look at Burketown, 25 kilometres or so from the Gulf of Carpentaria, where you could shop for groceries in the post office. We had lunch at the 130 year old pub and asked the locals if the barra were biting. Apparently not.



Lizard



Lawn Hill



Lawn Hill



Lawn Hill

After lunch we headed for Borroloola, across the Northern Territory border. We saw half a dozen Sarus Cranes feeding in a pond beside the road. They were very similar to the brolgas, but had a lot more bare red skin on their face and throat.

There were masses of flowering Sturt Desert Rose bushes along the 95 kilometres between Burketown and Doomadgee. The flower looks like a small single hibiscus and can be white or several shades of pink, with a dark centre.



Gregory River

We travelled another 100 kilometres west along the unsealed and bumpy Savannah Way, past Hells Gate Roadhouse (which was closed), and stopped for the night beside a pretty little unnamed creek. We agreed it deserved a name, so we called it Dip Creek, in honour of the many dips we had encountered on the road before we got there.



Flycatcher

All afternoon, an army jeep was the only vehicle we passed in either direction, so it was no wonder the roadhouses were closing down. Then we crossed the border. Between Dip Creek and Borroloola we traversed half a dozen water crossings without any problems. They weren't deep and we didn't see any crocs.

We headed through Borroloola to King Ash Bay, a popular base for fishing the Gulf. The first night we set up camp, a pack of dingoes howled themselves silly during the night. Thank heavens they were simply passing through. Although we heard them for several nights after that, they moved further and further away.



Burketown Dust

We weren't alone at Batten Point, a bush camp seven kilometres from King Ash Bay. There were about a dozen other campervans, tents and motor homes set up along the creek bank. It took us a few days to find our way around as it was such a huge water system with many creeks in which to get lost, but never fear, the boys had their toys – the trusty GPS.



Old Pub

Those in the know told us if we wanted to catch fish we'd have to travel at least 25 kilometres towards the mouth of the Macarthur River. So Mike and Ken travelled that distance and caught threadfin salmon, blue salmon,

snapper, grunter and cod. No barra, though. The fish were good, but the crabs were better. The northern crabs have an even better texture and flavour than our homegrown ones. Is your mouth watering yet?

Remember the red mark on Mike's hip? Yep, the blister grew and began to seep, although it wasn't sore or painful. We visited an excellent doctor at Borroloola Medical Clinic who wasted no time in taking a swab for testing. The results of the test came back – another staph infection. After some consultation between medicos, Mike's orthopaedic surgeon in Brisbane requested that he return as soon as possible. Hence, we packed up and began the long trip back. With another operation pending and more months of treatment, my man was not a happy chappy. I didn't say "I told you so." It wouldn't have helped one bit.

We worked our way south through the tiny village of Cape Crawford to the Brunette Downs Rest Area and stopped for the night. Once we reached the T-intersection with the Barkly Highway and turned east, we'd feel we were on our way to where we needed to be.

We woke dejected but coping and reached Mount Isa after fighting head winds for hours along the Barkly. We stayed two nights because Mike wanted time to wash the vehicles in full knowledge that the remainder of the trip was on bitumen and, because of the drought back east, water would be at a premium when we reached Brisbane.

We spent long days on the road in order to keep Mike's appointment with the surgeon. We got to Brisbane nearly 3000 kilometres later and Hank and Milo hadn't missed a beat.

Because we didn't want to ask our house sitters to leave early, we booked into a caravan park close to the hospital. Doctors, blood tests and x-rays filled our days during the following couple of weeks, after which there was to be another hip operation. This time it was a full hip replacement, albeit a temporary one, to be replaced sometime down the track when the infection was long gone.



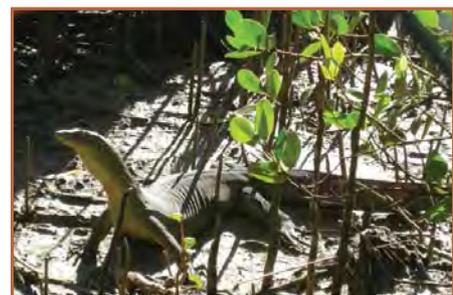
Silhouette at Dip Creek



Qld/NT Border



De Boys Risking Crocs



Water Monitor



Sunset

Surgery was scheduled and one piece of metal came out and another went in. My man was the hero of the physiotherapists – a patient who did his exercises. Apparently that was something new!

Meanwhile, I stayed with my children, alternating between my son and daughter, spoiling my grandchildren and trying not to be a burden. Thank goodness both the kids lived on the north side of the city, close to the hospital. In the meantime, I had a discussion with our house sitters and they were very good about moving out early. We agreed that when Mike was released from hospital he would come home. During the months that followed, we took one day at a time.

In the middle of all that I fronted up to a mammogram and ultrasound apprehensive and with fingers crossed. Good news: all was good for another year.



The Physio's Hero



Sunset

CHAPTER 5

OUR TRIP TO CAPE YORK PENINSULA



Deepwater and Eungella National Parks,
St Helens and Taylors Beaches,
Broadwater State Forest Park,
Henrietta Creek, Lake Tinaroo, Cooktown,
Lakefield National Park, Old Telegraph Track
The tip of Cape York Peninsula



Mike and Cast Net

It was not long after Valentine's Day when we locked up the house, hitched up Milo and yet again Hank took us all to Donnybrook for the prawn season. For four weeks, we chased prawns and crabs in the tinnies. Kids and grandkids came for sleepovers and trips out in Milo Too. No one enjoyed it more than Grandma.

Some time later, with our house sitters once again in place, we set out for a four month trip to Cape York. The

first stop for Milo was Bundaberg to catch up with some friends and former colleagues from Bundy Sugar. We noticed that a number of cane farmers around Bundaberg had jumped ship. Fields of sugar cane had been replaced with macadamia plantations.

When I was a kid my maternal grandparents owned and lived on a property in northern NSW with hundreds of bush nut trees. We loved them and would collect corn bags full whenever we visited. Yep, we took them for granted. Well, Grandad grew old and wanted to sell and he offered Dad first option. It was heartbreaking for all of us but Dad simply didn't have the money. He was such a stickler for paying cash and would never buy anything on credit, so the property slipped out of our grasp. I think of that every time I have to pay top price for macadamia nuts.

We drove 86 kilometres up the road for a two-day stay at Baffle Creek. It was a nice spot but, because the fish weren't biting we went for a drive into Deepwater National Park.



Surf in Deepwater NP

It was so cool under the trees and only a few steps to a long, secluded surf beach.

We headed back to Baffle Creek and enjoyed a cool ale before lighting the campfire. The weather was perfect and we were relaxing at dusk when four little kookaburras came looking for a feed. They sat close by and didn't laugh at us once.

We planned to reach Yeppoon next day via Tannum Sands, Boyne Island, Gladstone and Rockhampton. A roundabout way, I know, but we were keen to have a look at the coastal townships. After a full day of exploring we made it to Yeppoon, where we stayed at a beachside caravan park. The rolling waves lulled us to sleep that night.



View from Camp

A resident flock of red-tailed black cockatoos woke us early next morning. After a refreshing walk along the very wide beach, we hit the road to the small and very old town of St Lawrence, 170 odd kilometres away and a reunion with Ken and Dawn. It took us till lunchtime to reach our destination.

The gang of four was back together and keen to hit the road. That afternoon and evening we planned our trip north, enjoyed beer o'clock, ate dinner then threw away the cork from a bottle of port and mellowed. Life was good.



Walk in Rainforest

Our next stop was the small township of Carmila, located off the Bruce Highway at the foot of Connors Range, only 70 kilometres north of St Lawrence. We camped at the beach four kilometres east of town. That first day the weather was great, but then it became

unpleasant thanks to a high off Tasmania that sent sand and dust swirling around the vans. The forecasters had warned that that sort of climate threatened to hang around for days, so we pointed the wagons north and headed off.

North of Sarina we took an inland route to Eungella (pronounced ‘young galah’) National Park. We passed by Marian Mill, the largest sugar mill in the Pioneer Valley. Because milling hadn’t yet started for the year the sugar cane was growing tall all the way from Sarina to Netherdale, at the bottom of the range. A good season was in store for the cane farmers.

It was a tough call, but Hank pulled us ever so slowly up the 4.3 kilometres of steep and sharply winding road to the top of the range and the beautiful village of Eungella. Our camp overlooked the Pioneer Valley and the view was truly magnificent.

We enjoyed several rainforest walks, a picnic by the lake and sighted two new birds – the Wompoo Fruit Dove and the Eungella Honeyeater. At dusk one day we drove down the road to Broken River where we spent quite some time catching glimpses of a gorgeous little platypus playing near the river bank.

Then we came back down the range to walk the Finch Hatton Gorge track to a cascading waterfall that was flowing beautifully after all the recent rain.

After lunch we left the Pioneer Valley and travelled on to Seaforth. We found a north facing beach, protected from the south-easterly winds. Each day at beer o’clock we were visited by several possums and Bush Stone Curlews, obviously used to receiving bits of food from the campers. The curlews were large strange looking birds with long green legs and knobby knees. They’re very friendly at Seaforth.

A little further north was St Helens Beach, where we intended to stay for a week, fishing and crabbing, reading and watching birds. The local council kept it well mowed and provided tank water, bins, barbies, wood, picnic tables, toilets and a cold water shower, all



Finch Hatton Gorge



Lizard



Seaforth Beach



Bush Stone Curlew



At St Helens



Barramundi



Coconut Cracking

for free. In the morning and afternoon millions of sand flies invaded our space but we refused to let them spoil our time at that very peaceful campground.

A family of Red Backed Wrens lived there, as did lots of other birds. Half a dozen very tame Brush Turkeys wandered around our camp each day, and one became way too interested in my red thongs. For the first couple of mornings it came up to have a close look, then on the third morning it walked right up and pecked my toe. The morning after that I watched it make another beeline for my foot – I was ready – geez! For the rest of that week I wore brown thongs and it didn't come near me again. I often wonder what it was about the colour red that attracted that turkey.

Mike and Ken caught prawns, mud crabs, cod, fingermark, flathead and whiting. We all agreed we'd had a great week but none of us was sorry to leave the sand flies behind. We moved on to Ayr, where we gave the cars, clothes and our bodies a really good wash.

Then we headed off to Taylor's Beach, 24 kilometres east of Ingham, where Victoria Creek meets the ocean. Mike and I had enjoyed some good times there before. It didn't take long for the men to put one trailer together, prepare one tinny for action, set up the crab pots and drop them in the creek – in our strategic spots, of course!

They then got out their cast nets and went off to find the prawns. That was the procedure for the rest of the week and the time flew by. We ate prawns and crab, crab and prawns until one day our hunters arrived home with the first barra of our trip. They decided to try fishing the snags with lures and Mike tempted a 60 cm beauty out of its hiding place. That barra provided a delicious meal for four.

The gatherers were a little slack but not altogether useless. We went for a walk and brought back two very milky coconuts. The flesh tasted cool and sweet, and we saved most of the milk for future curries.

I still can't believe I could have had such a very senior moment one morning that week. Mike wanted his hair

cut and I forgot to put the attachment on the cutters. I ploughed a line right across the side of his head before I realised what I'd done. My husband, the skinhead. He was OK with it, no tantrums, phew!

We did a day trip north along the coast to Lucinda and Dungeness to see how that area had developed since our last visit ten years before. It hadn't changed a bit. We met a young couple at the boat ramp who were trying to make a living selling live coral trout to Hong Kong. The price they were getting per kilo wasn't covering their costs. They had to get something like \$35 a kilo to break even. In good times they got \$50 a kilo. Imagine what the Hong Kong public were paying for their meal of Australian coral trout! They had to expand into mud crabbing to supplement their income. The price of fuel was taking its toll on their business, just as it was affecting the rest of us.

We left Taylor's Beach and drove inland to Broadwater State Forest Park, north-west of Ingham. It was truly a little piece of heaven on earth. We decided to stay two nights and made the most of the wonderful rainforest walks. The Ulysses Butterfly lived there – the large one with brilliant blue wings, edged in black. On one of our walks in the forest we stumbled upon some ripe passionfruit, some eaten by wildlife, some untouched. We did enjoy those passionfruit and the price was certainly right.

At our next stop, Trebonne, we unhitched the vans and left them by the roadside while we went for a look at Wallaman Falls in the Girringun National Park. Here, Stony Creek tumbles off the Seaview Range and drops 268 metres into the pool below. From the lookout we watched and ooh-aahed at the rainbow that formed as the sun shone through the cascading water. Wallaman Falls is Australia's largest sheer drop waterfall.

We re-hitched the vans and moved on to Murray Falls, about 45 kilometres north of Cardwell. Although only a 30 metre drop it was stunning, and popular with the locals during the warmer months of the year. They could relax in the shallow pools as the water washed around them and over the huge smooth rocks on its way to the ocean.



At Dungeness



Camp



Largest Oz Monitor Lizard



The Falls



Murray Falls



Rapids



Fungi

After driving through many hectares of thriving banana plantations, we arrived at Tully Gorge campground, 40 or so kilometres inland from Tully. Although the wildlife was scarce, the rapids attracted wild water rafting enthusiasts from all over the world, mostly young backpackers. Buses arrived to collect them while we were there. They were dropped off further up the river and finished their wild water adventure at the campground.

We moved back east to Hull Heads. There was a caravan park and toilet, but no other services, not even a tiny shop, so the \$3.30 per person per night fee was reasonable. Unfortunately, our timing was a tad off as far as tides go. No movement in the tides meant no fish.

Mothers' Day arrived. I wondered how the Fun Run was going, and if Raelene was participating again. My brekkie was most enjoyable, lovingly cooked by my man at the Hull Heads campground. We continued north that day and took a loop road through Mission Beach, which was busier than we would have liked. We stopped for a cuppa a little further north at Bingle Bay, which we much preferred. It was a lovely place, with a nice beach, coconut palms, and no chance of overcrowding.

We continued on to Kurrimine Beach where we planned to stay the night. As it was Sunday, the local markets were on. We bought some late season mangoes for 20c each – no kidding, they were delicious. After lunch, we went for a lovely walk along the beach, saw some gorgeous little Red Capped Plovers playing at the edge of the water and tried to count the many boats out fishing. We returned via a track through the forest, and once again stumbled across lots of ripe, wild yellow passionfruit. We stocked up, filling our pockets and the bottom of our shirts. Perhaps those awful brush turkeys and bats, responsible for spreading the seeds, are good for something after all! While scavenging in the forest for more passionfruit, Mike came across a wild chilli bush and collected several tiny red chillies. We suspected they would be hot, hot, hot. Mike couldn't resist them as he loves hot chilli.

We headed west to Atherton, stopping at the Henrietta Creek campground in the Wooroonooran National Park, where we found a huge mandarin tree. All the lower branches were bare of fruit, courtesy of the campers who came before us, but ripe fruit hung all over the tree higher up. Mike drove in and strategically placed Milo under the tree. I climbed up the ladder onto the roof of the van and plucked dozens of sweet mandarins for our future consumption. Yum. We were doing well in the food gathering department.

The men wandered down a track later and came back with some ripe bush bananas. They were about a third as long and thick as Cavendish bananas, but would be hard to eat. Although they peel, look and taste the same, the flesh is full of seeds. The seeds are black, the size of short grain rice and granite hard.

After lunch we thought we needed some real exercise, so we headed off for a five kilometre return trek into the forest. We saw a couple of waterfalls, and fungi growing on fallen timber. It was a wonderful walk, except for the leeches that targeted us. Later, we spent quite some time removing those horrible little blood suckers.

Then we made it to Atherton, the hub of the Tablelands. On my birthday we visited the local wetlands, called Hasties Swamp, and enjoyed the antics of the water birds. A quiet day, but that evening we celebrated at a Chinese restaurant, pigged out on delicious food and finished with a deep fried ice cream. That wasn't the end – we went back to the vans and had a fizzy nightcap, or two – which reminded me of a previous birthday and another fizzy drink.

When Mike and I had gone out for my birthday dinner during that awful cancer treatment regime, I had resigned myself to drinking soda water. All those poisonous cocktails going into my bloodstream had wreaked havoc with my taste buds and I couldn't stand to drink either beer or wine. It all tasted revolting, like drinking liquid metal. At dinner that night I wondered aloud if perhaps a bubbly would taste any different to the still wine. Mike didn't think so, why would



Fan Palm



Bowenia



Bingle Bay



Bush Bananas



Fungi



Silver Falls



Nandroyd Falls



At Tinaroo

it? Anyway, we agreed it was worth a try and I was delighted to find that it tasted good. So good, in fact, that I had two and enjoyed the night out much more.

We left Atherton the morning after my birthday and travelled north-east to Lake Tinaroo. The lake was stocked with barramundi and we were told the barra had grown so enormous that there was no point introducing new stock under 30cm. They just got eaten by their big sisters. But we weren't there to catch muddy flavoured, freshwater barra. We were chasing red claw lobsters. While we weren't overwhelmed with our catches, we did get enough to freeze in brine for our future enjoyment somewhere up the track.

We met the resident water rat and lots of birds, even a female Victoria's riflebird, which was quite a treat. The nights were cold but the days were fabulous, the water as still as glass. We took a six kilometre walk through the forest and gave right of way to a huge red bellied black snake. I tried to decide which of those experiences had my heart pumping the most.

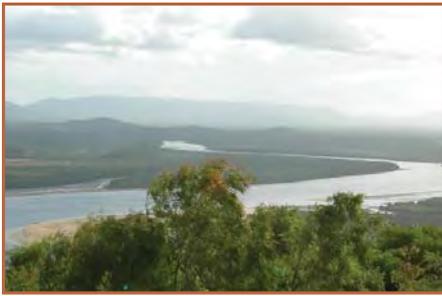
Currawongs danced on the roof of both vans every morning. Obviously, being the only very early riser among us Mike had bribed them to 'get those lazybones out of bed'. We coped, because we were eager to see how many red claw we'd snared overnight. We had a wonderful week at Tinaroo and hoped we could return sometime.

Then we drove to Mareeba, stocked up on food, fuel, grog, and rested overnight at the Rodeo Ground not far outside of town, ready to move on next morning.

Orchards very quickly gave way to uncultivated land and grazing beef cattle on the unfenced inland road to Cooktown. We were travelling on the Peninsula Development Road to Mt Molloy, named after a teamster who discovered copper there in 1909. We passed through the tropical savannah to Lakeland, which lies in a natural basin, formed long ago by volcanic activity. The fertile soil there grows peanuts, bananas, coffee and grain.



At Tinaroo



Endeavour River

At Lakeland we turned onto the Mulligan Highway, reaching Cooktown early afternoon. We passed the Annan Gorge with its striking stone walls, smooth boulders and rushing water. We would have stopped, but we came upon it so suddenly in a long, downhill, curvy passage, it was impossible to pull up. Then we passed Black Mountain, which is a pile of giant, black granite boulders. Picture a truckload of gravel tipped out on the ground, turn it black and magnify it into a mountain.



Isabella Falls

It had been raining off and on all afternoon and we had loads of washing after our week at Tinaroo. Hells bells, we'd have to waste money and use the dryers. Cooktown, where Captain Cook repaired the Endeavour, is nestled by the mouth of the Endeavour River where it enters the Coral Sea. We visited Grassy Hill lookout where the Great Navigator plotted a safe passage out for his repaired ship. We also visited the Captain Cook Museum and dipped our toes in the Coral Sea. Mind you while doing that we had our eyes peeled for the crocodiles that live there.



Track to Kalpower

Our next stop would be Lakefield National Park and we would be out of phone range for at least ten days. We hoped to find a great place to camp, catch lots of barra and cherabin, and avoid the crocs.



Cherabin

We left Cooktown after brekkie and had a great run along a newly graded Battle Camp Road to our first water crossing at Isabella Falls. Tiny cascades made this a very pretty place in the middle of nowhere.

By late morning we had overtaken the grader and were battling corrugations, dips, bumps and bulldust from then on. We entered the very large and remote national park intending to camp at Old Faithful Waterhole, only we couldn't quite reach it. Washouts just short of the campsite stopped us in our tracks so we decided to stay where we were. Between them, the men caught enough bait in the lagoon beside the first washout to set up our yabby pots. The next morning they were rewarded for their efforts. The cherabin were huge – 8-9cm around the girth, 30cm long. We'd never seen them so big and saved them for later on. In the Daly River, Northern



Clever Little Frog

Territory, they were all as small as a bait-sized prawn but I guess when you think about it, the Daly is so popular cherabin would never get the chance to grow very big.

Kalpowar Crossing was the main campground in Lakefield, not far from the Ranger Station. We unhitched there and did a recce of the place to see where we could safely tow the vans. 14 kilometres east and on the other side of Kalpowar Crossing is Pandanus Park, the Vietnam Veterans' Sanctuary – restricted access of course.

We settled into a campsite at Hann Crossing, beside the Kennedy River, 29 kilometres north of Kalpowar, facing a beautiful, clear stretch of water. Two weeks in the one spot – wow. We left the boats in the water and caught lots of big cherabin, all good eating size. Not many bait size though, and the big barra were elusive. We caught many small fish but only three big enough to keep and they were delicious.

The crocs never threatened us. At beer o'clock a few days after we arrived, we saw our resident croc for the first time, as it cruised slowly down the other side of the river. We estimated it to be about three metres long, and didn't see it again until beer o'clock the day before we left, when it cruised slowly past once more. We did hear it, though. On a couple of separate occasions, sometime during the night, it must have captured a hapless wallaby looking for a drink, and rolled it. The splashing was loud enough to wake us.

It was the snakes we had to watch out for; not one but many. They were a real nuisance at night around the camp, so no one went outside without a good torch. As they terrify me so much, I didn't go outside after dark at all.

When we moved on, we bumped our way slowly across fast flowing water at Hann Crossing and then negotiated a deeper creek with water over the wheels. We thought we'd have a look at the last camping area in Lakefield, called Sweetwater Lake. The track proved too small for the vans, so we had to turn around and retrace our steps, only to have both rigs become bogged in a water crossing that had caused no challenge on the way in.



Sunset



Sunset



Water Lily



Snake



Leaving Hann Crossing



Deep Crossing Later



Bogged



Musgrave Roadhouse



Weipa Stoplights

Ken and Dawn were leading that day so they got bogged first. We were very glad there was an alternate, if rough, track over the crossing, just big enough for the Landcruisers to get through. We unhitched Hank from Milo, crossed the creek bed and used the snatch strap to pull them out. But when our turn came, we got bogged as well. Our friends unhitched and pulled us out. It was an adventure we didn't anticipate but it was all part of the fun.

Musgrave Roadhouse is 40 kilometres from the National Park boundary. We arrived at lunchtime for a meat pie and hot chips – the reward for a long and hard morning's work. When we first got there, it was an amazing sight, like an oasis in the middle of the desert. There were at least a dozen touring vehicles, mostly Toyota Landcruisers, parked outside, their owners also having lunch.

One hundred or so kilometres further north is Coen, named by a 17th century Dutch explorer, after the Governor of Batavia. Today, over 80% of the population comprises indigenous people of different language groups. The Queen's Birthday holiday was a bad time to arrive; only the pub was open. We moved three kilometres out of town and camped at beside the Coen River.

Mid-afternoon next day we reached the west coast and drove in to Weipa, having been stopped on the way by traffic lights to allow one of Comalco's huge haulage vehicles through. Traffic lights were the last thing we expected to find in that part of the world. Weipa is the site of the world's largest bauxite mine and is most definitely a mining town. Orange shirts with reflector strips were by far the most popular fashion in town, for both men and women.

Next day, vans staying put, we set out for a picnic lunch at the mouth of the Pennefather River. It's a camping spot in the Gulf, 86 kilometres north of Weipa. Ken and Dawn had enjoyed a holiday there more than ten years before, and we wanted to see if we could tow the vans in and stay a week or two. By the time we reached the sand dunes we had been lulled into thinking that, with the help of a saw to trim the trees beside the track, we could maybe get the vans through. Yeah, right! The sand put an end to that idea – the deep, corrugated sand tracks threw us every which way. They were the worst we'd ever

experienced. When we finally made it to the campground however, it was idyllic. It was also popular; there were at least half a dozen other camps set up. We enjoyed our picnic lunch, savoured the beauty of the place and returned to Weipa thinking about plan B.

While in Weipa we solved a mystery that had first reared its head near Mackay. At night we'd hear an awful noise, like a rooster being strangled, only worse. Try as we might we could never identify the source of those cries. But in the campground at Weipa, we saw (and heard) the culprit – an ugly little sucker with a peaked head known as the orange-footed scrubfowl. It attracted quite a crowd as it scratched and squawked.

Departing Weipa, we retraced our steps by 140 kilometres to the turnoff to the tip of the Cape. Not far out of town Ken was stopped by the boys in blue and had to blow in the bag; then they drove past us. Mike had had a haircut, while Ken hadn't. We teased him about that.

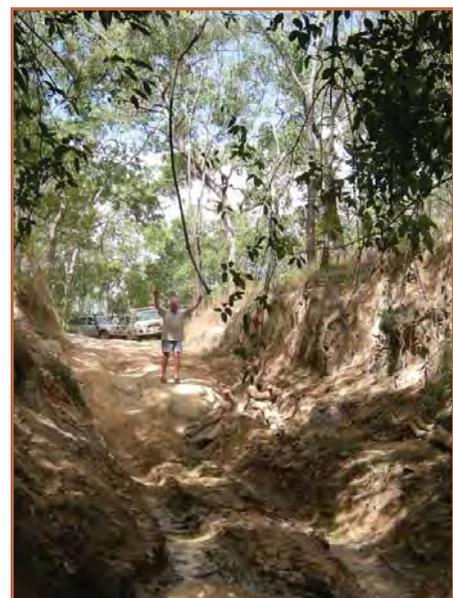
The start of the unsealed Telegraph Road north was kind to the vehicles and remained that way until we reached the Moreton Telegraph Station. Along the way we passed 36 pushbike riders who were also heading to the tip. We were glad we weren't out there eating all that dust. We arrived at Moreton early afternoon and spent the rest of the day sorting out our gear for the trip further north – it would be tents only from there on. By late afternoon the bike riders had started to arrive for their stopover and day of rest.

About 4.30pm, we saw our first young palm cockatoo and wasn't it majestic, putting its head on the side to keep an eye on us. Even better, it didn't squawk anywhere near as loudly as its sulphur crested and red tailed cousins. Not many people get to see these wonderful creatures in the wild and we did feel privileged.

We were also very lucky to have free and secure storage for the vans at Moreton. In fact we paid nothing and we camped there for three nights all up, one night before we left the vans and two when we returned. We also filled up the van tanks with their water. How good is that?

Friday the 13th, what an auspicious day to start tackling the old Telegraph Track. Not far along we encountered our first crossing at Palm Creek - a steep drop down to the water, mud, logs, the works. Talk about being thrown in the deep end.

The second crossing was Ducie River. Dawn and I were wading across to take photos of the men driving through, when I saw a snake in the water and beat a hasty retreat, almost swamping Dawn in the rush. Later we realised it would have been a non-venomous file snake as it was fully submerged and quite relaxed. At the time, it was simply a snake and snakes and I don't mix as everyone knows by now. Hence, we have no photos of crossing the Ducie.



Palm Creek Crossing



Mike at Cascades



Hank at Gunshot



Old Gunshot



Fruit Bat Falls

By the time we reached Dulhunty River – only 73 kilometres, mind you – we'd had enough for one day. We pitched our tents and some of us had a dip in the clear, fast-flowing water. A bit later 15 trail bike riders trickled in, one by one. They pulled up and also cooled off in the water before moving on.

The following day we crossed the Dulhunty River, then Berty Creek and with fear and trepidation approached the infamous Gunshot. We found a new Gunshot had been forged into the vegetation which proved much easier than we were expecting. The old tyrant was still there but was, without a doubt, impassable. Even the most irresponsible and reckless of drivers would balk at the sight of it.

That day we travelled only 22 kilometres before pulling up at Cockatoo Creek. It was far enough for us. We spent the afternoon relaxing by the creek, and it was there that Dawn and I spotted a beautiful yellow billed kingfisher, which only lives on the north-east tip of Cape York Peninsula.

Next morning we breezed through the creek crossing and moved on to the very pretty Fruit Bat Falls. While the men had a chance to relax in the water, Dawn and I went bird watching. We found a carnivorous pitcher plant, bigger than a Venus flytrap, but quite similar.

The men took another dip at Eliot and Twin Falls, further along the track. It's a very popular place, accessible from the bypass road which accommodates those travellers who don't want to attempt the old track. As we were leaving, those amazing pushbike riders started to arrive and it was clear they were all looking forward to a dip in the cool water. We camped two kilometres further north at Canal Creek and next

morning traversed a tricky crossing. The climb out was an unbelievably boggy mess of clay, but we made it OK. The men thought it was great fun slipping and sliding every which way.

From there we had a long discussion and made a big decision to continue. The old track deteriorated even more and we were a bit nervous that we'd made the wrong choice and would have to turn back. That was a really scary thought, especially after we crossed the log bridge at Cypress Creek and climbed a curving, boggy clay track with a steep drop

on one side and a cliff wall on the other. To have to go back the other way would have been terrible.

Logan's Creek was a little deep, but we made it OK and then we reached Nolan's Brook, the last crossing on the old track and the most worrying. It was 1.5 metres at its deepest point. After walking the crossing and finding the best track, we decided Hank would go first as he had a snorkel. He came through with flying colours. I don't have to tell you because you already know he's my hero.

Then Ken positioned his Landcruiser at the waters edge and turned the motor off. A big tarp was placed over the front of the vehicle and secured. Mike returned to Hank on the other side and backed him into the water, connected a strap and towed Ken through. Mike is my other hero.

When Ken turned the starter motor the rest of us held our breath. Yes! It fired up! What an achievement. We did it! We drove the old Telegraph Track. Woo hoo!

Then it was off to catch the ferry across the Jardine River. Well, that took a long time, a whole 30 seconds from one side to the other.

We drove through Bamaga, the largest community in the northern part of the Cape, and stayed at the Seisia campground. The next morning we drove to the car park at Frangipani Bay, where we hiked up and over rocks to the tip. There we were, 10° south of the equator and 180 kilometres from Papua New Guinea, looking out over the crystal clear water. That was an exhilarating experience. Of course, we had to take the obligatory photograph as proof!

We walked along the beach before returning to Bamaga for lunch, and heading south to the ferry. We had clocked up 5240 kilometres since leaving home.

28 kilometres down the corrugated bypass road from the ferry we turned towards the west coast. Then it was 27 kilometres of rough road, followed by nine kilometres of beach driving to our destination – isolated Vriliya Point. What a fabulous three night



Pitcher Plant



Canal Creek



Sloppy Mess



Hank at Nolans



Hank the Hero



Easier Dev. Road



Ferry



Track North from Seisia



The Bay



At the Tip

stay we had: combing the beach, fishing, watching the sunset, and combing the beach some more. Mike caught an unusual diamond trevally with great long tassles hanging from its fins, but otherwise the fishing was disappointing.

When we left the point, we drove 135 kilometres from the west coast to the east coast and Captain Billy's Landing. Captain Billy was an indigenous man who spoke good English. In 1880 he guided a government expedition party to the mouth of a creek, now named in his honour.

We had intended to stay overnight but the camp area didn't impress us. We decided to continue on to Moreton Station and back to the vans. It was a big day of driving but we'd had enough of putting up and pulling down tents.

Back at Moreton we spent a day washing clothes with our 'you-beaut' washing machines – a funnel with drilled out holes, attached firmly to a broomstick and plunged up and down in a bucket of water with a little washing powder. It worked very well, but is not user friendly by any stretch of the imagination. By the time I'd finished eight days of clothes for both of us I thought my arms would drop off.

We pointed the wagons towards Iron Range National Park and Chili Beach, our next planned destination. At the Wenlock River crossing we met some campers returning from Chili Beach, who told us there had been rain overnight and the road further down was an awful swampy mess. Instead, we found a campsite by the river and set out some pots for cherabin. We stayed a couple of nights by the Wenlock and during that time we were visited by three magnificent Palm Cockatoos.

By now the men were keen to put the boats in water and do some serious fishing. So, at Coen two days later, we did the usual restock of food, fuel and alcohol. We had to stay in town that night because the free camp at The Bend was chockers as the Victorians were arriving in droves on their annual five or six month sojourn to the warm north!



Road to Vriliya



Fishing



Sunset



At the Landing



Whew



Ranger Tim's Home

We made our way east to Port Stewart and met Ranger Tim, who was a ranger like no other. The fees for camping on Aboriginal land were \$8 per person, per night, no services provided. Tim decided he had a great place for us to camp, where he went fishing and crabbing. There would be no one else there but us.



Camp

We backtracked 20 kilometres to the turnoff to Silver Plains Station, then drove 18 kilometres to the homestead. We arrived to see two houses. One was new, while the original one was made of corrugated iron but still in good condition. Ranger Tim lived in the original house and offered accommodation to those fishers who needed it. The new house was occupied by the traditional owners, who made us welcome while we waited for Tim.



Princess Charlotte Bay

Three hours later Tim arrived. We followed him through some dense scrub – he used a chainsaw to widen the path for the vans. After some hairy gully crossings, we eventually made it the five kilometres to Breakfast Creek. Too tired to set up camp, we enjoyed a few relaxing ales and went to bed very early.

It took a couple of days to settle in and find our way around, but then we were fine. We motored to the mouth of the creek, two kilometres from camp, crabbed, fished and wandered along the enormous low tide beach at the top end of Princess Charlotte Bay. In one day we came home with 11 crabs, two salmon, a fingermark and a barra. We also caught trevally, queenfish, barracuda and a shark. Some became crab bait and others were given their freedom.



Mike and the Croc

While wandering along the beach, we saw a small, two metre croc basking in the sun. Ranger Tim was there at the time, spearing crabs in the shallow water with two other men. He came up and showed us his way of capturing crocs. Mike and Ken had their photos taken before Tim let the croc go.

The men went out again for another all day session and I was sitting at camp before lunchtime reading a juicy murder mystery when a white bellied sea eagle swooped and grabbed a trevally out of the creek. The

fish was too big for the eagle to gain lift-off, so it had to drag its catch up the sandy bank and proceed to devour it in front of me. In case you're wondering, the eye was the first to go! Yep, I know, yukk.

Wow, this was better than my book. The bird knew I was watching and kept an 'eagle eye' on me. It was obviously not happy with the situation because it made several unsuccessful attempts to leave during the following half hour. Finally, when it had eaten enough to carry its catch, it took flight. How lucky was I to be that close to such a magnificent bird. Mike was quite miffed when he returned to find that I hadn't taken a photo of the event. I was so captivated by it all, I hadn't even thought about grabbing the camera.

The evenings got so cold we couldn't believe it. Here we were right up in north Queensland with a fire going, and we still had to put our flannelette shirts on. No wonder the barra wouldn't bite, they don't like the cold either.

One day, after the men had returned from the mouth of the creek, Mike said, "They can keep their fishing in the far north; all we catch are fish we don't want to eat (meaning queenies, trevally, and the like). I'd rather go home and catch whitehead and flatting (meaning whiting and flathead)." He was so frustrated. Except for that first good fishing day, the tides were all wrong. Wouldn't you know it - we had to leave as they were coming good. The crabs were great, though.

There was a particularly high tide two nights before we left, and the splashing of a crocodile attack woke me up. It sounded like it was right outside our van. It would have been a big fish because the water was too salty for the land animals to drink. Time after time, I could hear the croc rolling and thrashing its huge tail. Scary.

The day we left, for the very first time there were croc tracks across the sand bank on the other side of the creek where the eagle had dragged his fish. Every day for the past ten days the men had walked up and down the creek that was very shallow at low tide. They'd be casting nets for bait and wading into the deeper parts to anchor the tinnies so they wouldn't get hung up at change of tide. There was no threat at low tide, but the resident croc must have been watching and waiting. In more ways than one, it was time to move out.



Flirting with Danger

Getting out, however, was far more difficult than we'd ever imagined. The increased tidal movement meant that water crossed the track at high tide and we faced a slippery, muddy mess. The first vehicle got stuck and we had to cut a path through the vegetation for the second vehicle to get into a position to tow. Eventually we got both rigs through the mud and cautiously continued on.



Slippery Mess



Bogged

At the last tricky crossing we got well and truly bogged. The first cruiser crawled down the steep bank and the heavy van slid down behind, pushing the front vehicle sideways towards a big tree in the middle of the crossing. We were trying to work out the best way to tackle the problem when Ranger Tim and the men from the station arrived. They'd been fishing and hunting in the bay.

They hacked away and made another track for their ute so they could cross and tow the two big rigs through. First they pulled Ken and Dawn through the mess and away from the threatening tree. When it was our turn, Mike drove carefully down the steep bank and Milo did exactly the same thing to Hank - down into the mess he went, then sideways towards the tree. We were very grateful for the help. It would have taken us forever on our own.

As it was, it took five hours to travel five kilometres. While we really did enjoy our camp at Breakfast Creek, we were also relieved to reach the boundary of the property with no real damage to either ourselves or our rigs. We all agreed we'd had enough rough stuff to last us quite a while.

As we reached the first climb to the Great Dividing Range, we stopped and camped the night in a road works quarry bed near Mt White. We went to bed very early, totally stuffed.

We left the top end behind and worked our way back to Lakeland, where we stopped and celebrated the end of the dirt road.



Tough Crossing

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Lakeland to Mareeba, Innot Hot Springs, Undara Lava Tubes, Normanton, Karumba, Walkers Bend, Julia Creek, Barcaldine and home

From Lakeland we headed to Mareeba to wash the vehicles before moving on. We arrived there on a Monday to the news that the annual rodeo was on at the weekend, so preparations were in full swing. We were allowed to stay in the 'Horse Float Washdown Area' and use the hoses to clean the vehicles, but we had to be out by Thursday.

Even though we were busy, working away with cloths and brushes, those few days proved very interesting. Exceptionally talented people were practising dressage on some magnificent horses, and Sideshow Alley was quickly taking shape. We saw plenty of folk getting around in ten gallon hats and Cuban heels, which are high heeled cowboy boots. They didn't wear Cuban heels on Spring Creek Station; the ground was so rocky they'd have broken an ankle every second day.

In the middle of Wednesday night we were woken by a B-double trundling into the grounds with a full load of cranky brumbies. So much noise, so many people and it was only going to get busier. Early on Thursday morning we headed south to freezing Atherton, where we washed our clothes, printed photographs and waited for our mail. After two days of cold noses, numb fingers and toes, we were glad to move on.

30 kilometres down the Kennedy Highway from Ravenshoe, we stopped at Innot Hot Springs. A dip in the thermal pool was so-o-o-o soothing to our aging bodies. Mike and I continued on after lunch to the Undara Lava Tubes, but Ken and Dawn had been there before, so they stayed behind for more thermal therapy.

We managed to catch the last guided tour of the day at Undara. Apparently, Undara means 'a long way', and one massive eruption from a single volcano 190,000 years ago sent lava 90 kilometres to the north and 160 kilometres to the north-west. That was very definitely a long way. That volcano boiled over continuously for five years, spewing out an estimated 23 cubic kilometres of molten rock.

The guide explained that the lava advanced through creek beds and gullies. The tubes were formed when cooler air above the flow allowed the top bit to dry, creating a ceiling. Over time, the thinner bits of ceiling



Undara Lava Tube



Mossy Floor



Cumberland Chimney

have collapsed and a new piece of history has unfolded. Tiny horseshoe bats weighing only a few grams lived in the crevices of the lava tube we visited. We saw a few happily snoozing away.

On our journey west we pulled into Cumberland Chimney picnic area. In the 1870s there was a gold rush in the Georgetown region. The chimney is all that remains of a crushing plant built to crush the ore.

Behind the chimney there is a lagoon full of white water lilies, rich with birdlife. We settled in for the afternoon with the binoculars, until Ken and Dawn found us. Ken had to blow in the bag again on the way. You know, he still hadn't had that haircut!

Next stop was Croydon, population 300, another gold rush town, although this one has been proudly restored for tourism. When the boom was in full swing, Croydon had an estimated population of 30,000 people and 36 pubs. It's now a charming place in the heart of the Gulf Savannah cattle country.



Lagoon at Cumberland

In Normanton we checked out the historic railway station and the Gulflander, now a major tourist attraction. Not far up the street from there is Krys, a life size model of an 8.6 metre salt water crocodile, shot by a 30 year old Polish born Aussie woman in 1957 on the banks of the Norman River. We camped on the bank of the Norman River that night.



Purple Pub

We wanted to see for ourselves if the rumours were true – that Victorians, in droves, migrate to Karumba every winter. Yes, those rumours were most definitely true. Our day trip there was a real eye opener. The resident population of 700 explodes by thousands for five months of the year. It's bitumen all the way so easily accessible to the nomads from down south.



Gulflander

The three caravan parks were bursting at the seams and there were dozens of hopefuls sitting in a paddock with no facilities whatsoever, waiting for a vacancy. We wished them luck! Karumba is a very pretty place with crystal clear blue water, but the Victorians can have it. Being squashed in a caravan park like sardines is not our idea of a good time, especially for months and months on end.

A prawning fleet operates out of Karumba Port and we were more than happy to pay \$10 a kilo for big green prawns which were not up to export quality. As we drove back to our camp through the saltpan and savannah grasslands we saw many wandering broilga.

Our next campsite, at Walker's Bend, got a unanimous tick. We spent ten days overlooking the Flinders River, enjoying the bush, catching cherabin and red claw, and watching the birds. Often we would have more than a hundred whistling kites in the sky above us, wings spread, drifting on the thermals. We saw a pair of sea eagles every day, either flying around or nesting in a eucalypt beside the river. There were plenty of crocodiles, ranging from 30 centimetres to three metres in length. Ninety percent were freshies. The little ones were so inquisitive; they'd drift beside the tinny and watch us pull up the pots.

Remember the movie, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert? During a mad moment a couple of years before, Mike had accepted a challenge made by a couple of our friends. Sometime during our travels Mike was to imitate the 'cock in a frock on a rock' scene from the movie. Those friends even helped us choose the dress – a Vinnies' special. Mike decided it was time to get it over with. Well, talk about mad, we laughed and laughed as, dressed in his pretty blue frock and bright yellow wig, he carried the ladder to the rock. He climbed up and posed, however, we had to be quick with the cameras as he's never been very good at standing on one foot for long and we didn't want him falling and hurting himself!

That night, before Ken and Dawn would go their separate way, we enjoyed a crackling campfire and a fondue dinner, followed by port and more port or whatever was left in the cupboard. As usual, we had a great time. I don't know what time we went to bed but we were all wonderfully relaxed and happy!

Now don't be thinking we had hangovers in the morning because that's simply not true. We were all a bit subdued, though. Walker's Bend had been such a beaut place to stay and we were sad to leave.



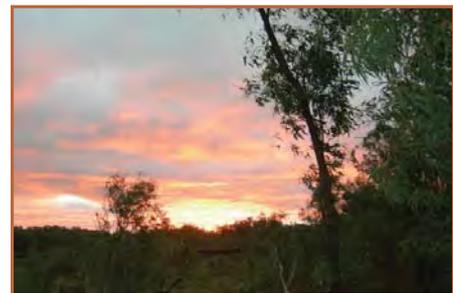
Krys the Croc



Water at Karumba



Cherabin



Sunset



Little Freshie



Brolga



Oops!



Big Foot at Cania Gorge



Wildlife



Wildlife

Nevertheless, we said our goodbyes at the Burke and Wills Roadhouse after lunch. Ken and Dawn drove off to Cloncurry, while we turned towards Julia Creek. About 100 kilometres north of Julia Creek the savannah plains came alive with brolgas, thousands of them, none in the mood for dancing.

Then, as we neared Julia Creek, the Gulf savannah landscape gave way to the barren outback. As we drove we counted the emus, bustards, eagles, goats, brolgas, kangaroos and budgies. What a magnificent country we live in.

At Winton, we looked at the upgraded museum, now called The Waltzing Matilda Centre and figured it was still a wonderful look at our history. That night, once again, we enjoyed some remarkable bush poetry. Anything that produces so much laughter from such a diverse audience has to have something going for it.

We then started our trek home and drove through Longreach and Barcaldine, where we found our way to the Lloyd Johns Weir, a popular local recreation spot. The weir is a free stopover south of Barcaldine. There were plenty of people there, as well as several goats. I was casually taking happy snaps, and lined up a photo of three goats carefully traversing down the steep wall. Just as I pressed the button, one of the goats lost its footing and landed at the bottom, legs in the air. It wasn't hurt, thankfully, but it looked so funny and still does each time I look at the photo. So rarely am I in the right place at the right time with the camera.

Making our way east along the Capricorn Highway, we spent a quiet night at Comet. Then we turned south on the Leichhardt Highway to spend a weekend at Cania Gorge, south of Biloela. We did the walks, had a look at the dam and enjoyed the wildlife and beer o'clock around the community campfire.

We travelled along the Burnett Highway and free camped at a place called Lawless Park. We'd stopped along the way to collect some wood for a campfire, planning to cook our dinner in the camp oven and have a quiet night. We had started to set up camp when

a tiny hatchback zipped in and pulled up not far from Milo. A very precocious young man stepped out, saw we had wood for a campfire and decided instantly that we would share it with all and sundry. He went off to find his contribution to our wood supply as another van pulled in. So much for a quiet night.

As it turned out, a wonderful couple from Bateman's Bay also joined us. He was 78, she was 70. He trained as a baker and started his working life as a shearers' cook. He had worked 14 hour days and 7 day weeks cooking for up to 70 men in outback NSW. He lasted eight years before buying the bakery in Crookwell. He and his wife were in that bakery for over forty years, where he met Mike's sister, who had operated the local nursing home. Talk about a small world, huh?

We detoured for a look at Kingaroy, where we bought some peanuts, then through Nanango and back to Goomeri to head east and spend a couple of uneventful nights in Gympie. We were ahead of schedule so when we got close to home we settled in for our last week, vegging out in the Mooloolaba Caravan Park, right beside the ocean. To say we were glad to get home would be an understatement. Our house sitters had done a fabulous job and had even put up 'welcome home' balloons for us.

As is usual when I go for my boob squish and ultrasound, I went in fear and trepidation. The next test was no different, except it was a significant milestone. It was five years since the cancer was removed and as I went into the room to change I asked the radiographer if it was only me or did others feel a tad nervous during follow-up tests. She assured me I was no Robinson Crusoe; that every single woman who came back felt the same. Do you know how relieved I was to see the result: 'Mild post therapy changes, no new abnormality, benign findings.' Yes, yes, yes!

Mike, where are we going next year?



Wildlife



Cock in a Frock

CHAPTER 6

OUR BIG TRIP TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY



1 Gem Tree fossicking, Elsey National Park, Corroboree Billabong, Bynoe Harbour

After another wonderful holiday at Donnybrook we came home with three weeks to pack for our next trip. We whipped the house and garden back in shape for the house sitters, confident they would take care of it while we explored more of our fabulous country and revisited some of our favourite places.

Hank and the travelling Milos departed Beerburum after lunch and made it to Wolvi, near Gympie, to join Dawn and Ken in time for beer o'clock. Over the following couple of days, we had lots of fun with some of their family and sorted out our itinerary.

The wagons rolled out of Wolvi, along the Wide Bay and Burnett Highways. That afternoon, north of the citrus town of Gayndah, we settled into a lovely spot at the top of the Binjour Range.

Then we poked along the Burnett Highway and stayed overnight at Biloela, where Hank had new air bags fitted in his rear suspension. With muscles pumped, he took us west



Muddy



Checking the pots



Possum



Flathead

along the Dawson Highway. Eventually, we pulled into a spacious Main Roads gravel storage area to camp and enjoyed a great beer o'clock. Being visible to the passing traffic, we enjoyed lots of toots and waves from truck drivers and miners heading home for the day. Drinks in hand, we waved back and no doubt had their mouths watering for their own beer after work.

Before Tambo, still on the Dawson, we had to stop as one of our brand new tyres had gone flat. While Mike was sorting that out he noticed our Anderson plug that connected the car alternator to the van batteries had come loose, fallen out and destroyed itself on the road. Then, when he was tightening the wheel nuts after changing the tyre, a stud broke off the hub. Far out – all of that in only half an hour – bad luck did come in threes that day.

Tambo Tyres confirmed the brand new Pirelli Scorpion had a fracture in the middle of the tread and couldn't be fixed. Great! We haven't had much luck with tyres recently. We holed up for the weekend beside the Matilda Highway, 40 kilometres south of Blackall, where the men worked all morning to replace the broken stud. When we left Blackall, Mike and I were a tad poorer than when we arrived.

We made our way west to Isisford, home of the yellowbelly, on the banks of the Barcoo River, then west again on a gravel road to Stonehenge, population 25. It's nothing like its English namesake. There's not a standing stone in sight. If the route we were taking didn't make sense to you, it's because we made a decision to take roads we hadn't travelled before on that part of our journey.

Along the Thomson Development Road, halfway between Stonehenge and Jundah, is Swanvale Lookout. It's a 'jump up' like a mesa and at the top there is a rest area with scenic views of the flat western horizon. The view goes on forever, and we witnessed a fabulous sunset. We set up camp and sat around the fire, looked at the stars and sipped a port or two.

Mike told us how his Dad would use only two sheets of the Sydney Morning Herald to cook enough chops

to feed his family of five. He'd place the newspaper in a four gallon drum and light the fire. The fat dripping from the short loin lamb chops would keep the fire going until the chops were cooked. Wow! We haven't tried to replicate this. First, we only buy fatty meat once in a blue moon. Second, I love my veggies cooked in foil, and two sheets of the Sydney Morning Herald, even if it was a broadsheet, couldn't possibly cook a potato.

We passed through Jundah, then stopped for a cuppa at Windorah, a small town surrounded by grazing properties. There we checked out the new solar farm. It consists of five mirrored dishes 13.7 metres across, each supported on a concrete base and steel mast structure. Each dish contains 112 mirrors. Like giant sunflowers, the dishes face and follow the sun. The mirrors concentrate the sun 500 times onto a panel of cells which convert the sun's energy into electricity and feed it into the town's electricity network. Wow!

As we continued westward, we were convinced that we were seeing outback Queensland at its very best. After lots of rain much of the land was green, there was water in the rivers and creeks, and the cattle were fat. Most of the gravel roads had recently been graded, which made the going easier for Hank and Milo.

We drove up the Diamantina Development Road towards Bedourie, camping on the gibber plain beside the road. I asked Ken if he wouldn't mind collecting some wood for the campfire, knowing that was impossible as there wasn't a stick of timber to be seen for miles. We'd travelled 550 kilometres that day so sleep was sound.

Part of the main road from Birdsville to Bedourie was still under water and closed to traffic, so we had to find another route to Bedourie. We had seen and crossed many gibber plains, but in the past couple of days we had crossed plains covered with shiny black stones called 'desert varnish', which actually looked like a really bad bitumen job.

Bedourie, on the edge of the Simpson Desert and in the middle of the Channel Country, was lush. There was green everywhere. We made it to Boulia and decided



Weird Crab



Cooking Dinner



At Blackall



Solar Farm



Green Desert



Gibber Plains



Desert Varnish



Burke River Sunset



At the Border



Corrugations

wed finish early, not far outside town, by the Burke River.

We had a cuppa then sat and watched hundreds of wild budgies play in the trees on the bank. That was such a treat; such small birds with incredibly vibrant colours. A family of Plumed Whistling Ducks swam across the river. Mum in front, Dad behind, five gorgeous little ducklings in the middle. That made me think of the grandchildren; I missed them already. That day we had another amazing sunset.

Westward ho! The Donohue Highway led us through picturesque plains of straw coloured Mitchell grass. When we reached the Northern Territory border we stopped to take a photo, and heard a hissing sound. Yep, another new tyre had bitten the dust. 400 kilometres of corrugations and bulldust was enough for one day. We camped by a dry Arthur River, with lots of friendly bush flies.

The next day we passed Hart's Range and stopped at a designated garnet gem field, accessible to the passing public. Because we had no fossicking equipment, we searched the surface and found lots of tiny garnet fragments, but nothing of any significance.

We arrived at Gem Tree Tourist Park the following day. While our clothes were washing, we watched splendid fairy wrens run around under the trees in the citrus orchard. Those birds were obviously used to being around people. At beer o'clock a fabulous crested chirruping wedgebill and a black and white hooded robin came to say hullo. We hadn't seen those two before.

Having recovered from our travels, we spent the next day fossicking for red garnets. Armed with picks, shovels, water and sieves provided by Gem Tree, we worked away at privately leased gem fields and found garnets. The gemologist graded all our stones and we came away with a dozen garnets worth cutting and setting into jewellery at some point down the track.

We left Gem Tree with a totally different attitude from our first visit. The new managers made a great difference – they were friendly and helpful. And we didn't get up close and personal with any Gem Tree prickles.

When we hit the Stuart Highway, we turned right and started our journey north along the dullest highway in Australia. Even the Nullabor had more character. That day we reached the Devils Marbles. We're told that locals regularly drive in to feel a deep sense of connection with the ancient spirits said to pervade the area. Mike undertook a spirit walk. Not sure, but I think he came back the same man. When he returned he joked that he was looking for a different kind of spirit, but couldn't find the rum bottle anywhere!

We continued on to Larrimah and found the old WWII Gorrie Airfield, where we stayed the night. Gorrie was built in 1942 and was the largest military base in Australia. Apart from bushland, the runway and a few tracks are all that remains. The runway must have been very well made as it was still in fabulous condition.

Then we travelled to Mataranka and set ourselves up in Elsey National Park. The weather was very hot and steamy, so we agreed we'd fish for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. When our first barra hit the deck there were lots of woo-hooing and punching holes in the sky. I caught a 55cm beauty that we enjoyed later with some Donnybrook prawns.

After several fabulous days and a couple more barra we said goodbye to Elsey and made our way to Katherine to restock, then hightailed it to Corroboree Billabong, via the Arnhem Highway. It's part of the Mary River System and a very special place. Paperbark forests, pandanus and freshwater mangroves support breeding populations of many species of water birds. Corroboree was home to saltwater crocodiles, wallabies and water buffalo and its banks were crowded with lotus and native white water lilies.

Dawn and I had a good time fishing. I caught a saratoga – a very primitive fish whose origins can be traced back 40 million years. They are good fun to catch, but they're too bony to eat. Mike spent most of his time using lures that rattled, catching several undersized barra that he had to throw back. He didn't appreciate our advice that only babies like rattles. Dawn and I blitzed the boys on our fourth day. I caught two, Dawn caught one, and the



Fossicking



Looking for Red



Devils Marbles



Resident Dingo



Runway



My Barra



Scenic Corroboree



Burdekin Ducks



Night Heron



Foot Fixed

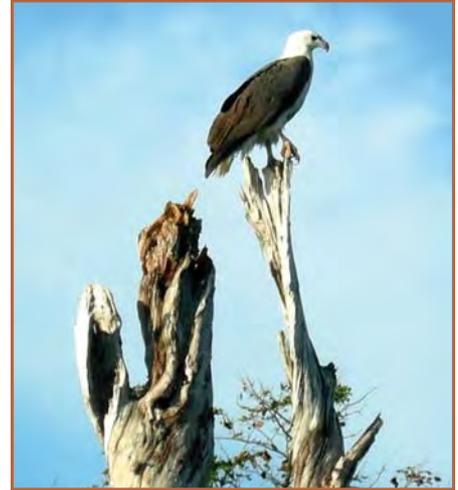
men caught zip. Dawn and I are still wondering why we had to leave Corroboree all of a sudden.

In Darwin we set up camp for a few days at a resort park at Lee Point. We had to pay \$100 as security deposit. Strange, because there were no keys or tags to return. Anyway, I had a minor medical problem. A week earlier at Elsey, my foot had fought a twig and the twig won. Despite my best efforts to clean the wound, a little sliver of wood refused to budge, so I had to front up for surgery. A young Darwin GP lanced the wound and extracted the obstinate little blighter. Three stitches later, all was good.

After backtracking down the Stuart Highway, we turned west along the Cox Peninsula Road on our way to Bynoe Harbour. Much later, we turned off the bitumen and onto a rough track. We bush bashed our way north for two hours, covering only 20 kilometres. Every now and then we stopped to chainsaw anything obstructing the vans. We used low range for the last little downhill section before reaching our destination, but golly, it was worth every challenging minute.



Crocodile



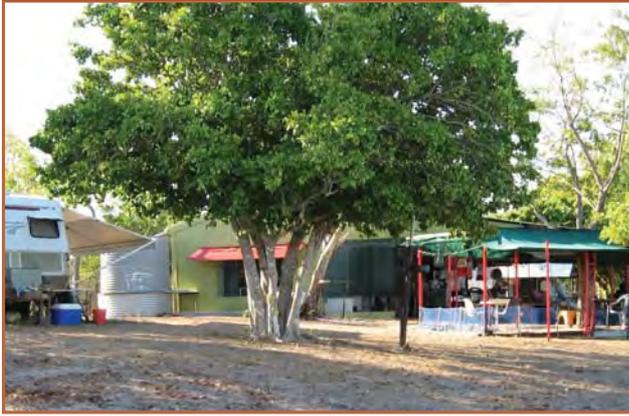
White Bellied Sea Eagle



Plumed Whistling Ducks



Track into Bynoe



Bynoe Shack



Muddie



Another Sunset



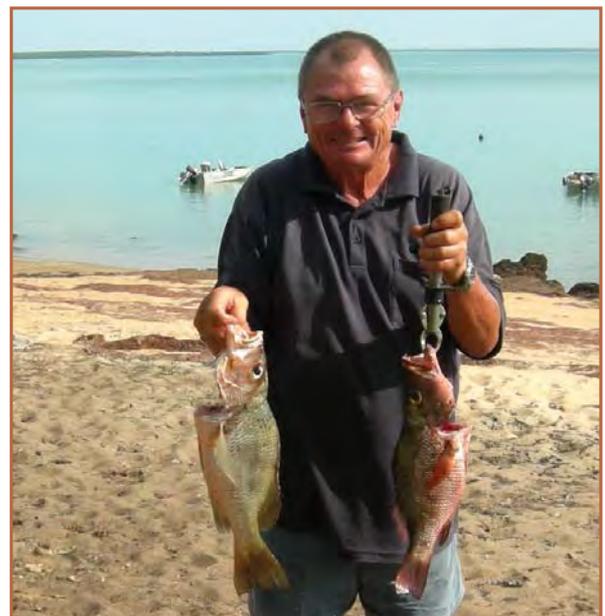
Goanna



Bocci



Tinnies at Rest



Reef Fish

|| Bynoe Harbour, Wangi Falls, Kakadu National Park Edith Falls, Roper River to Borroloola

I'll leave it to my photographs to depict the beauty of Bynoe Harbour. There were twenty or so corrugated iron shacks overlooking that vast expanse of water. Arch and Charli (Charmaine really, but she hates that) owned one of them. For 15 years they had spent the whole dry season at their shack. Only when the wet began did they head home to Darwin. We set up the vans beside their shack, looking out over the water, and immediately understood why Arch and Charli had chosen that lifestyle.



Beer O'Clock

During our first day on the water we caught two muddies and six reef fish. Our daily routine went something like this – fishing, cleaning fish, checking pots, cooking crabs, reading and relaxing, a very competitive game of bocci (girls vs boys, of course), beer o'clock, rounded off by watching spectacular sunsets.



Sunset

Over the first two weeks, we couldn't eat all the huge crabs we caught. Except for Mike, we all wanted a ham sandwich for lunch. Mike never tired of crab, however we did pull the pots out for a while.

Armed with some local knowledge, we fished the reefs in the harbour and spots up the creeks off Turnbull Bay where cod, nannygai, mangrove jack and golden snapper were happy to take our bait. Mike loved the 'jack attacks'. We also did battle with many sharks and the occasional giant trevally.



Muddie

The first crocodiles we sighted were up one of the creeks. They were not big, but active. One actually chased a big fish up onto the bank in front of us – the fish had no chance. It was an amazing thing to watch, although if we'd blinked we'd have missed it. Those crocs were babies, however, compared to one we came across one morning out on the reef in the harbour. We were heading out to our spot hoping to catch a few good fish and saw a large log floating right where we wanted



Jack



Croc in Creek



White Bellied Sea Eagle



White Bellied Sea Eagle



White Bellied Sea Eagle



White Bellied Sea Eagle

to go. As we approached it the monster simply sank before our eyes. Five metres would be a conservative estimate of its length. Needless to say the fish were in hiding and not interested in any bait we had to offer that morning.

One morning we were fishing over a reef in the harbour when a hammerhead shark appeared at the back of Milo Too. Very strange looking creatures they are with their flattened, hammer-like heads and big eyes sticking out at each end. There were three boats anchored on the little reef but ours was the only one the hammerhead was interested in. It found my line and proceeded to swim back and forth over the braid. Whether it had an itchy spot or simply enjoyed the sensation we'll never know, but it went on for ages and drove me nuts!

Then it was joined by a smaller hammerhead and the two of them played at the back of Milo Too for about an hour. We were very privileged no doubt to have such intimate contact with two of God's creatures. Our catch for the day, however, wasn't worth talking about.

Three white bellied sea eagles were regular visitors because Arch had trained them to watch for fish skeletons on the rocks in front of the shack. Since we arrived they had turned up almost every day, flying down against the breeze to claim their meal. Their elegance, viewed at such close proximity, was something to behold.

We remained at Bynoe Harbour until after Territory Day, 1 July, when the 'shackies' always got together for cracker night – yes, it was still allowed up there. We pooled our money and ended up with a box of mixed fireworks, enough to entertain the 20 or so people present. We lit a bonfire, sat on the beach and enjoyed a fabulous evening.

Bennie the resident bowerbird had built a beautiful bower beside the driveway, and we marveled when he brought home pieces of green glass, adding some colour to his array of sun bleached shells. Talk about a lover boy. Some days when we were relaxing under our shade tree Bennie would fly in with three girlfriends in

tow. Quite a little love shack he had going there.

While we were sad to go, we didn't want to overstay our welcome. After one last fishing trip we left idyllic Bynoe to stay a few days at Tumbling Waters, 50 kilometres or so back up the road towards Darwin. We washed our clothes, cleaned our vehicles and stocked up with good water. Then we set off again, to Litchfield National Park.

It's a beautiful place and a very popular tourist destination, being only an hour and a half from Darwin. We found spots in Wangi (wong-guy) Falls campground and settled in for four nights.

If there was one person in the crystal clear pool beneath the falls on any given day, there were over a hundred. Most spoke languages none of us could understand. It was weird to feel like an alien in our own country. Mike and Ken enjoyed the cool, clear water, though. They went swimming twice a day.

We did the bushwalk above Wangi Falls and were disappointed that the only living thing we came across, foreign visitors excepted, was a spangled drongo, a black bird with red eyes and a funny shaped tail. With so many people around, the wildlife remained hidden. It was the same deal at the rock pools, where we couldn't find anywhere to park the vehicles. We went back to camp, sulked over a red or three and got our maps out. Time to head to Kakadu!

On our way out of the park we stopped to look at the magnetic termite mounds. Some were a couple of metres high, aligned north to south, and looked like tombstones in an ancient burial ground. They're built to minimise exposure to the hot sun and the little white ants work for ages building the mounds with excrement, dirt and saliva – yuk. It's true, we read it on the information board.

Our first camp in Kakadu National Park, the northern Merl campground, would be home for a few days. In the blink of an eye, the men had the tinnies offloaded and ready for the East Alligator River. It was the most beautiful river in the region, with clear water and sandy



Brahminy Kite



Bonfire Ready



Alight



Fireworks



Bower

shores. The far side bank of the river formed the border to Arnhem Land.

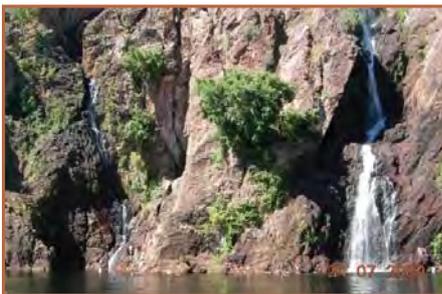
We came across a big croc within minutes of the boat ramp, asleep on a sandy bank. Ken went closer than he should and decided it was a fake, put there for the tourists paying big bucks for the river cruise. Yeh, right. If that's the case, Ken, why wasn't the damned thing there when we came back a couple of hours later?



Mike and Cod

Ken and Dawn, who had been there before, led us to a hidden lagoon off to the side of the river. It was inaccessible to larger boats. Two Jabiru surveyed their kingdom from a spectacular rocky escarpment.

The day got even better for Mike, who broke his barra drought by catching two legal sized fish in the East Alligator River.



Wangi Falls

That afternoon we took a short trip to the Border Store and Cahills Crossing that provided vehicular access into Arnhem Land. A young family of five was standing too close to the waters edge, which made us very nervous. A man was taken at the Crossing many years ago, and I knew how quickly these monsters could lunge out of the water. The beautiful little three year old dipping her toes in the water would have had no chance if a hungry croc had been lurking close by.



Termite Mounds

On a lighter note, every time I visited the loo at the northern campground, a tiny, tawny tree frog was sitting in the same spot behind the door. Of course, I always said "Hi". Those who know me well, take no notice when I talk to my veggies or the plants in the garden. But on day four the little frog was gone – oh, no!



East Alligator River

Day five, there were two backpackers chatting away, fixing their faces and hair as I went in and closed the toilet door. I don't know, but perhaps you can imagine their reaction when they heard me talking to the toilet bowl, "Ooh, you're back! Where have you been?" They stopped talking and there was dead silence. They were also conspicuously absent when I reappeared a tiny bit later. Me? I was very happy to see the little frog back in its special place.



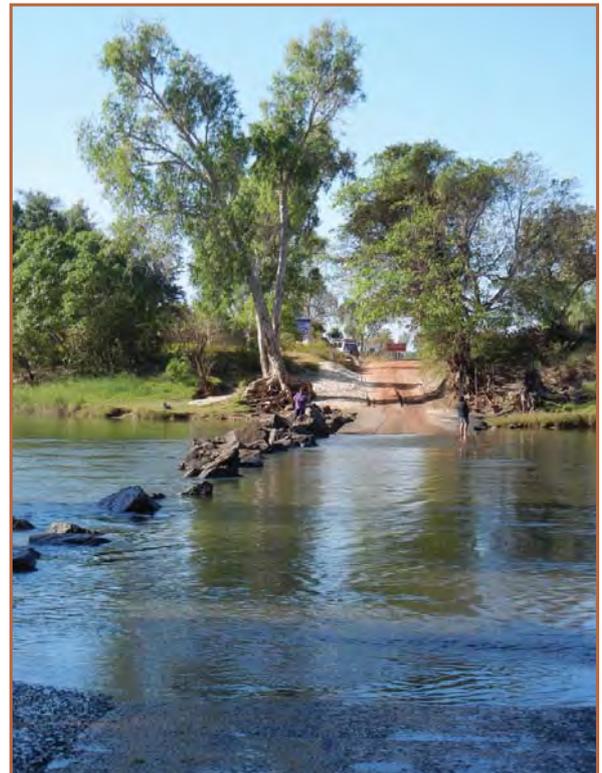
Big Crocodile



Hidden Lagoon



Two Jabiru



Cahills Crossing



A Smiling Mike



View from Ubirr

We also walked the Ubirr art sites on the Arnhem Land escarpment, and took a short climb to the top for a great view of the floodplain where lagoons and water lilies were still visible in the aftermath of the big Wet.



Friendly Willie Wagtail

We headed to Jabiru where we restocked, washed clothes, and stayed overnight before leaving for the southern campground, Mardugal. Over the following week we fished Yellow Waters, Mardugal and Jim Jim Billabongs. We released all but one of the fish we caught, preferring river barra to those that lived in the billabongs.

We climbed Nourlangie Rock for another great view of the Kakadu landscape and, in our opinion, saw some of the better rock art in the region.



Just Because I liked it

The 4WD track to Sandy Billabong was fun and we came across a carpet of beautiful yellow wildflowers. Those flowers disappear in a flash and we realised how fortunate we were to see them.

We left Kakadu and camped at Harriet Creek, where we saw three birds that only live in the Top End. They were the Northern Rosella with its conspicuous black hood, the Varied Lorikeet with a big white circle around its black eyes, and the plump Partridge Pigeon with large red patches on its face.



Fireplace

When we emerged from our vans the following morning, we were surprised to see a big horned buffalo sauntering down the dirt road. He was on his way to the creek for a drink.



Sand Monitor

Our Camps book included a place called Pussy Cat Flats, two kilometres east of Pine Creek. Pussy Cat Flats turned out to be the Pine Creek Turf and Golf Club. We were intrigued by the catchy name, so we had beer o'clock at the clubhouse and asked the bartender. In the old days, it was the location of an indigenous community, where the drovers would come looking for female companionship – sometimes coerced, sometimes not. It wasn't what we were expecting, but there are lots of similar stories in the history books.

Our next stop was Edith Falls, north of Katherine



Water Lilies



Jacana



Water Lilies



Family of Geese



Whistling Ducks



Saratoga



Magpie Goose



Nourlangie Rock



Another Monster Croc



Art



Sandy Billabong



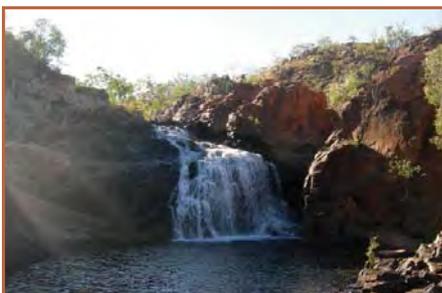
Muddy Track



Buffalo



Pine Creek



Edith Falls

and part of Nitmiluk National Park. We couldn't understand why there were so many tents and vans, but no one swimming in the big pool at the bottom of the falls. We discovered why next morning when we walked the loop track, looking for birds. Everyone was at the top pool, and wasn't it magnificent! During this walk we spotted our first little woodswallows. They're dark grey, with blue beaks. We saw not one but dozens, huddling together on one branch.

We restocked at Katherine and continued south on the Stuart Highway, agreeing that we'd never seen so many caravans on the road. They must be driving the truckies nuts! In general, grey nomads are not their favourite people.

South of Mataranka we turned east on the Roper Highway and stopped for a cuppa at a designated rest stop. While the kettle boiled we read some information boards. Apparently the early indigenous people used termite mounds to cure stomach ailments and to stem bleeding. Early settlers also crushed and compressed the mounds to make the floors in their homesteads. We cringed at this because we remembered what the termite mounds were made of...

When we hit the dirt on the Roper Highway, east of Mataranka, we knew it would be a long time before we found the bitumen again. Our first stop was supposed to be Roper Bar, where the Northern Territory meets the restricted area of Arnhem Land. When we got there, we looked at the campground and decided we really didn't want to stay, but before we left we hooked up to the water supply and filled the van tanks. Then we wandered down to the river crossing and had a good look at the 'bar'. It's taboo to cross this river without a permit and we didn't have one.

We took the track into Hodgson River, a spot Ken had been waiting to visit. Two years before when Mike and I returned to Brisbane because of Mike's hip infection, Ken and Dawn had gone on alone. The Hodgson is isolated, and they didn't want to venture in without support. So this time, we braved a horrendous track, losing a radio antenna to a tree branch. Milo suffered

a little ding, and we had a hard time finding a decent spot to camp. When we finally circled the wagons, we treated ourselves to an extra glass at beer o'clock. Ken had well and truly overcome his hankering to visit the Hodgson.

Next morning we continued along the Roper and entered the newly formed Limmen National Park. Stop one was Tomato Island, a very popular campground. Too many people for us, so we found a quiet camping spot not far down the road, where we stayed for two nights.

We took advantage of the excellent mobile phone reception and called our kids. During those two days we caught some cherabin, saw some cormorants, rajah shelducks and lots of water lilies in the billabongs. Water buffalo crossed our path and a shy plains turkey, or bustard, got caught on camera.

Then we found a campsite beside Mountain Creek which runs into the Roper River. We put the boats in the water, set the pots for cherabin before beer o'clock, then relaxed. It turned out to be a great spot because we caught heaps of cherabin and the Roper was only a short boat ride away.

For the first three days, we sank the cherabin on floats with no success at all. Then we met Charlie from New South Wales, who had been coming to the Roper for years. He was one of those rare fishermen happy to share their knowledge. During the following six days, employing Charlie's technique, we produced 26 legal barra and heaps more less than 55 cm. Dawn took the prize for the biggest barra, a whopping 82 cm. Thanks, Charlie!

One morning while Mike and I were targetting a particular snag, a sulphur crested cockatoo landed on a dead tree trunk nearby. It walked from the top to the bottom of that trunk, totally upside down, and took a leisurely drink.

Then we left the Roper River and the Roper Highway and entered Nathan River Road, stopping at St



Apostlebird



Wild Orchids



Roper Bar



Bustard Busted



Camp on Roper



Cherabin



Brown Tree Frog



Nice One



Mike's turn



Stop for Lunch

Vidgeon's Ruins, which had once been a mission. We set up camp beside a large billabong at the rear of the ruins where there were lots of lovely shady trees.

Mike decided we needed some exercise, so he and I set out to walk around the billabong. We saw lots of small crocs sun baking on the bank. Without exception, they panicked when they saw or heard us approaching, and belly-flopped back into the water. Not the big saltie we came across, though. We watched as it very slowly and quietly backed into the shallows. We gave it a wide berth.

Our next destination was Limmen Bight Fishing Camp on the western side of the Gulf of Carpentaria, where we stayed five days. In those five days we fished twice, travelling 30 kilometres to the salt water. Our catch included snapper, jew, barra, cod and grunter. We threw back a boatload of blue nosed salmon, some queenfish and lots of big, black bream.

Then we reached Towns River, where we positioned the two vans on a rock ledge, two metres above the water, right beside the wide, clean river. One boat went in the water and the men fished. After they found some cherabin for bait, the barra were theirs.

We came across another huge saltie baking in the sun. It was pushing five metres in length and had an enormous belly. That was a good thing, it meant it wasn't hungry.

When it was time to move on we drove to a pretty spot on Brumby's Lagoon. During the night we heard the dingoes howling close by. Then we both heard a thud and assumed it was a stick dropping from the tree nearby. Turned out it was not. The next morning we found the dingoes had been playing tug-o-war with the electric lead from the generator to the van. They'd chewed the cord right through in one section and had lots of fun chomping other bits as well. What a shame the gennie wasn't on at the time!

They pulled so hard on the cord that the plug actually came out of the van socket, which would have been the thump we heard. They wanted to take their prize back

to the lair, didn't they? Unfortunately, the damage was done, but where on earth do you find replacement 15 amp gear in the middle of nowhere? Simple answer: you don't.

At Cox River, another 16 or so kilometres down the track, we parked the vans right beside the river between the river gums. The men set the yabbie pots while the women watched the birds, as usual. I rescued a beautiful little butterfly that was stuck in a flycatcher plant. What a sticky mess, but I felt good to see it fly away. I bet it was happy to be out of there, too.

That night the men caught a kilo of cherabin. There had been a little drama earlier when they were putting the pots in and Ken slipped base over apex into the creek. Fearing a croc attack, he climbed out as quickly as he went in. His pride was hurt more than his backside, but at least he got out in one piece. When they came back to camp he got absolutely no sympathy from Dawn, who said, "They were clean clothes this morning".

We stayed overnight at Butterfly Springs in the Limmen National Park. There were lots of black and white butterflies and heaps of birds. We watched a bowerbird building his bower in a most unsuitable and exposed place. How on earth he expected to impress the females out there in the open, and get down to real business, was way beyond us.

I was reading that afternoon when Mike stepped out of the van and fell into the dirt. He hadn't even had a drink. The 'step' was unstable on stony ground and moved as he stood on it. I froze, expecting the worst, but the hip stayed in place, thank goodness. His skin was a bit challenged in a few places but we could handle that. Dawn and I began to worry about those two and their recent mishaps.

We drove 180 kilometres through corrugations and bulldust into Borroloola. We would have preferred not to stay overnight, but we desperately needed a long shower. And it was so-o-o good! The van park managers visited at breakfast time to see if we'd lost anything overnight, as many people had. When we



What a Fish!



Thirsty Cocky



Camp at St Vidgeon's



Cutie



Whistling Kites at Limmen Bight

checked, we found we were OK. Apparently, some late night two legged scavengers had allegedly taken anything that wasn't locked away or nailed down. We hoped we would never have to set foot in the place again.

Borroloola water is top quality, so we filled up, restocked with food and beer and headed east. Before we could blink we were back on the gravel, but the road on the south side



Grey Crowned Babbler



Campsite



Camp at Towns River



Along the Savannah Way



Resident at Towns



Power Cord at Brumby's Lagoon



Cox River

III

Manangoora Station Burketown, Flinders River, Cardwell, Peak Downs Highway and home

Manangoora Station was owned freehold by an indigenous family. Lennon, a grandfather himself, was the son of an indigenous drover who bought the property years before. Lennon was a great fellow with a real Aussie sense of humour and a keen eye for the dollar. The family mustered brumbies and allowed fishers to stay on the property, by the river, for a price. When we visited the price was \$150 per rig, but you could stay for as long as you wanted. In that area, that was very good value. At a similar place down the road, the fee was \$500 per week for exactly the same facilities – none.

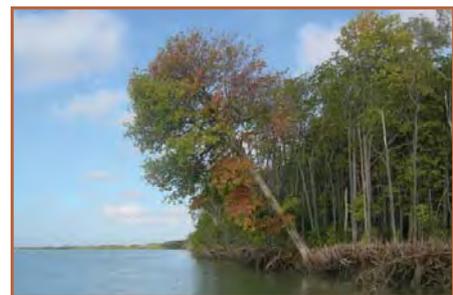
We set up camp at a great spot right by the Wearyan River, about seven kilometres from the Gulf of Carpentaria. First day, we motored up the river and found ourselves out in the bottom left corner of the Gulf. How special was that? On the way back to camp we trolled a few lures and Mike caught a 55cm barramundi. Guess what we had for dinner that night? From then on, we caught lots of barra, reef fish and enough muddies to keep us happy.

Between our camp and the station homestead was a permanent community of professional crabbers and their families. We met some of the children who were pupils of School of the Distance Education. Not sure how many pros there were, but several families were leasing riverside land from Lennon, who sold them brumby meat for bait.

Each crabber had at least one licence, which covered a designated area and allowed 60 pots. Only one crabber was permitted to put traps in the river and he was very active. The rest were positioned out in the Gulf. The crabbers took their catch to Borroloola each Wednesday for transport to Darwin, then Asia.



Manangoora Campsite



Wearyan River



Sunset



Fishing the Gulf



Wearyan Jack



Creek



Milo Too



Lots of Fish



Jewfish

About four days in, the men were putting gear in the boats for a morning's fishing, when one of the pro crabbers pulled in and asked if they'd like to go with him to check his pots. Would they what! Crabber Clem had 60 crab pots in the water at the bottom of the Gulf. During the trip he told the men many stories. His white father had adopted him when he was three. He had two brothers and twelve sisters. Clem served in the Australian Army and did tours in East Timor and Iraq. He met General Cosgrove at a function to welcome the diggers back from Iraq. Corporal Clem is still in the Reserves. When the Army does operations in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Clem is called on for local knowledge as he was born there and lived most of his thirty years (just guessing) in the area.

One morning at Manangoora I was sitting under the van awning, legs crossed, reading a juicy murder mystery. The men had gone off to fill the water containers at a nearby billabong. Suddenly, a movement nearby attracted my attention. Three metres to my left a snake was slithering across the grass, and it was coming my way!

It was well over a metre in length and more than 2cm thick, dark grey with a small pale head and a lighter underbelly. Holy smokes! "No, no, it'll turn off when it gets to the matting" I told myself. No such luck, across the mat it came. I froze. Not only did it keep coming, it actually slithered over my foot, aaah, then continued under the table, the towel rack, through the water hoses and into the nearest tussock of grass. I lost it – as my closest family and friends would expect.

I had palpitations and thought my heart would jump out of my chest! I'm strong in most areas of life, but snakes are my absolute downfall. Poor Dawn had to pick up the pieces and paste me back together. When the men returned, they burned down all the tussocks of grass near the van. They knew the snake was long gone, but they did it for me and my sanity.

I needed more than the usual number of drinks that night to ensure that I didn't have any nightmares... After lots of research and examining lots of photos, we think it may have been a coastal taipan, but we weren't sure.

We remained at Manangoora for a little over two weeks, catching mostly mud crabs, barra and cod. Mike had a jack attack and boasted it was the only mangrove jack caught at Manangoora that trip. He also landed a 5.5kg black jew, 87cm long. A real beauty.

Then we made our way to Burketown, planning to spend a few days checking out the big Albert River and that beautiful rolling cloud called the ‘morning glory’. Well, we did see the cloud form on the horizon at Burketown, but sadly it didn’t roll in while we were there. There was also a massive saltpan north of the town. We drove 20 kilometres across it and were very glad we had a GPS. It would be so easy to lose your bearings. A little wind and the tracks disappear.

Seventy kilometres further along the Savannah Way we found Leichhardt Falls. We liked it so much we stayed two nights instead of one. The falls were pretty, surrounded by clean river sand and huge, water worn, flat rocks.

We finally found the bitumen coming into Normanton from the west. Apart from a few short stretches of tarred road, we’d just travelled 1300 kilometres on gravel, some of it good, some of it really awful. We’d arrived in broilga country – there were hundreds of them.

For the following week, we camped at one of our favourite spots – Walker’s Bend on the Flinders River, 60 kilometres south of Normanton on the road to Cloncurry. It was cherabin heaven.

While we were up at Bynoe Harbour, we learned that Territorians call whistling kites ‘shit hawks’. I had no idea why. Ken decided he’d adopt the title and for the six days we were at Flinders, he referred to the numerous whistling kites that play high up in the thermals as ‘shit hawks’. During our last beer o’clock together, we watched the kites circling overhead. One of them decided to show Ken why they’d been given that nickname. Splat! Bull’s eye! Well, three out four of us thought it was funny.

Milo and Hank began the journey home next morning; our friends were going a different direction. We gave both vehicles a much needed wash on the grass at



Jabiru



Rosella Plant



Silly on the Saltpan



Leichhardt Falls



Camped at the Falls



Resting at Flinders



Cherabin



Sunset



Kapok Tree



View from Tower

Croydon Caravan Park, before heading off to camp again at the Chimney near Georgetown. When we woke after a chilly night, we found that a chip in Hank's windscreen had turned into a crack from top to bottom.

We worked our way east to Ravenshoe and Atherton. Between Atherton and Innisfail we came to Wooroonooran National Park, which had a wonderful rainforest canopy walkway. We enjoyed the walk and climbed the 38 metre tower for a spectacular view of the surrounding landscape.

Further down the road was Paronella Park, a heritage listed tourist attraction in far north Queensland. We joined the tour and heard the story of a Spaniard's dream to build a castle and bring his loved one from Spain. Well, over the years, floods and cyclones had taken their toll; however, the current owners were very passionate about their park and were undertaking major restoration work. There were lots of people present and the van park was on overflow.

We spoiled ourselves with two nights at Flying Fish Point, a holiday destination near Innisfail, where Hank was fitted with a new windscreen. Then we headed for Cardwell to stay with friends we hadn't seen for some years.

En route we detoured to Etty Bay, where we saw our first cassowaries roaming free. They wandered past and paid us not one scrap of attention. Obviously, they were used to visitors invading their territory.

We had a wonderful time with Brad and Lin. We were all once members of a deep sea fishing club in bayside Brisbane. We felt as if it was only last week, not several years since we'd seen each other. That's the way it is with real friends, isn't it? Anyway, we went fishing in their Goodwin long boat. The weather wasn't good for a trip to the reef, so we fished in the bay near a trawler wreck. Lin caught dinner; Brad hooked a feisty shovelnose shark; and I almost gave myself a hernia bringing in a big barracuda about two metres long. Mike spent half an hour and all his energy playing tug o' war with another shovelnose shark, but this one was a monster, over three metres long.

Mike took Milo Too and fished most mornings in Meunga Creek. He caught several barra, but only one large enough to keep, and that was on his last day out. We said goodbye to Brad and Lin and travelled south.

Travelling through Townsville we realised how dry the landscape had become. Then, near Mackay, we commented on the straggly sugar cane. It was harvest time, but the quality of the cane was terrible. We left the highway and drove through Marian and Eton – more disappointing cane crops - and joined the Peak Downs Highway west. We wanted to see how the coal mining area was developing.

What we saw was very confronting. We couldn't drive more than a kilometre on the highway without seeing a white sign that said 'Crash Site'. The signs didn't stop for ages. At one creek crossing there were about a dozen signs all depicting crashes, some fatal. Turned out it was an in-your-face road safety campaign to try to stem the carnage. Tired miners were rushing home after grueling shifts and coming to grief. There were 28 mines in that tiny part of Queensland with another 16 destined to come online. No wonder the local community was concerned.

From Nebo to Coppabella to Moranbah we observed many donga camps. They were well laid out and landscaped, and the dongas were air conditioned, but they were dongas just the same. Dongas look very much like shipping containers and there were thousands of them. Dysart and Middlemount were similar. The open cut mines were enormous and we were glad we made the detour to have a look. When we left the mines behind, our thoughts turned to home and we travelled as far as Mulgildie, a tiny community south of Monto, before we called it quits. With permission, we parked in the backyard of the pub for the night, before returning home next day.

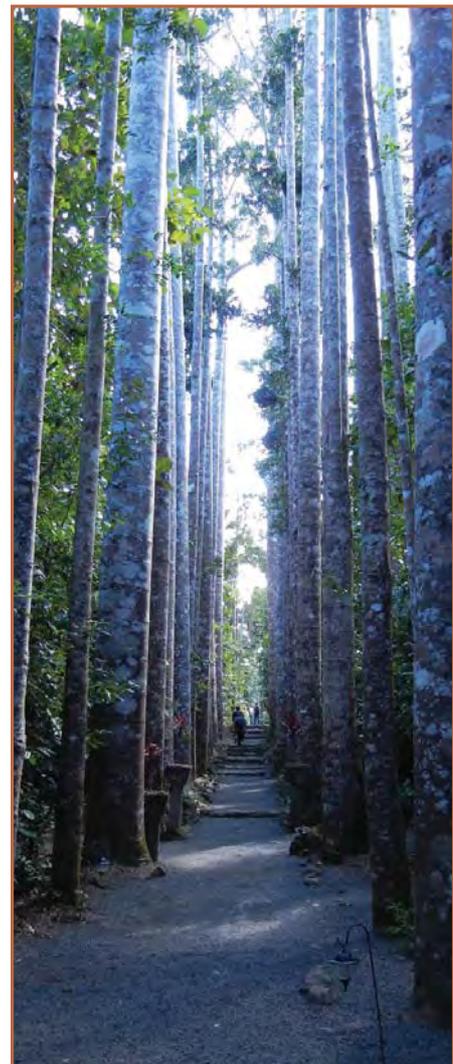
I was really looking forward to seeing our babies and it was time for my annual check up. During my visit to the oncologist I had mentioned my aching fingers, and he zeroed in on the cancer medication. Apparently, some of the long term side effects of that pill had finally



Bowenia



Paronella Park



Paronella Park

caught up with me. That wonderful man had steered me safely through years and years of treatment and now he was setting me free. No more cancer pill. I would still have to self-examine on a regular basis and have annual mammograms and ultrasounds but I would return to the care of my GP. Wow! That had to be a good sign.



Paronella Park



Cassowary



The Goodwin



White Lipped Frog



Nest of the Sunbird



Peak Downs Highway



Mulgildie

CHAPTER 7

SOMETHING SHORT AND SWEET IN QUEENSLAND



| *Beach Camp at Teerwah, Donnybrook, Wildflowers in the south-west and home*

After Christmas we travelled to Noosa and the Great Sandy National Park in Queensland. We were booked for ten days camping along the beach at Teewah. This involved taking a ferry across the Noosa River from Tewantin to Northshore. We felt a bit nervous as we'd never towed Milo on the beach before. With Mike's help, Hank did a fabulous job toughing his way through the deep, dry sand to get Milo down to the more solid, wet stuff. Our destination was another 35 kilometres up the beach where we would join Ken and Dawn who had been there since early December. We made good time, eyes peeled for playing children.

Some of the grandchildren came for a week and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The fire ban had been lifted so we toasted marshmallows, cooked potatoes in foil, and made twisties on a stick. Twisties start as a dough of flour and water twisted around a stick and cooked over coals. Then the stick is removed and the hole filled with syrup, honey or jam. Kids love 'em. They also loved building sandcastles, fishing, swimming, climbing sand blows, picnicking at the lagoon or simply exploring. The ocean sang us to sleep at night and the afternoon sea breeze kept us cool.



Our Camp



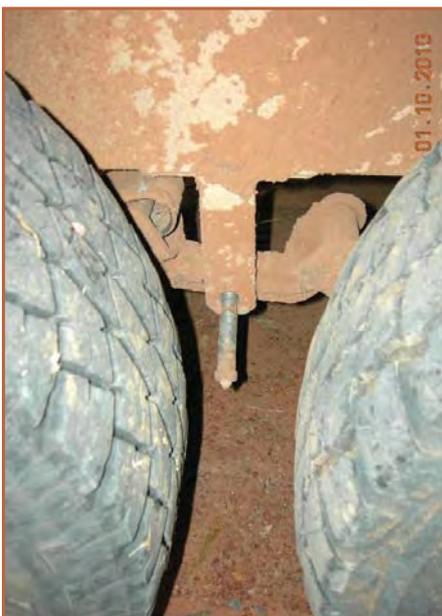
The Sandcastle

When that was over, we headed down to Donnybrook. Look out prawns and muddies, we're back. We were told that Fisheries inspectors were hitting the region hard. Sure enough, less than a week later when Mike and Ken were throwing the cast nets in Glasshouse Creek, up came the big boat. All was in order and the inspectors went off in search of another victim. On their way home Mike and Ken came across that same Fisheries boat firmly stuck in the mud. Our heroes pulled the boat out and were subsequently sworn to secrecy. However, I didn't promise the inspectors anything!

On one of their expeditions Ken pulled up 30 young eel tailed catfish in one cast. Cursing, he carefully extracted each, avoiding the barbs and sent them back to their mother. On his very next cast he hit the jackpot; up came another 90 odd! It's an understatement to say that he was not impressed. He had to watch out for the

spikes and waste heaps of time getting them all out of the net. To rub salt into the wound, Mike, who was throwing his net only a couple of feet away from the other side of the tinny, didn't catch one.

When the families came for weekends the kids went out to help check the crab pots. Their grandfathers gave them a good time, sometimes even pretending to race each other back to the boat ramp. The rain was a problem again that year. Although it didn't trouble the crabs, the prawns went to sea to escape the fresh water flowing down the creeks.



Close!

Then September arrived. Mike and I planned to check out the wildflowers in south-west Queensland and go bird watching. We made it to Charleville and had to call the RACQ. Mike noticed that the central load-sharing pin in the van suspension was out of place. In fact, the nut was gone and the bolt had almost worked its way right out. Phew! That was lucky. We could have been in the middle of nowhere and Milo would have gone home on the back of a tow truck. Of course, there was no bolt the right size anywhere in Charleville, was there? We sat and chewed the cud till the part was airfreighted from Brisbane. As you'd expect, the freight cost more than the nut and bolt, but the young RACQ mechanic was worth his weight in gold, fixing the problem in no time flat.

We moved on to Lake Houdraman outside Quilpie. The next day we looked at the murals in town depicting the history of the region. We were privileged to meet the talented local

artist who had painted those murals. She worked at the information centre, and was a lovely lady to boot.

We climbed up Baldy Top Lookout and watched the little fairy martens fly around us. They are part of the swallow family and make bottle shaped mud nests that stick to the ceilings of caves or overhanging arches.

Then we headed south, stopping for a steak sandwich at the pub in Toompine, population two, with one away fencing! For a small place it was surprisingly popular. While we were there three road trains pulled in, their drivers looking for lunch. From Toompine to Thargomindah we saw the most beautiful wildflowers. It was a stop start, stop start afternoon on the road.

At Thargomindah we spoke to the information officer about the road to Tibooburra. He advised it was open to 4WDs with caution. However if it rained, the road would be closed. Rain was expected that afternoon. We continued on to Lake Bindegolly National Park, 34 kilometres from town on the Bulloo Development Road, and set up camp by the lake. It turned out to be a great afternoon, even though I was disappointed that it was too windy to set a fire. The birds made up for that disappointment. We identified 20 different species, four that we hadn't seen before.

The most fabulous sight of the afternoon was a daddy emu shepherding his 14 youngsters down to the lake for a drink. He took them across in front of Hank, hesitated because he sensed me there waiting with the camera, then continued on his way.

That night the wind blew furiously. I'm guessing it hit 40 kilometres an hour, and the rain started early in the morning. We moved to a sealed road before we even had breakfast and any thoughts of travelling from Tibooburra to Bourke were well and truly quashed.

It rained all morning, but there were emus, goats, bearded dragons and even a turtle hell bent on playing chicken with the few vehicles that were on the road. We passed cotton plantations, grain fields and wildflowers as we travelled through Eulo, Cunnamulla and St



Mural at Quilpie



Paper Daisies



Pretty Coloured Flowers



Woodswallow



Toompine Pub



Wildflowers



Wildflowers



Wildflowers



Beautiful Blooms



Beautiful Blooms

George. At nightfall we parked by the Moonie River, in front of the Nindigully Pub. This pub was Queensland's oldest, its first licence being issued in 1864.

When we arrived at Nindigully, we opened up the van and found everything jumbled inside. Our coffee mugs jumped out at us when we opened the cupboard door. The sealed road was worse than many corrugated dirt roads we'd travelled, including the infamous Gibb River Road.

Well, we had to try a Nindigully beer and then dinner, of course, as the pub was well known for its great food. We sat with a friendly couple from Albury Wodonga who owned a heavy Bushtracker caravan. Their tow vehicle was a big Chevy that had very low ground clearance and they told us they were forever getting bogged. The vehicle was fitted with a winch that they'd grown to love! No wonder. They definitely needed to raise the suspension under the Chevy, just for starters.

A constant drizzle from the sky greeted us next morning. The gully where we'd camped had turned into a slippery quagmire, so we stayed on for another night, hoping that the rain would stop. A Victorian couple tried their luck moving out that morning and got stuck. It took two vehicles, one with our tow rope and another with a snatch strap, to pull them out. By midafternoon the rain stopped and we crossed our fingers. Then we enjoyed a very beautiful rainbow, visible from one end to the other right before sunset. A good omen, don't you think?

We took our time next morning, hoping the bog would dry out a bit more. Then, with our patience exhausted, Mike lowered the tyre pressures and our beloved Hank waltzed Milo up and out of the boggy gully with no problems. See why we love him?

Back on the road, we headed down the Barwon Highway for Goondiwindi. In a couple of places the surface water lapped the road but caused us no hassles. We arrived in Goondiwindi on Saturday afternoon, which meant the town was nodding off for the weekend. We cleaned the Nindigully mud out of our clothes and the

van before walking to the bank of the MacIntyre River and looking across to New South Wales on the other side.

We headed off towards Toowoomba. While Goodiwindi is famous as the home of Gunsynd, the racehorse, we'll remember it for its prickly pears. We'd never seen so many, and they were as tall as the trees! Suddenly, we realised we were on the wrong highway. We wanted the Cunningham, not the Gore. So, we hung a right at Millmerran and went south to Inglewood, where we stopped for lunch before making our way to Nobby.

This was Ken and Dawn's old stomping ground, and Dawn had asked us to find out if her big cod head was still hanging in the bar of Rudd's Pub. Many years before, as part of a fishing club competition, they were fishing in Glen Lyon Dam, near Texas not far from the Qld/NSW border. Dawn's cod was the biggest caught and weighed in at around 28lb. Go the girls! Anyway, Mike and I headed off to the pub to have a drink, a few games of Keno, and dinner. Sure enough, Dawn's cod head remained in pride of place and looked great. Remember Dad and Dave from On Our Selection? Legend has it that Steele Rudd wrote those famous stories in that pub. We camped on the common across the road and woke to more rain. It was time to go home. Enough was enough.

We made our way through a very foggy Toowoomba, north to Yarraman and arrived in Kilcoy where we came to a stop. The creek at Kilcoy had flooded and the road closed. So close to home, and yet so far.

Next morning the bridge was still closed, and would stay that way until a safety inspection was conducted. We found an alternate route, and headed down the Brisbane Valley. When we reached the Wivenhoe Dam we stopped briefly. It was only the second time in its history that the lake had filled to its capacity, and one of the five flood gates had been opened. We watched in awe at the volume of water gushing from the dam.

We reached home before the bridge at Kilcoy was re-opened. That felt good!



Dad Emu and Chicks



Dark Clouds



Nindegully Pub



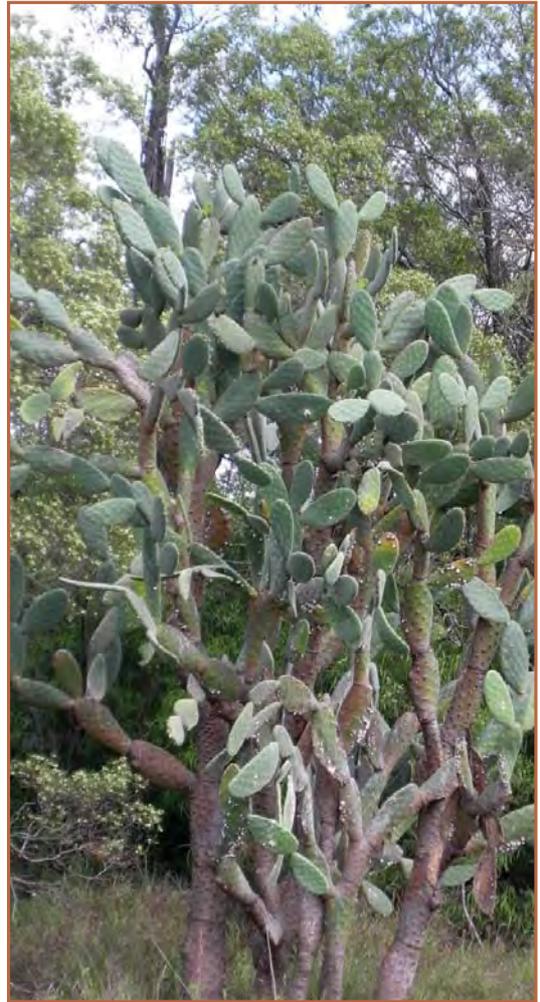
Sloppy Mess



Ducks



Rainbow



Cactus



Cod Head



Foggy Toowoomba



Road Closed Kilcoy



Wivenhoe

CHAPTER 8

SOUTH AUSTRALIA HERE WE COME



|

On the way to SA, A Family Farewell, Fleurieu Peninsula East

Unfortunately, the rain meant it wasn't a good prawning season that year at Donnybrook. When we came home we found the garden in a terrible state, so we had three full days of weeding and cleaning up before the house sitters arrived. We wouldn't be doing that again as all that bending played havoc with my knees. By the time we headed off to tour the three peninsulas in South Australia my knees were complaining so badly I could barely walk. Ken and Dawn were travelling to Western Australia, so we'd be on our own again this year.

We decided to travel via Canberra and Melbourne to catch up with family. So we pointed Hank and Milo south along the New England Highway. We pulled in for a cuppa at Wallabadah, south of Tamworth, and wandered through a First Fleet Memorial Garden. The memorial listed the names of all the convicts and sailors who voyaged on the First Fleet, and the vessels they sailed in.

Seventeen kilometres south of Singleton we found a campsite off the highway. As we were enjoying beer o'clock, a couple from Swansea, near Newcastle, arrived in a Winnebago. They remembered Milo from Broome and Karijini National Park a few years before. She must have made a big impression on them, huh?

We bypassed the centre of Sydney, travelling through Parramatta instead. As we were leaving a service station in Campbelltown, the police pulled us up and pointed out a flat tyre. Don't know what we ran over on entering the servo, but the almost new tyre couldn't be fixed. We changed it in the back streets of Campbelltown and continued on to Canberra.



Eskdale Village

Late that afternoon we set up camp in a noisy motor park on the south side of the city. Hank got himself some new shoes and that cost a cool thousand bucks, thank you.

Mike's mother was waiting for us, anxious because she expected us sooner. She had lost a lot of weight in the three months since we'd last seen her and while her mind was still sharp, her body was failing. She was 91 and weighed about 30 kilos. We stayed a few days then set out towards Victoria, suspecting we would have to return in the near future.



Mitta Valley, Eskdale

At Albury we detoured to Eskdale, a tiny village on the Omeo Highway, where some members of our family were staying at their trout fishing cottage over Easter.

We stayed in the caravan park, beside a fast flowing creek and an apple tree loaded with fruit. We found ourselves in the middle of a group from Wagga who had spent the last four or five Easters at Eskdale. They invited us to join them around their smoky campfire. We spent many hours chatting with them and playing musical chairs to get away from the smoke.

We climbed a hill looking out over the lush Mitta Valley, the tall poplars covered in yellowing leaves dotted among the grazing friesian cattle. Easter Sunday Mike went fishing for a brown trout but didn't manage to hook one. He said it was too damned cold to be wandering about in the freezing water anyway!



Fishing Dartmoor Dam

Easter Monday the whole family made their way to Lake Dartmouth and enjoyed a barbecue lunch before some tried their luck fishing in the dam. Dave, one of

our big kids, hooked himself a healthy rainbow trout that Mike and I enjoyed for dinner that night.

On Tuesday we left Eskdale and headed for Melbourne. As we approached the city it started to rain. That'd be right, as if towing Milo into the city wasn't stressful enough! Thankfully it stopped before we reached the caravan park in Coburg, eight kilometres north of the CBD. Close enough. Mike was worried about a tiny oil leak in Hank's transfer case. As there was a motor vehicle repair shop near the entry to the van park, we called in to get it fixed. Only a small job – or so we thought.

“No trouble”, the mechanic said, “any other problems? I'll take it for a run....okay?” He came back and reported all was well except for a noise on full right lock in the front wheel. “I'll have a look under the bonnet – what's that smell?” He checked the oil, and found water in what little oil was left. “Looks like a head gasket problem,” he declared. “Didn't you see the warning lights?”

Mike responded, “Did you?” If the warning lights had been working, we wouldn't have been having that conversation.

To cut a long story short, the water pump had seized, and the motor had overheated, warping the head. Fortunately the bottom end was okay. We agreed to put in a refurbished head, new water pump, sensors, gauges, and so on.

One week and \$6,500 later we had our Hank back. Even though he had obviously been very ill, he had run like a dream right up until the moment we handed him over to the mechanic. No unusual noises, no lack of power, no symptoms at all. Oh, what a feeling!

During Hank's week in hospital we used trams, trains and buses. We enjoyed a coffee in Federation Square, visited some of Mike's relatives who he hadn't seen for many years and wandered through the botanic gardens looking for autumn leaves. Apparently, autumn arrives in Melbourne on Anzac Day, so we were a little early. I wondered who told autumn it couldn't arrive until April 25 each year. We did however hear and see some bellbirds, which was a real treat as they are usually very shy and hide from view.

A tram took us back to Collins Street, where we wandered through the many lanes crisscrossing the major inner city streets. We couldn't believe how many cafes and coffee shops there were. I'd often heard it said that Melbourne was the world's most livable city and that may be so, but not for us; there were far too many people jostling for space on the footpath. We did enjoy our caffeine fix, though, and took a gander



Black Swans at Botanic Gardens, Melbourne



Wow, How Old is This



*Gog and Magog in Royal Arcade,
Melbourne*

at the two mythological giants, Gog and Magog, who stand beside the big clock at one end of Royal Arcade. Fortunately, we found our way back to Flinders Street Station, caught the train and returned to Milo safe and sound.

We picked up Hank and couldn't get out of the city quick enough. Too crowded by far, too much traffic, too much everything – give us some space! The Princes Freeway took us from Melbourne to Geelong and the

Princes Highway led us to Winchelsea, where we stopped and enjoyed a light lunch at the historic pub. On we went to Panmure, where we camped at a beautiful little park that was built to commemorate the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

Those fires burnt 210,000 hectares, an area twice the size of Melbourne, and a great number of people lost their lives. Many more lost their homes and possessions. One of those fires, in which nine people died, came to within a few kilometres of Panmure. As we relaxed that afternoon, the fires seemed but a distant memory. We watched a couple of yellow rumped thornbills forage in the grass a few yards away.



Gumnuts at Dartmoor

We drove into Portland for lunch, then headed for South Australia. As we drove west we caught glimpses every now and then of sand dunes and the ocean. Huge pine forests on both sides of the road reminded us of the pine forests in Beerburrum. We stopped for a noisy overnight stay at a pretty spot near the turn off to Dartmoor.



Port MacDonnell Coastline

We drove through Nelson next morning, where the Glenelg River met the sea, then we detoured to 'Australia's Southern Rock Lobster Capital', Port MacDonnell. The breeze chilled us as we walked to the lookout, on the site of the old lighthouse. It's no wonder many ships were lost along that rugged coastline back in the latter part of the 1800s.



Blue Lake, Mount Gambier

On the way to Mt Gambier we noticed a slight whine coming from the motor. As soon as we arrived we had it checked and found that some water from our previous drama had leaked into the alternator. Yep, that meant a new alternator and another \$500.

Mount Gambier is the second largest city in South Australia, and is built on the slopes of an extinct volcano. One of the crater lakes in that extinct volcano

is world famous because the water changes colour so dramatically every year. A vibrant blue during the summer months, it becomes green-grey from about April to November. I can't tell you why it happens; I just know that the lake is beautiful.

We also explored the amazing Umpherston Sinkhole, not far out of town. It had been a limestone cave until the ceiling collapsed. Now, it's a deep and beautiful sunken garden with magnificent vines dangling from the ground above, enormous tree ferns, crows nests and fabulous flowering hydrangeas. We wandered the meandering paths for ages.

Then we got a call from Mike's sister, saying that his Mum was very low and had stopped eating. Milo and Hank went into storage and we flew back to Canberra via Melbourne. We shared the vigil at Mum's bedside with Mike's sister, Ann. Sometime during those solemn days in Canberra, Ann drove us to lunch at a small restaurant beside a park. After we'd eaten we wandered the trails and watched the autumn leaves falling. Ann showed us some satin bowerbirds and their bower. We spent quite some time taking photographs and watching the antics of those wonderful birds.

Mum fought on for ten days, surviving on nothing but sips of apple juice and steadily deteriorating. She passed away peacefully, aged 91. Mum had lived in Mirinjani Hostel for almost ten years, so the family decided a small memorial service in the Hostel chapel would be appropriate. That way, staff and other residents would be able to attend.

We made our way back to Mount Gambier, collected Hank and Milo and continued on our way, via the Tantanoola Caves, 20 kilometres south of Millicent. There's something magical about caves. This cave was small, but spectacular.

Before we checked into the caravan park at Beachport we were drawn to Woolley Lake, a small saltwater lagoon, by the promise of good bird watching. We enjoyed the grassy walk around the lake, but there was little water and no birds. It had been a dry summer and autumn in that part of the country.



Umpherston Sinkhole



Umpherston Sinkhole



Autumn in Canberra



Dad Satin Bowerbird



Mum Satin Bowerbird



Autumn Leaves at Mirinjani



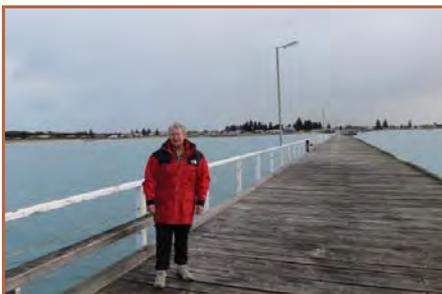
Tantanoola Caves



Walking Track at Woolley Lake



Red Necked Avocet at Pool of Siloam



Jetty

At the Pool of Siloam, a salt lake and popular swimming hole near town, we saw a dozen or so red necked avocets sheltering from the wind. They are large wading birds with a weird shaped beak that tweeks up at the end. The Pool of Siloam is almost seven times saltier than the sea, and said to relieve the aches and pains of arthritis. Well, perhaps not in South Australia in May, huh?

After spending some time on the jetty, we said goodbye to Beachport and travelled north to Robe, another holiday destination. There were many beaches around the bay, and Robe was home to a large crayfishing fleet. The ocean side of town was rugged and rough seas were eroding the 160 year old Obelisk that was once used to navigate vessels into the bay. Sadly, it was in real danger of toppling into the sea.

We moved through Kingston with its Big Lobster then pressed on towards Taillem Bend, when we heard an awful noise under Hank's bonnet, saw smoke and smelt something burning. Oh, no, not again! We suspected the compressor in the air conditioning unit had packed it in, so we turned it off and carefully made our way into town. No, the mechanic there was too busy; however we were too frazzled to continue and stayed in Taillem Bend overnight.

Next morning we drove to Murray Bridge, which is a large rural city of 18,000 people, less than an hour from Adelaide. As we approached the city we observed sheep, cattle, grapes and a very healthy vegetable growing industry. Then we called the Royal Automobile Association of South Australia and they directed us to some very helpful auto electricians who sorted out the problem post haste. Thank goodness, there are still some good guys out there. We booked in at a caravan park and chewed our fingernails. Yep, it was the air conditioner. Another \$1200, thank you very much. Okay, Hank was all better, and we were off to the Fleurieu Peninsula.

We followed the path of the Murray River south through the dairy farming country to Wellington, where the Murray ran into Lake Alexandrina. This shallow, freshwater lake was so huge that if you went

out to the middle you wouldn't be able to see land in any direction. Wellington provided a 24 hour free ferry service across the Murray River. We stopped for lunch at the Wellington pub, which had been operating continuously since 1848. Although it's nothing special to look at, the pub food was delicious, especially my pot pie! Yum. We sat and watched the ferry transport loads of vehicles back and forth across the river.

Next stop was Milang, where Lake Alexandrina came right up to the town. It had a huge caravan park and rows of brightly painted cabins right by the water, so it must have been a popular place in summer. We passed a few olive groves and more vineyards before we reached Goolwa and set up camp. Now, this was a town with character.

Goolwa was once one of Australia's principal 19th century river ports and a major shipbuilding centre. The town was declared a state heritage area in 1987. Today, Goolwa continues its wooden boat building tradition and maintains a 100 year old paddle steamer that takes tourists for trips along the Murray. We went to the information centre, where a very knowledgeable young woman helped us organise our visit to Kangaroo Island.

After a visit to the surf beach, we took a drive along a very bare stretch of sand. We then made our way to the Goolwa barrage, where the fresh and salt water are kept apart, as much as is possible. Several New Zealand fur seals lived around the lock, and they delighted us with their antics. One of them swam about continuously, lifting his flippers and tail as if they were sails on a sailboat. We watched for half an hour and he never stopped. His companions were doing their own thing: swimming, resting on the beams of the barrage, or sleeping.

A short drive from the barrage was the place where much of the 1976 movie *Storm Boy* was filmed, a touching story about a boy and his love for a pelican.

One morning we drove across the infamous Hindmarsh Island Bridge. We wanted to look at the mouth of the Murray River from shore before we saw it from the



Obelisk at Robe



Landmark at Kingston



Ferry across the Murray at Wellington



Old Sailing Boat



24 Goolwa Barrage



Water Ballet at the Barrage



Hindmarsh Island Bridge



*Murray Mouth from
Hindmarsh Island*



Barrage by Boat



NZ Fur Seal at Barrage

water. The Spirit of Coorong took us on a four hour cruise. First stop was the Goolwa barrage, then we passed through the lock, where we were reunited with the fur seals we had met the day before.

We cruised down to the Murray Mouth where the river entered the sea, separating two sandy peninsulas. Then we cruised into the waters of Coorong National Park and stopped for a walk across the narrow protective dunes to the Southern Ocean. Unfortunately, the tide was too high for us to twist up a few pippies, or cockles as they're known in South Australia. It's a big industry and we cruised past the cocklers' camps. For every few twists in the sand, we were told, they get a bucketful of cockles. This fishery is regulated to close between June and October.

When we returned to the lock the water was flowing backwards, or upstream, so we were concerned that the salt water was flowing over the lock. We were told that the high tide bringing in the salt water didn't get even close to the Goolwa lock because that's the way it's controlled, so while the river flows in reverse over the barrage, it's not salt water. We returned to Goolwa and agreed the afternoon had been a very pleasant experience.

We said goodbye to Goolwa and drove 20 minutes down the road to Victor Harbor. The population of 10,000 people swelled to 30,000 during holiday periods. Many years ago, Australia's first public railway operated between Goolwa and Victor Harbor. Today, one of Victor Harbor's big tourist attractions is a steam train ride that follows that same route.

We had lunch in one of the pubs and were pleasantly surprised to see a little replica steam engine pulling two carriages along a high ledge running around the dining room. A circuit took 70 seconds. Can you believe that Mike timed it? "As you do", he said. The kids who came in while we were there sat fascinated.

Victor Harbor had two whaling stations way back when the slaughter of whales was a recognised industry. After many years of shying away from the harbour, the southern right whales have begun returning to

Encounter Bay to mate and bear their young. That was such wonderful news and once again we were a bit early – they arrived from mid May through to October.

At the southern end of the city the Bluff offered a panoramic view of the extensive shoreline. Encounter Bay was one of the two huge curved foreshores that formed Victor Harbor. If you have ever wondered how Encounter Bay was named, I'll have to take you back to 1802. Englishman Matthew Flinders and his pussy cat Trim were sailing on the Investigator when they encountered the French explorer Nicholas Baudin on Le Geographe, who was sailing toward him. Although England and France were at war at the time, those two men met peacefully and exchanged important navigational information, after which Flinders named Encounter Bay.

We left the Bluff and its fabulous views and returned to town to walk the 600 metre causeway from the mainland to Granite Island, where there was a colony of fairy penguins. We visited the little centre for injured and rehabilitating birds at their feeding time and had a wonderful half hour watching them up close. They ate pilchards, waddled so cutely and swam so fast. Those tiny wonders will never be able to return to the wild but they were happy in their environment. In fact, they were pairing up and making nests, which had to mean they were happy!

On the day we were going to Kangaroo Island, we rose early so we'd reach the ferry terminal at Cape Jervis by 9.30am. Yeh, right! Fifty-eight kilometres won't take you long, we were told. But the road from Victor Harbor to Cape Jervis was hilly, winding and the surface uneven. I asked Mike to explain, without swearing, the condition of the road so I could get it right in my notes. He said, "I can't. Not without swearing." Even though we were stressing because we were running late, the drive through the Inman Valley to Yankalilla was stunning. Green rolling hills, sheep, cattle, horses, alpaca and geese outside the car almost made up for the tension inside.

We phoned ahead and told the ferry operators we



*The Mouth of the Murray River
Up Close*



Oystercatchers



Pelicans



*Confusing Flow of Water at
Goolwa Barrage*



Victor Harbor from Lookout

weren't making good time and would be a bit late. "Okay", the woman on the phone said, "but you may be asked to wait till the next ferry at 3.00pm". Far out!

The message that we were running late got to the men operating the ferry and they must have been in a good mood that morning because they were waiting for us. Whew! As soon as we arrived, they began loading the many vehicles already lined up. Mike got a mild slap on the wrist, but, we were on our way on time and had a fairly calm ride across Backstairs Passage. We headed for the coffee lounge – two strong ones, please.



Pacific Gulls at Victor Harbor



Fairy Penguin on Granite Island



Milo on Board the Sealink Ferry



Large Coffee Please



|| Kangaroo Island

After arriving at the island's ferry terminal at Penneshaw, we purchased a Parks Pass – essential if you want to enter the conservation areas. We dropped Milo off at the caravan park at Kingscote, the commercial hub of Kangaroo Island, then headed up to a little community called Emu Bay. We drove onto the beach and along the four kilometres of dense white sand. Then we grabbed our binoculars, and were rewarded with our first of many sightings of a tiny male superb fairywren, splendid in his garb of light and dark blue. He had brown wings and white belly, and boasted quite a harem of dull brown females. We also watched a very colourful fan tailed cuckoo and several silvereyes.

Over the years that we travelled through wine growing country, we had realised that the little silvereye was not a friend of the vineyard managers. As the name suggests, it has a small white ring around the eye, but mostly the bird is a yellow-green with black edged wing and tail feathers. Fortunately, silvereyes won't travel far from the safety of the trees, so the vineyard managers know that only the outside circumference of the crop will be sacrificed to these tiny birds. We had noticed a few vineyards had vines growing on the outside fence and wondered why, until we learned about these birds and guessed that the silvereyes had been taken into consideration. We thought that was a very clever idea.

Sunday, Mothers' Day, we drove to a place called Duck Lagoon and spent hours with our eyes glued to the



Beach at Emu Bay



Chestnut Teal at Duck Lagoon



Crimson Rosella



*Yellow Billed Spoonbill at
Duck Lagoon*



Narrow Entry to Stokes Bay



Stokes Bay Beach

binoculars. Then we drove north to Stokes Bay and walked along a pristine beach.

We splurged on a Mothers' Day lunch at Two Wheeler Creek –a vineyard, a marron (freshwater crayfish) farm and a restaurant. We had a platter of hot and cold marron, scallops, prawns, salad and delicious dipping sauces with garlic pita bread. We also enjoyed a couple of glasses of their famous sauvignon blanc.

A tour of the marron farm after lunch proved interesting. While these crayfish were originally from southern Western Australia, Kangaroo Island was an ideal environment for breeding them. They breed once a year and can have up to 600 sprats per female. Ouch! They can grow to over 1kg and may live for up to 20 years, but most are sold at around 100 – 250g at two years of age.

We hooked up Milo and drove to Seal Bay Road in the southern region, where the Raptor Domain was advertising an interactive presentation. We loved it! So different to any other bird of prey show we'd ever seen and we've seen a few. I got close with a boobook owl called Boo! A fabulous little mopoke, with feathers so soft you wouldn't believe.

The performance started with a red junglefowl, a very fine rooster, without whom there would be no chicken industry. We met Timmy the magpie and Tommy the currawong, both rescued and rehabilitated at the centre. Then the raptors arrived. Apart from Boo, we saw a young wedge tailed eagle, a kestrel, a hobby falcon, a barn owl and a tawny frogmouth.

From there we went to Seal Bay to visit a colony of Australian sea lions. We wandered down and along the beach with our guide among gorgeous big-eyed babies, young bucks showing their elevated levels of testosterone, and mothers back from 72 hours of fishing, exhausted and sleeping on the sand.

How about this for a birthday lunch – tempura whiting, crumbed calamari and poached king prawns, perfectly cooked, with chips and salad! Plus a glass or two of

local riesling. Until then, our experience with King George whiting had been negative, but not any more, it truly was delicious. After lunch we made our way to a campsite near Flinders Chase National Park so we could spend a few days exploring the western end of the island.

We did a lot of walking and saw many new birds. Before we took a guided tour of the local Kelly Cave, we strolled the two kilometre Burgess Track and enjoyed every second in the dense sugar gum forest. During the cave tour, we were both concerned that many, but not all, of the stalactites were drying out. Perhaps the gum trees above are soaking up all the moisture.

We walked the beautiful beach at Hanson Bay then returned to base at Western Kangaroo Island Park, where my personal chef Mike cooked a very enjoyable meal in the camp kitchen. We were able to share a wood fire with other campers and eat in a very relaxed environment. It was wonderful.

Then we had an early start in the National Park, going first to Admirals Arch via a boardwalk on the south-west corner of the island. The arch formation has been forged by the great Southern Ocean over many years. The fur seals rest and play beneath and around the arch. We watched some trying to return to shore. They would almost make it up the rocks to dry land then a wave would swamp them and pull them back into the wash. That went on until they got their timing right and came ashore exhausted. Mike and I found ourselves totally involved, urging them to 'come on, you can do it, quick before the next wave comes'. I'm sure they appreciated our encouragement. On our way back to Hank a tiger snake slithered across the path in front of us. That made me jumpy because I thought the weather was too cold for the reptiles and I hadn't been keeping an eye out.

Next we followed another boardwalk to Remarkable Rocks. It took 500 million years for these rocks to be sculpted by the wind. On the information board there was a photo taken 100 years ago of a couple standing beneath the overhang and we compared the picture with



Me and the Mopoke



Big Eyes



See Lions at Seal Bay



Sleeping It Off



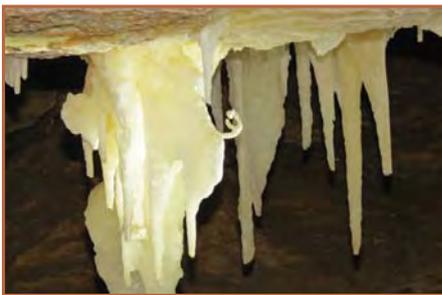
Cape Barron Goose at Western KI park



Scarlet Robin at Western KI park



Wallabies at Western KI park



Kelly Hill Caves



Kelly Hill Caves



Turkeys

what we were seeing that day. The only obvious changes we saw were the clothes the couple were wearing.

Next stop was Cape Borda Lightstation on the southwestern corner of the island. This spot was very remote, deep in rough, dense bushland, on top of a huge cliff face overlooking a vast ocean. The lighthouse was short and square, very different to the standard round shape you'd expect to see. Sitting so high above sea level, this lighthouse had no need to grow tall. Mike got to play gunnery officer and was given the honour of firing the cannon. It was deafening and I don't know how I managed to take a photo while staying in focus. I almost jumped right out of my skin. The cannon is fired every day at 1.00pm no matter if there's a tourist around or not.

We were hungry by the end of that tour and it took us another three-quarters of an hour to make it back to the nearest food place, Flinders Chase Café. The road was rough and before we reached the end of the corrugations the passenger's side rearview mirror broke away from its mounting. What can I say except ho, hum! Eventually, we enjoyed our late lunch and made it back to Milo without any further hassles.



Dad Superb Fairy Wren

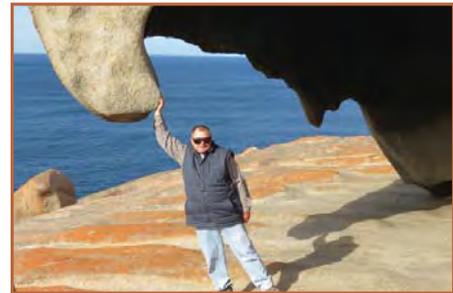
We packed up and worked our way north to American River, a small fishing community named for the American sealers who visited in the 1800s and mistook the narrow, hourglass bay as a river. We tried King George Whiting for lunch again, and again we found it absolutely delicious. We camped by the bay and spotted some crested terns, but there weren't many birds on the water, even the pelicans were missing. Maybe it was too cold and windy.

Then we travelled towards Penneshaw, diverting to Pennington Bay, a very popular beach for the north-eastern island residents. It was a beautiful crescent of clean sandy beach and aquamarine water that would be a wonderful place for a swim in summer. After checking into the only van park in Penneshaw for our last night on Kangaroo Island, we wandered through the village and understood how seasonal the island really was. It was the middle of May and already several cafes were closed and would not re-open until October.

We boarded the ferry and had another comfortable trip back to the mainland. I was grateful for the calm sea because I do get seasick. All those years of deep sea fishing and taking pills, I never managed to conquer it.



Remarkable Rocks



Mike at Remarkable Rocks



Tawny Crowned Honeyeater



Crimson Rosella at Duck Lagoon



Cape Borda Lightstation



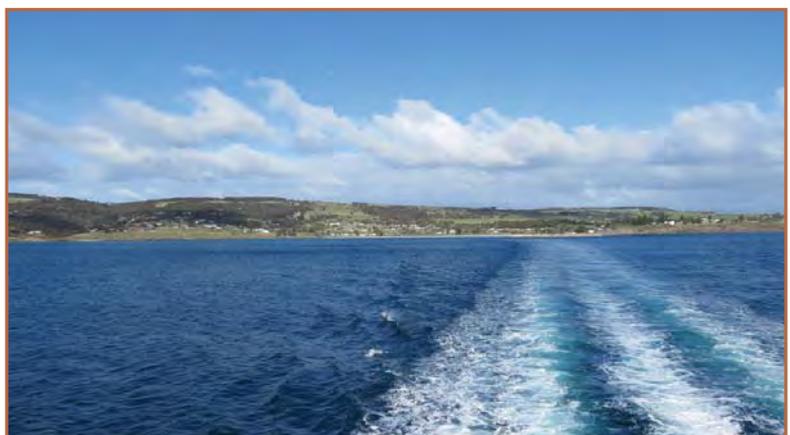
Hon. Gunnery Officer Wise



Crested Tern at American River



Popular Pennington Bay



Back to Mainland

III Fleurieu Peninsula West, Hahndorf, Adelaide Zoo, Yorke Peninsula

Back on the Fleurieu Peninsula, we made our way to Aldinga Beach where we had asked our house sitters to send our mail. We travelled north along Fleurieu Way, the road flanked by grapevines and olive trees. We dropped Milo off at our campsite and explored the area. Our first stop was the town of McLaren Vale, which was surrounded by massive vineyards and cellar doors. We did, of course, taste test some of the grape juice on offer. The vines were all losing their beautiful autumn leaves. Pruning would begin in June and that would be a huge job!

We travelled back to the coast and found Maslin Beach, with its spectacular coloured cliffs. Our brochure said it was Australia's first official 'unclad' beach. We had a good look around but didn't spot any nudies, although they'd have had to be keen, it was a cold day.

Driving on some of the beaches was allowed, so we did. The two fishermen we saw casting a line were both wearing waders. There were a lot of people walking their dogs and moving almost as fast as we were. The speed limit on the beaches was 10kph.



Maslin Beach

Our next stop was Hahndorf and the Adelaide Hills. Heading north-east the vineyards and olive groves give way to gum trees, pine forests and lush green pastures. With the pastures came horses, cattle, sheep and goats. Oh, and alpacas.

We were definitely getting old and forgetful. On arriving at Hahndorf we went into a café for a cup of coffee before joining the many other tourists wandering around town. We got halfway up the street before we realised we'd walked out of the café without paying. Feeling very guilty, we nevertheless continued on. The 100 year old elm and plane trees in the main street were shedding their leaves, presenting a picture perfect scene. Hahndorf would be just as beautiful in summer, however, with the great trees providing a lush, green canopy over the street.

The reason we visited Hahndorf wasn't for the specialty shops or its German heritage. We came because we both like the work of artist Hans Heysen. Many years ago, before we met, Mike and I had both been to Hahndorf and seen some wonderful paintings at the Hahndorf Academy in the main street. Not any more. The Academy had become the information centre and the art had all been moved. A collection of his work was now displayed at his former home and studio, The Cedars. Heysen lived and painted there



Mallards at Hahndorf Van Park



Adelaide Zoo



Funi



Wang Wang



Little Cuties

for over 50 years and the studio is heritage listed. We were there on a Monday and The Cedars was closed. Having come this far, we decided to stay for a night. We lunched at the German Arms Hotel before returning to the café, red faced, to pay for the coffee we had earlier. We booked into the only van park and paid an arm and a leg for the privilege. I was looking for gold taps in the shower – not even close.

Tuesday morning we were up and gone, waiting at The Cedars to see the great man's work. We don't believe any other artist has been able to capture our gum trees the way Heysen did, although Albert Namatjira came close.

We arrived in Adelaide by lunch time, settling in at a van park about five kilometres from the city. Then we caught a bus to the botanic gardens and walked to the Adelaide Zoo. We wandered for a few hours and realised how privileged we were to live only a few minutes drive from Australia Zoo on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. There is no question it is the best. We did, however, love Adelaide's little meerkats and the tiny tamarin monkeys. South Australia has invested a sizeable amount of money in an attractive and comfortable home for their giant pandas, Wang Wang and Funi. Now they just have to improve on the rest of the zoo.

Then it was time to tackle the Yorke Peninsula, so we headed north along Port Wakefield Road. A very strong north-westerly wind whipped up dust all around us. This part of Australia was very dry and still waiting for rain. At lunch in Port Wakefield we overheard a conversation about the grain farmers choosing to dry seed their paddocks. With the wind that day they would have lost all the grain as well as the topsoil. The wind turned one of Milo's hatch covers into a flying missile and had both arms of our lowered TV antenna disco dancing on the roof. Yep, the dramas continued. By early afternoon, when the wind had eased, we heard a severe weather warning broadcast – they were a bit late. We covered the hatch with plastic and anchored it with duct tape.

We stopped at Edithburg at the bottom of Yorke's heel as the wind brought with it lots of rain. The wind blew so hard our 3.5 tonne Milo rocked most of the night, and next day we bunkered down for more of the same. In fact, our position in the van park left us very much exposed to the gale force winds.

At least the farmers would be happy the rain had arrived. There was a pause in the downfall around lunch time, so we walked to the pub for lunch. The going was easy as the wind blew us along and we savoured that fresh smell in the air after rain. However the walk back after lunch was a case of two steps forward, one step back.

Our journey up the west coast was a repeat of the east coast and we were so disappointed that we'd struck inclement weather. We stopped at Minlaton and had a delicious cup of coffee from the Chockolaterie, where it was very difficult to resist ordering a few home-made chocolates.

We worked our way north, cursing our luck with the weather. It was still cold and overcast when we eventually settled in at Port Pirie and Mike took the opportunity to replace the TV antenna. We were relaxing after our shower when I thought I recognised a man walking past. When he reached the back of our van he saw the 'Milo' sticker and said, "Well, I'll be blowed, Milo!" It was a mate from our old deep sea fishing club. We hadn't seen John and Margaret for nearly ten years and we spent an enjoyable couple of hours catching up.



Windy Port Wakefield Road



Edithburg Camp



Fixing the Antenna



An Ever Watchful Butcher Bird

IV Eyre Peninsula and home



*Wudinna Statue of the
Australian Farmer*



Sturt Desert Pea

We progressed to Port Augusta then onto Whyalla, where we stopped for lunch. It was still very windy and overcast with intermittent rain, so we altered our plans. The weather forecast was for more of the same for most of the next week. We took a byroad north to Iron Knob and followed the Eyre Highway west across the top of the peninsula, heading for Streaky Bay. We hoped that by the time we made our way down the west coast road, we'd have better weather when we got to Port Lincoln, Tumby Bay and Arno Bay, where we could do some real fishing.

We stayed overnight in Wudinna, on the Eyre Highway. In the grounds of the information centre there is a huge granite statue celebrating 'The Australian Farmer', draped with sheaves of wheat and with several sheep at his feet. Sheep and grain were the lifeblood of this part of South Australia. As we were walking back to the

car after taking a photo of the statue, we found a beautiful clump of sturt desert peas in flower; the fabulous floral emblem of the state.

We made it to Streaky Bay by morning tea time. Our first priority was to hit the laundry, as we were running very low on clean clothes. This was our second visit to Streaky Bay, with the caravan park situated right on the foreshore of a protected bay.

A most glorious day dawned: no wind, blue sky and warm sun. We bummed around all morning. Mike went fishing along the jetty while I had a haircut. Then, while Hank was having his oil changed to protect the warranty on his new head, we checked out the shops and visited the Streaky Bay Restored Engine Museum. On display were 460 engines of many sizes and many uses, all restored and in working condition. The oldest engine was made in 1905.

Actually, the smell of linseed oil, petrol, kerosene, motor oil and grease that wafted through the three room building had me thinking of my Dad, who I loved dearly. He was always tinkering with motors and other equipment in his shed, surrounded by those very same smells.

Next stop was Venus Bay, a tiny fishing town overlooking a tranquil bay. Its permanent population is 20, although you wouldn't believe that if you counted the houses. 95% or more were holiday homes and were empty at the time of our visit. The van park

was close to the foreshore but had only bore water that was unfit for human consumption. Only keen fishers stayed there. We caught squid off the jetty and explored the heath along the coastline – a real spectacle with towering cliffs and big surf rolling in from the Great Australian Bight.

We left Venus Bay on the first day of winter and turned off the highway north of Elliston for a cliff top drive along the coast. Once again, we marveled at the rugged cliff faces and the thunderous waves crashing into them. We reached Coffin Bay at lunch time, had a look around town and bought Mike some of those famous oysters. That night we feasted on two of the squid we had caught.

The next morning we bounced our way across the rough track through the National Park and laughed at the emus racing us. Their bums wobble, did you know that? Rain began to fall, spoiling our plans for a picnic lunch. We turned back earlier than intended and came across a couple from Canberra, bogged in sand to the axles of both their vehicle and the trailer they were towing. Mike, the Good Samaritan, helped them out.

We hit Port Lincoln on a Sunday, so not much was open. On the foreshore there was a bronze life sized statue of the three time Melbourne Cup winner, Makybe Diva. Her owner was a Port Lincoln man, the second largest tuna farming operator in the region.

Port Lincoln had a reputation as Australia's largest fishing port. The demand for wild abalone outstrips supply and abalone farms had been established to supplement the shortfall. When we visited, there were 20 sites for growing mussels; 64 licence holders fishing for lobsters; 39 licensed prawn trawler operators and many more professionals fishing for scale fish and shark. The farming of Southern Bluefin Tuna and Yellowtail Kingfish is amazing. It was a big business when you realised there were 100 bluefin cages offshore. Each cage had up to 4,000 fish and when harvested the tuna sold from \$500 to \$5,000 each, depending on size and quality.



Eyre Peninsula Coastline



Some of the Coastline Around Venus Bay



Jetty at Venus Bay



Mike's Big One



Our Catch



Bum Wobbling Emu



Wildflowers Coffin Bay



Coffin Bay



Swim with the Tuna at Port Lincoln

Port Lincoln had a tourist attraction called ‘Swim with the Tuna’. A 15 minute catamaran ride from shore, there was an enormous cage containing 60 Bluefin Tuna. There was a viewing platform in the centre, and people donned wetsuits, flippers and gloves so they could swim with the fish. We booked at the information centre and looked forward to another new and exciting experience.

Overnight the weather deteriorated so badly we were sure our trip would be cancelled. As we hadn’t received a call to say so, we checked in at the tour office at the allocated time. “Yes, Mrs Wise, the trip is still on.” “Madness”, I said. “Just as well I took my seasick pills.” We headed out to see the big tuna. The conditions weren’t too rough while we were underway, but when we arrived at the cage, the crew couldn’t tie up. The catamaran was rocking one way, the platform another. It was far too dangerous. So we came home disappointed, but glad the crew had taken the safe option and appreciative of the full refund.

We had lunch and worked our way north, past the attractive coastal holiday town of Tumby Bay and onto the smaller, but no less attractive Arno Bay, where we called it a day. I was so impressed by the rose garden in the van park. The beautiful blooms were being wind burnt in the atrocious weather, but their perfume was divine.

It was still blowing a gale when we left the next morning for Whyalla. We had a look at HMAS Whyalla – the first ship built in the Whyalla shipyards in 1941 – and took a tour of the steelworks. We had a very knowledgeable guide who confused her captive audience with technical jargon. From a distance, we saw the blast furnace, wharf and coke ovens. Also from the outside we saw the plant and rolling mills where rail line, steel railway sleepers and structural steel is made. The good news was that significant expansion was currently happening on the 1000 hectare site. Go, Whyalla!

After Whyalla we began the long trek home, camping at Yunta where the overnight temperature dipped to 2°. Brrrr. As soon as our fingers thawed out, we were

off to Broken Hill, crossing the border into New South Wales before lunch. We stayed the night in Broken Hill, continuing on next morning to Wilcannia. As we travelled the local radio told us the temperature overnight at Yunta was -5° . Wow! And we thought 2° was bad enough! We missed it by one day. Do you think that maybe our luck had finally changed on this trip? The sky was clear, the sun was shining, the wind had dropped, and Hank was purring like a pussycat.

We crossed the Darling River at Wilcannia on our way to Cobar. We encountered so many goats along the way and couldn't tell which were stock and which were feral. They were behind the fences, in the long paddock and on the road. There were billies - one with a big, beautiful beard - nannies, big kids and baby kids. There were almost as many emus - no babies though. After travelling 460 kilometres that day, we were more than ready to stop.

Cobar is situated in the centre of New South Wales, and its prosperity was built around mining and pastoral industries. The town had a welcoming feel about it and was a lot bigger and more alive than we expected. If we hadn't been so keen to get home, we would have stayed longer and explored more. Next morning we slept in, then worked our way north to Bourke and across the border into Queensland. In two days we travelled almost 900 kilometres. We stayed in Cunnamulla for the weekend, where we spent a few hours out back of one of the pubs. We enjoyed a meal, relaxed in front of a gidgee campfire and listened to the tales of a 75 year old drover, who was a whiz with the whip.

Sunday, we had a look at the weir over the Warrego River, strolled through town, and admired the Cunnamulla Fella statue that still presided over the town.

We travelled to St George, passing the recently harvested cotton fields, and spent the night at Nindigully. The next day we continued through a bustling Goondiwindi, back across the border and on to Glenlyon Dam via the Bruxner Highway, where we spent a few days. The little wood fire was wonderful and we promised ourselves we'd return with Milo Too



The Tuna Cage



Arno Bay



HMAS Whyalla



At Yunta



Cunnamulla Whip Crack Away

and enjoy a few weeks fishing for murray cod and yellowbelly.

We made it home to fantastic weather and planned our return to the Yorke and Eyre Peninsulas, with lots of time and hopefully better weather. Maybe we'd go one November so we could get amongst the pink snapper. But it was time once again for my annual boob squish and ultrasound. I felt my stomach clenching already.



Glenlyon Dam



Mum and Bub at Glenlyon



The Dam Wall

✓ A Final Word

All was well for another year and I relaxed once more. Not totally though, apart from the regular checking for bumps I now had to look for alignment. Because one boob is bigger than the other - of course - these days I stand in front of the mirror as I dress and hitch up the heavier one so I'm lined up.

You know, when Raelene Boyle walked with Mike and me during that Mothers' Day Fun Run in Brisbane years ago, I don't think she realised what an impact her kindness had on me. She gave me hope and I'm certain I was only one of many. I remember before she left us she said, with her fingers crossed, that she was celebrating eight years free of cancer. I can't tell you how happy I am to be able to cross my fingers and say that I too, have reached that same milestone. That is truly amazing. It seems like yesterday that I was down on my knees praying that I would be around to watch my grandchildren grow up.

Grow up they have. I am so proud and so very lucky that they all live within a couple of hours travel from our home.

It's not possible for me to explain adequately how I feel about being given another chance at life; a life that will not go on forever. A life that I will never again take for granted. My heart is full and I treasure each and every moment I get to spend with my family.

As far as Mike and I are concerned – we intend to love each other, travel more and worry less for as long as we possibly can.

And a final thought. I'm willing to bet that Raelene and I will continue to front up for our medical checks every year with our fingers crossed! As will everyone else who has been visited by that cursed disease.

Thanks for reading my story. I hope you enjoyed it.

