



Newsletter No. 27 December 2011

What have we been up to?

I thought I would take this opportunity to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a safe and Happy New Year.

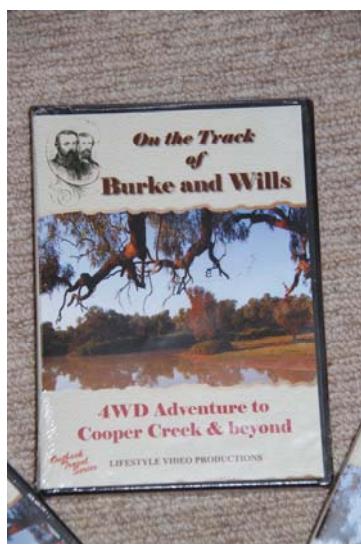


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Burke & Wills 150th Anniversary Tour DVD Price reduction

For a short time I have reduced the cost of the Burke and Wills 150th anniversary tour DVD to just \$20 plus postage, a great stocking filler (must be pretty uncomfortable having a DVD in your stockings??)

If you would like a copy you can purchase them from me, just drop me an email at info@greatdividetours.com.au



Get your copy for Christmas

Vic's new Book - Classic Outback Tracks

I must apologise as I originally indicated that my new book detailing 19 outback trips would be available in time for Christmas. Sadly this will not be the case and we are now looking at a March 2012 release date. I was asked to add in a few more tips and techniques to the book to make it the perfect package so this delayed the print run until 2012. But it has added value to the final product and it will certainly be worth waiting for. If you wanted to give this book as a Christmas present, no problem as I can issue a gift certificate for it now and will post out the book once it is available. A few people have already taken this option, so if you are after a copy for a Christmas present try the gift certificate idea. Just drop me an email at info@greatdividetours.com.au



Look for the DVD on 4WDOTY with the January issue of Overlander magazine.

Travelling the Outback

The second edition of my original book, Travelling the Outback is selling very well, audited figures (on which I receive my royalties) have just been made available for the January to June 2011 period and it looks like 1900 copies have been sold. That brings total sales since its release 2 years ago to approx 5000, not bad considering the first edition sold about 8,000 in ten years.

Yep, this will make another great Christmas present if you are looking for something different, just drop me an email and I can get one in the mail to you asap.

The adventures of the FJ

I've been rather busy with the fit out of the blue FJ over the past weeks (or at least in delivering it to various 4WD workshops and handing over all the money I earned from my book sales). Oh, but it has been fun, now I know why some people love shopping sooo much!

To start with the FJ went up to Out of Town 4WD in Newcastle for the fitting of the 120 litre auxiliary fuel tank. These masters of squeezing as much capacity out of the smallest cavity did a great job on the tank installation.



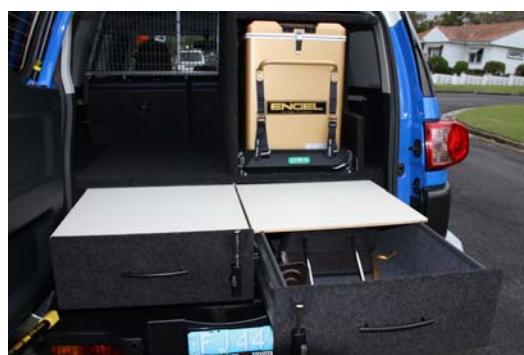
Check out the ORS drawers

Then I dropped the FJ into Off Road Systems at Smeerton Grange (don't you love that name!) Jamie had the FJ for nearly 2 weeks as they tried to grapple with my wishes to have a storage system, a cargo barrier, a fridge hutch and a new gold edition Engel fridge all installed in the small rear cargo space. But they did it! A masterful piece of engineering if ever there was one. Whilst dropping the FJ off the boss, Graeme, gave me a grand tour of the ORS shop. Did you know that they started out making high end audio speaker boxes and still do! In fact they make all manner of storage units and cabinets (yes of the kitchen variety) right through to Garbage bin holders that you see along the streets in suburbs. But, their magic definitely lies with what they can do in the back of a 4WD or van.

They proudly showed me a new VW Transporter that had shelves, and beds and even a swing out kitchen sink, amazing!

If you are looking to have a storage system fitted to the rear of your 4WDrive I reckon you can't go past the ORS units. www.offroadsystems.com.au

Now that I had my fancy new gold edition Engel fridge in place I needed to power it. So the FJ went back to Artarmon Automotive to have power outlets installed in the rear cargo area for the fridge and some auxiliary lighting, plus the fitting of a second battery under the bonnet. Piranha reckon they had a battery and isolator kit for the FJ so we got one of these. Sadly, someone at Toyota must not be talking to the other Toyota reps, because, although there is space allowed for a second battery, someone has then plonked the power steering reservoir in the middle of it. The Piranha kit includes a bracket to relocate the power steering tank, but it is a really tight fit and we may need to modify the radiator hose location as it is just touching the power steering tank. Not good if this rubs through. And something we all need to keep a look out for when having extra bits added under the bonnet. It wouldn't be the first time we've had a radiator fluid leak because a pipe or hose has rubber through on a trip. Go check your radiator and heater hoses now.



The ORS drawers double as a table top too!

Welcome back, (did you rush out to the garage to check your hoses?) Anyway, the fridge now has power and with extra power going to the back I had one of those fancy new LED strip lights installed on the rear

door. WOW! Does it give off some light! I'd love one of those LED light bars across the roof rack, are they legal??

After this the FJ went up to Mannell Motors at Thornleigh to have an ARB awning fitted to the roof rack, so I can keep cool or in Sydney's weather, dry! Through the FJ Cruiser club I managed to purchase a diff breather kit, but reading the blogs on the FJ forum site, I'm glad it will be Eddy at Artarmon Auto fitting this and not me. Nothing is as easy as the instructions make out!



Mannell Motors at Thornleigh

An untimely fuel leak from the carbon canister meant that I immediately saw the need for a fire extinguisher, so off I went to the local Autobarn store. Crikey! How long have men had these places to shop in? I spent a whole lot more money down there getting some more LED lights, and a tarp and some polish and some...., well you get the idea. I can't believe how cheap some of their gear is too! Probably all made in China but even I can't sell 1kg fire extinguishers for \$20!



Now I still need to sort out the actual storage boxes to carry my food etc and over the Christmas period I'll be looking at what is available. Then I'll install some tie down points in the storage area to keep these boxes in place when I eventually get to go 4WDriving. By the way, I filled up the two ORS drawers with a whole bunch of recovery gear from Terrain Tamer including a hand winch, snatch block, winch strap extension, snatch strap and of course some gloves and a tree protector. In the cabin up the front I've now mounted the excellent HEMA navigator Hni5 which not only has the HEMA 4WDrive maps loaded but also works as a street navigator when I'm in town. It even comes with its own nagging wife! Yep, there is a female voice constantly reminding me what the speed limit is, a bit like Big Sister watching over me.

Having had a set of Tyredog, Tyre Pressure Monitors in my Landcruiser for the past 4 years I felt rather vulnerable not knowing what was going on in the FJ's tyres, so Artarmon Automotive supplied another Tryedog unit for the FJ and now I feel far more in control, thanks guys!

The good news is, with all these extra bits I've added to the FJ, the ARB Old Man Emu suspension, which was way too harsh, has now settled down and the FJ is riding beautifully and still maintains its extra ground clearance.

Trips in the FJ

Fortunately it has not all been spend spend with the FJ, I've actually got out in it on two occasions now. The first was a recce run into the Brindabellas behind Canberra with Wayne and Jenny to have a look at some tracks they would be using on our Brindabella Camper Trailer trip. On the Saturday of that particular weekend the FJ had a starring role at an open day at Mannell Motors so we didn't get away until around 3pm. It was decided to head straight down to Castle View, my driver training facility near Braidwood, where we knew we had a dry bed and somewhere to cook dinner.



The built in chainsaw makes short work of obstacles like this, I wish!

Then we left early Sunday and went through Canberra to the Brindies. Spending the rest of the day sussing out tracks around the mountains and various alternative routes in case of bad weather, we eventually arrived back in Sydney around 9pm. The FJ went very well, the long range tank easily coped with the 900 kilometres we had driven and I averaged 13.5 litres per 100 k's which I was rather pleased with.



Oops, remember traction Vic!

The next trip in the FJ was in mid November when I led the Cliffs and Canyons tour. A bit more 4WD country on this trip, in fact we came to one nasty uphill with rock steps and the FJ's traction control made short work of it despite some substantial wheel lifts. This was followed by another steep downhill section, where I got the chance to try out the low gearing of an automatic gearbox mated to a petrol engine, well it was OK by these standards but I still needed a fair bit of brake pressure to keep the pace down. We also managed to lift a rear wheel

on this descent. Overall fuel consumption on this trip plus some around town running came in at 14.4 litres per 100k's. Can't wait to see what it gets on Stockton Beach which I intend to visit over the Christmas/New Year period.

So, as you see, I'm having a heap of fun doing up the FJ and using it. Someone said to me the other day, "You can't really sneak up on anyone in this 4WDrive, can you" Yep, it is in your face a bit, but quite frankly it is a very capable vehicle, nice to drive and fantastic value for money at under \$50k. (not counting all the extra bits I've added of course).

Overlander 4WDOTY

Now that the magazine is out I can talk about our long weekend of testing 8 new 4wddrives in South Australia. This year's test program was much different to past years where just new releases for the year were included, this time we took all mid spec family 4wddrives on the test route. And the testing was done in the outback at Mt Ive station in SA rather than the high Country of NSW and Victoria. And, we made a DVD of it all which you get free with the January issue of Overlander, race out and get it now, yep, I feature a bit in the DVD, sorry!



So who won? The **Landcruiser 200 series turbo diesel** won easily in the end. Despite its high price tag of \$90K it is an absolute perfect 4WD touring vehicle. The new, so called poverty pack, GX 200 series that is now available for \$79K is likely to sell a lot more Toyotas, but to be honest, the fitting of barn doors rather than the normal lift up

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window and fold down tail gate that makes the perfect lunch preparation table is a real loser for me. Looks like in the future I will still need to shell out the extra \$10K for the GXL version.

Back to 4WDOTY, for me the standout vehicle was the FJ, not again I hear you say; he keeps banging on about the FJ. Sorry, but at under 50k it is definitely the bargain buy of the year. I actually had the FJ top of my scoring list but the general consensus (and scoring) put the 200 series at the top followed on equal points by the Disco 4 and the Prado (even though it was in petrol form, if only Toyota had supplied a diesel Prado it would have probably scored second spot).



Photo shoot at Lake Gairdner

Spending a few days at Mt Ive station in the northern part of the Gawler Ranges basically due west of Port Augusta allowed me to soak up the atmosphere of the place. We spent a lot of time beside Lake Gairdner which is a huge white salt lake as the photographer did his best to capture the vehicles and the lake at their best. We were not allowed to drive on the hard salt surface regrettfully and can only dream of what amazing images may have been recorded.

On the way back to Adelaide I was unlucky to be leading the convoy when two sheep shot across in front of me. There was no way of avoiding them and sadly lamb chops x 2 were on the menu that night. I was driving the Jeep at the time and somehow only a couple of plastic moulds on the front bumper were dislodged, Mind you, the sheep went right under the Jeep at about

80kph and the Jeep bounced in the air a couple of times. It could have been a very serious accident but fortunately I employed my own teaching advice and just hit the brakes really hard and kept steering straight ahead, remembering that any violent steering to the right or left at that speed would have certainly ended in more than a disaster.



Vic being creative with a Jeep

About 3 weeks ago on my way back from Driver Training I had a very large kangaroo jump in front of the 100 series Cruiser. This time I was going at about 60kph on a narrow gravel road, visions of the sheep running in front of me flashed before my eyes and this time I was determined to miss the roo, you do get a bit tired of killing animals let me assure you. Anyway, the big roo kept coming straight at me from the left, I braked hard (skid marks prove it) and this time thought I would steer away to avoid the inevitable. Suddenly I realised I was heading off the road straight for a sold looking gum tree – at 60kph I knew who was going to win and it wasn't me. Fortunately I wrestled the wheel and unlocked the brakes enough to allow me to steer back onto the road thus avoiding a huge accident. Like I say at my driver training courses, no animal is worth dying for. What about the roo? Sorry but he went under the Cruiser and died instantly, as it turned out I was never going to avoid him, that happens in the bush. Once again, thank goodness for my sturdy steel bull bar as the Cruiser suffered no damage at all.

Past Trips

We've had few cracking trips over the past couple of months. We let Alex loose once again down in the South East Forests and all I heard was how good he was at clearing the tacks of giant fallen trees with his Leatherman pen knife. I'm seriously worried about those who travel with Alex as he seems to have convinced them of his prowess with his pocket knife. Anyway, everyone reported back that they really enjoyed the lessons in track clearing.



Alex reckons he cleared this twig with his pocket knife???????

Wayne and Jenny took some camper trailers on the first of our weekend camper trailer trip to the Brindabellas and once again they had good weather whilst the rest of us shivered and tried to stay dry on the coast. The feedback was good so look out for more camper trailer weekend trips coming up.

Ian Bragg led the first of our High Country trips into Victoria in November. Ian was filling in for Wayne D who had his heart operation in October is recovering well. It is always daunting for my guides to lead their first major trip but despite this and once again based on the feedback I've received Ian did a masterful job, just take a look at this email received from one of my customers

*Dear Vic,
We would like to thank your company "Great Divide Tours" and in particular your guide Ian Bragg for an outstanding tour of the Victorian High Country in November this year. Previous to the trip we had researched*

the area thoroughly, talked with close friends who had also taken the same trip with your company and watched many a DVD on this area. The tour really did "tick every box" as Ian said and then some. Spectacular views, Australian history, fun four wheel driving and excellent company.

Our guide Ian was also outstanding, displaying a real sense of care for people in the group. His knowledge of the area and a keen eye on the weather, and a well considered itinerary for the week resulted in experiences we might otherwise had missed. Ian is clearly a very multi skilled guide including expertise in navigation, communication (people & vehicles), mechanical knowledge and 4WDing. Ian is obviously a quiet and unassuming high achiever who must be one of your best guides.

Thanks again for such a wonderful experience and we would do it again in a heart beat.

*Many Thanks,
Paul and Wendy*

I couldn't ask for any more from my guides, could I?

Alex was back in the guide's seat last week with a trip up to Stockton Beach and whilst I don't get much out of Alex about his Stockton trips, he just conveys to me that he had a ripper time, and thinks the customers did too!



The tank traps at Stockton have become exposed again after being buried for about 18 months.

Anyway, this time I had a spy reporting on Alex, he was accompanied by the aforementioned recovering Wayne D who later said to me “Alex is crazy where he takes your customers” – now I’m really starting to worry. I think what he is referring to is that Alex likes to find the steepest sand dunes on Stockton Beach and then proceed down them closely followed by the clients who are thinking “did we just do that”!

Anyway, we haven’t been sued yet so I guess everyone is enjoying their time on Stockton with Alex.

Up coming trips

Ian Bragg is being flogged to death over the Christmas/New Year period working for me. He’s off next week to lead our 4 day Man From Snowy River Trip, and then takes another group on yet another 7 day High Country trip immediately after the Snowy tour. But that is not all, he returns to Bright only to head straight out again this time leading our camper trailer High Country tour in the second week of January. So Ian will definitely be an expert on the high country by mid January. We have just one or two spots left on each of these trips in case you are looking for something to do over the coming holidays.

In fact, we had such a good response to our High Country Camper Trip that I have enlisted Greg and Helen to lead another of these trips from 8-14 January so there is no excuse not to get away whether you like tenting or camper trailing.

In late January with Australia day falling on Thursday we’ve added a new 4 day trip to the calendar. You can join crazy Alex (if you dare) as he spends 4 magical days exploring the hinterland behind Bega and Eden on the south coast of NSW. This will be a fabulous trip through some new country for us and Alex as always will be showing off his bush skills to anyone who has nothing better to do with their time, did you know that the TV show All Aussie Adventures was based on trips run by Alex?



**One of the many many many highlights of our High Country trip
Craig's Hut**

The Ultimate Desert Challenge

I may just be taking on more than I can chew with this latest project. 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of the first motor vehicle to drive across the Simpson Desert. The late Reg Sprigg from Arkaroola, with his family, drove a Nissan Patrol and were also accompanied by a trayback Landcruiser and an International Scout, although those vehicles don’t get much recognition for this amazing feat. His wife Griselda wrote a book about this journey, it is called Dune is a 4 letter word and its worth reading. I know that Nissan Motors is making a big song and dance about a Desert crossing in September with a bunch of Nissans in celebration of Reg’s famous trip. For them it will be a rather easy trip as there are well formed tracks across the desert which I know many of you have travelled on recent trips with GDT.



MaxTrax will make it a lot easier

However, the Desert region is closed throughout the summer months for safety reasons; no access is permitted between 1 December and 15 March. The Desert gives way to Mother Nature during the Summer months and the track disappear under a sea of moving sand. The dune crests on those 1000 plus dunes become knife edge and are horrendously soft. In the main, the tracks like the French Line, the QAA and WAA lines virtually disappear.

To me this sounded great and more reflective of what Reg Sprigg faced when he conquered the Desert back in 1962. So I'll be departing Mt Dare station on the western side of the Simpson Desert on the evening of 15 March 2012. The plan is to be the first person to cross the Desert in its anniversary year. It will be hot and fly blown and the desert dunes are likely to be straight up and straight down with peaked crests on each one. Each requiring a lot of shovel work. And we are hoping that Eyre Creek is not flooded like it has been the past 3 years.



I bet we can't find this track next March

I'm being joined by a number of 4WD industry experts from Cooper tyres, Off road Systems, GPSOZ, and MaxTrax who have supported my efforts with the provision of 5 sets of MaxTrax to help us get over the dunes. We will have Anne and John Morton from Lifestyle Video Productions coming along to film our epic Desert Challenge and produce a DVD on the crossing. These are

the people who did the fantastic Burke and Wills DVD based around our re-enactment of their journey across Australia. I'll be accompanied by Wayne and Jenny in their Troopie and Wayne D in his Troopie. I also have a couple of spots left for clients to join us on this amazing 4WD adventure. If you don't mind a lot of heat, a lot of sand and a lot of flies and want to accomplish something that is going to be bloody hard work, then drop me an email at info@greatdividetours.com.au and I'll send you the itinerary for this amazing trip.

Arnhem Land

As you know I did my reccie run into Arnhem Land during 2011 and I've now finalised the complete 19 day itinerary for an incredible journey into Arnhem Land next August 2012. I have just one spot remaining on the first of these trips and once that is full I'm planning a second trip immediately following it between August and September 2012. This will be a truly exciting trip into an area that is very difficult to gain access, we will even be going into places not normally open to the general public so if you have ever contemplated trying to see one of the last remaining frontiers of Australia take a look at the detailed itinerary for this trip, just drop me an email and I'll email it out to you.



Arnhem Land scenery

NZ

Whilst I'm challenging the hot and dry Simpson in March we also have our 5 and 9 day New Zealand 4wd tag-along tours taking place, being led by my counterpart in NZ, Steve Beston. You really should consider doing one of these trips as the scenery in NZ is so different from what we

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have in Australia. I've done two of these trips now and can assure you that you will have one of the best trips you have ever done. Check out the trips on my website www.4wd.net.au



Stunning 4wdriding and scenery in NZ

New Product test

I'm always talking about the need to upgrade your suspension for outback travel. Two of my long time customers, Richard and Wendy recently upgraded their 4wdrive to a new Landcruiser Trayback and moved up to a little more comfort from the usual camping to a slide on camper body. They were joining us on our Canning Stock Route trip in 2011 so they knew that the suspension would need a lot of work and asked me what I suggested. I put them in touch with the boys at Terrain Tamer (also known as Don Kyat in Victoria) They have been supplying 4WD components for as long as GDT has been in business (23 years now!) and they came up with a suspension package designed to carry the heavy load over the longest 4WD track in the world namely the Canning.



Fitting the Terrain Tamer suspension

I recently asked Richard for some comments on how the suspension performed and here is what he had to say.

A few comments on the suspension – the vehicle and therefore the suspension performed well on the Canning and on our trip in general. It handled both sand dunes and corrugations very well. It was especially good on corrugations and the shocks remained cool when compared to shocks fitted to other vehicles in the convoy.

Our 79 Series Toyota tray top travelled fairly heavy with a Travelander slide on camper weighing about 640kgs (this includes two fridges, 220 amp hr of battery and mattress). When adding up to 300 litres of diesel, 125 litres of water, food, grog, clothing, bull bars, other accessories etc this put the total weight right up there at the GVM level.

When travelling around town or on the black top generally, with no water in the tanks and up to 100 litres of diesel and no supplies on board, the ride is firm – a bit on the hard side but this was to be expected and was explained by the techs at Don Kyatt. Due to the lack of garaged storage space it is generally planned to keep the camper on the tray.

Regards,
Richard

You can contact Terrain Tamer at www.terraintamer.com.au

Vic's trips are too expensive !

I don't get this comment all that often but it still raises its ugly head from time to time. Anyway, it got me thinking what is expensive and what do people get for their money. Looking at my Kimberley Explorer Tour for example. It is a 26 day trip and it costs \$4500 for two people. What you get for this is the leadership of a guide who has been there before, knows all the best spots, fixes your car (enough to either keep you going on your holiday or to get to a workshop that can fix it) pays for all your camping and access fees and in my case provides lots of lame jokes. That equates to \$86.50 each person per day for the trip of a lifetime.

I then looked in the Sunday papers at the travel section and found an 11 day tour at \$4,295 per person and you get to sit in a bus all day! That equals \$390 per person per day, for this they feed you and you get to sleep in a motel room each night.

So I figured you can either sit in a 4WD bus for 4.5 times the price each! And slowly drift off to sleep as you cover in 11 days what we take 26 days to see or you can join GDT and get real value for money. So I'm sitting here scratching my head and wondering "how can I be accused of being too expensive" I know we all want the best value for money from whatever we do but honestly why do people pick those really expensive alternatives and then complain about what we offer?

OK I'm off my fruit box now, sorry about that.

Facebook

Like it or loath it, it is here to stay and I have to say I've embraced it, do a Facebook search for Great Divide Tours and join the other 137 friends I have. I'm using Facebook to keep my clients up to date on goings on and every now and then offer some good discounts on some upcoming trips, so you can save on my already cheap trips. I'm also starting up a 'where is that photo' competition with lots of great prizes, so remember the old saying, you have to be in it to win it. Click on the Facebook link on my website www.4wd.net.au

A blast from the past

I'm sure this happened to a few of you, late one night whilst working on the computer an email came in, saying "Hi, are you the same Vic Widman that went to Lane Cove Primary School?" of course I was and it was a long lost friend that I had not seen or spoken to since our school days. Hi John! He was now living in Bangkok running his own business and it was great catching up and sharing some photos via email. Anyway, he sent me the following photo from my school days taken in 1964, you will probably never recognize me in the small photo attached, I was just 10 years old and didn't

have my beard or glasses then! I'll give you a hint, I'm one of the boys.



There is a hint as to which one is me, hidden in this newsletter

Thanks to everyone who joined us in 2011. And if you didn't get the chance to do so, don't let 2012 pass you by without coming out with us and seeing the real Australia.

Have a Merry Christmas and a safe New Year everyone.



Vic, Julie, Wayne D, Wayne B & Jenny, Alex, Brian, Dave & Irene, Richard, Greg & Helen, Ian B & Skippy/Yarn/Ian.

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