

## Across Oz 2006

Diary maintained by Vic Widman



### Day 1 5/8/06 Sydney to Cobar

After months of planning, what has seemed like days of packing and many sleepless nights of worrying, the big day has finally arrived.

We all gathered at Mona Vale beach at 7am amidst heavy rain showers. Sydney may be on water restrictions but the heavens had opened up over the past 24 hours making that last

minute packing a real chore. But we were in luck, the rain abated for 20 minutes whilst we gathered at the beach, handed out the commemorative T shirts and Desert Park Passes and notes for the trip. Not too many people ventured down to the crashing waves with me where I collected the traditional bottle of Pacific Ocean water, this would be carried across the centre of Australia from the east coast to the west coast to be delivered with much ceremonial fanfare to the Indian Ocean on the WA coast near Monkey Mia in a few weeks time.

The heavens opened up as we jumped back in to the heavily loaded 4WDs, some keen surfers asked where we were off to and offered to swap places, we declined of course.

And so we lumbered out of Sydney on that Saturday morning. First stop was a minor fixing of the tarp on Disco's roof rack which had become loose and flapping around on the M2. Eric provided an elastic net to secure Matt & Jo's tarp. Our next stop was at the park opposite Richmond air base where we met up with Raye Dege, Adrianna & Ron Harrex and eventually Ian Shepherd who was running a little late.

We climbed over the Blue Mountains on the Bells Line of Road and the temp dropped to 6 degrees. As we neared Bathurst it was still cool and the biting wind meant we elected to stop in a service station just before town to enjoy a hot coffee/tea and fairy cake or even bacon and eggs.

But we did not forgo our drive around the famous Mt Panorama Race circuit and every one marvelled at this supreme race track, albeit at a snail's pace. Peter had discovered that his big mast UHF aerial was malfunctioning but alas we missed the TJM store by 30 mins, but Auto One in Orange came to the rescue with a new aerial.

We travelled at around 95kph, the rain had cleared and the skies were blue, it was nice in the sun out of the wind and the temp was soon to reach 19 degrees. We were a little behind schedule so we stopped at 1.30pm for lunch in Wellington. The park provides a nice back drop and some of us even had our Maccas hit.

We started to get on with killing the kilometres and passed through Dubbo and then Nyngan as the sun sank in the west. We managed another drive into the sunset on the way to Cobar which we reached at 6.20pm.

Everyone settled into their rooms quickly and before long it was time for the short walk to the Bowling Club for our Chinese banquet.

We were all very tired from the long drive of 700 k's and the lack of sleep leading up to the start of the adventure so it was an early night and my head hit the pillow at 10pm, early for me.

## **Day 2 6/8/06 Cobar to White Cliffs**

What a great sleep we all had, woke up at 7am, beautiful clear day with a temp of 8 degrees. We had brekkie around the pool, which gave us more time to get to know each other, and those that had joined us in Cobar.

We refuelled in Cobar with diesel at a respectable 1.47 a litre. Heading north the sealed road lasted for longer than expected at 50k's before we finally hit the unsealed red dirt. The rain of two weeks ago had left its mark in the form of a vast green ground cover which stayed with us all day. Certainly makes the normal red look very different. The road to Louth had been graded since the rain, no doubt in preparation for the Louth Races which are being held in one week on 12 August.

We made a stop beside a very low and green algae filled Darling River for morning tea. I have never seen the river look so poorly, a combination of the drought and land holders in Queensland damming its feeder rivers.

From Louth we followed the northern bank of the Darling to Tilpa. This road was much more cut up by use after the rain and had not as yet seen a grader. Consequently there were deep wheel ruts which made you tram track at times, and even deeper washouts which were difficult to see on the edges of the road. No problems but you had to keep a watchful eye on the road. This was a shame as the green plains, occasional trough of water and a sprinkling of fresh wild flowers provided a lot of distractions.

The Tilpa Pub provided its usual hospitality and some of our group enjoyed enormous counter lunches whilst others were content to start working their way through the vast amount of food they were carrying. Having confirmed with Wanaaring police that the reported flood coming down the Paroo River had not yet reached the town we continued north from Tilpa to Tongo and the crossing of the Paroo overflow.

The road was still weather affected with deep wheel ruts and the occasional washout, but after passing Tongo and heading south on the road to Mandalay, we found 3-4 unavoidable water crossings. Most were firm beds and relatively clean crossings but one muddy dip had a consistency of soup and threw red mud onto the vehicles.

There had not been a lot of wildlife but finally we spotted some big red kangaroos as we entered the Paroo Darling National Park. The day had been perfect with a top temp of 19 degrees, but we were down to T shirts during the day. We arrived at White Cliffs at 5.15, in time to find our underground rooms and then go up to the roof top to view a sunset in clear sky.

We now had 37 people on tour and we filled the dining room, the meal was great, prepared by Richard from the Underground Motel, lots of laughs around the dinner table. We have had one problem today, Ian Shepherd or Skippy as we call him, as he is the Kangaroo Tent City rep, has had his alternator fail. Preliminary inquiries in White Cliffs have revealed no-one that might be able to repair it, so we may have to get him to head into Broken Hill tomorrow to have it looked at.

The only other point of note was that our second group found an old teddy on the road today and presented it to me to keep me company, so now teddy has been jockey strapped to the spare wheel on my roof and is on his way across Australia.

### **DAY 3 7/8/08**

#### **White Cliffs – Warri Gate**

Sleeping underground has its advantageous, it is so dark you have no idea what time it is, and hence I slept in until 7.20am. A hasty exit from bed to join everyone around the breakfast table for our cooked breakfast. The day had dawned clear and brisk, the temperature was in the single figures but the warm sun rays soon took the chill off the early morning.

We had a little free time in the morning for everyone to have a look around White Cliffs with some purchasing opals and others just sightseeing. Fuel was \$1.47 a litre.

We left town at 9.40am and made our way towards the Silver City Hwy, the road was still cut up from the recent rain, and although we were able to cruise at 80kph, you needed to stay alert for washouts and debris across the flood ways. There were still signs of the new green pick coming through and already some yellow wild flowers were appearing.

We had morning tea at a late 11am on Morden Creek and then stopped at the Tool Tree which had sprouted a bay tool tree at the intersection with the Silver City Hwy. From here it was a short run into Milparinka where the local volunteer guide for the Court House spoke with us. This was Roger Clark who is a film maker, his credits include the film on Tom Cruise, the Birdsville Track mail man and the Kimberley film with Ron Moon and Glenn Ridge.

We then continued into Tibooburra where we created mayhem at the local Shell Service station, refuelling 16 vehicles takes some time. Whilst here Matt Raudonikis

from Overlander Magazine showed up in the Range Rover Sport, he had suffered a flat tyre on his 19 inch tyres and was endeavouring to have it repaired in town. We will meet up again with Matt in Birdsville in two days hopefully.

It was after 3pm by the time we got out of Tibooburra, but with clear skies and 21 degrees it was an inspiring run towards the Queensland border. The Sturt NP is a vast area of treeless, rocky country with distant jump up hills, quite a sight. The drought has meant that the vast numbers of Roos and Emu have disappeared, and the one dead Roo we saw had 7 eagles feasting off it.

We crossed into Queensland at Warri Gate and immediately noticed a deterioration in the road conditions, it was red sandy country with flooded dips and numerous by passes, a real good Whopty Doo road, I love this driving and enjoyed floating the Cruiser over the red sandy moguls.

From 4.20pm I started looking for a campsite, one that was flat, large enough to handle 16 vehicles and with a plentiful supply of firewood. By 4.30pm we found it, a large dry claypan, it was ideal and we all made camp in warm sunshine. Our first camp was a beauty and everyone soon had their tents up. A near full moon is above me now at 10pm as I type this story, everyone has drifted off to bed and the pit of coals is keeping me warm. A wonderful day in outback Australia.

#### **Day 4 8/8/06**

##### **Noccundra to Arrabury**

Our first bush camp was a ripper, and with an early morning temp of 5 degrees was not too cold. At 6am, lying in the swag with the near full moon now set, I was able to see two satellites passing overhead. It was quite dark until 6.30 with the sun rising after 7am. There was not a cloud in the sky and golden orange in the eastern sky preceded the sun rise.

We broke camp at 9am and continued up the red sandy track towards Noccundra, still some water lying around from the recent rain but no real problems on the road. We had morning tea on the Wilson River opposite the Noccundra Pub in warm sunny weather.

From here we headed west on a sealed road past the Jackson oil field, the terrain was strewn with small rocks or gibbers as far as the eye could see. After approx 50 k's the sealed road gave way to red gravel and the gibbers continued until we crossed a dry creek and as if someone had drawn a line in the sand, the country changed to red sand. We bounced along the Adventure Way following a fence line until we called lunch break at 1pm.

A few kilometers down the road the gibber plains returned. This took us to the intersection of the turn off to the Dig Tree where we found Ian Shepherd from Kangaroo Tent City, he had left us at White Cliffs with a fault alternator in his Jackaroo, and after having it attended to in Broken Hill had driven via Santos to rejoin us.

We took a short diversion down to the Burke & Wills Bridge over a full Cooper Creek before heading out to the famous Dig Tree.

It was now time to head up the Arrabury Road and we were greeted with some of the biggest gibbers on the road we had seen, our speed was reduced to 40kph in places and wondered at the punishment that the tyres must be taking, but the Cooper tyres handled them in their stride.

I had camped at a nice claypan on this road last year and had it marked on the GPS. So we made for this idyllic spot and found it at 4.50pm. Another excellent camp site.

Everyone pitched in to collect the firewood, there is a great feeling amongst the group around the camp fire.

A phone call to Julie revealed that Matt from Overlander had had to return to Broken Hill to get a new tyre flown in for the Rangie and now it looks like he will try to meet us on Friday out past Poeppel Corner.

Today the temp climbed to 25 degrees, and tonight at 10.20pm it is still 12 degrees. There is a full moon and a clear night.

### **Day 5 9/8/06**

#### **Arrabury – Birdsville**

We woke a little after 6 am , it stays dark up here to well after 6.30pm as the sun does not rise until 7.10 am. But this morning we had the added bonus of the full moon sinking in the east before the sun rose. It was a big, huge in fact, yellow ball on the horizon. The temp was 5 degrees, but once the sun rose it warmed up quickly. Our secret campsite was a beauty, hidden from the road with loads of level camp sites. Irene enjoyed it so much that she went off exploring and became lost, a search by several of us eventually found her but even Alec became lost in the Cruiser after picking her up, a good lesson for all not to wander too far from camp.

We set off a little after 9am on the sandy track north. It is amazing how quick the terrain can change and just as we approached Arrabury Station the red sand gave way to the stony plains once again. These stony plains stayed with us all day to Birdsville, well over 300 kilometres away. The road was in good condition compared to the bull dust holes of last year as we headed towards Haddon Corner. The occasional dip still had a little water in it from the recent rains but we averaged 80 kph at times.

We enjoyed morning tea at Haddon Corner, the corner of Qld and SA, which was also surrounded by a pool of muddy water which had small yabbies swimming in it. We left the Corner and headed north again until the road reached the Birdsville Developmental road. The plan was to stop at Betoota for lunch, but knowing that there was no shade, I took the opportunity to stop at tree line 3 k before the old Hotel site. This creek bed was actually flowing with water and the small gidgee trees provided some shade from the hot sun. The Temp had risen 26 degrees.

The Birdsville Developmental Road was in great condition and driving at 90kph was easily achieved. We had good time until David and Maria missed their fuel needs and their Cruiser spluttered out of fuel 30 k short of Birdsville. John Purdy came to the rescue with 20 litres of diesel.

We arrived at Birdsville after 4pm and were greeted by Michael and Lynne who were joining us here. Checked into the dusty Caravan Park and refueled for the trip across the desert. It was at this time that Ian discovered that his swag had fallen off his roof rack, he thought all the way back at Haddon Corner, he is not having much luck. So he set off 300 k's back to the Corner hoping that no-one else had been out there after us, I don't expect to see him until the morning.

We had an enormous meal at the Birdsville Hotel before retiring. I should mention that the hot showers at the Caravan Park were well received.

### **DAY 6 10/8/08**

#### **Birdsville – QAA Line**

The camp at Birdsville was peaceful with just the frogs and night birds calling from the Diamantina Overflow. We woke just before sunrise to see the full moon setting in the west. Ian had returned to camp during the night and we saw that he was sleeping in his swag which meant he had found it. As it turned out he drove all the way back to Haddon Corner, arriving after dark at 9.30pm and was greatly relieved to see his swag left by other travellers who visited the Corner after us, beside the new picnic table at the Corner. He collected his swag and made a second entry in the visitors book before heading back to Birdsville where he arrived at 12.30am but not before collecting a kangaroo.

We were all booked into the Birdsville Working Museum at 9am with John Menzies. John is fantastic as he takes his guests on a tour of his museum and his lyrical voice adds to the character of this place. After an entertaining hour with John it was time for a coffee at the Bakery before we all gathered for the customary group photo in front of the Birdsville Hotel. It was quite a sight with 21 4wdrives lined up either side of the Hotel.

Eventually at 11.10am we drove out of Birdsville towards Big Red. After another brisk morning of 5 degrees it had warmed up and the maximum today was a warm 27 degrees. Not a cloud in the sky. At Big Red we dropped tyre pressures to 25 and 22 psi, front and rear. I climbed Big Red first just letting the Cruiser amble up in 1st gear high range, it did it easily. We soon had all 21 vehicles lined up on top of Big Red for lots of photos. The wind had picked up and the wind-blown sand off the red crests was getting into everything, even now at 10pm I am scratching the fine sand out of my hair as I type up today's tale.

Ronaldo found he had a punctured tyre at the top of Big Red, so when we descended onto the western clay pan we changed his tyre and would fix the problem in camp. From here on we were into the big dunes, the sand was soft but no-one had any problems and we tracked west at approx 20kph, doing most dunes in high range 2nd.

The Desert had much less vegetation coverage this year and the red sand stood out across the vast vistas from the top of each dune. We stopped at Eyre Creek for a late lunch at 1.30pm in hot sun before continuing on. An Emu played chase the cars with several of the vehicles from Group 1 and Group 2. We passed two restored Blitz Wagons heading east, one was a tow truck from Bacchus Marsh and the other a fire engine from Clare in SA.

We had made good progress being 110 K's west of Birdsville when I looked for a suitable campsite which I found off the track amongst the low woody trees in soft red sand. After making camp Pete and Eric repaired the flat tyre with a mushroom plug and tried in vain to find why Michael Alexander's radio was only working occasionally.

Once night fell there were millions of moths attracted to our lights and it made cooking a near impossibility, so we cooked in the dark. A phone call from Matt Raudonikis told us he had only left Broken Hill that afternoon and was endeavoring to drive all through the night to reach Birdsville and then hopefully catch up with us on Saturday on the Hay River track, we would leave coordinates for him under a tree on the western side of salt lake near Poeppel Corner.

#### **DAY 7 11/8/06**

##### **QAA Line – Beachcomber Oil Well**

We have stayed on Eastern Standard time to give ourselves more daylight in the evening, hence the sun did not rise until 7.15am today. There was a surprising number of birds calling with the new dawn, more than I have heard before in the Desert. The ever present peaceful dove being the most prominent, it has a haunting call that you usually only hear in the Simpson.

The day dawned clear as a bell and the full moon slipped below the sand dune at our backs well after sunrise. Despite our best efforts to muster by 8.30 we did not manage to get away until 9.15, but it didn't really matter as we were making good time. The track continued on its westerly push, easing the 4wdrives over the bumpy sand dunes in high range 2nd gear, we were averaging 20kph. The sand remained a bright red hue with just the hint of green shoots coming through. The salt lake before Poeppel Corner was dry and we easily crossed and headed down to the Corner to sign the visitors book and stand in the NT, SA and Qld all at the one time. We had a late morning tea with the time at 11.30am.

We then followed the track over the sand dunes to the north and eventually arrived back at the salt lake where the QAA line crossed it. We left a note for Matt under the tree at the intersection and marked the tree with some bright yellow tape, he should find this the next day and be able to follow the way points and our instructions to catch up in a day or two.

We had lunch at the Poeppel Oil Well site, the temp had risen from a pre dawn of 8 degrees to 27 degrees. Sam and Andy arrived in their Troopy with a slow leak so we had to change their tyre and at the same time found that John Purdy's Cruiser was

leaking diff oil from both front ball joints. I called Julie on the Sat phone and arranged for her to book John's Cruiser into Kittle Toyota next week for new seals.

The road to Beachcomber oil well was originally clay capped and we cruised at 40kph at times only having to be aware of the occasional washout. The afternoon sun made the dunes look bright red and there were a lot of camel tracks but only one spotting by Barbara.

From Beachcomber the track turns to the east for several kilometers and bounces over the dunes again. Slow going with spectacular red dunes. Just on 4.30pm I started to look for a campsite when Stephen and Ann called over the radio that they had a loud banging noise. Pete diagnosed a broken rear shock which he then had to replace on the track. Unfortunately ARB had supplied Steve with 4 front shocks instead of two front and rear, so Pete had to use one of his spare shocks on Steve's car.

In the meantime I found a good clearing well off the road 5 k' short of the track turning north. We made camp in the hot sun but found that the millions of moths that annoyed us last night were still present so had an early dinner and avoided the camp lights which seemed to attract the moths.

The night sky before the Moon rose at 8.30pm was brilliant, I don't think I have ever seen so many stars in the milky way. We managed a good radio interview with Murray Wilton o 2GB at 8.20pm. Everyone enjoyed a good sit and chat around the camp into the late hour of 11pm.

## **DAY 8 12/8/06**

### **Beachcomber to Madigan's Camp 16**

We broke camp at 9am after our coldest morning to date at 3 degrees. Another perfectly clear day with blue sky from horizon to horizon. We had 4 more kilometres to travel from our overnight camp to the end of the east bound shot line. Then we turned 90 degrees to the left and headed north. Immediately we drove into the red dune country. In the early morning sun light the dunes were almost blood red and we had many photo opportunities as we followed the swales northward.

The amazing thing being the number of tiny foot prints left in the sand, even on the steepest soft sand hills by numerous little animals that had tracked over the dunes during the night. Their tracks made intricate patterns in the sand. The drive was spectacular with the red dunes, the blue sky and the occasional carpet of fresh green shoots brought on by the rain over two weeks previously.

Some of the dunes had a one or two metre sheer face that we had to drive the 4wdrives straight out at and launch ourselves over. A few cars needed a couple of attempts and some even needed a snatch strap to drag them back out of a bogged situation.

After lunch the first group of vehicles misread a track heading out of the clearing and found them selves headed the wrong way but by using GPS readings we managed to over land back on to course, but not after attempting some very steep dunes.

The day warmed up to in excess of 31 degrees. After Madigan's Tree and camp 16 we decided to look for a campsite, but at this point Steve Shedden's Cruiser broke another shock on the rear. Pete had to fit his own remaining shock due to the fact that ARB had supplied him with 4 front shocks. Did I mention that before?

The prospect of finding a good camp was not good as we were in lumpy spinifex country, but a small clearing on level land provided us with enough room to fit in 21 vehicles. We set up the showers for a welcome wash and repaired the flat tyre off the Troopy of Sam and Andy. It turned out that some grit had been left in the tyre and had rubbed a hole in the inner tube. The tube was patched and re-inflated.

Dinner was enjoyed before the moths attacked the lights once again and the whole crew spent many laughs around the camp fire until 10pm.

### **DAY 9 13/8/06**

#### **Madigan's Camp to Lake Caroline T/O**

This morning was our coldest at 2 degrees, our rough bush camp turned out to be OK, and another perfectly clear day dawned at 7.20 am. We left camp at 9am and immediately started to meander along the river bed.

It started with small trees and no defined river bed, the track wound in and out and it was a real arm wrestle all day. We were averaging 25kph.

It warmed up again today to 31 degrees and whilst stopping for lunch under some scarce shade Pete broke the rear mount on his front torsion bar.

This was a major failure and would necessitate a lot of welding. After ensuring that he and Eric had everything they needed to perform the welding job, Pete suggested that I take the group onto Lake Caroline and our evening camp. We pressed onto the turn off to Lake Caroline and crossed the dry Hay River which was now a true river bed with high banks and deep sand and over hanging river gums. This year the claypans on the other side were dry and we followed a series of claypans out to the largest of them which was Lake Caroline. An island in the dry lake provided a good photo setting for the group. Whilst arranging this we heard the call on the UHF /from Matt Raudonikis, he had finally caught up to us in the Range Rover Sport.

The sun was low in the western sky as we headed back across the river and moved 8 k's to the north to make camp beside the river, a beautiful sunset through the trees behind the River.

Just after dark we heard Eric and Pete on the UHF and before long guided them to our camp, the torsion bar mount welded and strengthened.

It had been another eventful night and we caught up with Matt R, around the fire until 11.30pm.

### **DAY 10 14/8/06**

#### **Lake Caroline – Batton Hill Camp**

We had planned a little sleep in this morning, but at 7am a group of dingoes wandered down the river bed and were howling their mournful calls to each other. Pete headed out to Lake Caroline before sunrise, his repair job on the front torsion bar working well. We headed north at 10 am after a 3 degree morning and another clear sky, it was going to be hot today.

Finally we spotted some camels, and even some Bustards. We arrived at Batton Hill camp at 2pm, it was very hot and most of us rested in the shade of the camp.

At 4pm Kevin and Chris, cousins of Lindsay Bookie, took us out to Goyder Pillar for sunset. This was a magical drive, we climbed a rocky hill and then headed to the sunset viewing area. The colours on the rocky outcrops was fantastic.

The drive back to camp after dark was slow in heavy dust. When we arrived Lindsay surprised us all with a cooked dinner for all 40 of us. Lindsay surprised me even more with a gift of a beautiful painting by his sister.

I thanked him with the Bible joke which I am sure he enjoyed. I had another interview with Murray Wilton from 2GB which went well despite the phone dropping out 3 times. It was a late night at 11.45 pm.

## **DAY 11 15/8/06**

### **Batton Hill Camp**

Today we did not have to pack up camp as we were to spend it at Batton Hill Camp and with Lindsay Bookie. It was a leisurely start to another cloudless sky.

We started our Bush Tucker tour with Lindsay at 9am and headed out in the biggest convoy Lindsay has ever had visit him, 22 cars. His grandchildren piled in to the Land Council Troopie and Sebastian joined them. Kevin and a couple of the older boys drove the ute with all but the black dog in the back. The Black dog was tied up at the house but got away as we were about 2 kilometres away and ran like a greyhound to catch up. Lindsay threw the dog in the back of the Troopie with all the kids.

We spent most of the day travelling around Lindsay's land with him pointing out the various bush tucker items including the wild orange, bush banana vine, bush tomatoes and various seeds that can be eaten or ground into a flour.

We visited pebble hill from which we could see Smiths mountain and as Lindsay reminded everyone, Mount Vic which he named after me last year. We then headed up LandRover valley which was very washed out in places and one spot the Troopie became stuck in a deep rut. I managed to find a way around him and was able to snatch him out.

The drive back to camp was past some great flat topped mountains. The ghost gums back at camp looked stark and very white in the afternoon sun as we cleaned all the dust out of our air filters and out of our tents from the breeze that had blown through the day. At one time a desert devil or willy willy passed through camp and took David Rowley's hat off and sucked it up about 30 feet into the air only to drop it back at his feet.

We enjoyed a nice social time around the campfire after dinner and Chris gave us a little talk on the grinding and cutting stones that had been found in the area.

### **DAY 12 16/8/06**

#### **Batton Hill Camp – Alice Springs**

It was time to leave Batton Hill and another glorious day greeted us. We were all packed up and on the road by 9am. Once through the gate on Batton Hill it was a good road along the fence line for 80 k's. We spotted a herd of camels about 5 in all. At the Plenty Hwy we headed east for a few K's to Jervois Station where those that needed it topped up their fuel tanks. We also said farewell to Matt & Hendo who had to head back to the big smoke and Magazine deadlines.

The Plenty Hwy was a boring, high speed gravel road with the occasional glimpse of Harts Range to break the monotony, give me those rough outback tracks anytime in preference to these good gravel highways.

My planned diversion through some nice country near Gem Tree was thwarted by a new mining lease so we continued on to the Stuart Hwy and the sealed run into Alice.

We arrived at 4pm in warm weather of 31 degrees, it took a while to check in, but we were soon set up in the camp ground. Most of us enjoyed dinner at the Windmill Restaurant just up the road, and despite my head cold I had a good time.

### **DAY 13 17/8/06**

#### **Alice Springs**

Today is a lay day, time for everyone to restock and wash clothes. Another glorious day, no clouds but a cool breeze to keep the intense heat at bay.

Several of our group are leaving us as their trip has concluded, Peter and Ngaire have headed home and Craig has arrived to take his place. We have a free didgeridoo concert in the park tonight. It is very pleasant sitting here in the sun typing on the lap top, just wish my head cold would disappear.

### **Day 14 18/8/06**

#### **Alice Springs to Gary Junction Road**

It was time to leave Alice, frost on the tents told us it was a cool night, but once again the sky was clear blue.

Some of our people had a few last minute items to collect in town, so we assembled at the front of the Caravan Park at 9am only to find coolant leaking from David Gordon's Cruiser.

Marl and Craig had joined us for the remainder of the trip and Mark soon found a loose radiator hose which was quickly fixed. So it was 9.30am when we finally pulled out of Alice in another long convoy of 4WDives.

The drive along Larapinta Drive and Namatjira Drive is always a beautiful one with the folds of the West MacDonnell Ranges accompanying the road. We passed the more touristy places such as Standley Chasm and headed for Ormiston Gorge where we had morning tea and took a walk up part of the gorge. Everyone marvelled at the intense blue sky and red rock cliffs.

Shortly after passing Glen Helen Gorge we hit the gravel road and took the turn off to Haasts Bluff. The road was pretty rough with large stones and deep washouts through the dry creek beds. It was a hard drive for the cars and Ron and Theresa suffered a major blow out destroying one of their tyres. But the scenery was spectacular as the outline of the Belt Range which contains Haasts Bluff Mt Edward and Mt William made for an awe inspiring sight on the horizon. There were lots of Kodak moments along here.

Once we reached the Gary Junction Road the road improved to a good unsealed surface. We arrived at Papunya and found that we needed to turn left at the T intersection and then turn right onto the gravel road where "Kintore" was written in big letters on the road, no street sign here.

We travelled about 120 K's west on this road, spotting a few camels at last on the way. The temperature had risen from its frosty start to 27 degrees at 5pm as I pulled off the road and disappeared over a small sand dune to find a secluded camp for the night. The ground was flat and lightly covered in small clumps of grass which were easily levelled for a tent site. The setting sun through the Desert Oaks made for some nice photos.

As the orange glow from the setting sun silhouetted the trees I made a call to 2GB and relayed our great journey to their listeners.

Another great night around the camp fire before retiring at 10.30pm.

### **Day 15 19/8/06**

#### **Gary Junction Road to Pollock Hills**

After a bad night due to my head cold and persistent cough, I was glad to see the dawn and we rose to a 3 degree morning. It quickly warmed up during the day to peak at 32 degrees in the afternoon.

My main aim today was to get to Kintore before 12 noon to refuel. We reached there at 10.30am after spotting quite a few camels, everyone has seen a camel now and they all seem quite happy, the people not the camels.

There was one diesel and one Opal pump at Kintore, there was also a local sports day on so there was a lot of activity in preparing for the games with the indigenous people arriving from all around the area. Diesel was \$1.80 a litre not a bad price in my opinion. It took us nearly 1 ½ hours to refuel and we finally got away at 12 noon but not before the local Police had to act as if they were there doing something and stopped each of us to check we were wearing seatbelts and take a note of our names and rego numbers, funny how the white fella has to wear a seat belt but the indigenous people don't, seems discriminatory to me.

The road to the west was in good condition to the WA border but deteriorated after we crossed it. We came to a parkland like feature below a sheer sided mountain, the tall silver spinifex surrounded a beautiful grove of desert oaks and we found a nearby disused quarry to have lunch.

After lunch it was a battle to stay awake, travelling at 80kph through mostly flat terrain with just the occasional pile of red rocks to break the monotony. We stopped at Kiwirrkurra to view Len Beadell's burnt out supply truck which came to grief 30 k's to the east, the truck is now on display behind a fence to protect it from scavenging.

Approximately 10 k's west of here we passed through the Pollock Range and I noticed a track leading off the main road, I followed this over some quite rocky terrain between the hills for 2k's and came to a delightful flat area where we made camp. Sunset was beautiful on the back drop of red cliffs and I look forward to sunrise on the mountains behind our camp. During the evening we listened to the Shepparton talk by Len Beadell seeing as we were on one of Len's roads.

### **Day 16 20/8/06 Pollock Hills to Well 33**

The camp setting amongst the Pollock Hills was a beauty at sunrise with the cliffs behind us turning deep red at dawn. It was 3 degrees again this morning and climbed to 34 degrees at 4pm. We were on the road by 9am and enjoyed the drive to the west immensely, the wildflowers, spinifex and desert oaks made for a glorious drive.

Even the red sand, which at times was obliterated by the profusion of wildflowers was quite stunning.

The day was very hot and the lack of shade made for a hot stop for lunch, but Stephan and Ann came to a premature halt when their fuel line rubbed through and spewed diesel all over the engine bay. Craig, Mark and Eric managed to make up a new hose and had them back on the road in 45 minutes.

We paused at Garry Junction to sign the visitors book and then made our way to Well 33 where we camped under the windmill. Oddly, the small pool of water next to the windmill was full o gold fish! We set up the showers which were greatly appreciated after 3 days on the road. It was a late night around the campfire as we learnt more about our fellow travellers.

### **Day 17 21/8/06 Well 33 to Telfer Mine**

Today turned out to be the hottest day thus far with the mercury hitting 37 degrees, rather appropriate I guess given that we were drawing closer to Marble Bar, the hottest town in Australia.

We had adjusted our time to WA time so most of us woke up after the sun had risen at 6.10am. Instead of spending the first hour in near darkness, we found we were already contending with the heat of the day.

First point of call was the store and fuel at Well 33 community, Diesel was \$2.50 per litre. As usual we created our own traffic jam and it took nearly an hour to refuel those that needed it.

The road from here though was excellent and we easily maintained 90kph. In fact the going was so good we completed two days of travel in one. There were more stunning displays of wildflowers along with deep red sand dunes and even a few camels around Lake Auld which is a salt lake.

As we approached the Telfer Mine we found they also used channel 16 so we moved up one to avoid any issues. Finding a good campsite was rather tricky as the terrain was heavily covered in spinifex, but a side track 20 K's west of the Telfer mine lead to some level land which only required the clearing of some small spinifex to make a suitable camp.

After a call to 2GB and dinner we had a pleasant chat around the camp fire under the usual clear skies and millions of stars.

### **Day 18 22/8/06 Telfer Mine to Oakover River**

Our not so good campsite turned out OK, and it was another golden sunrise that met us as we awoke around 6am. After brekkie we broke camp at 8.45 am and set off on the good unsealed and at times sealed road to the west. We crossed where the vermin proof fence should have been, all we could see was a large rock with white writing indicating the location of the fence line. After about an hour of driving we came to the Woodie Woodie Road intersection with a sealed road left and right, with right leading to Marble Bar and left to our destination, Carawine Gorge. By now the sand hills that had been with us for the past 2 weeks had given way to rocky outcrops and hills. We followed a very scenic unsealed road towards Carawine Gorge. The last 200 metres to the gorge was across soft river rock and required 4WD.

The cyclone of 2004, Faye, had ripped out most of the river gums and cleaned all the sand out leaving only the rocky river bed, the trees that remained provided only little shade.

Some of the crew had a swim in the wide body of water that stretched below the towering black stained cliff on the opposite bank, but they had a lot of trouble exiting the river due the ankle deep mud. After a couple of hours we departed and headed further south down Woodie Woodie Road past the two sisters, breast shaped hills either side of the sealed road. We found the Skull Springs Road and followed it across the Oakover River and then found the rough 4wd track requiring low range to Eel Pool. I had the others wait whilst I ventured along the river, in low range, bouncing over large boulders and through ankle deep water. There were no camping spots

suitable to us, just one or two so we returned to Skull Springs Road and went back to where it crossed the Oakover River.

Here we found lots of campsites under giant paperbark trees and river gums and good swimming holes. After lunch and a swim in the cold water, it was 37 degrees in the shade, we made camp. We would stop here for an extra day as we had made up a day on the good WAPET road.

### **Day 19 23/8/06**

#### **Oakover River Rest Day**

A sleep in at last, it was warm through the night dropping to 20 degrees, but it was nice not to have to pack up camp. We all had a very leisurely day sitting around under our day awnings, having a swim and downloading photos onto computers. Eric changed John's tyres which had torn a lug off. And the birds called through the tree tops and some saw a Whistling Kite feeding its young. It was good to do nothing today.

### **Day 20 24/8/06**

#### **Oakover River to Marble Bar**

After our rest day it was good to get back into the routine of packing up camp and hitting the road. We were set to go by 8.40am, we are getting closer to our target time of 8.30 each day.

The route today would take us via a little used route known as Skull Springs Road. It started off eventfully for Ron and Theresa when an ominous rattle from the front of their Cruiser indicated a broken mount on their front shock. Eric and Craig and Mark were quickly onto it and had it replaced in no time. In the meantime as we wound our way through very scenic country a dingo wandered out to see what all the fuss was, and most of the crew got an up close and personal encounter with the dingo. Then they spotted some camels whilst out the front I was enjoying the rolling hills, twisty road and red rock with yellow spinifex. Once again the side of the road was a riot of wildflowers with even the Desert Rose making an appearance.

There was a lot of mining activity in the area with old and new mines scattered along the track with tell tale side tracks leading to the mine sites. At one intersection some wag had placed a pair of skulls and vehicle springs on a post indicating Skull Springs Road. We even had a small water crossing to keep us interested.

We reached Nullagine around lunch time and the roadhouse and small general store did a good trade in ice creams. The town was very neat with three parks and lots of old mining machinery on display. We decided to head north on the unsealed road to Marble Bar just 110k's away. On the way we were intrigued by long column of what looked like smoke but in fact they were small willy willies in burnt out areas sucking up the black ash possibly one hundred feet in the air.

We arrived at Marble Bar at 2.30pm, it was 34 degrees in the hottest town in Australia, they even have a temperature gauge in the main street. The town is very tidy and neat and clean and the Caravan Park is also very good. After settling in, washing self and cloths we headed out to Chinaman's pool and then the actual Marble Bar for sunset. Marble Bar was particularly good with the coloured and layered marble and quartz in the rock strata around the waterhole.

After sunset we walked up to the Iron Clad Hotel which is really clad in corrugated iron for dinner. Pizzas, burgers and fish and chips were on the menu and we enjoyed the meal in the beer garden After we returned to the Caravan Park we sat around a traffic cone with a torch under it to simulate our camp fire.

### **Day 21 25/8/06**

#### **Marble Bar to Newman**

Another beautiful day in WA, clear skies for 20th day in a row and this time the local bird population provided the entertainment in the Marble Bar Caravan Park. As we prepared breakfast a black and white Butcher bird caught a lizard in the Caravan Park and then above my camp it wedged the lizard in a fork in the overhead power line and then began to eat it, not very good for the lizard but fascinating for us below. The Butcher bird then flew to its nest a few meters away and fed its young. Meantime a couple of grey and pink galahs were nesting in a hollow in another tree in the Caravan Park.

We hit the road at 8.45 am and stopped in the main street to get some photos of the iron clad hotel before heading out along the Hillside Road. Our first stop was the Flying Fox lookout which looked up the Coongan River to the Marble Bar which we had visited yesterday. From here we followed the dusty road through wonderful hilly scenery to the Comet Mine which had a small museum and shop. Well, you would have thought no-one had seen a shop before and many souvenirs were purchased, we spent more than an hour here. The area had a lot of old gold mines and relics from the mining era.

From here we finally got on the road again and our next stop was Glen Herring Gorge. A tight and twisty track led into the Gorge, all along its length was a great display of wildflowers including the bright red Sturt Desert Pea. On the way to this Gorge some of the crew spotted a dingo which became very curious and provided many photo opportunities for the city dwellers. Glen Herring Gorge required a hike on foot into its deep red gorge, it was very hot in the sun, well in excess of 40 degrees, and the rock hopping and heat reflected off the rocks made for a tiring walk. But the sight of the high red cliffs and cool water in the gorge made up for the heat stress.

Finally back to our 4wdrives time had marched on to 12 noon and we needed to get on with covering some kilometers. The scenery on the drive to Hillside was stunning with large plateaus, jumbled rock formations, deep brown and bright red rocks and the ever present spinifex yellow and white. Some ranges looked like they had had chocolate melted over them as there deep brown rocks cascaded off the ridge with the encroaching spinifex making it appear as if the rocks had melted down the hills sides.

We passed the Station of Hillside which was on the banks of the Shaw River. Although the river only had pools of water in it, its wide banks and copious sand banks displayed that this river would be a grand sight in flood. Just past the Shaw River the terrain changed somewhat with jumbled piles of red rocks scattered across the countryside as if left by some enormous dump truck. In between these piles of rocks there were large areas of flat rock up to the size of a football field. I decided to stop at one of these platforms of rock for lunch and whilst photographing some unusual round rocks we discovered that this rock platform had several aboriginal art sites on it. We found drawings of men and women, kangaroos and emu foot prints etched into the ancient rock, a truly amazing experience.

After our lucky find and lunch we continued on the road to Bonney Downs. What a great road, it had just been graded and was very dusty but the scenery was spectacular as the road twisted around rocky mountains and through dry tree lined creek beds. Once we reached the Newman Road between Marble Bar and Newman the road became even more smooth and despite being unsealed we could maintain 100kph without too much trouble.

We had a long 150 k run into Newman and all of our interesting stops today had meant we needed to hurry to reach town before sunset. We arrived at 5.30pm and all managed to set up on the nice green lawns at Dearloves Caravan Park before dark. Unfortunately Ray blew a tyre and ruined it.

I had a very successful call to Murray Wilton at 2GB before heading into town for a nice Chinese meal with the crew. John Barbara and I later found Radio Hill Lookout and looked across the lights of Newman and the numerous mines in the area.

## **Day 22 26/8/06**

### **Newman to Karijini National Park**

We did not realize how lucky we had been with our bush camps, last night was very noisy in the Caravan Park at Newman, the endless procession of vehicles in and out of the Park, mostly mining vehicles kept a few of us awake during the night.

Surprisingly everyone was ready in time for the 8.30am Mine Tour and we all assembled at the Info Centre with our new wardrobe of reflective vest, blue hats and clear goggles. We boarded the tour bus and headed off to the Whalebone Mine site. This is the largest open cut iron ore mine in the World.

The huge machinery and expensive tyres at \$35,000 each was amazing. Our Irish tour guide, Katie provided a good commentary and we were able to view the open cut mine from two vantage points.

After the mine tour we had time to refuel and attend to more shopping before we assembled once more at the Info Centre at 12 noon for our departure.

Easy driving on a sealed road all the way to Karijini NP in yet more glorious weather, cloudless skies and around 28 degrees.

Once in the Park, even though the camp hosts knew of our arrival the area they had set aside for us was not practical with walk in camp sites away from our vehicles. So we were allocated sites in various camp locations at Dales Camp, we were spilt into 4 separate spots. However, this is OK as there are no fires permitted and everyone can do their own thing in camp after dark.

### **Day 23 27/8/06**

#### **Karijini National Park**

It was nice to have a leisurely start knowing that we did not have to pack up camp or drive anywhere today. We arose after sunrise at 7am, a real first for us. Eric, Anne and I were camped together and the others scattered around the various campsites. Everyone could do their own thing today. After breakfast we headed off on foot to the lookout over Circular pool in Dales Gorge and then descended the very steep descent via rock stops and even a steel ladder to the floor of the Gorge. We then walked up the gorge to the Circular pool, on the way there were lovely scenes of cascading waters over the flat, terraced slate type rock platforms. Every now and then this slate like rock formations had giant boulders strewn along the floor of the gorge, these looked like volcanic intrusion rocks that had fallen from the cliffs above our heads.

We then made our way down Dales Gorge admiring the numerous rock pools, giant paper bark trees and towering red cliffs. This eventually led to the beautiful Fortescue Falls where the water tumbled down the step like formations into the giant pool of water 50 feet below it. There were a lot of people here as this pool is easily accessible from the road above. We followed the track to the end of the gorge where Fern Pool is located and I enjoyed a swim in the cold water. I made it across the large green pool to the waterfall and managed to climb around behind the falls to feel the relatively warm waters cascading down the water fall.

Returning to Fortescue Falls Eric and I climbed back up to the plateau and walked back to camp. After lunch and little snooze in the shade of the Cruiser, we went for a short drive to the Visitors Centre where there were good displays of the aborigine history and the rock formations of the Park.

Returning to camp we headed out to the lookout over Circular Pool where we met most of the other crew for the sunset with the red rocks glowing even darker red in the fading light.

### **Day 24 28/8/06**

#### **Karijini National Park**

Today was going to be a real adventurous day for all of us. We set off to explore the deep gorges of Weano and Hancock. On the way we took a look at Kalamajina Falls which had an easy walk don to the stepped falls. We then stopped off at Joffree Lookout and Knox Lookout before reaching Weano Gorge.

The warning signs advised of difficult walks in deep water over rough terrain. Eric and I descended into Weano Gorge and made our way towards Handrail Gorge. This

was a spectacular gorge with deep red cliff faces almost touching overhead. We had to wade through waist deep water and it was a real challenge keeping all the camera gear dry. The other main problem for me were my soft feet and without shoes to protect them in the water it was very slow going. The Handrail gorge required a climb through a very narrow chasm and then use of the rail and rope to descend into Handrail Pool which was absolutely delightful.

From this point on the gorge became much more difficult and after watching Eric wade through chest deep water I followed. The water came up to my chin and I had to hold the digital camera high in the air hoping that I would not step into a deeper hole or slip and dunk the camera. I had left the back pack at the pool as it was impossible to carry it into this deep water. This gorge took me into a natural amphitheatre which was deep in the gorge, truly wonderful.

On the return trip we met Belle, a girl travelling on her own and we helped and encouraged each other over the more difficult sections.

It was now time to attempt Hancock Gorge with places such as Spider Walk, Kermit's Pool and Regans Pool. We descended the gorge, which was the easy bit, we then had to wade through waist deep water into the Amphitheatre and then tackle the Spider Walk. Here the gorge was about a metre apart and with hand and legs stretched wide you could just reach each side of the gorge. This was harrowing time as the river raced on very slippery rocks below and any slip would result in injury and as I was carrying all my camera gear on my back it would be certain loss of all this expensive gear.

But Eric, Belle and I made it, we reached Kermit's Pool with its deep water and crystal clear water. We managed to push on a little further until the need for abseiling gear became obvious although we managed to get to the top of Regans Pool. The return walk was just as interesting, by now my feet were killing me, especially when I needed to remove my boots to walk through the water, where I could, I climbed along the precarious platformed sides of the gorge always above either deep pools of water or rushing waterfalls. I was totally exhausted by the time we emerged on the sunny gorge floor and climbed back up the steel ladder and steep stone steps to the car park. But the feeling of accomplishment was something else. To think that just 3 months earlier I was seriously ill and had no energy to even walk out of the house, I was very very pleased to have achieved what I had.

We had a look at Oxer Lookout which over looked all the gorges we had been through that day and with the setting sun the country looked magnificent. We followed the road out past Mt Bruce, the second tallest in WA at 1235 metres and then back to camp by 5.30pm. A very satisfying day indeed.

## **Day 25 29/8/06**

### **Karijini National Park to Tom Price**

Despite the tiring day of walks in Weano and Hancock Gorge I had trouble sleeping last night, it was an early night at 10pm but by 1.30am I was awake. For the rest of the

night it was case of drifting in and out of sleep and listening to the dingos howling, one was right by our tents.

We rose at 6am with a big pack up ahead of us after our 3 night stay. But still made it by the allotted time of 8.30am. It started off a cool morning with clear skies and 8 degrees but once the sun broke the horizon the temperature rose with the sun. It peaked at 33 degrees in the afternoon.

We headed off in convoy out of the Park and onto Auski Roadhouse for morning tea enjoying the rolling hills and colourful scenery. Then we headed along the northern boundary of the Hamersley Range enjoying the view of the mountains out to the left. The road soon turned to red gravel and we found ourselves at the old town of Wittenoom. A short stop in the shop and then a drive up the gorge past the tailings from the asbestos mine. We stopped for lunch beside the river but found what looked like asbestos fibres in the rocks on the gravel beside the water hole. The surrounding hills were spectacular with their red cliffs and varied wild flowers.

From here we continued north until the gravel road climbed through the ranges amidst amazing coloured scenery. This road led us to Hamersley Gorge where we all managed the walk to the swimming hole beneath the twisted rock layers. This was a beautiful spot and it was hard to drag ourselves away from the warm sun, smooth rocks and cool water.

We followed the gravel road to the south and eventually hit a good bitumen road beside the railway line which took us into Tom Price. We checked into the Caravan Park for the night.

## **Day 26 30/8/06**

### **Tom Price**

The local Camp Draft kept a few of us awake for a while last night with the loud music and then the first of the Miners vehicles left the Caravan Park at 4.50am, so it was a slightly restless night. We woke to another glorious day, not a cloud in the sky.

This morning we all had free time to attend to chores such as washing, fixing vehicles, shopping and even an oil change for the hard working 4wdrives. Despite some very slow servicing by a very inexperienced mechanic all the chores were eventually completed and everyone had attended their 10 minute video on using the Railway road.

After lunch we set off in convoy in 32 degrees to the top of Mount Nameless behind the Caravan Park. At over 1000 metres this is the highest mountain in WA that you can drive to the top. The view was spectacular with the fine weather allowing a vista as far as the Hamersley Ranges and a great view over the Tom Price Iron Ore mine, we watched a 240 carriage train leave the mine site on its way to Dampier.

From here we descended the mountain without name and headed back out along the super highway towards the railway road. Once on this road it became unsealed but was in excellent condition and in many places the railway line was duplicated allowing for easy passing of trains. We soon had a train, empty, returning from

Dampier and everyone enjoyed the sight of such a huge train, we met it just near the turn off to Mt Sheila.

The drive up to Mt Sheila was very different to last time, now the growth around the road was very prolific and the western sun meant that we did not see the colours in the surrounding hills that we had seen 5 years earlier.

But the climb to the top of Mt Sheila was still extremely steep and fortunately it was still sealed although only just one lane wide. The climb and the view had everyone in raptures and we spent about an hour on top of the mountain, interestingly it is slightly lower than Mt Nameless by a few metres.

The trip back down the mountain was equally impressive and the near setting sun made for some great colours in the surrounding hills and white snappy gums. Once back on the railway road we headed back towards Tom Price only to spot a train coming from Dampier and one coming from Tom Price. The convoy stopped and watched as both trains passed us one after the other. A great sight!

The final drive into Tom Price was on sunset and as usual the colours of the setting sun on the landscape were simply stunning.

## **Day 27 31/8/06**

### **Tom Price to Exmouth**

Today was a long day on the black top, we had not travelled all day on a sealed road since day one. We managed to get away by 8.45 am after saying farewell to David & Heidi whose time with us had come to an end.

Paraburdoo is only small with a nearby mine, the road to the town is excellent and follows the undulating hills and dry creek beds which are typical of the Pilbara Region.

From Paraburdoo the road was less well maintained and did not even boast a centre line but it was still good and we easily maintained the speed limit of 110kph. We lunched at Nanutarra Roadhouse on the Nth West Coastal Hwy, it was hot at 37 degrees.

From here we continued south and then took the Burkett Road to Exmouth. The terrain was flat with the occasional red sand dune, but once we turned onto the Exmouth Road it was very flat. Even though the map showed Exmouth Gulf not far off to the right it was a long time before we saw the blue water. We passed through Exmouth town on our way to the Lighthouse Caravan Park and saw lots of large towers which we assumed were used by the RAAF as part of the Leamonth air base.

After checking into the Caravan Park I headed up to the Lighthouse lookout where I watched the sun set into the Indian Ocean, I also saw a whale off the coast and there were two oil rigs visible off the coast also.

We all had fish and chips in the café in the Caravan Park, the weather was still fine but it was sticky with humidity, something we had not felt previously. Now, at 9.30pm there is a strong on shore breeze typical of a sea side town, very different to what we have experienced to date.

## **Day 28 1/9/06**

### **Exmouth**

The wind eased off through the night and by the early morning another glorious day had dawned. Although the wind did pick up quite a lot in the morning it eased right away in the afternoon, it was also much less humid than yesterday.

I went up to the Lighthouse lookout at 8.15am to make some phone calls as there was no service in the Caravan Park. Whilst up there I sighted several whales off the coast line. I made a call to the Tourist bureau but it did not open until 9am so I called a couple of the whale watching tour companies to see if we could book a tour for the afternoon. Initially they were not interested but once they learnt there were 21 of us we soon had a whole boat to ourselves.

The plan was to pick us up by Mini bus at 1pm from the Caravan Park and the cost was just \$80 each for a 4 hour whale watch cruise. With that organized we headed into Exmouth to look around the shops, pay for our cruise and have morning tea. After this a few of us headed off to Shothole Gorge in the Cape Range National Park. This was a very interesting drive through the gorge which reminded us of some of the scenes from a John Wayne Western movie. The overhanging rocks were worn away in large caves with the white crumbly sandstone making quite a difference to the deep red and iron colour seen in the Hamersley Range.

We returned to camp for a quick lunch before our bus arrived and our skipper, Richard from 3 Islands Marine Charter drove us out to Exmouth port and our big boat the Draw Card.

We set off on our whale spotting charter and had no sooner cleared the break wall and a large Manta Ray swam passed. We spotted a mother and baby dolphin and a turtle and quite a number of whales. The whales were quite shy and would dive deep once the boat approached but after a couple of hours of far off sightings we managed to get within 50 metres of couple of humpback whales and everyone was very happy. The Chartered included afternoon tea and snacks and fruit platter and was well organized.

Our skipper returned us to the Caravan Park but not before rushing up to the top of the Lighthouse lookout as I was due to go on air with 2GB at 5.25 pm our time. But their programming was running late and it would be another 15 minutes before they could take my call so we returned to the Caravan Park and dropped everyone off. I went back up to the Lighthouse lookout to get telephone reception and make my call to 2GB which went over very well as I related the whale spotting charter and the view from the lookout which included more breaching whales, a setting sun and a lone sail board rider, not to mention the oil rig off the coast.

I elected to have fish and chips once more at the local café and then spent sometime sitting around our communal camp area with our fellow travellers, everyone was very happy with the events of the day.

### **Day 29 2/9/06**

#### **Exmouth to Coral Bay**

We were all packed up and ready by 8.40am and headed off down the coast to Cape Range National Park, on the way we visited many of the side roads that lead out to large car parks with short walks to the various beaches. Some were sandy and others rocky, Sandy Bay looked the nicest but a very strong wind made conditions outside the vehicle uncomfortable.

We stopped at Turquoise Bay where several of the crew went snorkeling with reports of many coloured fish to be seen just off shore. The strong current looked a little treacherous and the hardy few said it was a real battle.

The skies were crystal clear yet again but the wind was howling and even cool. We reached Yardie Creek at lunchtime. The creek crossing was dry and although the track was sandy it was firm and did not require lowering of tyre pressures. But it was very corrugated and had many Whoopy Doos. This road went on for some time with small tracks off to the beach every so often. There were giant sand dunes at times, white dunes which encroached on the vegetation made an interesting scene.

We also saw quite a number of goats and kangaroos on this road. The severe corrugations made for slow going and we did not make it into Coral Bay until 5pm. We are in a large Caravan Park but the wind is still very strong and cold.

### **Day 30 3/9/06**

#### **Coral Bay to Carnarvon**

The wind dropped off through the night and by the morning it was clear and fine with a little dew on the tents. We were up early as we had a glass bottom boat tour booked for 8am. The bay where these tours commence is quite beautiful and just a 200 metre walk from the Caravan Park. We walked out to the boat and no sooner left the sandy shore and we were seeing coral and fish immediately under us.

The coral was a little disappointing in that it was mostly a dull green colour and there were few colourful fish. But it was quite relaxing out over the reef looking at the acres of coral under us.

On return to land we had time to shop or at least look around and also take a short walk over the sand dunes above the bay.

Before leaving Coral Bay we took a short drive along the southern coast to another lookout over the beautiful turquoise coloured water.

The drive to Carnarvon was all on the sealed road, the only excitement being when Ronaldo realized he had lost his wallet which he believed had fallen out of his pocket whilst he was on roof inspecting his roof top box which he believed had been tampered with during the night. He had quite a lot of cash and his credit cards in his wallet.

Marcus thought he had seen it on the road so he and Ron went back whilst we moved onto Carnarvon. The scenery leading up to Carnarvon was pretty boring with low mulga trees and red dunes, but as we neared the town the flora was replaced by fruit trees and Banana trees. The Gascoyne River was dry which made it even more perplexing.

We settled into the very nice Coral Coast Tourist Park at 2.30pm and had time in the afternoon to look around town and visit the mile long jetty. We also booked a seafood café or everyone for the evening meal to celebrate Father's Day.

Marcus and Ron returned with the wallet and credit cards but not the cash which they believed must have blown out. The wallet was found caught on the roof rack.

The evening meal was very good and everyone had a good time, finally off to bed at 10.30pm.

### **Day 31 4/9/06**

#### **Carnarvon to Denham**

We had a late start this morning, giving everyone time for shopping and in my case computer work on the photos.

Then we set off at 10 am down the highway towards the Overlander Roadhouse. It was hot and becoming very windy. On the way we were joined by a group of Bash vehicles in all sorts of regalia, this proved to be quite entertaining and they too were headed for Denham.

As we headed in to Denham we heard on the radio the devastating news that Steve Irwin had been killed by a stingray off Cairns.

The scenery is quite uninspiring all along the main roads with low mulga and salt bush, hundreds of kilometres of it. It is only when you near the coast or inlets and start to get glimpses of the turquoise water that you see the real beauty of the area.

When we arrived at Denham which is right on Shark Bay the wind velocity had increased substantially, it was said to be peaking at up to 90 kph! The Caravan Park had allotted some fantastic sites right on the beach, but it was plainly impossible for us to camp.

I managed to get some cabins in the Park and some older style holiday cottages next door to accommodate everyone. We felt like we were in a cyclone.

## **Day 32 5/9/06**

### **Monkey Mia and Cape Peron**

We visited Monkey Mia early at 8am to see the Dolphin feeding, the wind had abated to about 30 kph and was very cold. Sebastian and Lynne were chosen by the Rangers to feed the Dolphins. Monkey Mia is quite a nice resort, we enjoyed a hot cuppa for morning tea to warm up.

We then set off to the Francois Peron National Park. The roads were very sandy and after a while we had to lower tyre pressure to 25psi. It was about 50 K's to Cape Peron at the top of the peninsular. I took a walk along the left side of the coast and have to say it was one of the nicest places I have ever seen. White sandy beaches, turquoise sea, red cliffs and then a big white sand dune being pushed by the wind over the red cliffs. The white sand cascaded down over the cliff like a waterfall and even the breeze caught the sand at times and blew it back up just like a waterfall.

The rocks on the headlands were covered in oysters and as I walked back along the white sandy beach a pair of dolphins swam into the shore line and followed me, they were less than 10 metres from the shore. I spent about 2 hours wandering this coastline and took over 150 photos.

When I returned to the car park a few of my fellow travellers were a little concerned for me as they did not know where I had gone, it was nice to know someone cared.

We made our way back to Denham, stopping off at the historic Cape Peron homestead where some of us had a swim in the natural hot spa bath tub.

Quite a few of us then had a nice dinner at a local café in Denham.

## **Day 33 6/9/06**

### **Denham to Steep Point and Return**

We were supposed to move camp today to Step Point but the high winds of the previous days made us think that a beach camp was not a good idea, so we decided on a day trip to Steep Point. It was a 520 kilometre return trip!

We left at 9am and set off for the Useless Loop Road, which was unsealed but in very good condition. After about 80 kilometres and once past the salt works the road deteriorated and we were soon in sand dunes. The sign said lower tyre pressures or else, so we did. It was a long drive over soft sand, corrugations and outcrops of limestone, but the big white sand dunes encroaching the bush, the beautiful waterways and the anticipation of reaching Steep Point all made it interesting.

After paying our \$22 per vehicle entry fee, we headed up to the Zuytdorf Cliffs and the view was awe inspiring. The sea cliffs were about 50 metres high with huge waves crashing into the base of the limestone cliffs. We followed the cliffs north until we came to the famous Steep Point, and the Most Westerly section of Mainland Australia sign. All the group photos followed and the view across to Dirk Hartok Island was grand. We even saw a turtle in the sea below the cliffs.

It was getting late and we had not had lunch so we followed the sandy track back down to the beach and parked all the vehicles on the white sand for a late lunch and swim. We even carried out our water ceremony and emptied the bottle of Pacific Ocean water collected from Mona Vale one month earlier and refilled the bottle with Indian Ocean water to return it back across the country. The trip meter thus far was reading 8,700 kilometres.

We were faced with a 260 k drive back to Denham and left the beach at 4pm, we made good time even after stopping to reinflate the tyres and arrived back at our cabins at 7.15pm. Some cloud appeared this afternoon, the most we had seen all trip and the forecast is for stormy weather.

### **Day 34 7/9/06**

#### **Denham to Kalbarri**

The day dawned cloudy and there had been some light showers overnight. We had decided to make a start at 10 am as this would give us an opportunity to visit the Shark Bay Interpretative Centre which was a new multi million dollar exhibition on the local area. It was very good and we could have spent a lot more time in there.

As we traced back down the main road we noticed rain falling out over Steep Point and learnt later that the unsealed road that we had used yesterday was closed due to the wet conditions so it was lucky we had decided against camping out at Steep Point.

We stopped off at Shell Beach and inspected the broad beach area which was made up of millions of tiny sea shells. Then it was back on the black top for the long drive down to Kalbarri. It was warm and sunny once again with temps around 30 degrees.

As we approached the crossing of the Murchison River we noticed a change in the landscape from low mulga and salt bush to more substantial trees, and even ploughed fields indicating some agricultural use of the land.

On the way to Kalbarri we passed through the National Park which had a lot of different wildflowers, we also made a quick visit to two lookouts which were only a short distance off the main road, Ross Graham and Hawks Head. We reached the Caravan Park at around 4.30pm but in the usual slow process it was 5pm before we got everyone in to make camp on the nice green grounds. It then took another 10 minutes for the receptionist to calculate what I owed, as a consequence I did not get to set camp myself until after 5.30pm as I also had to make contact with 2GB at 5.15 for my radio interview.

I took a short walk back up to the main street on sunset to see a colourful sunset over the river mouth and ocean and noticed lightning in the eastern sky. We had dinner in the camp kitchen as the storm passed to our east but by 8pm more lightning was seen directly to our north I thought this storm would hit us.

At 8.30pm the rain started amidst lightning and thunder and we all raced off to our respective tents for shelter and a very early night. The storm lasted a short while with lots of thunder and what sounded like heavy rain on the canvas roof. But by 11.30pm

we were all woken by extremely strong winds and more rain, it blew so hard I was certain tents and even trees would collapse. It was a restless night for most of us.

### **Day 35 8/9/06**

#### **Kalbarri**

Well what a night, I don't know how any of us survived it, it was still blowing strongly at 7am and some passing showers persisted. We set off at 8.45am for Kalbarri National Park and once on the unsealed road noticed even more wild flowers in the Park. Our first stop was Z Bend lookout where a short walk took us to a lookout over the gorge of the Murchison River. The gorge consists of eroded sand stone with many wind worn caves and layered rock strata.

We then went to The Loop which has as its main feature the Window which is an eroded rock with a large hole in it providing a view over the deep gorge. We spent quite a bit of time here exploring the many rock caves above the gorge. The weather was mainly cloudy but it was warm.

We returned to camp for lunch and I managed to do some washing, it was at this time that news came through that Peter Brock had been killed in a Targa event north of Perth, this had been a terrible week for icons of Australia with the loss of Steve Irwin and now Peter Brock.

I spent the afternoon looking at the coastal gorges and lookouts and the Rainbow Jungle where many different types of Parrots are kept and bred. We enjoyed a good meal at the Kalbarri Hotel.

As I type this at 9pm it has started to rain again, but this time there is no wind, lets hope we get some sleep tonight as I am very tired. Tomorrow we start to head back to the east.

### **Day 36 9/9/06**

#### **Kalbarri to Mt Morgan**

It rained a little through the night and then just when the tents had dried out at 6am it rained a short shower again. But during breakfast it stayed fine and the sun came out and the tents were dry by the time we packed them up. We left the very nice Tudor Caravan Park and headed off down the coast. On the way we noticed Hutt Lake which was pink, so we drove into Port Gregory where we could get a better view of this pink lake. The lake was part of salt works and the water had a very high salt content which also caused the pink colour.

We arrived at Geraldton which was quite a large city at 10.30 am and had morning tea at the port near the lighthouse. After refueling and a little shopping we set off for Mt Morgan. Up to now the scenery had changed considerably with fields of green all down the coast to Geraldton. This was Canola country but the drought had reduced the growth to near nil. The drought also meant there were no wildflowers, very disappointing.

As we drove east the cloud increased but it remained warm at around 27 degrees. We were going to camp at Mt Morgan tonight but the attraction of a bush camp was too great and we found a spot on the side of the road 20 k before town. The area had had 25 mm of rain the previous night and the concern was that the flat sandy ground may be boggy, and the last thing we needed was more rain tonight, so lets hope it stays dry.

We are enjoying our bush camp again and there are many camp ovens in the fire tonight.

### **Day 37 10/9/06 Mt Magnet to Kalgoorlie**

The camp oven meals last night were great as usual and we enjoyed some great poetry recitals from Ian Downing and a little ditty put together by Lynne Cazaly based on the tour group and recited in the manner of horse race call, very entertaining.

We went to bed around 10.30pm with a partly cloudy sky filtering the near full moon, our concern was that it would rain whilst we were in our bush cap as the red muddy terrain on which we were camped looked like it could easily become a quagmire.

On waking at 6am after a great night's sleep we had nothing to worry about as it stayed fine all night and by the time we had packed up even the clouds had dispersed. We set off into Mt Magnet at 8.30am and arrived around 9am as two huge buckets for the haul trucks were being transported through town. These buckets were bound for the Telfer Mine and were 8.5 metres wide, needless to say they took up the whole road and even the main street of Mt Magnet.

We travelled north for about 8K to view the rocky outcrop known as the Granites, here there were odd shaped and weathered granite boulders, some with caves and aboriginal rock art sites. We then returned to Mt Magnet for morning tea and a refuel before following the sealed road to the east to Sandstone. We found that once we left the known wild flower area that the flowers actually became more prolific. Mauves, pinks and reds lined the roadside at times.

In Sandstone we followed the signs to the natural formation known as London Bridge, this was a sandstone formation which formed a natural bridge which you could walk under, it was said that in the late 1800's the bridge was much wider and even had horse and buggy travel over it.

From here we found the Menzies Road which was unsealed, in fact this road was excellent and we could easily cruise at up to 100kph if we wished to. It was a long drive towards Menzies, just north of Kalgoorlie and the bright clear day was being replaced by some cloud. When we reached Lake Ballard we followed the signs to the Sculptures of the Inland which were a series of stick like figures placed at various points around the Lake bed. Normally this lake would be dry but the rain which had fallen two days previously had left a shallow covering of water on the salt surface and even as we walked out onto the Lake to get as close as possible to the first of the sculptures we noticed that the water's edge was moving just like the tide coming in. We retreated to our vehicles before being cut off by what we called the tide.

Once we arrived at Menzies it was 135k's on sealed road into Kalgoorlie and we arrived at this large Gold town just on dusk after a big day of driving. Most of us were quite tired and elected to do simple meals in the Caravan Park Cap kitchen.

### **Day 38 11/9/06**

#### **Kalgoorlie**

Well it rained again last night, in fact it poured, some of us had wet tents inside as well as out. Luckily today was a rest day in Kalgoorlie so we had time to let things dry out, or at least until it started to rain again at 3.30pm and as I type this at 4.45 pm it is still raining.

We took time to look around the gold mining town with some going to the Mining Museum, others doing washing and car/tyre repairs and most of us viewing the Super Pit which at 1pm had a controlled explosion which was quite spectacular. The giant haul trucks are constantly moving rock out of the pit to the crusher and yet only a golf ball size of gold is found in 6 truck loads of rock!

As it is raining again we hope it stops before it soaks everything again.

### **Day 39 12/9/06**

#### **Kalgoorlie to Fraser Range**

Well it rained for about 3 hours and made sure the tents were quite wet, so we made a delayed departure from Kalgoorlie at 9.30am. When we woke the skies were in fact quite clear and it looked like being a great day but at 9am a cool change came through and the temperature dropped and some cloud started rolling in again.

We followed the sealed road to Norseman and then the Eyre Hwy to the east in passing showers. We arrived at Fraser Range at 1.30pm. This is a sheep property which has opened its doors to tourists providing a camp site and camp kitchen with great facilities. I had pre-arranged with the managers Elaine and Rick for a tag-along tour of the property. We set off at 2pm and were joined by Rick and Paul the owner of Fraser Range. Paul has been here for 4.5 yrs and showed us some of the old ruins on the station. This included a cottage dating back to 1895 and stone dam which origins are unknown but it must be very old.

We also saw an Eagles Nest and numerous skulls of baby eagles at the base of the tree and learnt that 1080 poison is made from a native poison bush which is why the native animals are not affected by the poison. Rick also told us that wild dogs were becoming a real problem. We stayed out until 5pm and on the way back I had to stop to make my regular satellite call to 2GB.

As I came back onto the Eyre Hwy there were 3 vehicle camped for the night, this was a group of English people, one named Dave, who was skateboarding from Perth to Brisbane. I had a chat with them for a while and made a call to 2GB to see if they were interested in talking to Dave occasionally.

Tonight it has cleared up but is very cold with the temp already down to 8 degrees.

#### **Day 40 13/9/06**

##### **Fraser Range to Eyre Bird Observatory**

It was cold last night but not too bad at around 7 degrees, we woke to a brilliant day, sunshine and clear skies. This gave us a good chance to have a thorough look around Fraser Range camp area, not only is there excellent facilities and camping but there is also accommodation of various kinds, certainly a good place to stop off. In the shearing shed there was all the old shearing gear, this has not been restored as yet but Paul and Teen with Rick and Elaine plan to work on it once time and funds permit.

We reluctantly moved on and out on the Eyre Highway we turned to the east once more. I was surprised to find that our skateboarding Englishman, Dave had already travelled 10 kilometres and his band of supporters were happily filming him on one of the many long straights found across the Nullabor. After stopping and getting more photos and having another chat we set off to the east once again.

There were \$36m worth of highway upgrades taking place and it was speed limited to 40kph for kilometre after kilometre, although the truckies didn't seem to stick to this speed very well. We eventually arrived at Balladonia Roadhouse for morning tea. Shortly after this stop we reached the longest straight section of road in Australia at 146.6 kilometres. It was with some excitement that we drove this rather monotonous road for the next hour and a half.

After lunch at the Caiguna Roadhouse we continued to Cocklebiddy for ice creams at the roadhouse,(that is all these place names are, roadhouses primarily for the many road trains heading east and west).

We decided to go out to the Eyre Bird Observatory or at least for a track along the Baxter Range instead of following sealed Eyre Highway. When we reached the drop off the escarpment a sign indicated that the caretaker at the Eyre Bird Observatory (EBO) could be reached on channel 12 UHF for track conditions, so I called him up. Arpad was the man's name with his wife Mary and son Zac, we decided to continue on the sandy track out to the EBO to see the old Telegraph Station and hopefully the great Southern Ocean. After dropping tyre pressures to 25 psi for the soft white sand we were soon in the small car park at the EBO. Arpad had never seen so many 4wdrives at the EBO and helped to park us all in the grounds. He explained the history of the Telegraph station and showed us around the house. He also showed me a map of the road we wanted to follow under the escarpment and advised on a camping spot near an old homestead as there was no camping permitted at the EBO.

We then took a short drive down to the beach on the Great Southern Ocean, found an old shipwreck on the wide white sandy beach and wished we could have stayed longer as the sun was dipping low in the sky over the wet sandy beach, it would have made a great photo if only we did not have to drive out of the Conservation Park which surrounds the EBO.

So we drove off just before sunset back along the twisting sandy road back to the escarpment and turned right below it and followed the often overgrown track along the old rusty telegraph poles with the wire scattered along the track. In near darkness I found a suitable clearing near the old homestead and we soon made camp and had a warm fire going. We love our bush camps. It is a clear night with no wind and already the temp is 8 degrees.

### **Day 41 14/9/06**

#### **EBO to Eucla**

We woke up in 1.3 degrees to find we had camped in a very nice flat area surrounded by firewood with a view straight across to the Baxter Cliffs. We were on the road by 8.45 after turning our watches forward 1.5 hours to make the most of the early sunrises and now the late sunsets.

We continued to follow the 4wd route along the base of the Baxter Cliffs, the first stop being the old ruins just up the road from our camp. It is hard to imagine how the people lived out here all those many years ago.

The road was single lane usually with grass in the centre and it twisted and wound its way east for 80 kilometres, sometimes in wooded areas but most of the time in open salt bush plains. But always with the cliffs to our left. We saw quite a few red kangaroos and after exploring another side track to a well, we found a rock dam built high up on the cliffs. It was a great view from the top and the ingenuity to build the dam and guide the water into it was amazing.

Near the end of the track at Manudra there were more ruins and this time a grave yard for old cars including chevies, FJ's and various other relics. We stopped at the new roadhouse on the Eyre Hwy just above the ruins and found that the Eyre hwy at this point also descended the cliffs.

The Hwy now followed the Roe Plains with the Baxter cliffs still of to the left, it was like this all the way to Eucla. We refueled here and decided to camp in the caravan park and some stayed in the Motel rooms, this place had a lovely restaurant and a fish pond full of frogs surrounded by a very nice garden. The hwy had also climbed the cliffs once more.

This was also the site of the Eucla Telegraph Ruins on the beach and we walked to the ruins in the snow white sand and out to the ocean's edge where there was an old jetty. Looking into the Great Southern Ocean once more as the sun set in the west over the beach (longways).

It had been a sunny day all day with a temp of 22 degrees but a cool sea breeze made it quite nippy on the beach, most of us enjoyed a great meal in the restaurant.

### **Day 42 15/9/06**

#### **Eucla to Fowlers Bay**

We woke to another glorious day, blue sky with a little fog being blown on shore by the cool south easterly, the high stance of Eucla on the cliff top catching the sea mist.

We were on the road by 9am and soon passed through the WA/SA border, it wasn't long before we had our first of many visits off the highway to the viewing areas over the huge cliffs that make up the Great Australian Bight.

Some of these viewing areas were spectacular with great views along the coast of the giant cliffs with the waves crashing far below. It was amazing how the flat plain of the Nullarbor just ended in a giant drop off, you certainly had to be careful where you stepped and mindful of any sudden gusts of wind. We visited every viewing area marked along the coast.

At Nullarbor roadhouse we noted that fuel cost \$1.75 where as at Eucla it cost just \$1.56, it was apparently even cheaper at Ceduna at \$1.40 a litre!

We stopped for lunch at the Nullarbor Roadhouse and were amazed to find the temperature had risen to 32 degrees with a hot northerly wind, and yet out on the coast the cool sea breeze dropped the temp to 22 degrees.

After Nullarbor we made our way to the Head of Bight, there was a \$10 entry fee to visit the viewing platforms over the Bight but the sight of up 12 whales with their calves made up for this fee. We were amazed to see the whales just metres from the cliffs below us and spent an hour here watching these majestic creatures.

We crossed the treeless plain on the Nullarbor and were soon heading through ploughed fields and pasture improved land towards Fowlers Bay. Near the town we crossed several mud flats and noticed the huge white sand dunes out to our right. We decided to stay at the Fowlers Bay Caravan Park and no sooner set up the tents and then jumped back in the 4wdrives for some exploring. Armed with directions from the helpful caravan park manager we retraced back out of town 5 kilometres and took the Scotts Bay road, this took us out to the coast where the track was hard limestone, we emerged above a beautiful bay and were admiring the orange cliffs with organ pipe like formations when we noticed a whale and its calf in the bay below us. We then followed the hard limestone track passed more cliffs and beautiful bays to view Mexican Hat, an island feature. The sun was low in the sky when we headed back down the track and admired the wonderful white sand dunes. We reached the beach and lowered our tyre pressures to 20psi and headed off down the beach. It was just on sunset and the light in the sky, sea and sand dunes was marvellous. Eventually we came to some huge white sand dunes and could not resist driving up them. A great view from the top as the sun set over the pure white dunes.

We continued down the full length of the beach which led back to Fowlers Bay but were unsure of where the exit through the sand dunes was located. The light was fading but the orange sky made for some great photos over the gentle seas at the far eastern end of the bay. It was dark by the time we started looking for the exit off the beach and after following two dead ends I found a track that looked like it would lead us out. It was pitch black now and even the lights on high beam had trouble lighting the big dunes. Fortunately there was one set of wheel tracks ahead of me which I

followed, but I did check a couple of drop offs on foot before proceeding. The dancing lights of the following vehicles made for an eerie sight.

Much to my relief the tracks led to the exit down the big dune and back onto the road next to the Caravan Park, we arrived back at 7.30pm. We quickly set up the BBQ and lights and were eating dinner by 8.30pm, the spirits were high after such a great adventure, we even plan to get up at 5.30am tomorrow and go back up the dunes for the sunrise at 6.40am, so at 11.30pm I had better get off to bed.

### **Day 43 16/9/06**

#### **Fowlers Bay to Elliston**

Well isn't it always the way, when you plan to get up early at set time (5.30am in this case) and you haven't got an alarm clock you keep waking up every half hour. Well that's what happened to me. Anyway Craig, Michael and Lynne and Mark and I all got up in the dark at 5.30am and set off by 6am, in the dark back up into the sand hills. The first sand hill needed to be approached with some gusto and Mark needed a couple attempts to get the gusto right. It was half light and the sand hills of the night before certainly looked different when you could see them. From the top of the sand dunes we could see the sun rising over Fowlers Bay, there was a little cloud to add some colour. We tried to get right back across the dunes from where we came the previous evening but a huge sand dune stopped the others although I managed to climb it, it was certainly a struggle. So I came back and explored another large dune area stopping at the base of the biggest sand dune on the beach. We walked to the top of this dune and watched the colours change in the sky and on the sand as the sun rose. It was a great experience.

We returned to camp by 7.15am and had breakfast and packed up the remainder of camp, we all got away by 8.35am. We followed the road out to the Eyre Hwy and then into Penong which is the town of windmills, there were lots of them in the paddocks around town. We found diesel prices had dropped to \$1.38.

We then took the road to Point Sinclair, this unsealed road passed through some low mud flats where one side of the road had pink water and on the other it was blue. Stopping at the car park we walked to the beach which was just 200 metres away from the famed Cactus Beach which has a world reputation as a great surfing location, there was a good swell running with the off shore wind blowing the crests off the waves and there were about 12 surfers enjoying the good conditions.

From here we followed the road a short distance to Cape LeHunte which was a large bay with wharf and a car park, it was very picturesque, as was all of the coastline scenery along here.

We returned to Penong and headed for Ceduna where the fruit fly check was carried out. Then it was on to Streaky Bay which was another scenic coastal town. After lunch here and temps of 32 degrees, we headed for Elliston but on the way visited the rock formations known as Murphy's Haystacks. These large granite boulders stood out on a hill side where no other rocks existed, they were very large, round and perfectly smooth, quite a sight.

We arrived at Elliston and after checking into the Caravan Park explored the coastal cliffs with their stunning scenery and huge crashing waves. I watched sunset from atop one of the cliffs. Dinner was had at a great café.

#### **Day 44 17/9/06**

##### **Elliston to Port Augusta**

A strong breeze came up at 4.30am and woke me early but no cloud came with it so it was a starry night sky that I stared up into at that ungodly hour. We were up and ready to leave by 8.30am, and the wind was strong from the north and hot. The temperature rose all day and peaked at 34 degrees!

We followed the Flinders Hwy, passed long stone fences and wondered at the time and tenacity it must have taken to build these barriers over a hundred years earlier. Although we travelled along the coast you cannot see it and the surrounding country is predominantly agricultural based with large paddocks of Canola, wheat and similar crops. This made for impressive scenes of vast yellow, white and green fields. As we neared the turnoff to the Coffin Bay large hills rose around us and added a new dimension to the rolling and sometimes flat terrain. At Coffin Bay the wind was very strong and made for an unpleasant morning tea break but the warm weather was nice. There were quite a lot of expensive new homes along the water front at Coffin Bay, but we still wondered at the lack of people around especially given it was a Sunday.

From here it was an easy run into Port Lincoln, now this was a big town, it is supposed to have the largest fishing fleet in the world and more millionaires per head than any other Australian town, our drive around the Marina proved that both of these boasts could be right.

Refuelling a group of vehicles this size is no easy task and when there is only one bowser at the service station it is even more difficult, so this a real test of our patience but we eventually got there. Fuel cost an amazingly low \$1.34 and could have been 4 cents cheaper if we had a docket. We moved onto Tumby Bay for lunch, whilst everywhere we had visited had very few people, Port Lincoln seemed to have them all, so I was very pleased when we arrived at Tumby Bay to find the place almost deserted. The local café made a few dollars out of supplying us with lunch and we sat in the shade on green grass above the beach with the bay spread out before us, a warm day and a perfect setting.

From here it was a long haul up the Peninsular to Whyalla and eventually Port Augusta where we checked into the Big 4 Holiday Park. A nice grassed site for all of us and we enjoyed happy hour and then dinner together. Michael and Lynne had their name drawn out of the hat to win the set of Cooper Tyres donated by Exclusive Tyres as part of their sponsorship of the Across Oz trip.

## **Day 45 18/9/06**

### **Port Augusta to Mildura**

We woke yet again to another clear day and warm weather, the temp today would reach 35 degrees. We had planned to get away early at 8am and everyone was ready to leave on time. As we motored down the east side of Spencer Gulf the southern Flinders Ranges made a great spectacle in the early morning light. The road crossed the ranges at Horrocks Pass and after passing through Wilmington we continued south on the eastern side of the ranges past Mt Remarkable. The country side was green and heavily under crop, and soon the yellow of Canola patch worked the countryside, it was a great sight. The old towns of Gladstone and Melrose had some beautiful old buildings and you could easily spend a lot of time soaking up the atmosphere of this area. We turned east at Spalding and emerged at the historic town of Burra. We spent 1.5 hours here allowing time for lunch and lots of shopping in the many antique and old wares stores that lined the main street.

From Burra we headed to Renmark avoiding the very busy Sturt Hwy as much as possible until we were almost at Renmark and there were no more side roads. We had to wait a few minutes in a queue of traffic as one of the bridges opened to allow the passage of a boat on the Murray.

Before long we reached Victoria and as we were in more fertile lands the surrounding country was covered in grape vines and citrus trees. Arriving at Mildura at 4.45pm I could not believe the size of the city on the Murray and how beautiful its gardens and homes were. We were on a tight schedule and threw up the tents and headed off to the River at 6.00pm to board the paddle ship Rothbury for our evening dinner cruise. We had the whole paddle steamer to ourselves, all 16 of us, and enjoyed a beautiful cruise up the Murray River as the sun set. Some of the homes and house boats along the river bank were multi million dollar establishments.

Our final call to radio 2GB was made from the deck of the Rothbury and Murray Wilton could not believe we were in a paddle steamer, until the captain gave a blast on the boats horn and then spoke to Murray about the Paddle Steamer and the Murray.

A great evening and a great way to draw this trip to its near conclusion.

## **Day 46 19/9/06**

### **Mildura to West Wyalong**

We woke in the Caravan Park to yet another hot and sunny day. I allowed time for a look around the beautiful city and to refuel at \$1.39 for diesel and then we gathered at 9.am at the car park where we boarded the Rothbury the night before.

By this time the north west wind had picked up to around 50 kph and made driving difficult as it was a cross wind all day. The drive along the Murray to Rankin Springs was interesting as we saw various agricultural pursuits such as grape vines and oranges but it was obvious that many orchards had been left to overgrow, an indication of the problems caused by importing our fruit from overseas.

The Hay plains lived up to their reputation as boring and it wasn't until we neared West Wyalong that we saw some rolling hills and more crops on the land. We stopped in a Motel for our last night and took the courtesy bus to the local RSL for dinner.

**Day 47 20/9/06**  
**West Wyalong to Sydney**

The final day of our great adventure has arrived, the ease of camping in a motel was appreciated by all, we even missed packing away the tents and swags.

We had a great breakfast just 50 metres from the Motel and were on the road by 7.30am. A cold change had passed through during the evening and the temperature had dropped to 18 degrees, quite a change from the 34 degrees of yesterday.

It was a very sombre trip home as not only was it the end of our great adventure but from 9am on ABC radio the memorial service for Steve Irwin was broadcast and it brought a teary eye to many of us. When we reached Bathurst it also seemed appropriate that we visit the Mt Panorama circuit where only the day before they held a service for Peter Brock, the flowers and tributes were still on the track and we had the chance to sign the condolence book for Brocky.

So as you see it was a last day tinged with sadness but we reflected on all the amazing sights we had seen, it had been a truly amazing trip. I arrived home at 3.30pm after battling with the traffic of Sydney and wondering how long it would take for me to adjust back to the hustle and bustle of city life which is far more stressful than exploring Australia.

Thank you to everyone who experienced this amazing trip, we saw some wonderful sights and managed to achieve more in 47 days than some people might achieve in a lifetime. What a wonderful country we live in!

Vic Widman

Great Divide Tours