

Normanton to Broome July - August 2009

Jacob and Eva Bruderer,
Roy and Joan Buirchell,
Mike and Margaret Alexander

Meeting Place:

Leichardt Lagoon Camping area (near Normanton) on 12 July 2009.

First priority after setting up camp was to set the yabby traps. Added to those Mike had caught prior to reaching Leichardt Lagoon a good feed was enjoyed. This turned out to be about the limit of our success at fishing and yabbing.

Our campsite would have been about 6-7 metres under water a few months ago! It's incredible how resilient the local people are. We visited Normanton and Karumbah next day. Had a picture with the BIG croc, Mike caught 2 undersize fish and threw them back and viewed the Karumbah sunset.

Next stop Leichardt Falls. Close to the falls we came to an intersection. We weren't sure whether to turn left or right. Another vehicle was stopped before us contemplating which direction to go. Then a DMR vehicle approached. He didn't know where the falls were but after considerable thought he said he thought he had gone over a river crossing not far back. We took the right hand turn and not far up the road was a sign "Leichardt Falls"! There was a long, narrow causeway a short distance further up the road. We had arrived. Setting up camp proved entertaining!!!! Jacob got his trailer wheel jammed and Mike and Roy went to help. After getting him free they went back to setting themselves up. Roy released his trailer pin and his car, without the trailer to brake it, took off. It was looking like a close call as to whether it went into Jacob's trailer or over the cliff. But Roy proved to be a swift sprinter and managed to avert disaster. This place turned out to be very popular and while Margaret was relaxing under the waterfall (a crocodile safe place) a bus load of tourists arrived looking for photo opportunities. Never a dull moment.



The next morning Jacob and Margaret washed their windscreens while on the causeway. Proved a waste of time when Mike drove through a mud puddle, at speed, with his window open! The windscreen became opaque, he couldn't see, water came through the window drenching him, he drove up the sandy embankment but managed to get back onto the road without further disaster.

Leichardt Falls won't be an easy place to forget!

We headed south via Augusta Downs to Gregory Downs and Lawn Hill. Lawn Hill was beautiful. We walked, went canoeing, and Margaret and Eva braved the fresh water croc's and went "tubing" in inner tubes down the river. Neither of us got "nibbled".

From Lawn Hill we headed north via the back route to Doomagee. Road signage was rare. One of the few signs that we came across directed us into a deep river crossing. We later discovered there was a shallower crossing if we'd continued up the road a short distance. We only passed one vehicle and it didn't stop so we were unable to check if we were on the right road. After about 2 hours we came to a bitumen intersection just east of Nicholson River and Doomagee. We made it!! Back on the Savannah Way. This road was in reasonable condition with plenty of dips and river crossings, most dry or shallow. At one very steep river crossing we passed a vehicle with its caravan detached. Its tow bar had been pulled off the car. Camped the night at Calvert Crossing. Feasted on barramundi and chips.

Before we set off next morning Roy noticed his trailer leaves weren't properly fitted. The boys worked on them for 1-2 hours and finally got them reinserted. We headed north to Booraloola where Joan visited the Community Health Centre as she'd fallen and injured her leg at Lawn Hill. They re-dressed her leg and provided her with several dressings. We were impressed with the quality and prompt attention she received. Continued to King Ash Bay. This is a great fishing village with fuel, a clubhouse, grocery store etc. After setting up camp the boys worked on Jacob's trailer as one of the wheel bearings was "noisy". We decided to eat at the Groper Bar. Turned out it was "pie" night and the only thing on the menu until 7.30pm was, you guessed it, pie. They were a bit heavy on the stomach. Spent a relaxing day here fishing (caught nil), reading, walking, washing and chatting with fellow travellers, some of whom gave us some salmon fillets.

The Roper River Rd is well signposted and in reasonable condition, though there are some rocky sections, particularly at the river crossings. The Alexander's got a puncture today. It turned out to be a long, hot, dusty day. We stopped at the Southern Lost City and walked part of the trail. The rock formations are beautiful. Roy observed that it was cool within the shelter of the rocks.

Camped the night at Towns River. We'd heard that a "saltie" was stalking campers so the girls insisted on camping away from the river. After dark the boys went spotlighting. Margaret went also to "watch their backs". There was indeed a large saltie that was obviously observing the habits of campers close to the water, particularly the small sandy beach. This croc slowly approached us until it realized that it had been spotted, when it submerged and swam away. If you take appropriate precautions this is a good fishing spot. Apart from the croc's, the sandflies and gnats are hungry.

The next day the road was a bit rougher until we came to an intersection 89km south of Roper River. From here the road was in very good condition. There are plenty of places to camp along the Roper River Rd. Eva was astounded to find Roper River itself consisted of one building. Her map indicated you could get fuel, groceries etc so she was expecting a much bigger place. Stopped at a rest area for lunch and the boys worked on the other wheel bearing on Jacob's trailer. This was a pretty quick job as they now knew what they were doing and which/who's tools fitted.

We stayed at the territory Manor Caravan Park, Mataranka for 2 nights and enjoyed lazing in the Bitter Springs thermal pools. Margaret had carried “noodles” on her roof racks especially for lazing/drifted in these pools. The Alexander’s did a “bit of a car wash” to eliminate the worst of the DUST which had accumulated after so many days travelling dirt roads. Roy and Joan’s camper trailer was also accumulating DUST by the spade load. A few days on bitumen was sounding good. Jacob and Eva’s double insulated Taj Mahal camper trailer was very effective at keeping out the dust.



Katherine Gorge was our next destination. More canoeing and a sunset dinner cruise. Continued north to Kakadu with a detour to Edith Falls (worth the visit). Camped at Muirello Park in Kakadu where there were plenty of sandflies and gnats. The caretaker was even burning mossie coils in the showers. Despite this inconvenience it was a lovely camping area with some nice walks and ranger talks/walks

in the evening. A one day visit to Kakadu isn’t enough. We only saw a glimpse of what it had to offer and it was enticing.

Darwin was our next port of call. Being peak tourist season meant booking campsites well ahead. We managed to get 2 sites to share between 2 camper trailers, 1 tent and 3 vehicles! It was amazing where the parks were squeezing vans and tents.

Mike was very disappointed to miss out on swimming in the crocodile cage. This was also booked out while we were in Darwin. Roy and Joan decided they weren’t going to travel the Gibb River Rd “no more dust, our camper just isn’t suited to this style of travel” and we parted ways in Darwin. As they continued on to Broome via the bitumen we met up at several places along the way.

Turning south Lichfield was our next destination. The termite mounds in the park were amazing. Either huge individual mounds or hundreds of the magnetic ones. The pools and falls were all beautiful but crowded. In trying to dodge people both Jacob and Mike took separate tumbles and both of our cameras took a dunking. Jacob’s never recovered. Mike’s only recovered after he’d purchased a new one at Katherine.

En route to our camp site we did a recovery. A lady (with 3 children) had charged into a river crossing (too fast) and stalled in the middle. She was sitting on the roof of her car. As there was only 1 lane all traffic had come to a stand still. No-one had recovery gear!!! And no-one was game enough to brave the “crocodile infested” waters until Mike and Jacob arrived. Some watchers thought them brave, others weren’t too sure but there was probably too much traffic for crocs. Mike and Jacob hitched her up and Margaret pulled her out. This good

Samaritan act put us ahead of the queue and we managed to get the last camp spot at the next camping area. Natural justice?



The 4WD route south to Daly River was fun driving. Plenty of river crossings, one having an S bend, which Jacob loved. Margaret wasn't so keen as our floor leaked. When we arrived back on the bitumen Mike and Margaret knew they had a problem. Turned out that some of the nuts on one of our front wheels were loose. This was an easy fix and we were quickly on our way.

We had anticipated fishing at Daly River but the locals recommended using a boat. Since fishing wasn't an option we headed back to the Stuart Hwy and spent the night at Pine Creek. At dusk there were hundreds of lorikeets jostling for roosting spots for the night and they were incredibly noisy.

We visited Katherine for the second time en route to Timber Creek where we spent a day touring the escarpment and surrounds, prior to taking the sunset cruise on the Victoria River. There were several salties basking in the late sun and we enjoyed the eagle and kite feeding, in addition to a lovely sunset.

Keep River National Park has some fabulous walks. We ate plenty of fruit and vegies here and gave the rest away as the quarantine regulations are very strict on the WA border.

The caravan parks at Kunnanurra were packed to the rafters which had influenced our decision not to camp here. We refueled, reprovisioned and while waiting for the bottle shop to open, toured around. At Ivanhoe Crossing 2 guys were fishing in the middle of this long crossing while not far behind them 2 crocodiles were lazing. Neither of these guys were concerned as they were only "freshies"!



Then we were finally on the Gibb River Rd. We camped for 3 nights at Homestead Valley on the river opposite the Cockburn Ranges. This was a beautiful camping spot enhanced by an almost full moon. Again the boys had no luck fishing or trapping. The facilities here are excellent and there is nightly entertainment at the resort but the sight seeing is limited. Sunset tours

are brought down to the river so we had to be careful what washing we hung on our tent lines!

El Questro has several 4WD tracks, several gorges, a boat trip, a thermal pool etc. We did a day trip from Home Valley and were disappointed that we had chosen not to camp here as there was so much to see.

Along the length of the Gibb River Rd it was not unusual to come across people changing tyres. At Drysdale Homestead, en route to Mitchell Falls, they had 3 vehicles waiting for shocks and/or springs. The Gibb River Rd itself was in reasonable condition but the side roads were hardly maintained and very corrugated. We travelled from Home Valley to King Edward River, which has an excellent camping ground and did the last 78km to Mitchell Falls the next morning. It took 3 hours to travel this short distance.

For such an isolated spot there were a lot of tourists! They even run a helicopter taxi service to and from the top of the falls! Jacob and Eva enjoyed a return flight from the top of the falls. By the time the Alexanders walked back to camp Eva had bread ready to go on the fire.

Back on the Gibb River Rd we were approached by a fellow who asked if we knew anything about trailer wheel bearings. He'd approached the right people! About 2 hours later (it wasn't an easy job as the bearings had seized) this family was finally on the road. And so were we. Spent the night at Hann River. It was here that Jacob lost his hammer. Again. But he never found it this time. Must have been meant to be.

The next day we stopped at Barnaby Roadhouse, visited Bell Gorge and camped at Windjana Gorge. The latter is a spectacular gorge and it also has LOTS of freshwater crocs. Mike counted about 40 sunning in one stretch of the gorge. Usually croc's take off when approached but these ones must be very used to people and some of them got cranky and snapped if you disturbed them (like Mike did). Visited Tunnel Creek from Windjana. We headed into Derby for a quick visit prior to continuing to Broome where we intended to stay a couple of days. However, the Alexanders front end decided to fall apart and they ended up staying in Derby for 4 nights while waiting for parts and repairs. Not much to do in Derby after the first day! Jacob and Eva ventured into Broome on the latter 2 days and we met up again in Quondong, about 60km north of Broome. Eva and Jacob found a fabulous perch on a headland with magic views overlooking the Indian Ocean. Playful whales kept us entertained throughout our stay. The sunsets capped it off. It was hard to leave here.

We returned to Broome, Eva managing to book us into a caravan park (pretty amazing given the crush of tourists at present).



The sunset over Cable Beach didn't happen as a thunder storm was brewing but the traffic on the beach was amazing. Bumper to bumper cars as far as you could see. The next day the Alexanders discovered their fuel tank had a leak. The repair shop was fantastic. They received the car about 1pm, made no promises, but rang at 5.08pm to let us know we could pick it up. So we were able to head west as planned the following morning. Margaret was concerned about

getting accommodation in Broome if there was a delay with repairs. What with running about with the car that afternoon we again missed the famous Cable Beach sunset.

Thus ended the westward part of our trip. We continued travelling together east through Fitzroy Crossing to Mary Pool where we had a jolly night (Mike's fires attract people) in a very popular rest area before venturing onto the Tamani Track. We'd been talking to other travelers throughout our trip and been consistently told this track was in very good condition. The Alexanders were hoping this was so as we'd spent enough money and time on repairs. We stopped for fuel at Billiluna and Eva saw her first frozen kangaroo tail in the local shop.

The fuel pump attendant advised us that Rabbit Flat was open and fuel was cheaper there so we decided to stop there also. Many travellers had warned us about Rabbit Flats so we weren't expecting too much. We actually enjoyed our visit. The owners son was home for a visit and he served us. He was pretty cheerful. Also some of the kids were playing with something. Eva wondered if it was a toy? Turned out to be a live thorny devil. The colours on it were very bright. So a photo session was required which the kids enjoyed as much as us.



We camped the night not far east of the Granite mines, along with another couple of campers and made Alice Springs the next afternoon. Boy was it getting cold at night! Something we'd almost forgotten in recent weeks. Spent a night at Alice, another south of Marla, right next to the Ghan Railway line and finally parted company at Port Augusta, Eva and Jacob heading down to the wineries and Mike and Margaret off to meet their son at Gongolgon.