

CORNER COUNTRY TRIP

20 MAY TO 04 JUN 2010

The 5 vehicles and occupants all met up in Bourke on the Sunday and enjoyed a social dinner at the local club with some roasting and boasting by those present, namely Harris and Carol Johnston our very organised leaders, Mike and Eileen R, Pam and John F, Marcel C and Joe B and myself, Bruce M.

We took off early next day arriving 4 days later at Birdsville via overnight stops at Thargomindah campsite (very good facilities), Innaminka (fuel prices excessive) and the river next to the old Cadelga Outstation Ruins. The trip had a really interesting start with a visit to the "Nil Desperandum", a derelict homestead 2 hours from Bourke which was Pam's family home where she used to visit as a child. It was really interesting to hear Pam's recollection of what it was like to live and travel in the area some 50 years before.

The driving was easy and the countryside was green from the recent rains with lots of small wildflowers (which did not stand out but which were flowering in their millions) taking advantage of the once in a generation flooding. The creek banks were special, a bright spring green and whilst the corellas were less evident than in the dry, the riversides were teeming with activity from wading birds, cranes, storks, ibis, etc that had returned from the cities and from all over the country to take advantage of the flowing rivers.

The road situation was fluid and most roads were open but not the Bulloo Downs track which was closed due to flooding. The alternate roads are now tarred to the border with more work in progress towards Innaminka.



The early arrival in Birdsville left the afternoon free with a stop at the bakery for lunch of a curried camel pie and a latte followed by afternoon drinks and a night dining at the famous Birdsville Pub. The pub was pretty busy with 4wd drivers plus 2 tour groups that had flown in, possibly to see Lake Eyre.

The weather had been overcast but no rain for the first few days but by the time we arrived at Birdsville it was to clear blue skies 25 degrees and cold nights (very cold later on down to -3)



The following day (Friday) began with morning breakfast at the bakery before heading off to start the sand dune legs.

Big Red was inaccessible because of a long shallow lake so a diversion south (left) at the red "Coca Cola" fridge (the local guidepost) saw us in some broken ground to return to cross 'Little Red' and follow the track to the Eyre River.

There was a fair bit of traffic with the Toyota club following and a 7 car and a bike group and a few smaller duos coming towards us from the west.

When we reached Eyre Creek, we had to make a 70 km diversion to the north and just after crossing the creek, we diverted from the diversion and travelled a little used track which was in good shape and on which we came across a herd of 50-60 camels.

The desert flowering, which I had been particularly looking forward to seeing, began to start in earnest. The flowering is not colourful but grasses, shrubs, weeds, bushes are all in flower simultaneously. Although still sparsely spread out - the vista is millions upon millions with plain and subtle colours but a wonderful experience.. At different times, we were driving through carpets of white flowers on top of dunes.

We made our first camp in the desert that night to a lovely warm campfire after happy hour and dinner and next morning was icy and hard on the fingertips when packing up. This was the pattern for our nights in the desert.

Next day was good driving to Poeppels Corner and then we started down the K1 Track. The K1 had not been travelled for some time and was overgrown and in places moving dunes had obliterated it. The track was very difficult to see and the GPS confirmation that we were travelling between the right dunes was reassuring.

Around this point the green grass parrots started to appear as a constant succession of small flocks of 10-15 birds being disturbed by our progress. We also acquired a new leader in the form of a camel running at 20 km down the track in front of the group before he tired after 5 minutes and moved away from the track.



Everybody and vehicles were travelling well and enjoying the challenging conditions, but when we turned west on the Rig Road the degree of difficulty went up several levels as there had been no crossings for some years in the south end section. All the dunes were capped with soft sand and sharp drop offs, so all the boys with their toys had a great time. Harris got lots of sand filled shoes checking the condition of each dune before crossing. Yours truly got bogged, but everyone had an instance of needing a second run.

The next day Marcel was unlucky to stake a tyre crossing a dune and had to write off the tyre.

Vegetation changed and became much greener, frost and ice on the tents made for very cold nights and mornings. Going was slow and the slowest was 75 kms in 6.5 hours driving. We were using more fuel than we anticipated so we came up the Knowles Track and on heading west on the WAA line. We had to divert 22km around the lake near the start. Driving was now easier and we progressed to the French Line via Erabana Track.

Enroute, we encountered more birdlife, emus and a pair of dingos at the 4th night's camp. The group was feeling great: 5 great days of challenging driving and bush camping and the impression of being the first to travel the tracks and to be really in the truly wild unspoilt parts of the country. Additionally we had splendid nights with a full moon and clear skies.

The next day we headed for Dalhousie Springs. Marcel excelled his previous day with another staked tyre and the new double shock system split on the support for one of the front second shocks. The French are really good at swearing under their breath.

Dalhousie campsite was full but we camped on the road in the day visitors section and Marcel, John and I enjoyed the spring baths but the rest wimped out.

The next day we made the run to Mount Dare and myself and John were on empty the last 20 kms. As a matter of interest, the 3litre diesels averaged 25L per 100k. We all refuelled (\$1.96 L) and pushed on to camp the night at a lovely campsite at Eringa Waterhole and a fabulous wood fire where Marcel demonstrated the tunnel technique for campfire logs and we were treated to a magnificent sunset. It was good to get away from the crowds again.

We had a leisurely start with a monotonous run to Williams Creek, but the good news was that the Lake Eyre flights which were booked 3 days ahead, had a cancellation so 5 of us did a small plane flight over Lake Eyre.

We went to the Williams Creek pub for happy hour before a booked dinner, lots of character and a fun meal enjoyed by all. After dinner, back at the tent, there was no moon and the stars and Milky Way were out on full display. I'm sure you all know the feeling, awesome - a word somewhat prostituted by indiscriminate use in songs and colloquially but a word that best describes for me the night sky in the desert, one of the wonders of getting away from suburbia that I had forgotten until I sat still for a while with my sleeping doona wrapped around me - a magic end to an otherwise pretty ordinary day. One of the unexpected plusses of 4wd driving, Joe joined me for a time to also enjoy the night sky.

The following day more of us took the airplane trip and saw Lake Eyre from the air and saw what an



enormous expanse of water it becomes on flooding.

Harris, Carol and Joe went by car to view the lake and Harris found a small hole in his radiator requiring a further day in Williams Creek to make a running repair which held for the remainder of the trip.

The following day was a run further down the Oodnadatta track which had heaps of car/trailer combos heading north, many hardly slowing down to pass and one driver managed to crack both mine and Marcel's windscreens. The weather became overcast and the trip south was uneventful.

We were joined by a troopie for a short bypass run to Cameron's Corner where the driver, Steve, turned out to be carrying 600 litres of vegetable oil to run the troopie. He estimated it had cost him about \$20 for fuel from Melbourne to Mt Dare and down to Cameron's.

So we drove further south with nothing to report on the driving as such as it was cold, windy and overcast and we were just covering distance. We stopped in at the old Ghan Railway settlements, bridges and tracks and it was sad to see at the cemeteries that almost a quarter of all graves were children under 10 and mostly under 2 years of age. It was a very tough country out there in times past. En route we also visited a local eccentric sculptor with some weird interpretations of English words in relation to his nationalist passions - he could be mad, it's difficult to say. There was also a stopover at a sculpture park in the absolute middle of nowhere, again with a very eccentric feel, seems to be the flavour of things around opal fields.

The final night in the bush was marked by the largest bonfire that Marcel and Joe managed to build. I would point out that with cold desert nights, pyros are welcome and held in high esteem in the desert country. Top pyro honours go without a doubt to Marcel who travels with a small chainsaw to aid in satisfying his compulsion. I was most impressed with his technique of a shovelful of coals behind your chair which you can progressively move your chair towards and sit on top off to keep all the important bits warm.

The next afternoon we rolled into White Cliffs. After some drinks and a game of pool we returned to the rooms to discover the sergeant of arms, who turned out to be Eileen, with a large exercise book to record our misdemeanours and some unusual perspectives on a number of our actions and peccadillos. It was a lot of fun, dinner that night finished the trip and I got off next morning to a very early start back to Sydney in one run, others were taking a more leisurely two days.

We had a great time, very well organised by Carol and Harris, good company, good weather, the vehicles all behaved themselves and a unique experience of the desert in full flower and I now know why it is called Birdsville, having only previously visited at the height of the drought. We had some challenging four wheel driving and a visit to Lake Eyre for the once in 20 years flooding.

All in all, this was a very special and thoroughly enjoyable visit to the centre of Australia.

Cheers

Bruce M

PS

I also want to put in a plug for the reversible \$40 vests the club sells. I bought mine just before this trip and found it is an excellent and versatile bit of quality clothing for cold weather. Since used it for a weeks skiing and its far superior to many of the \$65 souvenirs you see and better value than some of the cheaper stuff you can get. I was surprised at the number of 4WD enthusiasts who noticed the club logo and started chatting to me.