

A SHORT CAMPING TOUR OF EASTERN AUSTRALIA

June 2023



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A plan to tour Australia in the campervan we ordered in late 2021 took a long time to come to fruition.

The history is that with memories of our eleven years touring Europe in a small Fiat Ducato-based campervan, we decided in 2019 to take to the Australian outback in a caravan for the first time. (The story can be found in <https://www.michaelandnorma.com/travels/travelogues/>).

We enjoyed our tour of eastern Australia, which took us as far north as Darwin and Kakadu, but decided that rather than a caravan we preferred the flexibility of a self-contained campervan or compact motorhome. We duly sold the caravan. However, then came Covid-19, which stopped all touring for a while.

As its threat eased, we ordered a new van in October '21 with a view to taking to the road for a long tour through winter 2022. But as for all recreational (and other) vehicles, delivery times just got longer and longer, so that it was not until October '22 before we could take possession of the latest (2023) model of the Jayco Fiat Ducato-based campervan.

We spent the summer making some substantial changes and additions to the interior of the vehicle to suit our particular preferences and provide better storage for camping necessities. We had already made plans for several other overseas trips and tours through the Australian winter of 2023. We therefore only had time to take the van away for three weeks in June as a shakedown for a planned much longer run in 2024. This is the story.



We left home on June 9 and drove up to visit Anita and Ron at their lovely place in Port Macquarie. As ever, we much enjoyed the town's waterfront walk, along with their bouncing black lab Buddy. The fishermen were active, with some landing real whoppers.

With them, we visited a couple of regenerative farming projects, many being open to the public as part of an annual program to promote the activity – we were very impressed. One of the farms was on a hilltop in the exceptionally pretty countryside of



Comboyne, with gorgeous views, out to the west of Port. We enjoyed seeing how the cattle, pigs and chickens were managed so sympathetically and well.



After a couple of nights, we were off up the Pacific Highway to Byron Bay, where we checked into the quiet **Glen Villa resort** near the centre of the town.

Here, we spent our very first night and dinner in the van, and were relieved that everything went well.



The resort is a vast area and mostly caters for huts and villas, seemingly largely occupied by part-time workers and tradies. It was surprisingly peaceful for a 'resort' in a tourist area – no kids, dogs, or games. We sat out in the sun and enjoyed watching the many birds – plovers, ibis, ducks, galahs etc. As the sun went down, we relished the atmosphere in the one of the darkest, quietist camp sites we've ever experienced!

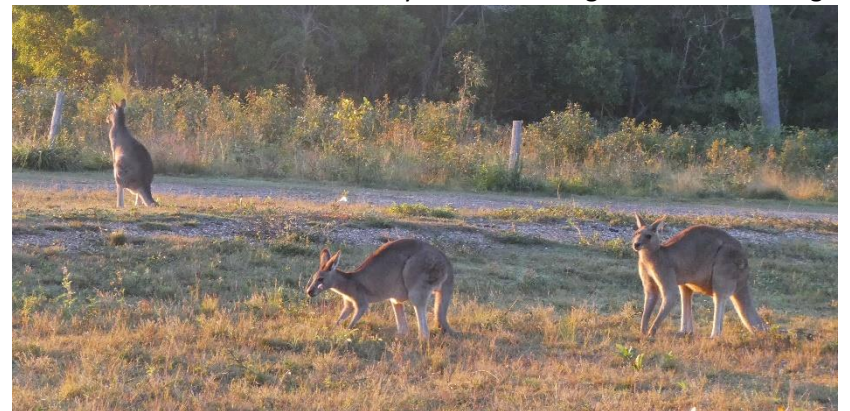
After two nights at Byron Bay, we tried to drive up to the well-known lighthouse up at the tip of the cape. However, this is discouraged through the lack of any parking areas along the narrow approach roads. This morning, those sufficiently determined to reach the lighthouse and enjoy its view were either walking or running up to the top.

We then had a fast and easy run north until we neared Brisbane, where we were faced by lots of roadworks and traffic that continued until we reached the notorious Bruce Highway. 90 kilometres after Gympie we turned north-east off the Bruce through Maryborough and over flat flood plains towards Hervey Bay,

turning east again towards the Great Sandy Strait and the settlement of Booral. Our destination was **Virtue Farm**, another large self-sufficient and regenerative enterprise.



The camping area was in a wide sloping paddock, with a good but long-range view of the strait, backed by Fraser Island. The owners only have up to five campers at a time, with no power, water or internet, so all was very quiet and peaceful, just what we wanted. We woke early after a cool night to see the orange sunrise over Fraser Island – and to see the hordes of kangaroos all over the paddock.





looked around, was satisfied, lay down on a bank and went to sleep. All a wonderful sight and experience in a beautiful sunny day.

We walked around the developing small farm, with several plantings and garden strips under mulch. Chickens were wandering around, and for no reason an aggressive cockerel that had seemed sociable when we had earlier walked through their area decided to attack me with some violence, his claws drawing blood from my legs!



After two splendid nights and more kangaroo-watching we took a tour round the area, first to have a look at the ferry wharf at River Heads from where people – many in four-wheel drive SUVs – are taken over to Fraser Island (K'gari). The neighbourhood is clearly becoming popular, with scores of new dwellings and some large development compounds.

We visited Hervey Bay and the huge Urangan marina/yacht club, where we stayed for a short time in our yacht Cera in 2002, sailing south down the coast after returning from Vanuatu. Following its expansion since we were there, we could recognise none of it.



Many were very close to us, big and small, male and female, and tiny joeys jumping around their mothers and in and out of their pouches. Pairs of roos put on their boxing shows. The biggest male

From a distance we could see over some quiet anchorages in the Great Sandy Strait, many of which we had enjoyed while cruising the coast quietly south from Mackay. The photo shows where the Mary River meets the strait.



It was then back on to the Bruce Highway for a rather boring ride up a stretch of southeast Queensland, aiming to get as far north as possible. We bypassed Bundaberg, which we should visit again one day.

Approaching Gladstone I asked the satnav for a free camp in Calliope, but that didn't appear to exist. Evening was upon us, so we were content to settle for the **Gladstone Showground's RV Park**. This a big sloping area, very busy but quite acceptable for an overnight stop with power. It was warm on arrival, but rapidly cooled as usual.

It was about 110 km from there up to Rockhampton, where we turned east to the coast again, coming to the delightful little town of Emu Park, which we had passed through with the caravan in 2019. We parked at the beach.



It hadn't changed at all, as far as we could see. Last time we had walked the length of the superb war memorial, with its marvellous interpretive artworks based on Frank Hurley's WW1 photographs, but we gave a detailed return a miss. We did spend more time at the Singing Ship, a large white sculpture built in 1980 as a bicentennial memorial. It looks from a distance like the sail of a ship, rigged by tubes with holes like a recorder. They emit a lovely tone, which we could hear once I had politely requested some gardeners to turn down their portable radio and its pop music. They were appropriately apologetic.

We had a picnic lunch there before returning to the Bruce for another long drive. An early sight was the collection of knobbly mountains in the Mount Etna Caves National Park, looking like tennis balls half sunk in the dirt. On our eastern horizon was a backdrop of big volcanic hills in the Goodood National Park, just visible through a smoky mist.

Finally, we made it to a minor road that took us through farmlands to the sea and the **Cape Palmerston National Park** and its **Holiday Park**, which was rated highly by Wikicamps users (like us). It was indeed a large and beautifully laid out and well-maintained camp site, with very friendly managers and a good book swap. Kangaroos were wandering around neighbouring fields as we arrived in the late afternoon.



As we parked up on a comfortable pitch we were immediately welcomed by a large group of very vocal black-and-white Burdekin (or radjah) shelducks. The males make a whistle, and the females more of a wheezing sound. We learnt that this Australian shelduck is a unique genus, only found here. We resolved to stay a few



days.

It was a warmer dawn than we had been experiencing, and the first we had not used the efficient diesel heater before breakfast.

After routine tasks in the morning we took a walk down across a wide meadow and through a strip of



coastal forest to the beach. At low tide this was a spectacularly vast expanse of sand, and a few of the more southerly Barrier Reef islands were visible on the horizon. In continuing lovely weather we spent much of the next day reading in the sun. Many of the long-timers spent much of the time chatting with each other, and we found that camping down in the meadow (which had one or two power points if needed, and a few 'roos) would be a good and quieter choice if we were to return here one day.

On Thursday 20 June we pulled out of this very pleasant site and drove past fields of Brahmin cattle to the nearby town of Sarina, back on the Bruce, for supplies at Woolworths and to pick up yet more tourist literature.



From here we cut inland at the village of Marian and continued west towards the Eungella National Park for about 50km on a minor road along a wide valley almost totally covered by cane fields. Many were being worked, with cuttings being loaded into classic sugar trains.

The whole way we seemed to be heading for one mountain range or another, with no apparent way out as they apparently overlapped each other. Adding to the dramas were several hazard reduction burns.

The road was obviously open to flooding during the wet season, with many appropriate warnings before dips in the road. Getting low on diesel in this very quiet part of the land we were pleased to find a tiny fuel station/general store in the little village of Finch Hatton (which we thought was a very English-sounding name!).

From there it was a very steep and winding climb through several hairpins carrying notices warning of the dangers of the route. It was indeed reminiscent of some challenging Alpine passes, but very much shorter! The climb led to the small town of Eungella and on to the target of the run, the view from the Sky Window lookout. This has a staggering view down the length of the flat land of the valley we had just traversed. Up here it is a rain forest, packed with huge and very old trees and magnificent tree ferns.





The last stop in the national park, and essentially the end of the road, was at the Broken River locality. From here we took a short walk down to a rocky stream with many pools upstream and down. The place is famous for being where a visitor is most likely to see a platypus in the wild. A few groups of youngsters were well settled in, waiting for who knows how long to catch sight of the creature.



On the way back down towards the coast we had a look at a few bush camps, but in the end decided to press on down to Mackay and a **Discovery Park** camp site near the harbour which we had enjoyed in the caravan in 2019. It was essentially full, but we were allocated a small pitch in a quiet corner right next to an ablutions block. In the caravan we had had a big pitch with a pleasant, wide outlook over wetlands, and this time we had booked two nights without checking first. A mistake, as we really do know better. I had a quick walk down to the waterway, still an attractive corner, but that was it.

We pulled out after lunch the next day and drove about 25 kilometres up the coast through a series of pleasant country roads to the **Cape Hillsborough Nature Tourist Park**, adjacent to the eponymous national park. We had a courteous welcome to what was obviously an excellent site, but were not too impressed by having to wear yellow wrist bands. This is because they don't want non-paying visitors wandering through and using the amenities. The national park and its surroundings are popular for casual day visitors, and we supposed this was fair enough to discourage them from entering.



The pitch was spacious, and we settled down in the afternoon sun. Curlews and bush turkeys were pottering around, and a pair of the former saw the hedge round our van as home.



Also casually strolling through the camp site was a lone kangaroo, which we understood to be one that had been the subject of rehabilitation after illness or injury. She slowly moved up to us, came to me from behind as I sat in my chair, moved to my side, looked at me from an inch or two away, and gently nuzzled my right cheek. Quite an experience, indeed. I felt very privileged.

The park was well equipped, with a swimming pool, kids' playground and good facilities, but it was more of the kind of 'holiday park' that we normally avoid. (It had recently joined the up-market group owned by the

NRMA.)

We took an evening walk down to the beach, another wide expanse of sand at low tide. It was scattered with, and backed by, dramatic black coral rock formations. A causeway, open only at low tide, provided access for walkers to cross over to an islet just offshore

It was all really very pleasant, and we booked in for another couple of nights.



After a coolish night we saw that the site was emptying out, and we looked forward to more peace. Wrong. From mid-day on, new groups were pouring in, many with big families, setting up together. We quickly found out that the coming weekend was the start of school holidays in Queensland, a week earlier than in NSW. It soon became very noisy and disrupted, and I cancelled the extension of our stay. They weren't very happy about this (NRMA doesn't do cancellations, apparently), but did understand, and they would have no difficulty in filling our pitch. We took another walk down to the beach in the evening, and dined to the sound of scores of happy and excited kids!



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From here, on the next morning we started on our long way back south, having reached as far north in Australia as possible this year in the time available. We went back out through more vast sugarcane fields, very tall now, so that at times we seemed to be driving through a tunnel. We joined the Peak Downs Highway, which runs into the hinterland to the south-west, with countryside devoid of crops for a scenic change. There were lots of rounded, peaky volcanic hills.

Just outside the neat town of Clearmont we stopped to explore a machinery museum, prominent at the side of the road. Lots of outback towns have such museums, but this was an exceptional example. This is mining territory, so there were



several examples of mining equipment, much of it beautifully presented, lots of old trucks and cars and domestic bric-a-brac. We especially liked the guards van in an old train, equipped with “every convenience”!

There was a special display showing how the town was nearly wiped out by massive flooding following a cyclone.

From here we pressed on south through Emerald and to an excellent **rest area just north of Springsure**. There were lots of rigs there, but all well spaced, and it was a good place to spend the night. We had just crossed back down over the tropic of Capricorn, and it was very cold overnight. We then set off down the Carnarvon Highway and turned into the minor road leading to the Carnarvon Gorge National Park.

This was a longer run than we expected (as is not uncommon when touring Australia!) through pleasant farmland, where we were inspected by a wide range of animals. We got quite a fright when an emu rushed out from the side



then in front of us; we just managed to miss it.

Approaching the national park and the gorge we saw wide ranges of steep and dramatic cliffs, but the gorge itself turned out to be too long a walk in from any parking place. We thought we’d seen enough, but called into a good-looking bush camp on a rocky spur on a hilltop with a great view. However, the manager apologetically told us that the site was booked out for another two weeks (the school holiday period, inevitably).



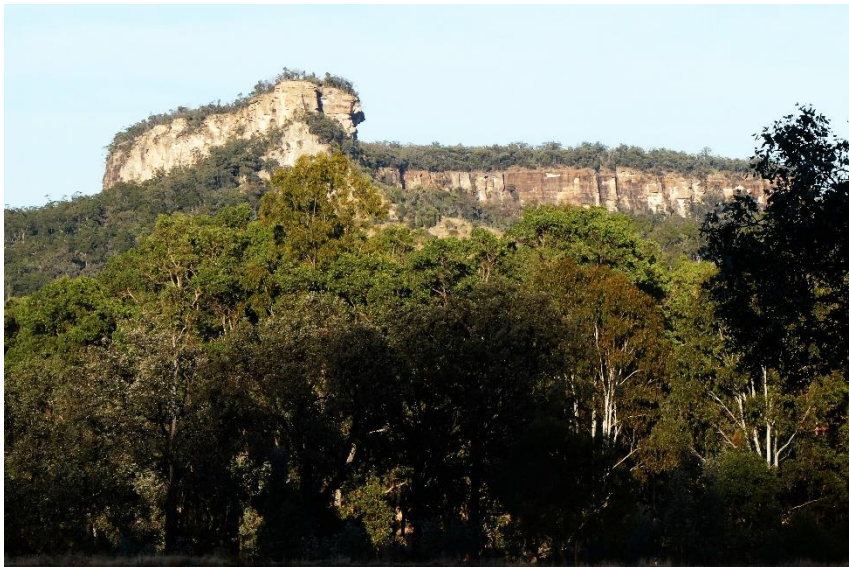
We drove in as far as possible and did take a short walk into a picturesque series of glades and pools, with the sun shining through the tall, thin palm trees.

On the way out we stopped to view the remains of a crashed American C47 Dakota that came down in an electrical storm in November 1943. It was carrying Australian and American servicemen, who all died.





Further on down the main road we turned into a dirt track leading to a **disused quarry**. On an upper layer of the diggings there were a pair of motorhomes, but we settled into a lower area that was a perfectly acceptable free camp except for the prickles among the weeds! It was a sunny afternoon, getting quite hot for a change, cool at night. As the sun went down, we had some splendid views of the cliffs and surrounds of the Carnarvon Gorge.



After an early start the next day we continued down the Carnarvon (part of the “Great Inland Highway” tourist route), a good road, with lots of high ups and low downs over the old volcanic ranges, with more views of the cliffs of the Carnarvon Park and ranges to our right for most of the morning.

We reached our planned stop before lunch. This was the **UpsNDowns caravan park and farm stay**, just north of Roma. It looked like an attractive proposition in our camping guide app, and we joined a few campers in the main part of the farm with access to power. This was fine for a while, but the family groups poured in during the afternoon and we moved over to the other side of the property, a big grassy area beyond the barns, without the power we didn't need. We set up by ourselves right next to a wire fence overlooking pastures to the horizon, with a wide variety of both wild and farm animals on the green and grey ranges.



We were immediately welcomed by a big white cow, which was soon followed by a group of horses – all wanting a handful of grass, of course. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon, and at about 4:00 pm the owner lady came by with a large group of family campers on a tour of the property and descriptions of the farming life.

In a cool dawn the sun rose red and orange over the horizon. We spent most of the day watching and (Norma) talking to the animals, and reading



in the sun.

There were several camels wandering into the proximity, with some of whom Norma became friendly. We followed the descriptive tour in the late afternoon. All very pleasant indeed.

But we had to get going again the following day, first to the major town of Roma for some substantial shopping at Woolworths, a bottle shop and a pharmacy. The prices were generally higher than Sydney, we thought. We also discussed our observation that many of the country folk were carrying a good deal of weight

and not looking as healthy as might be expected. Another matter for comment was that we saw few or no people of obvious aboriginal heritage in the centres of the bigger towns.



Our next destination was St George and the **Warambul Balonne River Hipcamp** (!), which we reached in time for a late lunch. The camp was a small paddock adjacent to a homestead, with a capacity for four rigs only. It was all fine by us, as another example of how property owners in the country were opening up part of their space for low-density camping. There were lots of old small farming artifacts hanging around on decorative display, a small kitchen centre, and a fire pit.

We had camped in a tourist park site in St George in 2019, and seen the many memorials along the green banks of the Balonne River that showed how high the multitudes of floods that the town had survived over very many years. Our site this time was on the river downstream of the dam in the town, and we walked down to the riverfront, at low level. The young farm owner told us of how the floods had

swamped his property during the worst times some ten or so years ago. In the late afternoon we joined him and two of the other couples on the site round the camp fire for a long and very pleasant evening chat over several glasses of wine with interesting people. We're not really devotees of the Aussie camp fire fetish, but this was fun.



We left early the following morning because the forecast for the weather – which had been very good, albeit cold at night – was not promising. When booking the next stop, the proprietor had warned me that the approaches to her place could be difficult in the wet. As it happened there were only a few drops of rain on the way down the Castlereagh Highway to the **Carynya family farm**, just north of Lightning Ridge.

We were signed in by cheerful Jacinda, who told us that unless we wanted power (which we did not) we could set up anywhere in the 300 acres of the open farm, plenty of trees, sandy tracks meandering through patches of low growth. The only request was not to get too close to other campers! Plenty of choice. Not a



problem. But then the rain did set in; it was gloomy by dinner, 18 degrees in the van.

It was another cold night, but dry in the morning. We went into a yard near the farmhouse to join the tour of the property, led by Jacinda. Kids and their families (and we) much

enjoyed her presentations and explanations over the chickens, goats, goats and several varieties of cattle, including handsome longhorns. Children especially loved holding and hand-feeding the baby goats.

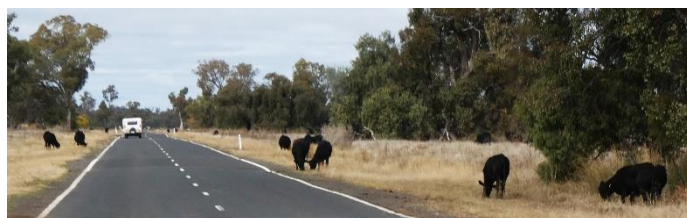


The next night it was literally freezing, and we couldn't use the heater because it takes too much current – so in the morning it was colder in the van (2 degrees) than in the fridge! We were away as soon as possible, heading home along the mostly boring Castlereagh Hwy through Walgett, Coonamble and Gilgandra.

We pressed on down to Bathurst, where we spent the night at the **showground RV park**, which to our surprise was nearly full.

From there it was an easy run back home on Saturday July 1 for lunch.

The three weeks (and about 4,400 km) away had been a lot of fun, and



we had learnt a lot about living on the van and how well we would be set up for a much bigger and longer trip next year.

It was different in many ways from the smaller van we had driven around Europe, but the work we had put in remodelling much of its interior over the summer had all worked very effectively.

We also learnt more about living in a campervan in Australia rather than in a caravan on tow, and we were very happy with the change. The caravan did have a much bigger and more comfortable living space, but towing a caravan has its own complications and we were pretty much confined to caravan tourist parks. The Ducato camper was far more flexible in regard to where we went and where we stayed. There are clearly plenty of options beyond caravan parks.

And another lesson was in how much we had enjoyed the time we spent on simple farm stays. They will be a high priority for planning in the future.

