

CAMPING ROUND WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND MORE

A 2024 winter tour of Australia in our campervan, travelling over 16,000 kilometres through New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia.

**Michael and
Norma
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Introduction

In June last year Norma and I took our first long camping tour in our Fiat Ducato-based Jayco campervan. After Covid-related delays it was not delivered until October 2022. We first did a lot of work on it to improve its storage capabilities and make it more suitable for our own preferences. We were not able to get away until June 2023, and took a very pleasant three-week trip generally up the NSW and Queensland coastal regions as far north as Mackay. (The story can be found at <https://www.michaelandnorma.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/A-Short-Trip-Australia-2023.pdf>.)



On return we decided that we and the van could well undertake a longer tour. In late 2022 we had taken a caravan up to Cairns and Darwin, returning inland, so that we had already completed the 'eastern loop' of mainland Australia. What we aimed to do now was to match these travels by taking a long loop around Western Australia and back.

For this tour we decided on a winter trip, to enjoy the warmth of the tropics during Sydney's winter. The obvious problem was that for at least part of the round tour we would be well below the Tropic of Capricorn and out of the balmy north. We spent a lot of preparation time studying average weather patterns for the towns and regions we expected to be covering, to make the best possible of conditions within our timescale of around three months.

We decided on a generally anticlockwise circuit, driving north up the Stuart Highway from Port Augusta to Katherine in the Northern Territory, and then turning west and south over the Northwest Coastal Highway around Western Australia. We would return via the Eyre Highway back to Port Augusta and thence home.

Sydney to Port Augusta

We set off on Tuesday 7 May in good conditions and in all respects ready for sea, as we might have said in our sailing days. The choice of route to Port Augusta was between the Sturt Highway through Hay, or the Barrier Highway via Cobar and Wilcannia. We chose the latter because we were more familiar with the former.

Our first day out was a longer drive than we had anticipated. Bypassing Orange and Molong we enjoyed lovely countryside up the Castlereagh Highway and through Mudgee, a nice little town surrounded by expansive wineries. We arrived about 4:30 pm after seven hours including a lunch stop, covering about 420 km.

For our first camping stop we had chosen a small site adjacent to the Dubbo regional airport – not in the end that we heard much aircraft noise. We had not booked ahead and it was full, but the rather



discombobulated owner found us a place in a driveway behind an unoccupied bnb outhouse. It was a shady but acceptable position under trees, once he had rolled out a long cable to connect us to the house!

We were generally familiar with Dubbo and its many colonial buildings, so after a relaxed start we skipped the town and pressed on

the next morning to pleasant Nyngan. We stopped there to get some cash from the bank, just opposite an old RAAF chopper sited in the central town square – don't know why it was there! We passed through Cobar along long straight stretches of the Barrier Highway. The town and its interesting mining history was already familiar to us from our motor racing days, so again we didn't stop because we were keen to get on to less familiar roads.

We had lunch at the Florida Rest Area, then for the night continued on to the Bulla Park rest area, between Cobar and Wilcannia. Ten minutes before arriving, we were hit by a tropical-level downpour. We parked by the rest area's central picnic shelter. We had hoped to get further into the bush and away from the road, but there were pools of running water around us within a few minutes. According to the local paper, local farmers were already fearing rainstorms and consequent difficulties for getting stock in.



There was some road noise during the night, mostly road trains. But there had been no more rain overnight and it was mostly dry around us. We did have a small branch of eucalyptus fall on us, with no obvious damage.

Then it was off along the Barrier Highway again in cloudy and cool conditions, lots of long straight stretches and little traffic. We didn't stop at usually quiet Wilcannia, on the Darling River, the main service centre for the area's vast sheep and cattle properties. It had once been a shipping port for paddle steamers, before the water level dropped and road and rail took over.

We pressed on to Broken Hill, and turned off up the main road north for a short distance to the famous settlement of Silverton.

It had been a booming minerals mining town in the late 1800s, but became more famous latterly because of its backdrop in advertisements and movies including Mad Max 2. We had visited before to see the basics, but this time we had booked into what turned out to be one of the most unusual farm stays at which we had ever camped.



This was at Silverton Outback Camels, a farm that takes groups of tourists on camel-ride tours of the settlement. It has space for a few undemanding



campers. These will have chosen the site, like us, because it was known to be a highly unusual place where all manner of farm animals wandered around within the property.

We couldn't find the place at first, but caught up with the owner, Petah, as she was leading a camel train through the little town. She directed us, saying that our on-line booking was 'lost'. In any case, there was plenty of space, with just another one or two vans.



An extraordinary range of farm animals, of all kinds and ages, were wandering around, including buffalo, sheep, goats, pigs, emus, donkeys and llamas. Groups of geese, ducks, guinea fowls, turkeys and white peacocks settled down around us. Some pigeons and chickens were kept in large cages.





Come the evening, teeming thousands of corellas gathered in the trees and glowed in the golden light of the sunset. Masses of galahs pecked around the patches of grass and seeds.

There was light rain overnight, so the red dirt became a shallow layer of red mud. We wandered around piles of junk, including rusting cars and trucks, and some remains of the Mad Max scenes. Of course we strolled through yet more groups of farm animals wandering free – the lot. The animals were great fun; the environment took some getting used to!

On moving out the next day, with the final sight being buffalo chewing away at a pile of hay, we took a drive further into the hinterland to the Mundi Mundi lookout.



It was not a particularly high viewpoint, but it did overlook vast expanses of bushland, with few special features within them.



Behind us, along a long ridge, a prominent line of wind turbines made their presence very obvious from Broken Hill and miles around.

Then it was back on the main road, still straight and lacking great interest.

Lunch was at the tiny Olary settlement, by an old train loading platform. Police checked out Norma's status as I was sleeping on the bed after lunch! There were a few hilly sections on the latter part of the day's drive before we turned off the highway and north towards Peterborough.



There, we pulled into a splendid (and free) public RV park, just a big green field a walking distance from the town. At the entrance was a donation box, some local activity signs and a book swap. We enjoyed a sunny evening in a good place, and again enjoyed the sight of huge flocks of birds in the trees and around us – mostly galahs this time – as the sun went down.

It was very cold overnight, under clear skies. In the morning we went over the road to visit the Steamtown Heritage Rail Centre. Peterborough was originally a simple farming centre, but rapidly developed after the railway arrived in 1881. The museum features locomotives and passenger carriages. Some of the latter were fitted out with special equipment, such as for childbirth and baby care for those living in remote areas.



In those days Australia featured several different railway gauges, and the town had the distinction of being the meeting point of three of them. The most important feature here was the world's only example of a three-gauge turntable, a remarkable piece of design and engineering. The carriages were simply rotated until in line with the appropriate rail gauge. There was also an intriguing collection of road vehicles fitted with train wheels for use on the railways.

It was an interesting indoors and outside display, best for railway buffs, but we had to be taken round by a tour guide. He was a life-long train man, hugely enthusiastic and expert, but (for us) he regaled us with too many long, personal reminiscences, covering his long experience in the railway business. Norma presented her apologies and dropped out after a time, and I got told off for entering a (medical) carriage on my own, before being taken in by him.



We shopped in the town, at an acceptable IGA, and then returned to the van and sat in the sun reading until it began to cool off again. By this time we were slowly getting used to the camping life again!

After another cold night, it was a late start into the town then away through a series of villages, bypassing Port Pirie on our way to the Stuart Highway. Just south of Port Augusta we pulled off the highway and along a 6km rocky dirt road (Horrocks Pass) and up to Hancock's Lookout. This presented a splendid view, extending across sparsely wooded ranges and hills, farmlands and pastures. In the distance we could see the northern reaches of Spencer Gulf and over to the Eyre Peninsula.

The approach road and a roadside cairn carry the name of grazier John Horrocks, who explored the region in 1846, aged 28, bringing with him the first camel imported to Australia. We chatted with a few local people out for Mother's Day and a picnic.



We crossed the big bridge in small Port Augusta, at the very head of the gulf. In the 1850s it was the main harbour for expeditions making for the interior, potential farmer-settlers, and construction teams building a telegraph to Darwin. The arrival of the railway in 1917 was another important link for the town. There would have been plenty to see there, but we were anxious to get going north, to the Northern Territory – and warmer weather!

Port Augusta to Katherine

So, therefore, we caught the Stuart Highway at its very southern end. We passed several lines of rounded and isolated hills, and on through dry and damp low-lying lands between the white, salty, Lake Torrens and Lake Macfarlane and several other 'lagoons'.

We turned off the Stuart at Pimba. This is another important rail and road transport link, founded at the end of WW1 as a camp for railway construction workers. It was a short run from there out to Woomera, and to the Woomera Travelers Village and Caravan Park. It was an odd place, very busy, with many big caravans and several pup tents. We tucked into a corner with another small campervan carrying a young British couple touring Australia in their own van, just as we did in Europe each summer in the 1980s.

The next morning we drove into Woomera, a place of great interest. Following WW2, the British government, with the assistance of its Australian counterpart, sought to establish an outback testing range for rockets and long-distance missiles. A large area of remote outback country was requisitioned for what is now called the Woomera Prohibited Area. General and logistical support was provided by the new town of Woomera.

From 1957, Woomera became a global focal point for space activity, including being chosen as the launch point for the European Launcher Development Organisation (ELDO). At the height of its space activity, Woomera had the second highest number of rocket launches in the world after NASA's facilities at Cape Canaveral in Florida.

Weapons testing, including nuclear devices around Maralinga, continued until 1980, and the town was opened to visitors in 1982. Some defence and aerospace trials and test launches still take place in the rocket range.



At its largest point in time, the Woomera Prohibited Area encompassed 270,000 square kilometres, more than twice its current size. The WPA today still encompasses an area of 122,000 square kilometres, about the size of England, and remains the largest land-based test range in the Western world. While the end of the Cold War marked a dip in defence industry use of the WPA, its importance for test and evaluation has steadily increased since the late 1990s.

We spent most of the time wandering around a wide display of rockets and missiles from the Woomera site – all very well presented, with useful explanatory placards.

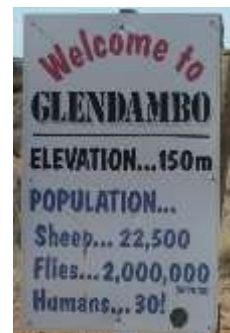


There were a few aircraft, also, including a Canberra and a Gloster Meteor, the first British jet fighter.



The Canberra fighter-bomber brought RAF memories for me, back to our time in Cyprus, where I was able occasionally to fly in this aircraft on training bombing missions and occasional 'jollies'.

That was all we really wanted to see, so it was back on to the Stuart Highway through the otherwise forbidden land of the Woomera Prohibited Area. One of the last settlements we could visit before diving into the prohibited lands was Glendambo, now essentially a ghost town with a roadhouse. This warns that it's the last fuel stop before Coober Pedy, 250km away.



We stopped at times to look over the several salt lakes among the low, scrubby landscape. There were a good few 'roo fatalities along this stretch, and we only just avoided a couple of emus running across the road.



There was a good lookout point and rest area overlooking the salt Lake Hart. There was once a European organisation's satellite launching pad nearby, but none of ten launches was successful in getting a satellite into orbit and the site was closed down in the 1970s.

Further away to the west lies Lake Gairdner, the site of several land speed record attempts, including Perth's Rosco McGlashan. He currently holds the Australian land speed record there at 802.6 km/h in 1994 at Lake Gairdner.

There was very little traffic approaching Coober Pedy, which lies just north of the prohibited area's boundary. For some kilometres out we were already noting piles of spoil from the opal diggings and other mines. At first sight the town was reminiscent of Lightning Ridge, another opal town.



We drove a dirt road up a very steep hill to a well-reviewed bush camp site that we had booked. We were met by the friendly owner of the site, which sat near the top of a bare



hill overlooking a wide expanse of flat land to the east. The surface was a pure white dust, with white rocks dotted about. The owner, Karen, lived in a dugout typical of the town, and an adjoining dugout was her bnb for hire. It was a very interesting and unusual place to stay, and we had it for our own overnight.

We watched a beautiful sunrise in these very peaceful surroundings and decided on a rest stay. We were soon joined by a couple of caravan groups, but there was plenty of room.

During the day a wind came in from the south, blowing white dust. It became very hot. We moved to the edge of the drop-off and avoided the worst. Flies became a problem as the air cooled through sundown.

Over a glass of wine we had a pleasant and interesting evening talk in the van with Karen, about her dugout and its associated air bnb. We learnt a lot about Coober Pedy, the lifestyle and the mining.



The first hopeful miners arrived at the country's richest opal field in the 1920s, and generations followed them despite the climate: over 50 degrees C is not uncommon in the summer. Consequently,



many miners and their families – not to speak of hotels and cafes – tunnelled underground for shade and shelter. The name 'Coober Pedy' is said to derive from an Aboriginal term meaning 'white man's hole'.

We drove down into the town the following day, and first went to the underground opal mining museum. It was well laid out and free, with plenty of opals to buy in the associated shop!

There were interesting displays of the evolution of the area since prehistoric times, when central Australia was truly 'all at sea'.

Opal is formed from a solution of silicon dioxide and water. As water runs down through the earth, it picks up silica from sandstone, and carries this silica-rich solution into cracks and natural faults. As the water evaporates, it leaves behind a silica deposit. This cycle repeats over very long periods of time, and eventually opal is formed.

The history of human settlement and opal mining were well presented by audiovisual displays, photographs and artefacts.



We shopped at the IGA for basics, fuelled up and then we were back on the way up the Stuart. For the first ten kilometres or so out of town to the north, on each side of the road lay both active and inactive opal mines, leaving their countless white mounds visible out to the horizon.



We continued through the little town of Marla, where the famous Oodnadatta Track comes to its western end. There is a roadhouse there, but we continued north to spend the night at the Agnes Creek rest area. This was a lovely wide open

space scattered with bushy little trees, with no human company but too many flies!

It was very cold at 4:00 am the next morning, but we soon warmed up under spotty cumulus. It was a peaceful rest day, apart from fly-fighting. We had to close up the van at 4:30 pm. We felt quite remote, and in fact by this time we were near the geographic centre of the continent. There was no wildlife to be seen, to Norma's disappointment.



After two nights here we were in our way again along the Stuart, and crossed the border into the Northern Territory. There were no formalities. We fuelled up in Erldunda, essentially a large upmarket roadhouse complex with a resort, motel and backpacker rooms apart from the camp site. We filled up with diesel at \$2.84 a litre, the highest price we had come across.

The importance of this place is that it's the junction where we turned left along the Lasseter Highway, We were now on our way to the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, one of the major targets for the whole trip. This road would take us to the village of Yulara and the famous and fabulous Uluru.



Along the way we passed through several cattle properties but with very few cattle to be seen. Norma thought that a lone cow in a field looked happier than those in the packed cattle trucks going the other way, assumedly to oblivion.

About 100 kilometres from Yulara we approached an immense red mesa which looks somewhat like Uluru from a distance, and is often mistaken as such. This is

Mount Conner. It's nearly as high as Uluru and covers a much greater area of land. While it is a part of the whole Uluru-Kata-Tjuta complex, it is different geologically speaking, being sandstone based and dry. The only access to it is by taking a private 4WD tour.

We continued to the essentially compulsory Ayers Rock Campground at Yulara, because stopping or staying at any of the nearby rest areas was no longer permitted. We were welcomed pleasantly and given a good position with power and water at \$70 a night, expensive by local standards but understandable.



In the evening, with many other campers, we walked up a hillock to view a long-range sighting of Uluru as the sun went down. Sure enough, the 'rock' did change colours through sunset, and we looked forward to a closer sighting the following evening.

In the morning it was time to visit the Uluru complex, one of the major targets for the trip. We checked in and paid the three-day entry fee at

the Park Entry office, which was much less busy than we had anticipated. We then found our way to the Cultural Centre, with the same difficulty in directions we had found in other parks that were trying hard to minimise ugly signage.



There were interesting explanatory galleries in the centre, which holds permanent displays and installations explaining Aboriginal culture, history and traditions. There were some excellent artefacts for display and on sale. They were not cheap – a carved and decorated snake I liked (the work of a famous Aboriginal artist) cost \$3,500. But fair enough, I thought.

We were then off for a drive to and around the world-famous rock, once called Ayers Rock, now Uluru, and the world's best known monolith. It is in fact the tilted top of a 550-million-year-old mountain, most of which lies buried under the red earth.



We started on the west side, beginning a clockwise circuit.

The rock is indescribably magnificent. From a distance, and on the approach

road, Uluru looks quite smooth. The closer we got, and when walking around, we came across multiple piles of rocks that had broken away. We came across



multiple ridges, cracks, gulleys, holes and enormous caves, all capable of catching and storing water for the people of ancient times. The watercourses were dry, but the mineral stains made them look alive.





We ambled part of the Mala Walk, just a few metres from the base of the rock. We then drove round to the north and north-east faces, viewing the most 'sensitive' area of cultural significance. These strange configurations on the otherwise smoother parts of Uluru are regarded as sacred by the Aboriginal people, and cannot be closely approached

We finished the circuit by mid-afternoon, and went back to the camp site. Later, we returned to a special car park with the best

view of the rock during sunset.

There was a delightful collection of family campers in party mood, beers and wines in hand, kids in full excitement mode. We waited only 30 minutes or so for the rock's colour to change, probably not the most dramatic sight to be seen at some other times, but in any event both beautiful and spectacular. We had a tot or two at the scene, along with the many others. Back to the van and dinner at 7:30 pm.



Sunday, the next day, was for the 'Olgas', or Kata Tjuta. Its collection of rocks could easily be seen from our camp site, about 40km away as the crow flies.

After the short drive there, we first visited the Valley of the Winds, which lay between two of the vast domes. The highest, Mount Olga, rises more than 500 metres above the surrounding land, and the entire formation covers an area of 3,500 hectares. There are several possible walking paths, but leaving them is not allowed because the area is sacred under Anangu men's law.





We walked up the Valley of the Winds a short way, but the wind was in fact too strong and unsteady.

We went on to the rather less gusty Walpa (still meaning 'windy'!) Gorge. This walk also dives deep into the stony complex, and I walked maybe half the whole possible way. The rough and rocky surface made it too uneasy for Norma.



The sun's bright, gleaming colouring of the high, steep, golden-bronze rocks was unforgettably ethereal.

We returned to the camp in time for a late afternoon shower. The main downside to the visit was the dense hordes of flies. We had originally scoffed at the prospect, and sight, of people with head nets from cap to neck, but soon gave in and joined them in protecting – especially – our eyes, ears and nose.

It was warming enough by 10:00 to get on our way the next morning, but with a brisk easterly wind under blue skies. We flogged back 140km east along the Lasseter Highway and turned north up the Luritja Road for another 360km to Kings Canyon and its resort.



On the way we had passed the Kings Creek station, a possible stop with a camel farm being an attraction, but on later research we did establish that the resort was indeed a better choice for a stay at the canyon – but an expensive one, in the Discovery/G'Day chain, with which we were becoming familiar. We were given an acceptable pitch overlooking a panorama of cliffs and gorges. We spent ten minutes sitting in the sun with Aerogard to hand.

The next day was Tuesday 21 May, which meant that we were now just two weeks out from home. It did seem a lot longer, mainly because something new was happening all the time, and that's part of the travel process. A very cold night was reported by the weather bureau to have been freezing.

We got going reasonably early for our visit to the fabled Kings Canyon, in the Watarrka National Park. Kings Creek runs along the bottom of the canyon, and gives it its name. The creek was named by Ernest Giles, an early European explorer, who reached the canyon in 1872. He named it after a friend of his, Mr Fielder King, not of any royalty.



This is one of the most spectacular canyons in Central Australia. It started millennia ago as a crack in the sandstone, which gradually expanded over the age. Now, the almost vertical canyon walls are over 100 metres high, with Kings Creek at the bottom.



The canyon is said to contain hundreds of different plant species and 80 species of birds. During a day's hike, like ours, only a tiny example of each is likely to be seen, of course.

There is a choice of walks within the canyon and around the rim. The most spectacular treks require a climb up a long series of rocky 'stairs' up the face of the wall, and would have been too dangerous for either of us – especially coming



down. I did try mounting the first few metres for a photo shot, and that was enough for me. (The photo below taken from the rim is from Google stock.)



But the walk along the creek along the bottom was pleasant enough, following the dry creek. The cliffs that embrace the canyon were spectacular in the morning sun. There were lots of attractive trees and plants but, as Norma observed, few birds to be seen.

Part of the gorge is an Aboriginal sacred site. The Garden of Eden is a permanent waterhole surrounded by plant life, but it is an important men's sacred place for the traditional owners so visitors



are not allowed to swim in it. It can only be reached by climbing down a long series of wooden stairs from the canyon rim.

We returned to the camp site for lunch and spent a peaceful afternoon reading in the sun, protected by the van from a strong and cool SE breeze. We again had to wear the stupid head nets, which nevertheless do work. The flies disappeared by late afternoon, when a pink sunset shone. Running out of provisions, we started planning our upcoming visit to Alice

Springs.

We made a reasonably prompt move out of the site but then faced a big back-track out of the Watarraka National Park and south down the Luritja Road. The George Gill Range lay along the northern side to our left. The latter part was quite scenic, with stony little hills and winding roads. At last we re-joined the Lasseter Hwy and returned east back to our intersection with the Stuart at Eridunda. The round trip from the Stuart and back had come to no less than 1,300 kilometres. It didn't look that far on the road map, but distances do get to you when touring this country!

Soon after leaving the camp site we had noticed a star crack, initially not obvious, in the upper right corner of the windscreen. More worrying was that a line crack was now slowly extending from that and down to the left towards the screen centre. We thought that the screen had probably been struck by a stone from a closely passing road train a day or two previously. It clearly had to be repaired or replaced in Alice Springs.



On the way up to Alice there was some attractive scenery again, crossing the James ranges and the completely dry Finke River.

Just before driving through this gap in the MacDonnell Ranges we arrived at the G'Day/Discovery

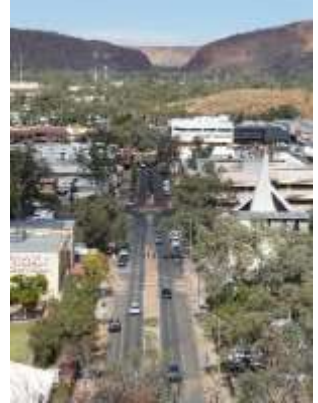


camp site and booked for four nights. We rang a possible windscreen repairer/replacer, and arranged for a meeting the next day.

We drove to WB Windscreens early and Leanne, the proprietor, confirmed that the crack could not be repaired and would continue to extend. The options were to simply carry on and ignore it, or to replace it at some cost. Getting the screen in (by train) would not be a problem, but the lane-following and related electronic driver assistance systems that depended on the windscreen for this latest-model Ducato would require calibration. We agreed to go along with that decision, with hope that a new screen would arrive within five days. Our RV insurance company agreed to cover most of the cost.

We drove into the town to see about shopping at Woolworths or Coles, but we couldn't park anywhere nearby. We sort of expected the town – as shown in many television accounts before we left – would be awash with out-of-control kids, but everything appeared 'normal' as far as we could perceive. We came across a local 'Piggley' grocery, which had sufficient – but expensive – stores. The evening's pork chops were in fact excellent!

A problem with our allocated position in the middle of the camp site was that we were surrounded by a group of big caravans spilling out very noisy children, shouting, bouncing balls and the like. We appealed at the camp office for a change of pitch tomorrow.



We took a tourist drive up to the Anzac Hill lookout, which had good views of the town and the MacDonnell ranges.

We then drove out to the Desert Park facility, which demonstrated and explained the different kinds of environment and wildlife in the outback.





Most memorable were the only (as far as we could see) dingo and an emu, and an excellent display of mainly nocturnal creatures in a dark display area. The park covered a large area, and we got lost a few times, so the visit was quite a hard walk in the end.



Back at the camp site, our appeal for a quieter spot was successful, and we were given an excellent space at the end of a row, peaceful and with views of the ranges. We spent a quiet Saturday in this good commercial park, and Norma made friends with the several dog-walkers. The skies remained blue and the temperatures pleasant with just a few cumulus clouds. Norma did the washing. I exchanged window fracture chats with a similarly affected neighbour, who was employing another firm to replace his screen.



On Sunday we took an outing to a car and truck museum. This was excellent, with a large collection of historic cars.

The interesting main focus centred on cars of American and other overseas design that were built or assembled in Australia – a car history story on its own.



A 1927 Australian-built Chevrolet Capitol Tray Top was an early example of what we now call a ute. A 1923 Rolls Royce featured a fabric body made in Melbourne and fitted on a chassis imported from England.



The museum also featured a large (sponsored) Kenwood display in a huge hanger. There was an amazing line-up of both the newest and heritage prime movers, of indescribable size and brilliant presentation.

Over many years they would have been hauling many huge ‘things’ on their trailers, hopefully not too often hurling stones at innocent camping cars . . .

On a quick tour we tried to visit the Culture Centre and the Aviation Museum, but both were shut. It turned out that many major tourist attractions were shut through Sunday and Tuesday – as were, it happens, the bottle shops!



It was a brisk start to get to the windscreen repairer early the next day. The screen was replaced carefully and professionally as far as we could see. No new driver assistance warnings appeared on the dashboard and we trusted that the screen had self-calibrated. Then, as advised by Leanne, we took a shopping trip to a good IGA in the suburbs, the best one we had been to.

We spent a quiet afternoon, discussing where else we should visit before leaving Alice for the far north. Alice Springs had been a surprise: an apparently thriving little city, encompassing all the major shops from Coles to Bunnings, clean and wooded streets, and green suburbs. There were no obvious signs of uprising or other troubles, although most public and private buildings displayed more protection and screening than in other major towns. We also well understood that the villages and camps beyond the central area were often scenes of disruption and violence, which were prone to spill over into the town. Groups of delinquent locals and children – mostly boys – were coming in from their homes in the surrounding Aboriginal camps with terrible domestic situations. Alice itself otherwise presented as a very pleasant place to live (also setting aside wet-season floods and summer heat!).



After leaving this very good and helpful RV park we took the Larapinta Drive out to the West MacDonnell’s Range and National Park. The ranges are hundreds of millions old, thrown up from the deep and buckled into dramatic landforms.



We stopped first at Simpson’s Gap, a surprisingly dramatic and picturesque feature. It’s a deep valley with a permanent waterhole between the towering cliffs; a lovely place.



About 25 kilometres further west we came to another highlight of the National Park, Standley Chasm. It's a narrow, towering canyon, lit up on both sides only when the sun is at its highest. It's wholly on Aboriginal land, held to be a cultural precinct. There is a neat entry centre, with a small café and bush camp site, all run by the local people. There was quite a long and latterly tough walk into the canyon, which got higher and steeper along the way, where it ended with a small pool. Access through the gap was blocked by rocks.



We returned back along the Larapinta Drive to the Stuart Highway, bypassing the Alice suburbs, and were not surprised by facing a longish flog north along dry, straight roads of no particular interest. We resolved to stop mid-afternoon because it had been a long day. However, we couldn't find the promising stop identified in our primary online camping guide, Wikicamps.

We stopped at a small and busy rest area, where we were told that about nine kilometres back we had passed the entrance to the free bush camp we were looking for. We returned, and indeed came to a dirt track, extending from the main road into the bush for about a kilometre.

A small sign told us that we were heading into an old WW2 base, the New Barrow Staging Camp, set in a wide area of private land permitted by the owner for free camping with no facilities such as power or water. During the war, from 1942 to 1945 it was the first stop for troops moving north from Alice Springs, and large tin sheds were mounted on concrete slabs.

The buildings have all gone by now, but there were still some of the concrete foundations scattered around. There were a couple of caravans spaced out in the area. We found a good position among the wild shrubbery. We resolved to stay the following day in this remote and peaceful place, of a kind we had been missing for several days.

For the first time in the trip it got quite hot during the night. We were surprised not to have seen much in the way of wildlife or birdlife – where were the kangaroos and wallabies, for a start? We did see a flock of galahs feeding on the ground nearby, however.



At 11:15 the next morning it started to rain, heavily. We had no Telstra access, let alone internet, so no way of getting weather forecasts and this rain was a surprise. The rain then stopped for a while, and we thought that even if more fell, we were on a dry patch on firm undergrowth and did not see any risk of getting stuck. In retrospect we should have moved out. And in any case, by mid-afternoon we couldn't think of anywhere else to spend the night.



However . . . the rain came returned, and very heavily. The dirt roads around us quickly became sodden red mud, and when a 4WD with a big caravan arrived he left deep squishy tracks in the red mud. It looked like we couldn't leave in these darkening conditions even if we chose to. It did little for morale to find that the air-conditioner above the bed was

leaking and wetting the blankets. Further, because of the overcast skies the solar panel had not been sufficiently feeding the battery and lighting would be limited.

A gloomy evening and a dreadful and sleepless night followed for us both, as under torrential rain we tried to work out in our heads how on earth we could get help if we needed to be towed out. We were beyond any electronic communication and lay hundreds of kilometres from any settlement, let alone a town with a tow truck.

It was still bucketing down in the morning, and I discussed with the experienced driver of the big 4WD off-road rig nearby what might be a route with a reasonable chance of either of us getting out. We walked around the bushes and grassy areas, gauging what was the firmest surface, and reviewed how deep we might sink into the mud of the tracks out to the main road, seemingly a long way away. Together we found a stony and narrow track running along a slight ridge through some trees, which we thought would probably end up at the main road. I went back and gunned the van through the bushes up on to this track, and sure enough, it did get us finally back to the Stuart Highway. Talk about relief!

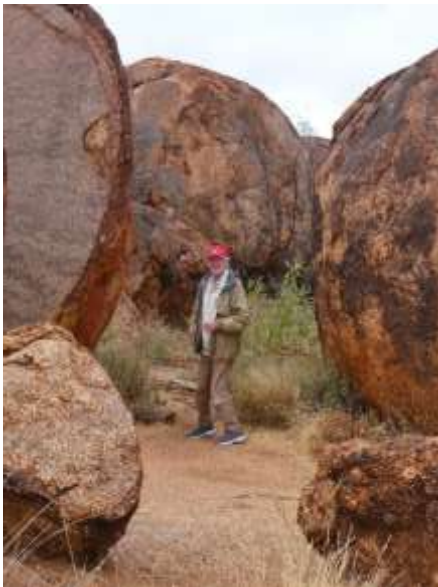


So, we got going again, as it happens in good time, and the rain eased for a while.

Some 120 kilometres up the road we came to an outstandingly attractive and interesting feature. In the Devils Marbles Conservation Reserve, close by the side of the road and extending down into a wide, shallow valley, we saw an amazing collection of gigantic granite boulders, the Devils Marbles of the reserve.

These are of great cultural and spiritual significance to the Aboriginal traditional inhabitants of the land. *Karlu Karlu* is the

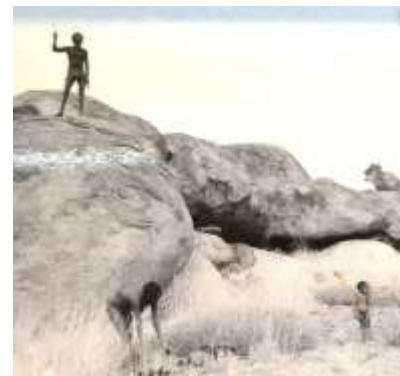
local Aboriginal term for both the rock features and the surrounding area. The Aboriginal term translates as 'round boulders'.



We learnt that the marbles are the remnants of a solid mass of granite, the bulk of which still is underneath them. This had been molten magma, and as it cooled and emerged from the ground, water fell into the cracks and reacted with minerals in the granite. This weathered granite was relatively soft, and as it washed away it left boulders sitting on top of the hard granite underneath. Many are perched in precarious positions, seemingly poised to roll away at any moment.



Being one of the most widely recognised symbols of Australia's outback, the Devils Marbles are also one of the most visited reserves/places in the Northern Territory.



We were lucky enough to have the site to

ourselves, once a noisy tourist group had driven off in their bus. We wandered freely around the amazing reserve, in awe of the way that four-metre ball-shaped boulders were balanced on top of rounded bases with no apparent support, and others were split cleanly down the middle as if struck by an axe.

Continuing north, we came next to Tennant Creek, where we fuelled up and bought some basic supplies. The town was another of the settlements set up to serve the telegraph station 10 kilometres to the north. It was and still is a small town, but which boomed when gold was discovered in 1932. Gold mining has recently been revived here, and tourism is helping the local economy. We were intending to top up our wine supplies, but the Bottle-O was surrounded by a large group of frowning indigenous men waiting for it to open (about mid-day), so we moved on.

We lunched nearby at the Three Ways Roadhouse, where in 2019 we had turned to the east on the Barkly Highway, on our return from Darwin with the caravan.

We had booked a spot for the night at a well-reviewed campground at Banka Banka Station, a historic cattle station just up the way. It was another place along the Stuart that had been a WW2 staging camp. It was a fairly simple camping operation, but with all necessary facilities. The rain, however, had returned relentlessly and continued into the night. By this time we had bought a simple little billycan, which we hung under the aircon to catch the drips.

The rain cleared during the morning and it was a clear blue sky by evening. We came into conversation with our next-door neighbour, 72-year-old Chris. She was in the process of walking across Australia from north to south, covering 3,060 kilometres from Darwin to Adelaide and averaging 30km a day for 103 days. She was spending the nights in a converted minibus with a male friend as van driver and supporter. The aim of this amazing woman was to gather money and publicity for charity. She was a lot of fun to talk to and discuss her adventure.



Up behind the farm sheds there was a lookout at the top of a small hill, a good photo opportunity. We walked around the rest of the farm and watched the swarm of new arrivals; the camp was booked out, we were told.

The following day was for a long run. We left early by our standards, and re-joined the Stuart. As ever, we faced long, straight and often featureless roads, on cruise control at 105-110 km/h. There were many very bad potholes to be avoided by weaving, like many other vehicles. Looking rather sad were settlements like Renner Springs, and towns like Elliott.

Daly Waters, which we hadn't visited before and was a few kilometres off the main highway, wasn't 'sad' at all. On the contrary, it was cheerfully weird. This description covered the people, the several animals, wrecked vehicles and aircraft. We had lunch there, near the pub – claimed to be the northern Territory's oldest. Some of the wandering horses and cattle had a look at us.





The town has an interesting aviation history. Amy Johnson, Bert Hinkler and Charles Kingsford-Smith all touched down on the local airstrip during their pioneering flights.



Qantas used the same airstrip as a stop on its first international service to Singapore, starting in 1934.



Back on the road we thought of stopping at Mataranka, where we had camped in 2019, but a look at the place as we drove slowly through discouraged any such idea. It was looking rather run-down and insecure. So, we had to press on to Katherine, also familiar from the caravan days and experience there.

Latterly, that afternoon, the road had kilometres of hazard reduction fires along each side. Flocks of black kites were chasing wildlife, alive or dead.

It was a long drive to Katherine, nearly 600 kilometres over the six hours at the wheel. But the passing scenery was very attractive at times, with small hills in the bush and the occasional bluff and craggy cliffs.

We had booked for a night at Katherine's Riverview Tourist Village, which turned out to be packed. It was the kind of regimented 'park' that looked a bit like a POW camp, with notices everywhere – including a sign in each cubicle, 'Please flush the toilet'.



But at last it was a warm evening, as well it should have been, as we were now at the northernmost town of this tour and the intention had been to get away from the cold southern winter! Katherine has boomed along with the cattle industry and the nearby RAAF station at Tindal. The surrounding landscapes were generally very pleasant, and recent rains had made the undergrowth and trees very green. There were sprinkles of pretty pink flowers, of a kind we had not seen before.

We had had a notion to visit the Nitmiluk National Park, including the gorge and river, but bookings for the river trip were full for a day or two and there was no other way of seeing either. So we gave up on that idea, drove away with no regrets and went shopping.

The local Woolworths, where we had shopped with the caravan in 2019, was still much the same as its namesakes anywhere. Which made it a pretty good shop, by Top End standards. But we were soon to cross the border into Western Australia, where we knew we would have to surrender any fruit or vegetables. We refuelled at a BP station that was boarded up and looked shut. Before filling up I even checked whether they were in fact open for business. But the Indian manager said yes, 24/7! The large groups of gloomy local people moping about did look menacing, and we had had the same reaction last time we were here.

Katherine to Broome

We got on our way, at last leaving the Stuart and turning down south-west along the Victoria Highway. At this point it was part of the A1 main round-Australia road. Here the highway had been opened relatively recently, so it was better surfaced and maintained than the Stuart. We were here starting our long run round inland of the great Kimberly Plateau, largely impassable for other than hefty four-wheel drive rigs using the rough Gibb River Road.



Our route turned out to be a very attractive, winding and hilly drive. There were expanses of green growth on both sides, again also featuring masses of colourful wild flowers. The scenery was backed by a series of mesas and escarpments. We crossed several streams, both running and dry, generally leading north to the King River. We passed through more burn-offs, supervised by hungry black kites again. The country here was in fact recovering from Cyclone Jasper, which had hit in December.



We had decided that it would be a short run this day for a change, and then take a couple of days rest. We booked into the Victoria River Roadhouse, which lies by its namesake river. It is surrounded by the Jeburra/Gregory National Park, featuring imposing red sandstone cliffs.

We chose a delightful corner in the very spacious camping ground, and spent a quiet afternoon in the warm sun. What a contrast to the last stop!



In the morning it was cloudy first thing, but it cleared to a beautiful day. We did some fixes and rearrangements around the van. We had had a dashboard warning that the AdBlue level was low, and added five litres from our spare can.

(The mandatory use of AdBlue is a nuisance; it is basically urea, which is sprayed into the exhaust to lessen the emission of nitrogen oxides from diesel engines. If you run out of the additive, the engine stops and needs resetting by a mechanic.)

We had no Telstra/internet access, but the roadhouse had good wifi and advice from the youngsters running it. It was clear by this time that much of the work in outback centres is done by pleasant young overseas people on various kinds of visa. They were unfailingly helpful.



After a pleasant and restful couple of days we left this excellent roadhouse for what turned out to be one of the best drives of the whole trip. We continued down the Victoria Highway, with the road curving right and left, up and down, and all in pretty good condition. On each side, especially through the Gregory National Park, we were embraced most of the way by the red sandstone cliffs and green growth of the escarpments, all magnificent sights.



We stopped to view the big Victoria River and continued this enjoyable drive through Timber Creek and finally to the last rest area before the WA border, at Saddle Creek.



We were there in time for lunch, and parked up at the inner end of the site with a close view of the escarpment. There

were lots of flowering trees around us, with little coloured birds flitting around them. For another afternoon we were sitting out and reading in the sun, through to a peaceful evening under the reddening cliffs.



It was sunny but cool the next morning, as was now becoming the regular case. We were still discussing how it was that there were so few wallabies and kangaroos to be seen, especially in the lush green bush we were camped by. We thought there might be more than enough food out there following the cyclone and floods some six months ago.



Continuing on this fabulous road we were still overlooked by massive escarpments, shining red depending on the position of the sun.

Finally came to the Western Australian border, facing its notoriously strict quarantine requirements.

We were welcomed by Colin, a very friendly official. Norma had been stressing about the rules for some days, and was confident that we were completely 'clean'. She was dismayed when a smiling Colin came up with what he called a 'smuggled' tiny lettuce leaf!

So off we went into Western Australia, where we knew we had to adjust our clocks by an hour and a half but were not at all sure which way! Either way, it was time to go on



to Kununurra and its Coles supermarket. It was a good shop, and we were served by the pleasant people of the kind that we found all over this outback part of the country. It was a pleasant little town, with wide clean streets like many of those still developing in these regions. In the case of Kununurra, it was founded only in 1961 to serve workers on the ginormous Ord River Irrigation Scheme



By way of contrast, it did seem that the little shops in more remote villages were dying or shut.



This fabulous drive continued by turning south off the Victoria Highway and down 40 kilometres or so on the new Argyle Road



to the Ord River, its dam and its dramatic surroundings. This was an exceptionally memorable visit.

The first damming of the Ord River created Lake Kununurra in the early 1960s. Work started on the main Ord River Dam in 1969 and was completed before the official opening on 30 June 1972. The main Ord



River Dam, known as Top Dam, holds back the waters of the Ord River in Lake Argyle. The lake is Australia's largest dam reservoir, covering an area of 741 square kilometres.

The Ord River dams provide water for irrigation to over 117 square kilometres of farmland and extensions to the scheme are under way to allow irrigation of a further 440 square kilometres. By 2009 more than 60 different crops were being grown in the Ord catchment area.



The main Ord River dam also generates power for the local community of Kununurra, but not elsewhere.

In the early days there were disputed views about the economic value of the irrigation scheme. However, over the last 20 years new crops have been planted and fresh fruit markets generated in both South-East Australia and Asia – especially China – with greater economic success. And more recently, it has become a superb recreational resource and a haven, in this arid region, for wildlife and birds.

With lovely views all around we drove across the main dam and then down the other side to where the water spills back into the Ord River. This then passes west of Kununurra, discharges into the Cambridge Gulf and thence to the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf in the Timor Sea.



From the dam it was a return drive up to the Victoria Highway and then west to its intersection with the Great Northern Highway. There we took a diversion north along green cattle country with hilly backgrounds to Wyndham, the northernmost town in the Kimberley.



The town's entrance sign was mounted next to an 18-metre concrete crocodile, and a big baobab tree stood at the entrance to the caravan park. We relaxed after another brilliant day's driving and sight-seeing, one of the best, all with very little traffic.



The next day we started our local explorations. We first took a terrific drive up to a viewpoint on the tip of a high escarpment, which was a prominent sight from the camp. We mounted a very steep and narrow road worthy of the Dolomites, winding through hairpin turns that the van managed well.

From the top there were great views of the five rivers that flow into the Cambridge Gulf and the open sea: the King, Pentecost, Durack, Forrest and Ord. As they melded together, they were separated by giant tidal sand flats.



A cruise ship lay on the town dock, and a small anchored freighter was loading iron ore. That sounds like frantic industry, but it was all pretty calm.



In the distance, way across the flats to the west, we could see the escarpments of the Cockburn ranges, where lie the Gibb River Road and the El Questro resort.



We drove back down to quiet little old Port Wyndham, the northernmost in the state and very important in the development of the Kimberley. Its beginnings came with the Halls Creek gold rush, and continued to service the beef industry. A drovers' memorial commemorates drovers bringing cattle from the outback to the port. The Wyndham meatworks opened in 1919 and was the town's major employer until it closed in 1985.

From 1889 the overland telegraph also played a large part in Wyndham's history and was operational until 1921 assisting ships entering the port. In the 1930's it was the Australian landing site for aviators seeking to establish new solo flying records between England and Australia. In 1935, the first Australian Inland Mission Aerial Medical Service (later renamed the Royal Flying Doctor Service) was established in Wyndham. An Afghan Cemetery commemorates the camel drivers who provided the first freight services to the region.

It is all very quiet now, and the little port village is run down. The cruise ship on the main dock was clearly inactive.

The small and rusting freighter was indeed loading iron ore into a barge, but it would have been one of the few that were small and light enough to make it so far upstream.



Around the port there was a fair bit of junk lying around, but also an entertaining line-up of old narrow-gauge rolling stock.



We returned to the van for a long, relaxed afternoon in the sun, and now coming to adjust to the one and a half hour change in clock time. This allowed drinks at the new 'local' time of 5:00.



This is baobab country, as we had already recognised, and we shared the camp grounds with what a sign said was the 'largest boab tree in captivity'. It is widely known as Wyndham's Prison Tree, thought to be about 4,000 years old and an example of such trees' use as temporary lockups from the 1890s.



After leaving this excellent camp site we enjoyed another fabulous drive south from Wyndham, with the Cockburn ranges to our right (the west).



Again, we enjoyed the sight of the bronze escarpments rising behind the green flatlands below. From the road we could see the location of the up-market El Questro resort, the last stretch of the road to it being passable only by heavy-duty 4WD vehicles, ruling us out.

We rather sadly left the Victoria Highway when we re-joined the A1 Great Northern Highway. This was still a road of good quality, typical of the newer roadworks in prosperous WA, although there were still some of the corrugated sections being resurfaced. We passed the dirt road leading to the Bungle Bungles, which even the toughest off-roaders agreed was close to impassable. Internet chatting did raise the



In the area, the country was covered by ugly, dumpy termite mounds out to the horizon. We were in wide cattle country now, and did enjoy seeing a big mob being mustered by helicopter, an amazing sight.

question as to why the WA government chose not to make access to this famous collection of boulders easier, along what was not a very long stretch of road.



The topography got flatter on approach to our next planned night stop, the Larrawa Station Nature Stay.



This was an acceptable stop, but was not as accessible or interesting as most farm stays along the east coast. It was \$30 without power for a place on a field, but Norma did appreciate the pig farm and the young piglets.

We were still well north of the Tropic of Capricorn, but nevertheless we had an exceptionally cold night under clear skies. We had planned to drive a long way south-west, to a roadhouse near Broome, but about 100 km down the road we came across one of the best free stops of the whole trip: the Ngumban Cliff Rest Area. It was an expansive space, with plenty of room for all, and there were shaded picnic places and amenities for those who wanted them.



Having arrived in the morning we had a free choice of location, and we tucked into a splendid small space of our own, overlooking a rocky valley and with long and wide views over classic outback scenery. We had a very peaceful and pleasant day in the sun, reading mostly, and latterly watching vans and rigs of all shapes and sizes rolling in. The biggest was a converted bus towing a 4WD ute.



An Australian camping obsession that we do not share is the camp fire. We can understand such enthusiasm in the vast expanses of the 'real' outback. But in the early evening in this now quite busy rest area someone demonstrated his manhood by lighting a ginormous fire. The same thing had happened the previous evening, also in a site with scores of other campers. Neither really affected us, because of the overall size of both areas, but we disliked the smell and smoke as much we feared such fires spreading.

Grumpy us. We still enjoyed a clear sunset under a crescent moon.

We reluctantly moved on from this great free stop. Initially, we continued through the same countryside, backed by several mesas and bronze cliffs. These more spectacular sights gradually diminished in number, thus making the roads less attractive but better sealed.



We passed through Halls Creek, where Western Australia's first significant gold discovery was made. The subsequent rush was only a matter of months, but the town survived to serve the pastoral industry being the last stop for drovers heading south on the famous Canning Stock Route to Wiluna.

Approaching the high new bridge at Fitzroy Crossing, we came to a long stretch of road being developed and widened.

We knew that flooding generated by ex-tropical Cyclone Ellie in December 2022 and January 2023 had caused significant damage to sections of Great Northern Highway at the Fitzroy Crossing, and destroyed the 1968 bridge over the river. This cut access to Aboriginal communities east of the Fitzroy River as well as the East Kimberley and Northern Territory. Incredibly, the impressive new bridge was completed by December 2023, and we were approaching it driving along the foundations for a brand new stretch of the highway.



There were two long stops at traffic lights, and in between, all vehicles were being led by pilot utes. At the end of such a stretch the unfinished dirt road widened into two lanes. Many vehicles – including big trucks – were coming the other way. Then, 'BANG!' 'Oh no-o' I yelled, as a stone slammed into the windscreen in front of me. Sure enough, it left a star fracture. This was only three weeks after the previous strike, and a fortnight from fitting a brand new screen. We wondered what we had done to deserve this!

The new crack was above my line of sight, so I had no trouble driving, and we continued to our planned stop at the Willare Bridge Roadhouse. From there we would continue on to Broome for advice on the screen and, hopefully, a fix.



The roadhouse was a good example of its kind, and the bridge it overlooked had also required substantial reconstruction. We tucked into a cosy corner, which we often managed to do!

It was 'only' 180km to Broome and we were off early, passing increasing numbers of termite nests, this time spiky-topped ones.

On the web we had looked up several possible windscreen workshops in the town (there were a lot!), and chose one that appeared to favour repair rather than replacement. That approach would suit us, and we went straight there. However, they told us that the star crack was only just too big to repair to their standards, and that there was no way they could replace the windscreen within a matter of weeks. The helpful receptionist did confirm that this would be so anywhere in the town, after she made several phone calls. Her suggestion was, 'just get used to it; there's every chance you'll get another crack anyway!'



I was aware that do-it-yourself kits were available to 'fix' small cracks by forcing a clear resin into the glass fracture, basically what the professionals do when possible, but using heftier equipment. I bought such a DIY kit at a nearby AutoPro car parts store.



It was then time to do some exploring of Broome, which lies at the southern end of a peninsula. The long and well-known Cable Beach is open to the sea to the west, and to the east is the expansive Roebuck Bay. The town presented at first sight as a neat and tidy place, with green parks and pleasant views.



The site for the town in the mid-1800s was intended to be a port and base of operations to provide facilities for the extension of the pearl shell fishery and for intending pastoral and agricultural settlers.

The history of pearl fishing here is very interesting, albeit sadly brutal over times. The practice of collecting pearl shells existed well before European settlement, initially most important – and successful – in the Torres Strait. Coastal Aboriginal people along the north-west coast had collected and traded pearl shell for possibly hundreds of years, simply free diving in quite shallow water. But by the 1880s the pearling

masters in Thursday Island were using diving suits, connecting to compressors powered by man or motor on larger sailing vessels. This allowed deeper and longer dives, and was so successful in those waters that they moved to the west and the vast pearl oyster grounds in the waters off the Kimberley coast.



By the nineteenth century mother-of-pearl was in worldwide demand for use as buttons, cutlery handles, watch-faces and inlay for marquetry. The rich beds of pearl oysters off the beaches of the north-west Australian coast provided a ready supply. Around 1900 the local pearl industry provided work

for some 400 luggers.

But harvesting the shells by diving was an extremely tough and hazardous process. Contrary to Australia's federal laws at the time, men from south-east Asia – predominantly Japanese and Malaysian – were imported for the work as indentured labourers. Many did not survive, dying from drowning and the bends. When white men were brought in, they suffered an even higher death rate. Understandably, racial tensions were high.

Nevertheless, by the turn of the twentieth century, Broome was a town of enormous wealth derived almost entirely from pearl-shell fishing. This led to additional racially motivated conflicts. White collar occupations and positions of power were exclusively held by Europeans, and racial segregation was common in Broome until the 1970s.

We drove first to the Broome Museum, an amateur project but well done and with many helpful information displays. There were good descriptions of the times and procedures of the search for pearl shells and, as a bonus (going to lugger owners, not divers), spherical pearls. Stories about pearl luggers featured, understandably, as did the dangerous nature of the work faced by the divers.

There was also much posted information on the 1942 air raid by Japanese forces and the deaths and destruction it caused. At least 88 civilians and Allied military personnel were killed. The town was a refuelling point for aircraft on the route between the Netherlands East Indies and major Australian cities and had become a significant Allied military base. But there were no Allied fighter planes based in Broome at the time.

The Japanese fighters destroyed at least 22 Allied aircraft. These included an USAAF B-24A Liberator full of wounded personnel. Nearly 20 died when it crashed into the sea. The Allies also lost 15 flying boats at anchorage; several Dutch refugees were on board and many were killed. At very low tides, the remains of some of the sunken aircraft appear. At the airfield, the Japanese fighters destroyed several American and Australian military aircraft.



In a nearby park overlooking Roebuck Bay is an attractive and moving memorial for those killed in that short conflict, featuring outline figures with their names on them.

We had lunch in the van, then wandered over to a nearby bottle shop for a top-up of our whisky supply. We thus first encountered some of the restrictions on alcohol sales in the top end. We needed photo ID for both of us, limited to a maximum of a litre each, limitations we had faced in Darwin five years previously. But we thought it was all workable and sensible, in these times of local turmoil.



Down in Chinatown, the original hub of the town, we admired how well reconstructed it was, as far as possible replicating the Chinese originals. (Although, to be honest, much of it could not be replicated, according to pictures of the time.)



We had a look at a couple of luggers, one restored and one showing the years' scars. There is an elegant teak court house there, originally built in 1889 as a telegraph office. It then became a court house, and remains so now.



Cable Beach, facing the open sea to the west, was another must-see, and we drove down the road to the southern end of the peninsula. Here is an access road down to the beach. On a mid-to-low tide the beach was covered with a mass of four-wheel drives, trailers and tinnies. Fishing was clearly the main attraction, with a few swimmers and jet-skiers around. The name is such because it was once the terminus for the underwater telegraph cable linking Broome with Java and thus Australia to the world.



We were finding Broome surprising, obviously prosperous and organised like the best of the waterfront holiday towns on the east coast. Its big airport and Qantas timetable were supporting holidaying Perth folk on their winter excursions.

We returned to the town and the previously booked

Discovery Park, overlooking the 'turquoise' (as promoted) waters of shallow Roebuck Bay at low tide.



I buckled down to my first attempt at a DIY fix for the windscreen's stone fracture. It worked out better than I had

expected, and I gave it another dose of resin the next day. The principle is that the injected resin makes the cracks invisible. In our case the lesion was too large to disappear completely, but although not invisible the crack was hard to see (depending on the angle of sunlight). I soon found it could be ignored and forgotten as we drove along.

Broome to Perth

After a visit to Coles and another AdBlue top-up, we left this attractive town and continued south. The road was long and uninteresting, leaving the coast for the open inland, a change from the great drives we had been enjoying.

However, along the way we did pass another mustering of a huge mob of cattle, this time by a handful of stockmen on horses. Such an Australian sight.



We pulled into the Stanley Rest Area, another capacious and well looked-after facility, typical for WA. It was hot on arrival but because we were early, we found some shade under a tree.

From there, we simply drove down the 300km or so from one rest area to another, along mostly straight roads with no special features. Over the flat landscapes there were few animals to be seen but a few cattle



were wandering, and a few small creatures were lying dead by the roadside.

After a long stretch of roadwork we came to the De Grey rest area, just north of Port Hedland. This was very big, with lots of places but little shade. We were settled by lunch, and relaxed with books in the afternoon.



The next day, back along the Great Northern Highway, it was just a couple of hours or so to get to Port Hedland. The number of immense road trains was increasing steadily, and we saw one of the famous four-



kilometre-long railway trains carrying unimaginably heavy loads of iron ore. We were interested to learn that each mining company has its own railway system and vehicles, carrying ore from the Pilbara mines to Port Hedland and Dampier.



We got to a Discovery camp just in time to book in. On the way we did pass a free camp in an open red-dirt square area, packed with all kinds of camping rigs, but we wanted to plug into the mains and use some other amenities of a camp site after several nights in rest areas without them. Nearby, acres of sand and mud extending out to sea showed how much work must have gone into building a massive harbour in these flat lands.



After settling in we returned to the town and the Information Centre. We heard the beginning of a promotional lecture, but slipped away to have a chat with a very informative man in a senior position there. He gave us a lot of his time, with very sharp insider comments on some social problems in these industrial centres.

The 'modern' history of the town starts in April 1863, when Captain Peter Hedland of the cutter *Mystery* nosed into the narrow entrance of a channel through the mud and mangroves and discovered a wide inland waterway. He named it Mangrove Harbour and two months later it was renamed Port Hedland by the Surveyor-General.

It became identified as a port for the pearling and cattle industries. Exploration of the iron ore deposits through the 1960s resulted in a massive development program. With a lack of timber for building, no roads and only a small quantity of drinkable water, it's amazing that the initial tiny settlement would grow into one of the largest and busiest mineral ports in the world.

It is now a major deep-water port for the Pilbara iron-ore industry, supported by the modern technology required to operate the giant BHP Billiton facilities. Its surrounding flat lands are the habitat for many and varied birds and wildlife.



Salt is another important industry, and conical piles of salt are prominent in the scenery.

The port has also been a base for pearling luggers, and in their own cemetery lie many Japanese divers.



We walked down to a viewpoint on the port waterfront to see the immense ore ships on their docks. We watched one coming in right close to us – an impressive sight, indeed.

Enormous machinery and modern technology are both required to run this industrial giant. From the viewpoint we could see three ships being loaded, with ore pouring into their holds. But we could *not* see the ten or so more that were docked further up the port.



We were told that 53 ships were waiting at anchor offshore, and we could see that ships were coming in and going out every few minutes.



Back at the camp site, we discussed the impressive number of young couples with large and expensive off-road caravans and campers. We remembered how we camped when we were their age!

From Port Hedland there is a choice of route for those heading south: continuing down the North West Coastal Highway via Karratha, Route 1, or taking a longer inland loop via the Karijini National Park and the mining town of Tom Price. We had read many highly favourable reviews of the national park, and that was the route we chose. It was a good decision.



The road was fairly quiet to begin with, except for the many road trains carrying ore to the port. The empty ones were going our way, and given their length they were hard to overtake – although they were always as helpful as possible.

The scenery was initially flat scrub, with several signposts at the highway ends of dusty red roads extending out to mines too far away to see. The general feeling was of an immensity of all operations here, even though we could hardly ever see a mine.

We came to the Auski roadhouse and campground. It was not big, but there were



plenty of available pitches when we arrived in the early afternoon. There was excellent phone and internet connection for a change, with assumed credit to the high communications tower a few metres away.



In the evening I took several photos of the road trains also resting at this classic truck rest stop.

We tried booking a camp site at the Karijini National Park, but the bureaucratic website – ‘click here, click there, wait’ – was impossible to navigate.

The weather was beautiful again, and some wind helped to keep the worst of the flies away.

In the morning we set off for an easy run to the Karijini Park, but soon after leaving the rest stop the road began to rise quite steeply.



What we had unexpectedly come across was a pass through rocky, steep hills. This was the eastern end of the Hamersley Range, a mountainous region that crosses the Pilbara and includes the Karijini National Park.

We took a winding little side road up to the outstanding Albert Tognolini lookout point and rest area. It was named after a former WA Commissioner of Main Roads, who was responsible for major





improvements of sections of the Great Northern Highway. The view of the 'pass' was outstanding, with many road trains driving both up and down at near walking speed.

From there it was a short run to the national park, and we hoped that the substantial diversion required to get there was worth it.

At the visitor centre we had a good discussion with one of the helpful staff, helping us to balance visiting the most important features against the difficulty of getting to some of them.

This is an enormous and remote park, the second largest in the state. The park is physically split into a northern and a southern half by a road corridor, the Karijini Drive. Two groups of tourist attractions such as gorges and waterfalls are located north of the drive, one at the west end and the other – along with the tourist centre – at the east. Both are accessible via sealed and gravel roads. There are two major groups of dramatic gorges, carved out where creeks, dry for most of the year, channel raging water after the winter rains and summer cyclones. There are no sealed access roads in the half of the park south of Karijini Drive.

We decided to first visit the western group of gorges. Half way there we realised that this had not been a good decision, and that we had grossly under-estimated the size of the park. To get from one group of gorges to the other we had to drive back down from the camp site and visitor centre to the Karijini Drive, along the drive to the west, then up again to the gorges. This distance was a full 88 kilometres, and we would have to return the same way. We were told later that the two main gorge collections had previously been directly linked by a much shorter but very rough dirt track that cut across the middle of the park. This was now closed while they build a new and sealed roadway, which will help a lot.



Anyway, we finally reached the gorges in the north-west corner of this vast park, and we first went to the Oxer Lookout, one of the park's great views. The lookout is perched on a sliver of land at the junction of four deep gorges – Weano, Red, Hancock and Joffre – with iron ore-stained cliff walls falling near vertically on all sides.

It was all highly impressive. We spent time wandering from viewpoint to viewpoint, peering down into the chasms and trying to take photos that picture their immensity.



We then had to drive all the way back, along the line of the Hamersley Range, past the visitor centre and to even more fantastic views, this time at the eastern end of the park.



The main sight here was the enormous Dales Gorge. From the many viewpoints on its rim walk we could see all the



way down the deep, sheer-sided chasms to its deep bottom, where at the eastern end the Fortescue Falls were pouring water into the streams and pools along the floor of the gorge. At the western end the water collected at the very deep (and reputedly very cold) Fern Pool.



Back then to the bush campground, a very pleasant facility with individual pitches cleared among the thick growth of trees. This had been an interesting and busy day, with quite a lot of walking.



After a very cold night we took a return visit to the Dales Gorge and Fortescue falls lookouts, mainly to see whether the morning sunlight would give different views and colour patterns. It didn't, really; to get sunlight down both sides and to the bottom of these gorges means getting there at mid-day, and this did not fit our schedule (such as it was).

So it was back to the main road and another run along it to the west. This took us to Tom Price, where we were interested to see whether we could view a mine from a lookout, rather than taking a tour of the depths, which neither of us was keen on. The answer was no. We did some provisioning at Coles, which was close to the visitor centre and the main road, where we parked for lunch.

We pressed on to the west with no plans made for the night, having had no internet access at the Karijini camp. Google Maps suggested that from Tom Price we should cut down to the Wittenoom road on our way back to the coast, although our paper maps indicated that the road was unsealed. It turned out to be a fine sealed surface for a while, with multiple mining operations on each side. But suddenly the tarmac stopped. The road transformed into one of the roughest and toughest corrugated roads we had ever encountered. If we stayed on it, these conditions would continue for 30-40 kilometres. We stopped when a kilometre or so in, and discussed the situation with a young couple in a serious 4WD off-road rig who had also stopped. They were very experienced, but even they thought it would be best to turn back and go the long way round.

So, we returned to Tom Price and drove south to Paraburdoo (what a lovely name!) and finally back up to the Wittenoom road, a retreat of over 100km.



However, the whole deviation went through highly impressive scenery by the standard of the region, with ancient ranges on each side.

We had anticipated stopping at a 24-hour rest area, but it had been obliterated by the new roadworks that were giving us a good run. We finally got to the widely advertised but poorly reviewed Cheela Station, but were only to be told that this vast camping area was entirely booked out. It didn't look that promising anyway, with a lot of red dirt and much movement of heavy mining trucks and machinery. The receptionist suggested we try a rest area just two kilometres down the road. This was not on our list, but it was fine, and we got a good space, just big enough for us.



It was all very busy, though, and our closer neighbours decided to light a camp fire right under one of the many 'no fires' signs. We barricaded the van to keep the flies and noise out.

It was a steamy night for a change, with some showers. We got on the way early, and were driving for a few hours in the rain, at times heavy. Pools of water were appearing along the roadsides and beyond.



We agreed to stop early at the Nonutarra Roadhouse at the junction with the coastal highway we had left near Port Hedland, and fuelled up there while waiting for the 2:00 entry. It was a typical roadhouse, on red

dirt under scattered trees. And plug-in power was available, which was a relief because we were finding our battery capacity alone was not enough for more than two days unless there was good sunlight on our solar panel. Drizzling rain continued for the rest of the day.

It was a very boring run throughout the next morning, although under clearing blue skies and over very good road surfaces. The main sight was over endless areas of countless termite mounds.



From Nanuterra we went on south-west down the A1 highway and then diverted across to the Exmouth road and down to Coral Bay, taking us back to the west coast just north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

The village was very touristy and the caravan parks were full of many long-term or permanent residents. A lot to do with this is that Coral Bay has the famous Ningaloo Reef close to the shore.

Just a little way down the coast lay a beautiful open cove, giving access to the reef. Ningaloo Reef and coast are a marine park and a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is the closest to the land of all Australian reefs, and thus very accessible.

We saw that it was giving some protection for the several moored boats from the worst of the swell and the strong southerly following the small depression and rain we had just experienced.



It was a lovely sight, but under the conditions it was easy to see why few boats were taking tourists out to see the whale sharks (if there were any at this time), dolphins, manta rays and the like. Back through the village we caught sight of another reason it's so popular: a wide white sandy beach.



Back on the A1 highway we pulled into the Minilya Bridge roadhouse. It wasn't much of a place, but did have power, and the nearby rest areas did not. At this point we calculated that we were as far away from home as possible in Australia, about 3,760 kilometres as the crow flies (around half as many as we had driven thus far).

Driving away from the roadhouse we immediately passed the much better free camp on the other side of the road – but, as we had already determined, without power supply or running water.



The first run of the day was down to Carnarvon, primarily to visit the so-called Museum of Space and Technology. Unfortunately, this was a very disappointing presentation. The building was stuffed with a jumble of unrelated and poorly described collections



of radio and associated electronic bits and pieces. The museum building was originally set up to support the NASA space programmes from 1964 to 1975, and is shadowed by the original OTC satellite communications disc. There was some entertainment for families sitting in a simulated capsule and landing on the moon.



The town was born in the 1880s as a port for the shipment of wool and livestock, and was later the location of a whale-processing plant. Lying some 150km south of the Tropic of Capricorn, it is nevertheless called the “gateway to the tropical north”. We thought it was a pleasant enough

place, looking like other such seaside towns that welcome seasonal accommodation and retirees.

The Carnarvon Heritage Precinct, out of the town on Babbage Island, which is connected to the mainland by a causeway. The highlight here is One-Mile Jetty, which was built in 1899 and stretched 1,493 metres into the Indian Ocean.



A train line took goods out from the mainland to its end for the ships. The jetty is no longer safe enough to walk along, but it was an impressive sight on its own.

There is a good collection of maritime and railway hardware as part of a little museum there.

There is a small – and rather open – space for small-vessel moorings, and what looked like to us as a difficult pass through steep swell out through overlapping mud banks to the open sea.

After lunch it was another two-hour slog down through unremarkable scenery, most of it wet and some flooded. At the intersection with the Shark Bay Road we signed in to the Overlander Roadhouse. This offered a powered site at \$30 or an unpowered site for free. We took the latter, as the battery was in good shape by now. We shared the space with numerous trucks and tradies, and a single woman with two kids in a brand new caravan she had hardly ever even reversed. It was obviously all new to her, but she disclosed nothing about her story.

After a now typically cold night we were welcomed by a blue, cool morning. From the roadhouse we took the Bay Road west along the Shark Bay Road and then up the long, mostly straight road up Peron Peninsula to Denham, in the centre of the Shark Bay World Heritage area and Marine Park.

As ever in Australia, in practice the drive seemed a longer leg than implied by the map! Along the way there were several lovely lookouts, with clear explanations on millennial-old organic rocks lying in waters that were super-saline because tidal flushing is obstructed by a sandbar.



The ‘beaches’ were composed of countless tiny white shells, which in some places and at some times have become compacted and solidified into rocks. Other rocks in the park are called stromatolites, which are hard mounds of living algal material. Only found here,

they are thought to be the oldest living things in the world.



Denham was a simple place. We had lunch on the waterfront, with a pretty, bright blue outlook, and did a simple shop at the IGA.



We drove on up to Monkey Mia, which turned out to be a waste of time. It was mostly a big RAC resort, with public access costing \$15, and where a charter boat could be taken to view and feed – hopefully – the bottlenose dolphins.

It was a 152km trip back down and out of the peninsula to the Coastal Highway at the

Overlander and from there, another 47 down the highway to the excellent Billabong Roadhouse and its free campground. A big sign at the roadhouse said 'Don't Drive Tired'. Good advice for travel on these long roads.

The next morning was grey for the first time in a while. Heavy rain started later in the morning, and the air conditioner went into dripping mode again, requiring a bucket by now. We decided to stay, and watched many more travellers coming in and seeking a spot that would not soon become an impassable pool of water in muddy red sand. It was also very cool, and we had a discussion about returning one fine day to south-west WA, but in the summer!



Despite doubts, the rain stopped and we had an easy drive out around the puddles the next morning. Down the highway we

came to Kalbarri and its eponymous National Park. It turned out to be a lovely little town, offering river and coastal cruises and lots of new seaside developments.



At the end of the Murchison River the pass to the sea looked very forbidding at low tide. Inexperienced visitors with canoes or kayaks are encouraged to take to the waters only with a guide.



Along the coast there we walked along a series of great sea views including colour-banded cliffs and bluffs, all with great views of the sea.

We drove on down the coastal road until reaching the main highway at Northampton, then along generally fast roads through Geraldton.



We sought a sealant that might seal the leak in the aircon, but with no success. From what we had read, Geraldton was a very attractive town, the largest port and main administration centre for the region. However we didn't have time to stop there, because we had confirmed connections to make in Perth.



We had lovely scenery along the way – as green as Britain, swarming with shorn sheep and contented black cattle.

We stayed on the attractive Brand Highway until pulling into the much-recommended Western Flora Caravan Park. This was well off the main

road along a good sand track. There was only one man in charge for the huge site tucked away in the bushes. We soon saw the many kangaroos around the entry, and more further into the camp. There were no other campers to be seen in this remote place, and we tucked in with a full moon shining through the

windscreen. Coming back to the van from the facilities with a torch to light the way, I was startled by a big 'roo bounding past me in the dark.

We were up early after a very cold night and drove for three and a half hours to the industrial outskirts of Perth. Here, we were looking forward to catching up with our friend and my namesake (but no relation) Professor Michael Henderson. Among many other positions Michael is the Founder and CEO of the pioneering international business Emergency Triage Services, which offers emergency medical services to companies and other major entities world-wide. We have long known of each other remotely, because we have shared a serious interest in motor sport and over a long period both raced identical – and very quick – cars. We had previously met in person only once, during a recent visit by him to Sydney.

We went first to the factory building that he is setting up as a base for his and his family's race cars, and the future care and maintenance of others. His son Xavier met us there, along with some friends, and with the help of a ladder I climbed on to the top of the campervan to see if I could find the source of the leak through the air conditioner. I resealed what looked like cracked sealant on its outside front face, and from the inside tightened up the bolts that clamp together the outer and inner parts of the unit. We began to live in hope.



Following Michael we drove to his magnificent 100-year-old mansion in Peppermint Grove, overlooking the western bay of the Swan River. We settled down in the forecourt of his driveway and plugged in. He was out that evening, involved in a hockey tournament, so we simply enjoyed hot showers and an early bed. It had been a busy day.

We had previously visited (by air) and explored the city of Perth and its attractions, so this time we decided to drive down to Fremantle for the day.

The main visits were to be to the maritime and shipwreck museums. Both were good, but the labelling and explanatory plaques were better in the latter.



The main Maritime Museum is a big one, and holds the Americas Cup-winning yacht, Australia II, with its winged keel. There is a nicely reconstructed whaler, and a pearly lugger.

Jon Sanders' *Parry Endeavour* was strung up in a way to reproduce a violent run down the face of a massive wave. One of my heroes, Sanders was

the first single-handed sailor to circumnavigate non-stop twice, in 1981-1982, in his S&S 34 monohull *Perie Banou*. In 1986 Sanders set out again from Fremantle, and this time completed three solo non-stop circumnavigations aboard his 47-foot (14 m) yacht *Parry Endeavour*. Several other sailing records and many Sydney-Hobart races are also in his logbook.

Particularly impressive in the Shipwrecks Museum was the display of the starboard bow of the *Batavia*: retrieved, restored and reconstructed with the original timbers. Brilliant stuff.

We spent a while parked by the lawns and beaches along the waterfront on what was a very pleasant day – cool, but in the sun.

We ate out that evening with Michael and his sons and daughter, wonderful company in a restaurant near his house. We were lucky to find a parking space big enough for the van in a busy part of the suburb!



Perth to home

We were away in good time in the morning, farewelled by Michael, who was flying off overseas. It was drizzly from the start. We started down the southern freeway, then from Mandurah out to the coast along the spit of land outside Peel Inlet and Harvey Estuary. There were countless new settlements along the way, primarily near the sea.



Winding through one of the suburbs, we saw several kangaroos in empty building blocks among the many new dwellings. (In fact, we had commented many

times during the trip on how few kangaroos we had seen.)

Passing through these many posh new seafront suburbs we often discussed the apparently booming conditions in the state of Western Australia.



Continuing down the coast to Bunbury we contacted my distant cousin Libby Corson, with whom we had previously arranged a visit. (We share an interest in our shared great-grandfather, John A Henderson, who sailed out to Australia from Northern Ireland as a paying immigrant in a sailing ship. For more about him and his beautifully written account of the voyage, see www.michaelandnorma.com/family/).

We told her that we expected to get to Albany during tomorrow's afternoon. We continued down the good quality Bussell Highway, mostly open land of green fields with good-looking cattle and sheep, intermittently lined with trees.



We passed through the wine-making town of Margaret River, some five kilometres in from the coast and the hub of a spectacular region with fantastic coastal and inland scenery – not to speak of the several wineries inland. It was originally established in 1920 as part of a scheme to build up dairy farming.

The town itself is now a typically touristy and picturesque wine country centre. There are more than 200 vineyards in the region.

From there we drove south on the Bussell to its end near Cape Leeuwin and its high lighthouse, the furthest south-westerly point in Australia and the meeting of the Southern and Indian oceans. It is surrounded by amazingly rough coastal scenery. The skies were clear by then but it was still very windy.



Rocks could be seen awash miles out to sea.

Back towards Augusta we pulled into the Turner Holiday Park, apparently owned by the shire. It was very quiet, offering an off-season price, but we only

scored a very small pitch with no view.

We walked along the waterfront of the Hardy Inlet, where the Blackwood River meets the sea. Access to the ocean looked very dodgy! A new, small but tough-looking harbour marina was open to the sea on the eastern side of the cape. There were only a few charter boats tied up there at this time of the season.



It had rained heavily earlier, but we were very pleased that – thus far – there had not been a single drip from the air conditioner. Here's hoping, we reflected.

There were pelicans and ducks walking around the camp site, but we couldn't see any dolphins, let alone whales, which we were told did swim into the inlet from time to time.

Yet another cold night! The roads were damp after heavy night rain, but the aircon was still staying dry. We started up to the Brookman Highway, there turning eastwards at last, and beginning what was to be one of the loveliest runs of the whole trip.



We took the Stewart Road south-east through the green Milyeannup National Park, then down the Vasse Highway for a stretch along the side of the Greater Beedelup NP.



We took another eastwards short-cut road, the Channybearup road. This turned out to be a lovely and spectacular road, with good surfacing but featuring a narrow,



winding way through hill and dale and very varied countryside. We passed many wide open green pastures, woodlands, vineyards, and a wide variety of stock. It was an unexpectedly superb run.



At its end we cut down along the South Western Highway through several more national parks, many featuring 'big trees', exceptionally straight and tall eucalypts.



Lunch at a nice park in Walpole, by the sea.

And so to Albany. In Walpole, and in the Albany outskirts and also in the town, when manoeuvring the van at slow speed, the engine appeared to hesitate and fall into what we later learnt is called 'limp mode'. The engine still ran, but with no response from the throttle. We could continue at walking speed, but only get going again properly by stopping altogether and restarting the motor. This had happened just once on last year's trip to Queensland but never again after thousands of kilometres. Until now. So this had become a new matter of concern.



But we finally got to Libby's house and met her for the first time, along with her sister-in-law Pat. (Pat is the recent widow of Libby's brother Ian Scott Leggett, a much admired and well-loved doctor in Albany and other parts of WA; his other interests included sailing and woodworking, including boat-building.) Pat has a tennis-court size lawn behind her house, up in the hills behind the town and with a wonderful view. We were just able to manoeuvre the van through her back entrance and on to the grass. In the evening we gratefully took

them out for dinner at a good local bistro.

The first thing the next morning was to make arrangements to return to Perth and get the van's electronics sorted out. We made a booking for a Discovery Park campsite near the Fiat Professional dealership and workshop. The Fiat advice by telephone, and that of my own mechanic in Sydney, was that it was best to get the problem sorted before we set out upon the long drive east across southern Australia, including the Nullarbor stretch.



Meanwhile, we were taken touring around Albany by Libby and Pat. Driving around the waterways and viewing from the hills we came to realise what a beautiful complex of waterways, beaches, bays, islands and channels comprises the greater Albany harbour. It all suggests that the sailing would be great – when the weather's right! But it could be difficult when it isn't, which it wasn't that day, with a furious westerly and passing showers, white water on the rocks and shoals.



In the afternoon we drove up to the complex of war memorials in the heights of Mount Clarence, overlooking both the sea and the city. We first visited the National Anzac Centre in the Albany Heritage Park. This is an example of the more modern and immersive museums, with stories told in several video booths and the ability to follow the stories of individual soldiers. It was a valuable and unique experience, even for us regular visitors to war museums.



The nearby Desert Mounted Corps Memorial has an interesting history. It stands near the summit of Mount Clarence, and we walked up to it. The impressive memorial is a 9-metre bronze statue of an Australian mounted



soldier assisting a New Zealand soldier whose horse has been wounded. It was originally erected in 1932 at Port Said, in honour of Australian and New Zealand mounted soldiers killed in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign between 1916 and 1918. The memorial was badly damaged in anti-British riots during the Suez Crisis of 1956. In 1959, the United Arab Republic agreed to send the memorial back to Australia and it arrived in Albany in 1960. A copy of the statue was made and then erected on Mount Clarence in 1964. Another copy was erected on Anzac Parade in Canberra, as the Mounted Memorial.

We spent the evening at dinner in Pat's house with her family and Libby. Good fun.



There was a lot more rain overnight but just a few showers in the morning. We were picked up by Libby for a tour around Shoal Bay, the wide near-circular harbour (an area of about six by four kilometres) on which Albany sits along its northern shore. On its eastern side is the notorious 'Gap', the pass out to the



expansive outer harbour of King George Sound, where large ships can lie. On the way round we visited the old whaling station, where we had a light lunch.

We returned to the city for a special treat, a recital in the Uniting Church of the Gabriel Faure's beautiful Requiem, performed by a splendid local orchestra and choir. Moving and memorable in many ways.

Finally, we were out for our last evening with Libby and Pat and a good dinner at a nearby bistro.

After fond farewells all round, we had a simple drive back up to Perth on another route, the more direct Albany Highway. We yet again drove through lovely south-west countryside, with black cattle and white sheep on green fields and on a sunny day. We spent the afternoon in the camp site in Perth, even sitting out for a while.



On the first of July we were up early and at Fiat Professional Welshpool by 7:15, as arranged. There was only a small reception area, but we were not there for long. At 9:15 the pleasant receptionist came out and told us that the van was sitting outside, ready to go! She told us that they could not find any fault that could have caused our problem, but just in case, they had completely replaced

the system with an upgraded version.

So we were soon off and away to the east, towards Kalgoorlie-Boulder. As it happened, we were not too dismayed about all this back-track palaver, because we had originally wanted to visit the goldfields region which, however, would not have fitted in with the original itinerary.



We didn't get far that day, because we drove down a dirt road to see the Baarndee Lakes. These are the remains of an ancient river system which over time has become salty as it dries out each hot summer. It has been mined for salt and gypsum, but nowadays when it has water in it the system is popular for swimming and water skiing. It was a quiet and pleasant place that afternoon, after the busy-ness after the last few days. We even had

warm sun to sit in. It had been, we agreed, a more successful day than we had anticipated – and feared! We decided to stay the night.

It had been a fine sunset the previous evening; but about midnight we were both awakened by the sound of a howling wind, rocking the van on its springs. It remained highly uncomfortable and rather alarming for the rest of the night, and rain started soon after it got light. We moved out immediately, because existing depressions around us in the sand and bush were beginning to fill with water. We drove to the junction of the track with the main road and had breakfast before moving off. The heavy rain continued for the rest of the morning.



Around mid-day we stopped at the little town of Southern Cross to shop for basic provisions. The only food shop there was a Foodworks, which we already knew was one of the lower-standard franchises. This particular one was the worst grocery we had ever visited in Australia! We did get some basic stores. The town was very quiet, with no tourists to be seen. When prospectors found gold here in 1888 they named the site of their find after the group of stars that had guided them there. Later, the streets were all named after stars and constellations.

We continued along an uninteresting straight road, with little traffic except for a large number of road trains, some of them being four-trailer monsters 53.5 metres long. Almost all were obviously associated with the mining industry, and we were certainly again in mining country.



We reached Coolgardie in the afternoon, a town we could immediately see was one of interest and keen to attract tourists, including those in RVs like us. We drove around taking photos of old public buildings, many very picturesque, some in decay.



The find of gold reported in Southern Cross set off a gold rush and led to the biggest movement of people in Australian history, with prospectors from around the world converging on the area.



The influx of prospectors following the 1892 discovery of gold here made it for a short time the third largest town in Western Australia, after Perth and Fremantle. At the height of the rush in the late 1890's, there were 15,000 people living in Coolgardie and a further 10,000 people in the surrounding district. By this stage in its growth there were 23 hotels, three breweries, six banks, two stock exchanges, three daily and four weekly newspapers and more than 700 registered mining companies.

Today, the two-storey former court building is home for a goldfields exhibition, documenting the rise and gradual decline of the town and surrounding gold fields.

Coolgardie's gold production began to lessen in the early 1900's and the town's population began to diminish, as those who hoped to find their wealth in gold moved on to newer fields.

The major sight of the afternoon was the huge open-cut gold mine, the Lindsay mine. It has been in operation during various stages over a total period of over 120 years, from 1892 to 2013.



We parked up for the night at the town's RV-friendly 48-hour free stop, an open space around the 1896 – now defunct – railway station. An old steam engine and carriages still lie along the platform, with a handwritten sign on a window appealing for hooligans to stop wrecking the interiors.



We enjoyed a quiet and mostly sunny sunset.

In the morning we drove on to Kalgoorlie-Boulder (the two towns had been amalgamated).

We and went first to the good Goldfields Visitors Centre, in its imposing old town hall. A statue of Paddy Hannan, the man who discovered gold here in 1892, stands nearby. Kalgoorlie and its 'golden mile' are at the heart of Western Australia's gold-mining industry, both past and present.

From there we drove out to the Mount Charlotte Reservoir and lookout, where we learnt how water had been brought incomprehensibly uphill to Kalgoorlie from Perth. Mount Charlotte is both the beginning and the end of the story. It was near here that Paddy Hannan discovered gold, sparking the rush which led to the need for water. And it was here that the water finally arrived in 1903.



Western Australia's eastern goldfields were lacking in that most precious of resources – fresh water. Water from a dam (Mundaring Weir) on the outskirts of Perth became lifted by a series of pump stations and dams through steel pipelines to its destination 560km east. The Mount Charlotte lookout is on the hill that is in fact the main Kalgoorlie reservoir, hidden by the growth around it.



For a long way along the road to the goldfields, Norma had been commenting and photographing the prominent white pipe running for miles alongside. Originally the pipeline was intended to end at Coolgardie but even before construction began in 1899,

Coolgardie was in decline while Kalgoorlie was booming. The decision was made to extend the pipeline to Kalgoorlie and Mt Charlotte was chosen as the obvious site for a reservoir at the pipeline's (then) end. It was not a large hill but it was sufficiently high to provide pressure for a water supply to the town.



The Goldfields Water Supply Scheme was built when 30,000 people resided in the goldfields centred around Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, as they do today. Now there are an additional 8,000 km of pipes leading off the main conduit, with 100,000 people relying on them. The system now guarantees a secure water supply for those living in the wheat belt that supplies half the nation's wheat. And millions of sheep.

We moved on to visit the 'Super Pit' gold mine, but once there we were politely told that blasting was soon to occur and asked to go back down and come again tomorrow.

We went then on to visit the Hannans North Tourist Mine. This was established in 1991 to demonstrate historical mining techniques. The mine site is historically important as it was one of the first mines in the Kalgoorlie area. The “tourist” reference was not promising, but it is in fact a real mine, now defunct but where much of the infrastructure has been left in place.

We wandered all over the quite large area, which included four standing lift frames and buildings supporting administration, engineering and domestic activities.



The basic living quarters were in separate areas for men and women, with very simple furnishings and cooking facilities, all looking like the workers had just gone out for the day. It felt appropriate and natural, and we thought it an excellent attempt to reproduce what life had been like in such camps.



A monster truck and an equally monstrous bulldozer were there to be climbed over and the unconnected controls fiddled with.



In the late afternoon we checked in at the Discovery Park in Boulder, which was not a good example of this upper-range franchise. Not a blade of grass was to be seen.

There was a southerly change overnight. The rain eased early in the morning, and our first move was back to the Super Pit. It is still an active gold mine, the biggest in Australia, and may have ten years or so to go, although it was supposed to have been closed in about 2021. Debates now centre on what should be the future for the ‘finished’ pit.

It was an awesome sight indeed. We were particularly intrigued by the movements of the massive ore trucks, which looked like Dinky toys from above. In a never-ending convoy they climb up and down steep and narrow tracks cut into the sides of the immense pit, dumping their loads at the top and returning to the deep base of the mine for reloading.



All round about were immense hills of spoil that had been dug from the ground and the gold extracted.

Then it was back into town and to the Western Australian Museum, which is prominently dominated by a transplanted tall headframe (the structure supporting the lift). We went up it about half way in a new lift,



from which there was a good view of the attractive country town. Back down in the museum there were a succession of explanatory galleries.

They presented very good descriptions of the history of local mining and the people who managed and worked in it and their travails. There were descriptions of the dreadful conditions faced by the miners, and



the infectious diseases resulting from the living conditions.

Vast quantities of timber were required for lining the tunnels, and by 1900 the region was bare of trees. The timber was all brought out again when the open pit took over from the tunnels.

There were displays – in an underground vault – of different configurations of raw gold and its various shapes and sizes when mined, from dust to sheets and nuggets. The whole was a good and interesting museum.

We returned to the camp site for lunch and in the afternoon for washing and drying in the nearby amenities block, along with some basic work on the van. The mainly sunny afternoon was punctuated by light showers.

The first leg of the next day's drive was the run south to Norseman, past many signposts on each side of the road pointing to countless 'small' but active mines. On our left we passed the shiny-white, dry Lake Cowan. In the town we did a big shop in the IGA for the provisions that we hoped would be enough for most of the Eyre Highway run, while taking into account the quarantine requirements at the SA border.

We found with some difficulty the bronze statue of the horse named Norseman. In 1894 when prospector Laurie Sinclair stopped off to visit his brother on his way to Esperance, he tethered his horse "Hardy Norseman" overnight. In the morning he was amazed to discover that it had pawed up a gold nugget. A rich gold reef was discovered on the already proclaimed Dundas Field and thousands flocked to make their fortune.



The 'Camel Train' line of corrugated iron statues of camels, honours the animals that did so much to open up the country in those early days.

We filled up with diesel (at \$2.50 a litre) and AdBlue, conveniently at a truck bowser at half the price sold in containers.

Then came the turn east and the start of the Eyre Highway, the 'Nullarbor run'. Initially we ran through pleasant countryside with little formal farming apparent but still green and bushy. Latterly it started to rain, as we finally came to the Caiguna Roadhouse. We drove through big puddles in the forecourt and round to the back of the property and the John Eyre Caravan Park. This had been quite an easy but long

run for the day, at 556 kilometres including the final '90-mile straight' to the settlement, reputedly the longest in the country.



It was a slow start after warming up a bit! The first town along the Nullarbor road was supposed to be the heart of sheep country, but there were few to be seen.

Along to our left we followed for many kilometres a prominent bluff and tall cliffs, all being the southern

edge of the Hampton Tablelands. The escarpment had once been at the seafront, but geological uplift and falling sea levels left the cliffs high and dry.



Near the Madura settlement the road eased to the north and traversed a pass going up to the top of the tableland. The original pastoral property here shipped horses out to India via Eucla, to Norma's interest, given her horse-riding soldier father's time in India and Pakistan.

Eucla, on the tablelands, comes just before the SA border, and Norma had been busily sorting what provisions we could keep from what we couldn't. But at Border Village we soared under a sign that said we didn't have to stop there. We never did come to understand the various interstate quarantine differences.



Each side of the road was by then the Nullarbor National Plain, part of the Nullarbor National Park. Signposts advised us that in caves along the way there was evidence of Aboriginal occupation over 20,000 years.

There were several stopping and rest places with walkways down to the sea and the bluffs that defined the coast. By mid-afternoon we were becoming wary of heavy clouds ahead and we had warnings of bad weather around the area of Ceduna. Along this stretch the low land was very flat and exposed, lonely indeed.

At one stopping place, however, we were joined by a road train, and the driver stepped out and began checking the tyres. We started a pleasant conversation with him, which was very interesting indeed. While talking we saw his wife emerge from the truck's cabin to take their little white dog for a walk. They were a 'two-up' couple, an example of the many who share the road and driving tasks in these immense vehicles. It was a pleasure to learn a little about their lives, but they soon had to move on to meet their deadlines hundreds of kilometres away.

I had a particular interest in their work and lifestyle, because in my road safety consultancy days I led a group to examine any safety issues that might arise from the two-up system. On balance we found none significant, and it became common practice – and as safe as will ever be possible for any heavy truck movement over such vast distances.

We pressed on along the road, which was running close to the sea and edges of the



Bunda cliffs on our right. We came to the settlement of Nullarbor and its roadhouse and settled in quickly and easily, unlike the previous night. It stayed cold and dry overnight.



It had been a long day on the road again, seven hours and 534 kilometres.



The next stop along the road was not far away, at the 'Head of Bight' viewing area at the northernmost point of the Great Australian Bight. It was brilliantly set up (by the SA government and local Aboriginal people), with an excellent descriptive centre and splendid viewing platforms reached by safe and secure wooden walkways. There were glimpses of whales in a blue ocean under blue skies. A

heavy swell was breaking on the tall, vertical Bunda cliffs. It was a lovely and memorable spot.



Pressing on further, there was nothing special to be seen, but we never found the Nullarbor boring or uninteresting. Our favoured guidebook did not agree, commenting on the Nullarbor Roadhouse being located *'as it is at the bleak heart of the Nullarbor, where few features break the monotony of the vast treeless plain'*.



The countryside changed all the time, varying from flat and dark, to expanses of small trees with lots of birds, and then thick with low bushes laced together with acres of spiders' webs.

Latterly the country opened up widely, with green pastures and fields of sheep. There was little traffic and an excellent road surface. Around Penong there were several traditional windmills bringing water to the surface.

Ceduna is effectively the end of 'the Nullarbor'. We found the whole experience interesting and engaging, never boring at all. The first crossing of the plain by car was made by the intrepid Frances Birtles in 1912, who followed old stock tracks. A rudimentary road was built during WW2 for defence reasons, but was poorly drained and vehicles were likely to become bogged.

The Ceduna Foreshore Caravan Park was acceptable, with good facilities, but open to the local streets and separated only by a wire fence.



We walked out to the waterfront of Denial Bay to view the sun setting behind the town's pier. This is exceptionally long, its purpose being to carry goods well out into the shallow bay to enable vessels to berth. It replaced a floating raft. It was never really

a working port, as Denial Bay is well named as being too shallow for most shipping.

Back along the Eyre Highway it was now the Gawler Ranges that were running along to our left. Both to our left and right we passed by immense wheat-growing paddocks, mostly now shining bright green in the sunlight. We were finding as a general rule there was very little wildlife to be seen. Continuing east, however, the sheep and cattle properties became even bigger, with the homesteads invisible beyond the range horizons. On the roadsides, the only settlements were small roadhouses, and the only village was Poochera, just bypassed by the highway.



In our reading we learnt of the Pildappa Rock, which was not one of the best known of its kind in Australia. We reached it at the end of a very rough 15-kilometre dirt road north from Minnipa. Corrugated and rocky, the surface was only just tolerable for us and our van.

However, the detour was very well worthwhile. The rock was highly impressive, and comparable to the much better-known Wave Rock in WA. We were on our own, and completely free to drive and wander right round its massive,



striped walls. The 'wave' is thought to have formed as water runoff from the rock combined with the soil to erode the stone beneath the original ground level. The soil was then worn away, exposing the eroded rock. We walked around and on the rock and its outcrops, and could have climbed to the top if we'd wanted.



There were 'No Camping' signs all around, which we had expected, but we did come to a camping ground that was a spacious paddock in a private property. It was a great place. We dropped a donation into a box at the gate, and were later joined only by a pleasant couple in a serious off-

roader van, who parked a respectable distance away.

It was a very peaceful night, followed by a misty morn. We returned to the rock for more photos under sunlight from a different direction.

We drove out carefully, taking nearly an hour to cover the 15km back to the highway. It was then another lovely country drive through wide views over vast paddocks, interspersed by occasional bushy expanses. Norma did spot a dingo, the only one we had seen in the wild.



We came to Iron Knob, a settlement in the centre of an enormous area of iron mines and extraction. It was the birthplace of the Australian steel industry. Following discoveries of iron ore here in the 1870s, a mine and township were set up in 1901, quickly followed by a heavy tramway to transport the ore to a blast furnace and port at Hummock Hill, now Whyalla. Around 150 million tonnes of ore were excavated



here until the mine was closed in 1998, leaving the adjacent hills what to be honest is now a ravaged scene. We spent the night at a free community-owned camping area, quite busy, all fine.

On a deviation from the Eyre Highway we took a short run south-east down to Whyalla, mainly to do some shopping and visit the Maritime Museum. Whyalla was established in the late 19th century as a port for exporting iron ore from Iron Knob. It is now a major industrial centre, being the site of one of the country's largest steelworks. It has a pleasant location by the sea.



The museum was very interesting for me, being based on a WW2 (1942) minesweeper corvette. The ship was named after the town and is now mounted high and dry there. Despite a few structural changes, the ship still presents the atmosphere of what life was like on one of these apparently suicidal vessels.

The basic procedure for destroying mines was first to locate them by means of a sensor. The mines were moored to the sea bed, holding their explosive heads a few metres below the water. They were detected and located by the sensors, after which the ship would trail chains to cut the mines from their tethers. Once seen afloat, they were then exploded by the ship's gun.



Because their draft had to be kept to the minimum possible, these minesweepers had a flat bottom and no keel, and thus no very effective mechanism or structure to contain its rolling motion at sea, reportedly up to 40 degrees each way! Not exactly a comfortable ship, let alone its dangerous task.

It was another short run up to Port Augusta and to a Discovery Park on the waterfront of the very upper reaches of the Spencer Gulf. It was not a bad place, but the air was cooling again by 4:00 pm and we had to tuck ourselves back into the van.



It turned into a horrendous night, with a gale-strength wind rocking the van and rain battering the roof. The conditions eased a bit in the morning, but it was a good place to stay and we booked in for another night. The weather improved during the day, and we spent a restful day reading.

We woke to blue skies the next morning, but it was still cold of course. We were slow getting away, having decided to take things easier during the final series of legs over the final run home. It started with a pleasant drive to Peterborough, just north of Adelaide, which completed our western loop of the nation via Broome. We then enjoyed a long stretch of hills and winding roads that would have been a dream run in an Audi or Ferrari!



It was a less interesting run north-east to Broken Hill. A sad occasion was that a small dark wallaby shot very fast out of thick undergrowth to our left and into our path. There was no time even to lift the throttle before it collided with the front right corner of the van, with little damage to us but a fatal injury for the wallaby being the inevitable result of a 110 km/h impact. The

unfortunate creature was also then struck by a car towing a caravan going in the opposite direction.

We spent the night at the Broken Hill G'day Park, nothing special, but a stopover with mains power to help keep us warm.

We doubted that it could get any colder, as we fired up the fan heater at 4:30 am in the morning, and managed to get to sleep at last. We were then off for a pretty standard run from Broken Hill to Cobar, a familiar road of a few years ago driving to and from our annual motor race meeting at Mallala.



The highway here is on the bumpy side, much used by the heavy vehicles of course but nothing like the smooth major roads of Western Australia.

Being wary as a result of yesterday's animal strike we were very careful passing the several mobs of 'wild' animals lining both sides of the roads. But these were not wallabies

or kangaroos, but feral goats, millions of them, in and out of farmland and apparently able to negotiate any fences. But unlike the wild native creatures, the goats are generally very sensible, looking up to approaching vehicles and moving away from the roads when prudent. Nice-looking creatures, really. We learnt that each one belongs to the property where it is at the time living, and may be 'harvested' and sold as such.

We used another G'Day Park in Cobar. We had booked the day before, and were told on arrival that the camp was now full. We like Cobar, which we know well, but did no more exploration of the place this time.

In the morning we made a reasonably early start for what was planned to be a longish day, planning a night at a free camp at Lake Wallace, near Bathurst. This would allow a mid-day arrival home the following day, a Monday.

But . . . while getting AdBlue from a bowser, I became extremely cold out in the wind. Following some discussion on whether we should just continue and get home by early night this day, we decided to press on.

All went well until we made a bad choice of our final approach to Sydney: Katoomba and the motorway, or the Bell's Line of road? We chose the former, dismissing Google Maps' firm recommendation for the latter. We soon found out that Google was right – there were massive delays along the extensive night-time roadworks in and around Katoomba and the other villages along that route. Then, the Great Western Highway was packed by a seething mass of traffic in every lane (on a very dark Sunday night), conditions which we had not experienced for a long time, and never in the van!

We finally made it home into our driveway and to a very welcome (and warm) bed.

A brief review

In terms of mileage, this was the longest single camping trip we have ever done. From home to home, we had driven a total of 16,194 kilometres. Our annual tours in our similar van in Europe from 2007 to 2018 averaged about 12,000 kilometres for each four-month stay. Australia is a very big country, of course, and the settlements, towns and cities – where about 90 percent of the population live – are obviously well spaced apart. But we very rarely got bored or tired. The sheer expanse of the country is one of its drawcards.

But we had a great time. The few glitches were easily shrugged off. Over three long trips we have now traversed both the two main east-west highways and the three north-south. We are now planning to return to far north Queensland next year, taking in smaller roads and towns, and moving more slowly along the way.

Our campervan continues to be our favourite option for a touring vehicle. In 2019 we tried a caravan for a trip up to Cairns and back down the hinterland. Towing a caravan is a very comfortable way to go but the combination is often cumbersome in both small towns and cities. Many overnight stopping places in towns and villages are confined to fully self-contained campervans and motorhomes. Caravan owners are more likely to have to use commercial parks with all their conveniences, and regulations.

The work we have done on fitting out the interior of the van has been justified in spades. We could live aboard indefinitely, if we had to. However, we do plan to boost the electrical capacity, because of more 12V gadgets and heavy use of the fridge and sometimes the diesel heater, both on battery power. We did spend more time than we had anticipated at sites with 240V mains access to run a fan heater for cold nights.

The latest Fiat Ducato, the base vehicle, with a turbo diesel and 9-speed auto gearbox, drives like a car and can easily keep up with the traffic. Our overall fuel usage was 9.7 litres per 100 kilometres, which we thought was good.

When it comes to trip planning, Australia poses some difficulties, mostly through the climate. This year, our priority was to be in the far north for at least part of the country's winter. Once well above the Tropic of Capricorn most days were balmy, and it was pleasant to sit out or walk around in the afternoon's sun. But the evenings were – for us – too cool. And the nights were becoming far too cold for us even well before we crossed that line on our way south, which we had not forecast. In summer, of course, it is too hot in the far north, not to mention the likelihood of cyclones. So our future plans will tend to favour the shoulder seasons, and not try to take in northern and southern Australia in an equal go.

In summary, it was a terrific trip, with many places of great interest. We will long remember, in particular, Western Australia's Pilbara and Goldfield regions, without which Australia would not have been as prosperous as it is now.