

## TRAVELLING EASTERN AUSTRALIA BY CARAVAN 2019

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**Saturday 13 July**



After months getting the “new” caravan re-organised and all together with new wiring and battery management system, finally left home for points (hopefully) far north.

First stop was for our visit to the new home of Anita and Ron in Port Macquarie – a splendid place in a bushy location, birds swarming. A routine drive up, no problems following a minor adjustment to the caravan loading. Good catch-up session up in the evening.



**Sunday 14 July**



Morning walk along the very attractive town waterfront. Lots of people out on this cool, very windy but sunny day. The Hastings river bar, at late outgoing tide, was very rough, although a whale-watching catamaran did make it out. Must have been a pretty uncomfortable ride. Lovely stretches of beach each side of the entrance, and we walked through some of the dunes.

Good lunch at a café by the small marina, then in the afternoon to the famous koala sanctuary. A terrific visit, with some good view of koalas in rehab and joeys climbing the massive eucalypts. Then walked through the adjacent historic Roto House, built in 1890 for a 75 acre family property, and one of the few surviving 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden (mahogany) buildings in the town.





On Monday, After much planning and doubts about busy camp sites (“caravan parks” as known in Australia), booked a place for two nights at the Iluka Riverside Tourist Park. Then another pretty routine run along the freeway north, bypassing Kempsey, Coffs Harbour and Grafton before the deviation through national park rainforest to Iluka at the entrance to the Clarence River.

Fluked a very good position overlooking the river – obviously the two days were simply between stays by long-timers, which most of the campers were, along with a heavy concentration of permanents in “mobile” homes.



It was a good place to reverse park into a site for the first time (successfully), and start using the caravan’s services also for the first time. But all went well. The west wind along the river was very cold, although the sun was bright, and we were glad that at the last moment we had bought a little fan heater. Worked a treat.

### **Tuesday 16 July**

The camp facilities were obviously pretty new and very good, as we continued the settling-in process. We took a morning walk along the riverside to the small marina and fishing-boat docks – now much smaller than they would have been a few years ago. The fish at the co-op were nothing to write home about, and the fishermen had mostly not ventured out because of the strong wind. (Which we learnt on the news had overturned a catamaran off Stockton Beach after unwisely coming out from Port Stephens in clearly forecast conditions and losing a couple of the crew.)

During the day rabbits were pottering around the place. The wind gradually lessened, and it got nicely warm in the sun before a pretty sunset.



### Wednesday 17 July

After more planning, not yet sure on how far we should plan to drive each day and how far we could expect to get with the van, decided again to make a booking because a suitable destination, Tin Can Bay, was bound to be busy – and, indeed, could offer us only one night's stay. Again, though, not a particularly notable drive and a bit too long, continuing along the main Pacific Highway past the Gold Coast, Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast. Lots of roadworks, the long-awaited Pacific Highway upgrading.

Came to the Tin Can Bay Tourist Park and took a short walk down to the shores of the bay – expanses of muddy sand at low tide. But it was quite a well-remembered scene from our sailing days, and we took a photo that duplicated one taken during our voyage down the coast in 2003. Took a drive round the town to get some beers, fruit and veg – a typically pleasant, simple coastal village.

For the first time, did not need the heater in the evening.



### Thursday 18 July



But still very cold in the morning! Did a shop in the very good IGA supermarket then off north again, this time making no booking. Still plugging up the highway, a rest stop lunch was made interesting by the notable presence of an emu. The bird was clearly a resident of the location, and could be hand fed (pretty much anything) by visitors.

The highway by now became an ordinary two-way road most of the way, but we then left the main drag south of Bundaberg, which we bypassed and continued up the Tableland road just in from the coast. This finally took us to near Agnes Water and the gateway to the Horizons Kangaroo Sanctuary.

A sign there said that there was a “kangaroo experience” during the afternoon, but made no mention of a camping area. But recent comments on WikiCamps, the camping guide on which we relied almost exclusively, implied that we could camp there, so we plugged up a steep hill until camper vehicles came into sight. As did the proprietor, Garry, who muttered something about not taking caravans (confirmed by a later look at the facility's web site, which warned that it was not suitable for caravans because of its very steep approach). But he ushered us into a perfectly acceptable site, next to another caravan.



So there we were on top of a hill, with great views overlooking heavily wooded plains to the east and the sea at the small town of Seventeen Seventy, and more hilly woodland to the west. We then walked up to Garry's daily lecture and demonstration of his and Denise's work with kangaroos, centred on the rehabilitation of orphaned joeys. The sanctuary around their house is fenced, but otherwise the property is not, so plenty of "wild" kangaroos and their joeys are happy to attend the lecture and be fed (sweet potato only). Garry has, to say the least, some unorthodox views on humankind, their future, their feeding and life skills, and probably on kangaroos as well. But his actual care of the animals is relatively mainstream and they sure looked well. Lots of visitors, including campers, enjoyed the presentation.

Most of the campers, it turned out, were youngsters in rental motorhomes and campervans, so it seems that the sanctuary is on some kind of list or Facebook page for such travellers.

#### **Friday 19 July**

Calm and peaceful night, sunny morning. A quiet, non-driving day for a change. We've done over 1,500 kilometres so far. After some sorting out in the morning, we simply sat out in the sun reading for most of the afternoon. Very pleasant. Watched the latter part of Garry's presentation again.

#### **Saturday 20 July**

Slightly more active this morning. Disconnected the car and drove up through Agnes Water to Seventeen Seventy, at the north end of the peninsula on which we are camped at the very top of the aforementioned steep little hill.

Along the west side of the peninsula rides Bustard Bay, which extends southwards as a channel separated from the other side by a long sand bank. In the channel lies a small marina and several moorings, and across on the other side is the Eurimbula National Park.



On 24 May 1770 Lieutenant James Cook anchored at the northern end of the Bustard Bay channel, just inside the bar, and came ashore for the second time in Australia. An obelisque and plaque ashore commemorate the occasion.

It's a very beautiful little part of the world, and we took several short walks along different parts of the shoreline. On the eastern side of the peninsula there is a long surf beach, which this morning was exposed to a cool south-easter, a typically building trade wind. This was discouraging any surfers, apart from a kite-surfer riding the whitecaps.

Stopped on the way back at the shopping centre in Agnes Water. The FoodWorks supermarket was excellent, and we did yet more stocking up for the next few days.

A bit cool for sitting out in the afternoon, but did so for a while, with a short chat with Garry before campers started coming in. The predominance of young Europeans was interesting, and we did note that there were several backpackers' lodgings in Agnes Water.

### **Sunday 21 July**



After some more kangaroo-watching in the early morning, rather a reluctant getaway from this interesting and engaging place. These followed a not very memorable transit drive further up the Bruce Highway, bypassing Gladstone and up to Gracemere, just south of Rockhampton. The Gracemere Caravan Park was nothing to write home about, but acceptable, and we scored a good location under palm trees.

### **Monday 22 July**

A good touring day. After Norma took some ibis photos near the van – this is a wetland area – we set off to the tourist office on the way into town, passing a couple of the bull statues that represent Rockhampton's status as the heart of the Queensland beef country. Outside the tourist centre was a structure defining one of the notable features of where we were: right on the tropic of Capricorn, at 23°27'30". So we were stepping back into the tropics after a long time. Not that you'd know from the weather, with nights still cold and the days with a cool wind.



The man in the office was helpful, and he advised us to take the circular route we had already decided on, supplying us with supporting literature and local maps. He wasn't interested in the neo-Gothic cathedral which we had noticed yesterday, but on the visit we then made we thought it was a very pleasantly imposing sandstone church with due deference to the grand medieval cathedrals of Europe. It had some lovely stained glass windows and a graceful inverted boat-shaped roof to the nave.

From there we drove out to the coast and the village of Emu Park and its rocky shoreline backing some stretches of sandy beach. A most notable feature was an absolutely splendid WW1 memorial park laid out along a stretch of the headland. There were some marvellous interpretative artworks based on Frank Hurley's photographs, and more photographs of Australian soldiers and frontline nurses.







At the far end of the war memorial was the Singing Ship, a large white sculpture built as a bicentenary memorial in 1980. What look like sailing ship's rigging wires are tubes with holes like a flute, and even in the light wind we were experiencing they were emitting a delightful and tuneful tone.

From there we drove a little further up a coastal road towards Yeppoon, and made a stop at Rosslyn Bay marina. We pulled in there during our passage-making down the coast from the Whitsundays in 2003. Very little had changed, and we enjoyed a good lunch at the harbour-front restaurant there.



A little further up the coast there is a little cove called Wreck Point because of the curious case of an unmanned sailing ship that went ashore on the beach in October 1848. The vessel Selina had departed Brisbane for Sydney in July 1847 but failed to arrive, and was next seen on this beach 15 months later with no one aboard. An attempt was made to salvage her, but she later sank in Keppel Bay. An architectural simile of the wreck sits above the point.



We completed the circuit by driving back to Rockhampton, and taking a deviation up a steep but well-maintained road to the top of Mount Archer, which dominates the eastern part of the town. It is a national park, and has been set out with walking tracks and some new and impressive lookout points. There are good views all around the area, including inland plains scattered with lumpy little hills of (we assume) of volcanic origin. The impressive Fitzroy River snakes its way round the town on its final stretch to the sea.



## Tuesday 23 July

Back on the road again, leaving about 10:00 am and arriving about 4:00 pm – long enough on the road, including lunch and fuel stops, we thought. And the road itself for this stretch became more and more poorly surfaced and bumpy, and we faced several delays through the authorities' current efforts to bring it up to the standard that can justify its status as a national highway. We passed a few signs leading to Shoalwater Bay, where there was currently a major international military exercise under way. We had heard warplanes overhead in the morning.

We took a lunch break at an excellent camping ground (as opposed to a holiday, tourist or caravan park – we are still getting used to the nomenclature, which is different from Europe!). Much cheaper than what we still call a “camp site”, with lots of open space, reminiscent of the French “aire” and its like in Europe. We will make more use of these once we get more settled in.

We were squarely in sugarcane country by this time, and the farmers were in the process of harvesting. Sugar-trains ran along and across the road, looking just like those in Fiji. The mills were belching white smoke, we presumed steam, and the fields are no longer being burnt once harvested. The mulch is left to help the next crop along, and in one field we clearly saw the new cane shoots among the decaying mulch. Ranges of hills backed the fields along the horizon.



Our destination was Mackay, and a camp site in the suburb of Mackay Harbour, the Mackay Marine Tourist Park. This looked pretty good, and we were allocated a largish pitch at the end of a row. All the pitches are angled, which seems to mellow the look of regimentation when they are all lined up in right-angles.

We took a short late-evening walk down to the wetland area right beside the park, and spent a while watching the multitude of seabirds on and around the lagoon and streams. Later, we enjoyed listening to some live music, a weekly event here. This time the artist was singer/instrumentalist Simon Busman, with a delightful folksy voice, and we bought one of his CDs.

### Wednesday 24 July



Took a trip out to the Mackay marina, where we entered back to Australia after our passage from Vanuatu and spent a few days. We drove out to the end of the massive breakwater, noting that there were many vacant berths throughout the marina. We don't know why – cyclone worries, too expensive, too far from the Whitsundays? Who knows. Walking along the line-up of apartments on the shore, we saw that they seemed very expensive (around \$600K) for what they were.

Drove back into Mackay itself, and came to an excellent Coles in a shopping centre on the outskirts. Did more stocking up than anticipated.

Quiet afternoon in the sun, and we decided to stay another day in this good site, the best of the trip so far. An ibis and several ducks wandered round the van.

The day's exercise was for the first time rolling out the awning. No doubt we'll get used to it, and the bits and pieces will become easier to slide, but it does seem to be an unnecessarily complicated and hefty piece of equipment compared to the Fiamma awning we had on the camper.

## Thursday 25 July

Cool overnight and first thing in the morning, with a very heavy dew. But it soon warmed up, as Norma did some washing. We had extended our stay here a day, because it was such a pleasant place, and so just spent the time relaxing in the sun and reading. A good day for settling down.

## Friday 26 July



Off on the road again, but not a very long drive up the coast to Airlie Beach, a visit mainly for old times' sake. The countryside was still fairly flat, with the mountain ranges alongside inland of the cane fields. Some amazing Brahmin cattle gazed at us in an inquiring way as we passed them on our way to Hideaway Bay Caravan Park, from where we drove back in to Airlie Beach.

Airlie Beach had not changed much from our time in 2003, although the waterfront has been tidied up, with some attractive walkways. The main street was even more touristy, with lines of cafes and tourist offices and agents offering rental stays and vehicles.

There were plenty of yachts in the main anchorage. Just the east, a channel has been cut through the shallows and mangroves to a new boat harbour, which is now the main port for tourist boats and a marina with berths for lease. Shute Harbour is now therefore quieter, and the waters there are now covered with moorings rather than offering an anchorage. It was not clear whether the same applies for the anchorage off Airlie Beach township. But all was looking very pretty in the sun over blue waters.



Back near the camp site we drove up to Hideaway Beach the tip of the peninsula, and from the shingly beach we could see some of the amazing conical islands well offshore which – we assumed – had no anchorages for yachts.

## Saturday 27 July

Pressing on up north, our first town for the day was Bowen, a centre for fruit and vegetable growing and cattle grazing. It is known (according to the tourist literature) as the “mural capital of the mainland”, but we only saw a few on our way through, with the most impressive being the big water tank on the top of a hill with a huge painting of a whale breaching off a lighthouse point.



We bypassed Townsville on our way to our first free-camping spot, the popular but large Bushy Parker Park, just north of Rollingstone. This was a really good stop, and it would have been easy to decide to stay longer. A short walk down from the camping area took us down to a very pretty creek, which in places had been dammed to create pools for swimming. A pleasant couple from Warriewood (!) had swum there, but Norma said it was too cool even for her. This was the kind of camping we were looking for, but we had to keep moving at this point.



## Sunday 28 July



It was a shortish drive up to Cairns, but overnight the weather had changed, with rain clouds hovering over the ranges to the west. We passed along the Hinchinbrook Channel that separated us from the island, which was also shrouded by clouds as we looked over to it from a lookout point. We dropped a few coins in a box for some excellent bananas. These were sold from a roadside stall amid the banana fields with the fruit wrapped in coloured covers. The leaves of the plants were chopped down and lying in a shambolic way among the colourful plastic that made the fields look like third-world slums!

Approaching the city, we could see up to the west the Atherton Tablelands, cloudy again, with sheets of rain moving over them.



Booking a camp site in Cairns at short notice had been difficult, but the Cool Waters Holiday Park said that they could “squeeze us

in” for a few nights. We were helped to squeeze in to a very small pitch among some long-termers, where it felt a bit claustrophobic. But we had arranged to catch up in Cairns with our good friends Jill and Col Haste, so we soon drove up to their apartment at Trinity Beach and enjoyed much talk about touring before and during dinner cooked by Col.

## Monday 29 July

Col and Jill came for a morning visit, and we had coffee with them at the site café. We might have been a bit ungenerous with our first impressions of the site, because Norma found later in the morning that the main part of the park was lovely. But at this time of the year, passing visitors can’t be choosers.



In the afternoon we took a run into Cairns for a look around. We parked by the yacht club, and walked around the wharves and marina. It’s a pleasant enough precinct, and there’s been a fair bit of development since our short visit here in 2002.

We particularly liked the way the city fathers have managed the vast mud flats that extend out from the centre of the town into the river where it meets the sea. A large part of it has been turned into a grassy park featuring a very pleasant shallow swimming area, which to the eye of faith could look like a beach. There were hundreds of locals and tourists enjoying the pleasant, sunny weather.

## Tuesday 30 July

We extracted ourselves from our tight little pitch, and set out on the road again. Just up the road we did a major stock up at the Woolworths in a big shopping centre, and immediately thereafter climbed the steep, winding road up into the Atherton Tablelands.

The first would-be stop was at the touristy village of Kuranda, but it was thrumming with people and there was nowhere to stop with a caravan. So we pressed on down the Kennedy Highway (aka National Route 1, the Savannah Way etc), a good and quite quiet road heading across the northern part of the Tableland plateau to Mareeba. We bypassed the centre and took a minor road out to the bush camp we had chosen with the help of our WikiCamps guide, Mareeba Bush Stays.

This is a vast camping area, with the only facilities being a solar-heated shower and a drop toilet. Just what we had been looking for! We chose a place near the northern end of the hilltop camp, with expansive views to both east and west, and settled in. In the evening, after a peaceful afternoon reading in the sun, we watched the sun setting orange in the west.



## Wednesday 31 July

The next morning, after a silent and very dark night, we drove into the town of Mareeba. The town services an intensive local agricultural industry, including all tropical fruits, coffee, tea and even wine - mango wine! Its population is multicultural, following waves of immigration during the several periods of its history.



Mareeba has an excellent tourist office and local heritage museum, in which we spent a long time wandering around its various displays. This really the only place to visit in the town, but it is one of the best of its kind we have seen.

Its original emergence goes back to the gold-mining days, which of course brought substantial settlement, but a major part of its history and well displayed in the museum was its important part in the Australian tobacco industry. (Interestingly, this is hardly mentioned at all in the tourist hand-out literature – too politically incorrect, I suppose. As were the several golliwogs shown as children’s toys in settler times.)

The North Queensland tobacco industry was born in the early days of the Great Depression, and its survival and success was down to the Australian, English, Italian, Albanian, Croatian, Serb, Spanish and others who set their hands to this difficult but remunerative crop. In 1932 huge tracts of land were offered by government for tobacco farmland. A big enamel sign proudly proclaimed “Tobacco Powered our Economy & Ruled our Lives for 75 Years”, and during this time the region was the largest tobacco-

growing area in Australia. Support for the industry began to wane in the 1980s, and by 2002 it was gone.



There was much else of interest, including an example of a rail ambulance wagon, one of those that ran pending the development of decent roads and finally the emergence of the flying doctor service. Timber was a big industry, and there was some marvellous old wood-mill machinery, including an immense planer of inconceivable mass. There were other displays of dairy farming, household goods, and war histories featuring local men.

Back at the van we had another peaceful day, hot in the sun but cool – too cool – when the easterly trade wind blew over the plateau and the sun was blotted out by the tropical cumulus.

#### Thursday 1 August

Stayed put for a quiet day at this excellent site – excellence moderated, however, by its exposure to a cool and gusty south-easterly wind. Still, sat out in the sun for a good part of it.

#### Friday 2 August



Off to the south along the Atherton Tablelands, and the first blight on an attractive landscape was a vast range of windmills along a line of hills in one of Australia's prime scenic areas. As we drove higher and higher we encountered a lot of misty rain, with the surrounding hilltops in the cloud base. The fields were heavily cultivated with all kinds of fruit trees, especially bananas. What with the showers and the rolling green countryside – these are the “wet tropics, after all – the scenery looked quite English!

Our first stop was to visit a strange volcanic crater in the Mount Hypipamee National Park, south of Atherton. This sits in a classic rain forest, where signs along the walkway warn visitors that cassowaries are around and can be dangerous. We didn't see any, though. The crater itself was extraordinary. The whole area has a volcanic history, and the vertical tube was formed by a violent gaseous explosion that blasted this deep hole in the earth. The rocky walls of what now is a crater extend about 60 metres down from a viewpoint halfway up, and the depth of the water in the crater is about 70 metres. The water is covered by a weed that supports a form of freshwater shrimp not found elsewhere. A river runs through the adjacent rocky valley in this once violently disrupted landscape.

This was a pleasant walk in a cool light drizzle, and we continued on down to Ravenshoe, the highest town in Queensland. Inevitably, the highest point around it – Windy Hill – is topped by more windmills.

We took a short – one kilometre – detour off the main road to see the Millstream waterfall in the





Millstream Valley. This is supposed to be the widest single drop waterfall in Australia, and looked very attractive in the recovering sun. The walk down to the viewing spot was quite steep, but both of us managed it fine. Not so fine was the appalling – albeit short – drive out again, along a potholed stretch of gravel that only allowed about 5-6 km/h. It caught us a bit unawares going in, during which Norma's herb bottles all ended up on the floor, along with other disruption. We are hoping there's not going to be too much of that in the future up here!



We had lunch in the car park and drove on to Undara, with the road lined by thousands of termite hills, many looking like elephants and other heavy-bodied creatures.

It was an easy drive in along a minor road to the Undara site, where we checked in and were allocated a reasonable spot in what is really just an expensive bush camp. The van next to us soon lit up their camp fire, which seems to be an obsession with many campers in Australia. Cool again as the sun went down.

### **Saturday 3 August**

A quiet morning before the outing in the afternoon that was the main reason for our being here. This was the tour of the Undara Lava Tubes. They lie in the centre of a very wide field of volcanic activity some 150,000 years ago, and their access is within land settled by the Collins family in 1862. In 1990 they formed a partnership with the Undara Volcanic National Park and created Undara Experience to manage public access and tourism as a private company as a gateway to public land.

Access to the lava tubes is only by tours organised by the company, and they do it well. Our young tour guide was well informed and cheerfully affable without being condescending. The widespread volcanic rumblings had caused relatively few eruptions high into the air, but rather resulted in the deposit of jumbles of granite and basalt that we could see everywhere in association with just a few low craters. Most of the volcanic lava, meanwhile, flowed underground over a layer of granite creating tunnels throughout the cooling basalt – the lava tubes. The tubes in this volcanic field are among the most extensive and long as any in the world.

Where visitors are taken, down long flights of stairs, is first to open-air longitudinal cavities now colonised with energetic and very healthy vines. In these stretches, the roof of the tunnel has collapsed and become part of the base. Further in, the roofs closed in as we walked on, with marvellous patterns in the rocks where the cooling basalt layers had dropped away.

In the longest tubes to be visited, the blackness became absolute (without a torch) and there was, we were told, the potential for a dangerously high proportion of carbon monoxide in the air. We were also told that this was the reason that the tubes have never been favoured by the aboriginal people for their use for dwellings or otherwise. The current occupiers are primarily microbats, and we saw one or two. There are countless numbers in other parts, where they are hunted by snakes.



On the bus back to the centre, the guide pointed out that on one side of the road there had been obvious hazard-reduction burning, and on the other side the grass was tall but very dry. The back-burning is cyclical on a matrix plan and, he said, good for the animals. The fires were small enough and well-controlled enough to allow most creatures to escape. Afterwards, the regrowth was green and healthy, and we could see for ourselves how the kangaroos and wallaroos were enjoying it.

It was all very fascinating and a very worth-while visit. We stayed on for the second night.

### Sunday 4 August



Good clean-up, then on our way again across the vast savannah plains with their light coverage of eucalypt as far as the eye could see. This is the Gulf Development Road, more popularly known as part of the Savannah Way. On the map, this enormous area in the southern part of Cape York is a mesh of small waterways, all dry now, draining into the major rivers including the Gilbert and the Einasleigh. Signposts along the road point to multiple localities, mostly if not all cattle stations.

The development roads, as they are known, grew originally from the unsealed roads servicing the small towns, mines, settlements and properties. As traffic grew in numbers and size, the centre part of many of these basic roads were “developed” to better accommodate cars and heavy trucks. Along this route, we were encountering many kilometres of these partially sealed roads where, if you encounter an oncoming vehicle the procedure is to drop your nearside wheels into the gravel on the left. This requires, at times, serious challenges to one’s driving skills! The locals are all used to it and to the thick clouds of dust that are thrown up.

In parts along the way the roads are sealed all across their width, which is a great relief when you come to them.

The first town we came to was Georgetown, an uninspiring little place where we needed to stop for fuel and basic supplies. The grocery was also the fuel station, resulting in crowding and confusion both at the pumps and in the shop. A young woman stocking up just before us spent nearly \$900 on her supplies, presumably for an extended period at some outstation. The prices, Norma reckoned, were in the order of double those in Sydney.

We had lunch along the way by a lonely old chimney, the last relic of the Cumberland Mine, the largest and most successful of the gold mines in this, the Etheridge field. It was highly mechanised for the time, and became the centre of the new township of Cumberland. A dam was built to supply water, and is still there as an attractive part of the scene, partly covered by waterlilies. But there’s nothing else, the township and the machinery declined and disappeared when the gold ran out in the late 1800s.

Long the road we again saw countless termite mounds. However, these were quite different from the elephantine structures we had observed before, all being much smaller, pyramidal and spiky-topped, as numerous as the trees in a forest. Among them grazed the cattle.





In the early afternoon we thought we'd had enough driving, and stopped at a parking and rest area by a long road bridge on the western side of the Gilbert River. This is a big space, with only a handful of vans there, and we set up in a peaceful place under some trees. A short walk down to the river showed it almost completely dry, with only a few pools remaining. A few months ago it was flooding up to four metres above the road bridge, in the late stages of the notorious – but transformative – “wet”.



The hot sun was welcome, and although the persistent easterly wind was still blowing, it was not so unseasonably cold.

### **Monday 5 August**

It was a quiet night, and much warmer than we had been experiencing. It seems that few of the very heavy trucks run overnight and we are a fair way from the road. We were woken by the sound of nuts and berries falling on the roof of the van, having been picked off by a variety of colourful birds such as the red-winged parrot and the olive-backed oriole. Other birds included groups of raptors circling, looking for prey. There were lots of attractive – but completely unknown to us – flowers in the nearby bushland. A kangaroo lolloped through the bushland beside us.

While very dusty, this was a great place to stop and we decided to stay another night.

### **Tuesday 6 August**

Back on the Savannah Way, still the Gulf Developmental Road, the driving became easier because it was very quiet – just a few road trains going the other way, mostly carrying cattle, probably for export to Malaysia or Indonesia.

We took a stop at Croydon, which was a great little place to visit. It is known as the heritage capital of the gulf, and was once the third largest town in north Queensland with a peak of 10,000 souls. It was established in 1885 to service a goldfield that extended for 18 km and produced nearly 24 tonnes of gold over 35 years. Silver, lead and tin were also mined here. The gold rush attracted thousands of Chinese immigrants to the region as a whole, who contributed in a major way to the industry but – as is now recognised – were rarely given any credit for their hard work and diligence.

Presently, the town and the area is fundamentally dependent on the beef industry, for domestic sale and export through Karumba to Indonesia and Malaysia. Tourism is already a major contributor – we would suspect strongly supported by caravans and motorhomes, and there is still some mining activity in the hopes of further finds.



The visitors' centre has a good little museum with mining equipment, a very rusty steam engine, road vehicles and the chassis of old railway locomotives (under restoration!). There were some nice animal sculptures in metal scattered around the green lawns.

The town has restored and maintained an excellent heritage precinct, comprising a whole block. The buildings include the town hall, the former courthouse and police station (with lockup), and the police sergeant's residence. All were beautifully presented, with lots of explanatory panels.

In Normanton, further along the road, we presented ourselves at the tourist office, used the internet to tell a few people that all was going well, and obtained a permit to stay for two nights at a free camping area alongside the Norman River. This turned out to be a vast space, with only a handful of vans well spread apart, and suited us well.



### Wednesday 7 August

The choice of route from Normanton is between continuing along the Savannah Way, or cutting south on the Burke Developmental Road. We chose the latter because from here on the Savannah Way has about 1,000 kilometres of unsealed or partly sealed road on its way towards the Stuart Highway and Darwin, whereas we would be assured of sealed roads, albeit on a much longer route. This turned out to be a good choice for another reason.



So, down the Burke we went, heading for Cloncurry. At about 1:30 pm, we went over a cattle grid and felt something wrong, then after a while, "bang"! The nearside tyre had delaminated and exploded. We pulled off and replaced the blowout with the spare, ably assisted by a friendly aboriginal council worker who stopped to offer help very soon after we came to need it.

On then to the Burke and Wills roadhouse, where we fuelled up. We realised that we would be able to get another tyre at Cloncurry. However, soon afterwards, nearly 60 kilometres north of the town, another bang told us that the other tyre had also blown. This was more awkward, because it was nearly 5:00 pm and daytime was running out, and also because we could only just get off the road at all, which made it a hazardous position. And, of course, without another spare we were completely immobilised.

In these outback areas, if it looks like you need help, someone will soon come and offer it. This time it was two young men, electricity workers from a local mine. Fortunately, I had taken out premium NRMA national breakdown cover just before leaving, so we decided to call for help – we would need a tow truck. But the only reliable mobile phone service in these parts is Telstra, and we have Optus. So the guys managed to call RACQ, which acts for NRMA in Queensland, who told us they would organise a tow. But they couldn't call us back to confirm they had done this, and so while waiting, after the men had gone, we were getting worried that we would have to spend the night by ourselves by the side of a near-deserted road.

But a couple of hours or so later a tilt truck driven another cheerful local emerged from the dark, disconnected and hoisted the van up, and led us down to Cloncurry. There, he took us straight to the Cloncurry Oasis caravan park, where the friendly lady manager was not at all surprised to see us! The towie took us to the "usual" area for the wounded and deposited the van in what turned out



to be a good position.

Another camper soon came to say that he was aiming to pick up a tyre from the local tyre service place first thing in the morning, and he would show us the way.

### **Thursday 8 August**

So, after a good night, we drove to Cloncurry Tyres with the two blown-out examples on their (fortunately undamaged) wheels. Cloncurry Tyres, about 5 km out of town, turned out to be a massive place, the man confirmed that he had masses of tyres that would replace our wrecks, and we could pick them up later – which we did after lunch.

By this time, and confirmed over the next couple of days, it was clear that tyre servicing and replacement is a major source of employment in this neck of the woods. The Cloncurry Tyres truck was coming and going at regular intervals, and on one occasion stopped by us because he thought we were a different set of campers who had already called for help! So we didn't feel quite so bad about two tyres going bang one right after the other, because it happens a lot in the outback. In our case, the fundamental reason was probably that our tyres were the van's originals, looking good in all respects because they had had so little use, but were probably unsuited for heavy duty and were time-expired anyway. All lessons learnt.

While waiting we went for a look around the very attractive town of Cloncurry, starting with its main attraction, the John Flynn Place Museum. This commemorates the life and achievements of the Reverend John Flynn and the beginnings of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Cloncurry became the birthplace of the RFDS, which began as the Aerial Medical Service in 1928. The town already had an aerodrome and a hospital, and was seen by Flynn as the centre of the outback. Qantas was also conceived in Cloncurry, and supplied an aircraft called the Victory, a modified De Havilland DH50A biplane. The modifications allowed a patient to lie on a stretcher, closed in by windows, just in front of the pilot.

Flynn also, with the essential assistance of Alfred Traegar, developed the pedal-generator-powered radio sets for communication between stations, doctors and RFDS base stations, of which Cloncurry was the first. All this and much more details are well displayed and explained, and very interesting. The current \$20 note pictures Flynn along with aspects of his work, including the Victory, an outback padre, the pedal generator and the body chart used for remote diagnosis.



An art gallery within the museum displays some lovely paintings of early Cloncurry.

Another problem soon emerged after we returned with the new tyres on our wheels: the exploding and thrashing steel-belted laminates had done a fair bit of damage to the wheel arches, which are made of pretty thin fibreglass. So, along to Mitre 10 in town for the requisite stuff, and some substantial reconstruction of the wheel arches on site the next day.

## Friday 9 August

Fibreglass work was the order of the day, and this committed us to a third night here to ensure a full cure. But everything seemed to go OK.

We then looked further at Cloncurry, firstly at the rebuilt but looking sort of period old buildings now holding the pub, Mitre 10 and other businesses. The post office looked genuine, and we were served by a lovely lady who had owned a property in the Hunter but fell in love with this place and stayed.

And then – as ever, in these places – to the visitor centre. This was another excellent example of its kind, looking over sloping lawns scattered with ancient (by Australian standards) agricultural and mining equipment. And a road ambulance converted to a rail ambulance – these vehicles fascinate me. The centre featured the part played by Cloncurry in the development of the uranium mining industry, and in particular the Mary Kathleen mine, close by on the way to Mount Isa. The initial discovery of uranium was in 1954, and the open-cut mine had an on-and-off again history depending on the world price for uranium until it was closed in 1982. A big sign of the period propounded “Australian Uranium – a Future Fuel”. Half right, half wrong.

Burke and Wills came very close to where the town of Cloncurry would be established, when nearing the northernmost point of their epic but ultimately tragic first ever crossing of Australia from south to north in 1860-61. In January 1961 they had great difficulty coping with the Selwyn ranges, where the Mary Kathleen and Mount Isa mines would be established a hundred years later. Burke wrote: *“at last through – the camels bleeding, sweating and groaning”*. He named a nearby river “Cloncurry”, after his friend the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Cloncurry in Ireland.

## Saturday 10 August



After an interesting and busy stay at a site absolutely fit for the purposes we required, off again, but this time to the west along the Barkly Highway. The good quality road started rising slowly, past masses of rocky crags, hardly the Alps but a refreshing change from flat countryside. Deep in the craggy land just to the north of us lay the old uranium mining town of Mary Kathleen, but the ruins are only accessible with heavy-duty four-wheel-drive, unfortunately. Soon afterwards we came to Mount Isa, with several mines still working. Two huge chimneys

towered over the place as we approached, and the town itself, quite large and busy, looked like any other mining town.

We stopped for lunch at a rest area, where we saw an unusual sight: an enormous fifth-wheel caravan, on three axles, being towed by a truck prime mover! On the UHF, a little while later, we heard someone commenting on the same unusual *equipe*. Norma takes pictures of unusual setups and rigs, so photographed this one for the collection.

The road flattened out as we reached the plateau of the Barkly Tablelands, with nothing much of interest to see but acres and acres of small, dark brown termite pyramids. We fuelled up at Camooweal – you fuel up when you can, in some of these parts – where the only item of interest was a statue of a stupid kangaroo. Some of the small roadside buildings did look truly period in nature.





Then we crossed the border into the Northern Territory, and adjusted the clocks back half an hour. The land became flat and absolutely featureless until we came to the rest area at Avon Downs. This was a good place to stop, quite popular, but snuck into a good space between small trees.

The Barkly Tablelands are known as drover country. A plaque where we parked described how the Avon Downs station was established in 1882 by Thomas Guthrie, a grazier from Victoria. Later in the year 11,000 sheep left Rich Avon, in north-west Victoria. Sixteen months and 3,500 kilometres later, drover William Caldwell and his men arrived at Avon Downs, along with 4,000 sheep. The drive was the longest sheep droving enterprise in Australian history.



### **Sunday 11 August**

It was out-and-out cold first thing in the morning, at about 13 degrees in the van. The cold wind, that has been with us for a while and comes up from the currently freezing south, persisted. But we were away in good time, along with several others, for another long drive – but, like those earlier, not boring albeit a bit monotonous, if that makes sense. The traffic along the Barkly remained light and the surface generally very good. We fuelled at the well-known Barkly Homestead Roadhouse, a posh operation by the area's standards and pressed on to another well-known landmark, the Three Ways intersection between the north-south Stuart Highway and the east-west Barkly. We turned right, naturally.



Flat, scrubby country was alongside for a while, some of it having been subject to skilful burning that was confined to the tops of the scrub and encouraging the green shoots at ground level, a technique we had seen before. The termite mounds appeared entirely unaffected. The deserty stretches were generally fiercely stony, and we talked about the tribulations faced by early explorers walking across thousands of kilometres on this kind of footing. A few rocky outcrops appeared as we approached Renner Springs, where we fuelled – and then returned to for the night, having looked at and rapidly dismissed a potential free camp just up the road because there was no-one else there and we weren't going to spend the night by ourselves in a gravel pit.

We negotiated an excellent position without power right by an attractive freshwater pool, the main home for three geese with whom Norma soon became firm friends.

By this time the weather had settled, the wind eased, and the temperature in the comfortable high 20s.

### **Monday 12 August**

Such a good place that we decided last night to stay on for another day. Which again started on the very cold side, at about 13 degrees with a piercing southerly wind that was powerfully turning the windmill water pump across the pretty pond from us. Overhead, however, the cloudless sky stayed calmly blue, and it warmed up in the sun even while the wind continued until mid-afternoon.



We saw a lot more of the three geese, which sort of adopted us because we were probably in one of their prime resting spots. Later, we were visited by a pair of peacocks, and chickens wandered around the (rather worn) facilities.

We heard from a late arrival that the free camping place we had rejected last night eventually had many vans parked there. But we rejoiced in the decision that had brought us back to Renner Springs instead.

## Tuesday 13 August



Usual cool morning, but little wind to start with, and a good getaway at about 8:15. The morning's run was just a simple slog up the 130 km/h-limited Stuart Highway, with straight roads disappearing at the horizon as the edges approached infinity. The only interest was being held up for a while by one of the biggest "things" we have ever seen being hauled on a truck – or, rather, two trucks because there were two things, which were probably buckets for enormous mining diggers. Their width took up pretty much the whole of the road. They were actually going at a reasonable speed, around 87 km/h, so we were happy just to sit behind them for a while. It would have been impossible for us to pass anyway, although a small vehicle did squeeze by on a wider stretch. The rear escort car called us on the UHF, but my handheld's batteries were dead and I couldn't respond.

After lunch, we stopped for fuel at Daly Waters, where the trucks were resting, so got past there. Then on up to Mataranka, where we turned right along a minor but surfaced road to the Jalmurark campground in the Elsey National Park. Quite a big area in the bush with big parking places, but a really confusing layout.

We took a walk around to have a closer look at the termite mounds on which we had been commenting the whole way in the top end, and then went down to see the Roper River. There was a small launching ramp there, but the waters were shallow and we could see rocks. There were warnings of crocodiles, but at this stage of the dry season there would not be any salt-water crocs this far up.

Not much else to see, really, apart from the typically scrubby native bushland of these parts. Some gum trees had been wound round with thick vines (?) in a way that looked like they were being throttled. Birdlife was few and far between.



## Wednesday 14 August

Up to Katherine for a major shopping stop in the morning. There's a large mall there with easy stopping and access for RVs of all kinds. We did a stock up at Woolworths, the usual shopping list. I then went on an expedition – after the alcohol shops opened for business at 2:00 pm – to search for a carton or two of wine. At the first of these, BWS, after showing and have copied my driving licence, I was admitted and told that I could buy one carton per person per day – but they didn't have any cartons anyway. At a drive-in close by, they did have a few in the back corner, but double the price of Sydney.

There were a lot of grumpy-looking aboriginal men and women lying around, Noumea style, and we do understand that efforts to curb alcohol use by some of these people is to be encouraged.

The afternoon's run took us up through the small settlements of Pine Creek, Hayes Creek and Adelaide River. We didn't stop, but at most of them there were brown signs pointing to sites that were of importance in WW2 but, according to the literature, there is nothing much to be seen now.

We had decided to visit the Litchfield National Park and to stay at the village of Batchelor, its gateway settlement, rather than go in and join the lottery for a park site. It was being reported that there was no chance of a site for a caravan after about 10:00 am. So we camped at the Batchelor Holiday Park, which turned out to be a good choice: low key, plenty of choice of a position and no officialdom, a bush camp with perfectly good facilities. We set up within a group of palm trees.



The owner feeds flocks of the local birds each evening, and entertained those who are not so used to interactions with birdlife by encouraging hundreds of rainbow lorikeets, corellas and cockies down for a feed.

#### Thursday 15 August

Birds were not the only "wild" life – in the morning we found a large cream-coloured rabbit comfortably ensconced underneath the car!

We unhitched the caravan and set off in the Volvo on a tour of the Litchfield National Park, one of the major sights in the Northern Territory. The first stop was at an immense grassy expanse on which there were countless "magnetic" termite mounds, aligned north-south to minimise their exposure to the sun at the hottest time of the day. They need to build above-ground because they cannot survive the soggy soils of the wet season.



The termites that arrange this alignment are found nowhere else on earth. By artificially altering the magnetic field round a building mound, scientists have found that the blind worker termites change their alignment from true north; in other words, they do use a magnetic sense to align the mounds. Wow.

Termite mounds are built by the worker termites, while the queen rests in the mid-centre of the base. At the beginning of the wet season reproductive termites called Alates grow wings and migrate to look for a mate; the vast majority, of course, become food for birds, reptiles, mammals and fish.

There are several waterways and waterfalls in the park, and the next stop was at the Florence Falls, a beautiful pair of streams seemingly emerging from the top of a cliff without being fed by a river. What happens is that in the wet season huge amounts of water are stored in underground cracks in the sandstone, while in the dry season it seeps out and feeds the streams and waterfalls. The sandy, scrubby





bush through which we walked was very similar to elsewhere we have been so far, but the high cliffs and escarpments are what make the park here something special.

Just downstream of the falls is the Buley Rockhole, a lovely little pool lying at the base of a series of small falls running down the escarpment. This is one of the pools where it is possible to swim here, and some visitors were doing so, but did comment on how cold it was! Some were just sitting in the pools further up. Many of the tourists were obviously from Europe and the East, again with a good few travelling in rented campervans and motorhomes.



We took a short detour down a gravel road to the Tabletop Swamp. On the way Norma was impressed by a line of bushes with attractive little pink flowers of a kind she had never seen. The swamp is noted for its birdlife, but in the middle of the day – as it was by that time, and we had lunch – there was not much action to be seen. There were several egrets, a heron and some ibis out there, though.



On then to the most famous sight in the park, the Wangi Falls. They lie in clefts in the sandstone landscape, and the water falls into a large pool that is a popular swimming place, being used as such by several people and groups. There wasn't as much water flowing as at the Florence falls, but the sight was still spectacular, with the cliffs forming most of a circle, or *cirque* in France. Lots of little insect-eating birds were flitting in and out of the trees for food. There are reportedly several kinds of fish and some turtles in the pool.

This was a good tour of a great little national park,

and we returned to the camp site for a peaceful afternoon and another night here.

## Friday 16 August

Quite warm overnight, for the first time on the whole trip, and hot and steamy in the morning. It was not a long run planned for the morning, on our way to Darwin, but an apparently serious problem arose on the way. We had been noticing a vibration at certain speeds, especially over minor corrugations on good roads – but they suddenly got much worse. In the course of pulling off the road to investigate, the tremors were felt strongly in the steering. Coming to rest and working the steering wheel brought an obvious “graunch”.

Looking underneath showed a lot of lubricant outboard of the boot for the left front CV joint. Getting away again with great caution everything seemed OK again, although we never got up to normal cruising speed before pulling in to our planned camp site at the Robbie Robbins Reserve, about 10 km out of town. We were allocated what the manager said was the only powered site left available.

A google search failed to come up with any Volvo dealers or mechanics, but a couple of addresses seemed worth investigating. We tried a small workshop that claimed to service any car, but it looked very uninspiring. Through asking at a Hyundai dealership we were directed to a workshop that claimed to specialise in repairs to European cars, A2Y Auto Repairs.

It did look promising, with the badges of all the Euro prestige cars (including Ferrari) over its doors. Yash Sharma, the owner, got another car off a hoist in order to take a look under the Volvo. Unfortunately (as it turned out) he disregarded my suggestion of a CV problem and diagnosed a wheel bearing failure, with the leaking fluid being from melted bearing grease. He set in place orders for parts (from “the south”) in the hope they would arrive Monday to allow work Tuesday. So, we left in some hope.



The camp site is just a ring of pitches all around some playing fields, and adjacent to a horsey facility. We had scored quite a good, wide spot in the (much-needed) shade of two big mahogany trees, both of which were magnificent, healthy specimens like many others round the fields. The main problem was that we were directly adjacent to the Stuart Highway, the main drag into Darwin, and we forecast correctly that there would be a lot of traffic noise. We were also in the flight path to the airfield, but all the other potential sites were too. Nevertheless we were obviously going to have to spend some time here, so resolved to put up with it all.

## Saturday 17 August

It was obvious that we were going to have to do some touring while stuck here, and the car seemed to be behaving itself when not towing, so in the morning we set off for the big city. On the way we visited the Charles Darwin National Park, just down the way, which was established to highlight the rich mangroves of Darwin Harbour. The city’s skyline was easily visible to the south-west across the mangroves lining the expanse of Frances Bay.





During WW2 the site was one of a network used as munitions depots. Several bunkers line the roadway through the park, and one of them houses displays depicting Darwin's role in the war. Port Darwin – encompassing



all the waterways and harbours – became highly important to the Australian and US forces once Japan entered the war, and this was equally clear to the Japanese. The first Japanese raid, from aircraft carriers, attacked Darwin on February 19 1942. On that date 242 Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin in two raids that left the town, the wharves and the RAAF station devastated. At least 253 people were killed and many more wounded. There were more than 50 further Japanese raids on Darwin on an almost daily basis between then and November 1943. By June 1942 Japanese forces had over-run most of the Dutch East Indies and New Guinea.



We then drove into the city, and after taking a look at the main commercial waterfront and the long Stokes Hill Wharf, parked in the centre and walked through the central Mall, which is much the same as in any other small city.

In the south-west corner of the city, ending in Emery Point, is the relatively new marina and residential precinct of Cullen Bay. As we hoped, there were several cafes and small restaurants there, but the only busy one was that we chose for a perfectly acceptable lunch at the edge of the water.

Enough for the day, so we returned to a hot afternoon reading and fiddling with the van.

### Sunday 18 August



The morning outing was to the Darwin Military Museum and Defence of Darwin Experience. This is on East Point; West Point is away on the other side of Port Darwin, on the Cox Peninsula. The East Point Reserve, a very attractive recreational area, is reached by driving up along Fannie Bay along a road lined on the inland side by the poshest houses we have seen here. Out in Fannie Bay were many anchored or moored yachts, looking miles from anywhere let along a dinghy landing. A high proportion were catamarans, confirming the shallowness of the anchorage.

The museum is located on one of the old WW2 defence installations, including a 9.2" gun that was never fired in anger. It is an example of one of the trendy "immersive" museums, with lots of interactive screens, voices and videos. Unfortunately, the main movie – with films of the actual bombing in 1942 – was out of action, and the various other exhibits were rather confusing and repetitive. Outside, there were some bits and pieces of field guns, vehicles, and the remains of a WW1 tank. The most interesting information was on the defences against



submarines, with electronic warning cables and a physical net and wire barrier across the whole entrance to the harbour, several kilometres from East Point to West Point.

Rather frustratingly, during all this driving around – although at never more than 80 km/h – there had been no vibration, sounds or signs of any other disorders of the front left axle. However, from what we had experienced and the leaking lubricants we could see, we did need to have it fixed!

### Monday 19 August



Outing for the morning, and indeed for the day, was to the Darwin Aviation Museum, until recently known as the Australian Aviation Heritage Centre, which sounds better really. This is really a great place. It was started by a group of aviation enthusiasts who salvaged the remains of planes and other relics salvaged after Cyclone Tracy in 1975. It grew into a museum facility that was opened to the public in 1988. Negotiations with the USAF and the NT government secured the loan of a Boeing B52 bomber and the finance to build a facility – a hangar, basically – to house it and the other aircraft and artefacts.



We much enjoyed a better (simpler) description and movie of the Darwin bombing that we had seen at the military museum, as well as the aircraft and the several explanatory plaques. The aircraft include a refurbished DH Dove – of great interest to Norma, who has served as a hostie on one – and a beautiful CA-27 Sabre under the looming shadow of the B52, a B25 Mitchell bomber recovered from a crash landing in the Tanami desert, and a refurbished F111. There is also a ferocious “Huey”, the Vietnam era Bell 47 helicopter gunship in the late stages of restoration. A good replica Spitfire Mk VIII sits among the other planes. There are several, smaller aircraft scattered around, and fascinating bits and pieces such as part of a Liberator bomber converted into a caravan.



Over it all sits the B52, another museum example of which we had seen at Duxford in England. We also remembered being anchored in 1987 in Gibraltar Harbour by the runway, where American squadrons of these bombers regularly roared into the sky trailing clouds of black smoke from their eight engines. The instrumentation and controls in the cockpit of this example were as complex and intimidating as I have ever seen.

Across the forecourt, and not directly associated with the museum, lies a hangar where another group of enthusiasts are restoring and flying another group of old aircraft. We wandered over and got friendly with a bloke working on a Dakota, and who gave us a free run of the hangar once we had established our aviation and historic car credentials!

After that, we took a short run down to the big suburb of Palmerstone, where there is a new Coles, and did some basic stocking. Quiet afternoon, waiting for the Volvo parts to arrive – but no.

### **Tuesday 20 August**

Drove into the mechanic's place to find out what was happening – assured that the parts would be here today – and late afternoon, confirmed that they had arrived.

Otherwise, got stuck further into some big books!

Bit of a change overnight – dryer air and some wind, but temperatures still pretty warm. We are favoured by the shade of the impressive mahogany trees on either side of us.

### **Wednesday 21 August**

Took the car in with a lift back to the camp from our neighbour caravanner, and at about 2:30 took a taxi in to pick it up. The main fix was replacement of the left front wheel bearing and seal, and the wheels were realigned.

Quite windy from the south all day, much reduced humidity but quite hot until early evening.

This was a good stop in the sense that the site was relaxed, and we had good neighbours and a pleasant outlook over the playing fields. But the noise from the Stuart Highway, only a few metres away, did necessitate earplugs for most of each night . . .

### **Thursday 22 August**

Away at last, for the initial slog back down the highway through Palmerstone and Humpty Doo and the turnoff east along the Arnhem Highway on our way to Kakadu and the national park. Nothing much to see on the way through the flat wetland country until we pulled into the Corroboree Park Tavern for a fairly early stop at about lunchtime.

The campsite there was very pleasant, a paid bush camp fundamentally, among the trees with wallabies around and lots of birdlife. We were able to choose our own place, which we like to do, and settled down for a quiet afternoon.

Latish afternoon we boarded a minibus for a ride into the Mary River wetlands, where we boarded an aluminium catamaran for a two-hour sunset cruise of the billabongs. This turned out to be a highlight of the trip, and was much



supported by the knowledge and enthusiasm of our guide, Chrissie.



We potteded gently along the calm waters between fields of sacred pink waterlilies, with lots of lovely little big-footed birds walking across the waterproof leaves. Many other birds were soon to be seen, including ducks of various kinds, sea eagles, darters, kookaburras, egrets, and beautiful blue kingfishers.



The area has a high concentration of saltwater crocodiles, and a half-submerged small one was pointed out as soon as we left the dock. But as the cruise went on, we saw more and more, culminating in a truly enormous male (the females don't get so big) lying in the mud bank at the water's edge. We got slowly closer and closer, with Chrissie obviously watching closely for any signs of aggression. This was an amazing encounter with this formidable creature. As we pulled away, the croc was approached



by another, smaller, that we had spotted swimming nearby. An apparently violent but short encounter then occurred among the lilies and reeds, before the intruder pulled off and "our" croc took a swim back to his resting place.



On the way here we had passed several places offering "jumping croc" tours of the wetland waterways. These are artificial encounters with the crocodiles, teasing them with lumps of meat so that they jump out of the water for the enjoyment of tourists. We were very pleased, as we had worked out from the tourist literature, that our tour played no such silly games with the wild animals but treated them with respect in their natural habitat and behaviour.

Another quite rare sight was of a wild – that is, feral – buffalo, which wandered down to the waterfront but was easily scared away as we watched him.



The cruise ended as the sun went down in a splendid orange display over the wetlands, framed by bunches of pandanus and woody trees. The whole exercise was a marvellous experience which we enjoyed a great deal.



## Friday 23 August



After the quietest and most peaceful night for days, we woke to watch several wallabies pottering around the site. From there it was a longish drive along the Arnhem Highway and into the Kakadu National Park. We stopped briefly at the Aurora settlement and tourist office to purchase our park passes, and then on to Jabiru and the Kakadu Lodge camp site.

Again, this was a good and quite informal site (although a lot more expensive than the last one!), very big but lightly occupied, and we could choose our own pitch – a good shady one, close to the swimming pool, as it turned out. We settled down to watch the birds, including the many who made the most of our dripping water tap and the dish of water Norma placed below it.



We also had a swim before reclining by the excellent shaded swimming pool, which had a waterfall at one end and was one of the best campsite examples we have experienced.

## Saturday 24 August

We had booked an early morning half-hour flight (with Kakadu Air) round the nearby area, and were picked up by a courtesy bus to take us to the airport – although aerodrome would be a more appropriate appellation. There were only two other passengers in the single-engine high-wing aircraft, and all of us had a window seat.



We took off to the east, and the first sight to see was the old open cut Ranger uranium mine. The mining area is to be rehabilitated, although it looks as though there's an awful lot of work to be done. There is hopefully one day to be opened an underground mine by the same company, ERA, but the proposal is still wound up in green tape and local aboriginal "considerations".

We flew from the wetland plains to the rocky country, the eroded sandstone plateau, with mists lying within the curves of rocky escarpments. As the plateau got higher and



its faultlines deeper, some remarkable forms appeared, including a golden sandstone arch. We then flew briefly north out of the rocky region and over the far upstream reaches of the East Alligator River, winding snakelike away to the north and the Gulf. Nearly dry in parts up here, some stretches of the river were clearly visible as shining white sand, with a narrower stream running alongside. Away from the river the Magela wetlands extended all the way to be seen, green and bushy with small trees and mangroves in some parts, and completely flat with green water plants, small lakes and billabongs in others. Smoke was rising from deliberately lit fires in the dryer areas. We took a short look at the tiny aboriginal settlement of Oenpelli in Arnhem Land.

After landing from this most interesting flight, which gave us a good picture of the vastness of this land, we went on to visit the Bowali Visitor Centre and Kakadu Park Headquarters. It's got good displays on aboriginal history and culture, and shows episodes from an ABC series on Kakadu. The one we saw was mainly about the management of the dangerous salt-water crocodiles, especially in relation to the activities of tourists who like to enjoy swimming in the many waterholes and streams left in the dry season – when the salties are meant to have moved off downstream towards the sea but some haven't . . .

We did a little shopping in the supermarket in the centre of the Jabiru township. All the few shops, banks and the like are clustered in one development, and some quite attractive-looking suburbs, playgrounds and a lake extend to its east. It was all obviously planned and laid out as a mining centre with facilities for the mining personnel, but now depends largely for its existence on tourism.

So then it was back to the very pleasant camp site for a peaceful afternoon reading in the shade and a swim in the equally pleasant shaded swimming pool.

### **Sunday 25 August**

This morning we drove out to the east about 40 km, as far as you can go before reaching the East Alligator which here separates the Kakadu National Park from the indigenous Arnhem Land. To enter here or going further by driving over Cahill's Crossing (a ford on rocks over the river) requires a permit from the Northern Land Council.



We first did a circular walk round the Ubirr rock formation to see what is regarded as one of the most significant collections of aboriginal rock art and drawings in the world. The drawings depict the indigenous people's knowledge and spiritual beliefs, and we regard them as analogous to Old Testament history as depicted in an ancient European cathedral's frescoes. There is a wide variety of styles, in part because the drawings were made over a very long period of time and (as for European frescoes) there has been a good deal of over-painting and touching up. Some are swift scrawls, with a surprisingly modern impressionist look but



supposedly dating back up to 5,000 years, depicting for instance male figures running – collectively known as the Northern Running Figures. Others are full of anatomical detail, including those showing fish and turtles, and others show everyday activities such as carrying spears or nets, datable from other archaeological



evidence to be less than 2,000 years old. Reds and yellows, from ochre and other dyes, are the primary colours. An especially interesting drawing is clearly of a thylacine, showing stripes that differentiate it from a dingo.

We clambered up to the top of a small mountain of layered rocks to a lookout point with a great view of the green Nadab floodplain, with a few small lakes remaining at this end of the dry season.

We then drove a short way down past a tiny border store to the meeting place for a “cultural cruise” on the East Alligator River. The guide was a local aboriginal man whose commentary – when we got used to his strong accent –

was fluent and explanatory. To start with we edged our way upstream a



little bit to Cahill’s Crossing. This is based on a line of rocks across the stream, one of several that partially dam the river, depending on the season. Approaching the crossing we saw scores of saltwater crocs, and Norma murmured a suspicion that they may be well fed for the benefit of tourists – but be that as it may, there were lots of crocodiles to be seen all along our course. Some were very large, basking in the sun on “their” little beaches.



In the trees and all along the waterway there were the usual assembly of birds big and small, from kingfishers through darters to sea eagles looking imperiously from on high.



The corrugated rock formations with which we were now so familiar arose on both sides along the way, and on some flat sandstone walls we could see aboriginal drawings. Ashore on a beach in Arnhem Land, where we turned to return downstream, our guide demonstrated the making of some aboriginal tools, including spears. These can be thrown – or, rather, launched – by way of a woomera. This is a wooden beam with a hook at one end. This is inserted into the thrower’s end of the spear (made of a light bamboo-like stem), and a flick of the woomera gives impetus to the spear. He launched three spears across the river, which





must have been nearly 100 metres wide at this point. He did stress that to kill an animal, for aim and force of impact, a range of 20 to 30 metres was more practical.

Back at the camp site after a very good day's outing, we were dismayed to find that a big tent was being erected by a large family extremely close to our pitch. Considering that the very large camp was probably less than a quarter full, and there were plenty of other good shady places available, we thought this was inconsiderate to say the least. But to avoid any unpleasantness, we simply upped sticks and moved away to another place.

### **Monday 26 August**



This day we had to move on anyway, and started off from Jabiru down the Kakadu Highway southwest back towards the Stuart. Our stop of the morning was in the Burrungkuy (Nourlangie) region, where rock art is a feature. Again, we did a circular walk round the sandstone rocks and caves and saw some pretty remarkable drawings – the best known of which are comparatively recent, including for example a western man with a pipe in his mouth depicted in early colonial times. But in the main the drawings retell the aboriginal dreamtime stories, such as that of the Rainbow Serpent and the Lightning Man. Some parts of the escarpment here are regarded as sacred, dangerous places which, if disturbed, cause trouble.

On the way out of the park we came across some immense termite mounds, the biggest we had encountered thus far.

On our further south towards Katherine we again experienced the vibration somewhere in the suspension that had caused us to go through all sorts of trouble in Darwin in an attempt to get it fixed. It was becoming clear that the problem had never been in the wheel bearing. But it seemed to come and go, and we resolved to press on and have it looked at again in Tennant Creek.

Katherine is a major centre in the region, and we had shopped there on our way north. It was started as the site for an overland telegraph station at a ford across the river that the explorer John Stuart had named after Catherine, the daughter of his major financial backer. Just south of the town in the RAAF Tindal base, which for a while after the Darwin bombing became the military headquarters in the city's place.

Meanwhile, we pulled into the Nitmiluk National Park campground, about 40 km to the east of Katherine, for the night. To see the Katherine gorges we booked yet another river cruise for the next morning.



## Tuesday 27 August

The gorges in the Katherine River hereabouts were named Nitmiluk by the Jawoyn people. It means “cicada place”. We walked down from the good camp site to the riverside, and boarded the customary aluminium vessel for the cruise. The guide this time was white Australian and again was fluent, relaxed and informative. We were to do the two-hour, two-gorge tour among the various options – there are 13 gorges in all. Some groups take five or six days to walk around all of them.



The crocodiles here are of the harmless freshwater variety, and we passed one peacefully lying on an isolated rock. There are a few sandy beaches that lead up to nesting sites, and we could see the tracks left by the freshies. They walk on their limbs rather than slide along on their stomachs like the salties, and that's how you can tell which kind is leaving the tracks in the sand.

It was a beautiful cruise through the steep-walled gorges. The geology is that the sandstone here is exceptionally hard, which we had commented on, wondering whether it was granite. It is corrugated and cut about in all directions, with several steep fissures running as fault lines across the run of the gorges.

The first gorge is not as high and steep as the second. They are separated by a rock bar, and we walked about 400 metres from one boat to another. On the way we saw yet more examples of aboriginal art on some flat rock faces. This boat trip was another great experience, through beautiful and impressive scenery.

However, we were soon on our way again south down the Stuart Highway. But then the darn rattle and steering tremor re-emerged, and when we called into the village of Mataranka for fuel we asked whether there was a mechanic nearby to discuss our symptoms with. We were directed to Roper River Transport and Workshop, where the mechanic there could not understand the symptoms but said he could not look at it for at least two days. So, we thought, on to Tennant Creek hoping things would not get worse.

Well, of course, they did, and we pulled off the road about 8 km to the south of Mataranka with a grinding noise and complete transmission failure – no drive at all. We were able only to just pull off the road surface, which made it pretty scary as immense road trains and other vehicles roared past within a couple of feet and the





occasional roar of a horn. A local cattle farmer (with an huge property by the road) gave me a lift back to the workshop, from where I could make a call to the NRMA/NTAA system for a tow. We again blessed the day we decided to subscribe to the NRMA's premium level of cover!

It turned out that this workshop (Roper River Transport and Workshop) was the local agent for the NRMA towing service, and a couple of hours later a towie turned up with a tilt truck with a ball to tow the caravan. As we hauled it up on to the truck I saw that the left-side front driveshaft was hanging loose from the hub, with the protective rubber boot mashed to pieces. So much for the wheel bearing "fix"!

He brought the whole equipe back up to Mataranka, where we had chosen the camp site nearest to the town, and dropped off us and the van. As the sun fell, we enjoyed a beer and some wine, wondering what will happen next and how long it will take!



### **Wednesday 28 August**

The Territory Manor Motel and Caravan Park turned out to be not much of a place, rather run down. But there was plenty of space there, quiet, had some shade from the several trees and was as good a place as any other to sit and see what would transpire.

Communications were a problem, as in much of the top end – no signal on my usual phone or the Galaxy pad (neither being Telstra, which we found is essential up north), and no wi-fi. My Travelsim phone, however, which we use overseas, did work because it uses any available signal and thus opened some communication with the workshop. Through that, just before bed, we got a text from the workshop to say that they couldn't even look at the car until the Friday of next week.

### **Thursday 29 August**

After an understandably unsettled night, and very cold in the morning, we walked to the other end of the township and back to the workshop. Through a long process, using their phone, we first established that nowhere other than in Darwin would we be able to get our European Volvo fixed. So, after a call to the A2Y workshop, we decided to take it back there, whose proprietor had misdiagnosed my complaint of a suspension thump in the first place.

NRMA Premium confirmed that we could get towed there under their coverage, and they would arrange that with the workshop. Pickup was arranged for 7:00 am the next day.

### **Friday 30 August**

Picked up as arranged, and rode the 430 kilometres up to Darwin in the truck with Briar, the young driver. As before, the Volvo was on the back and the caravan was hooked to the truck's towbar. Our only stops were at a weighbridge for Briar's coffee and smoke, and another at Hayes Creek Wayside Inn. This had been closed for some time, and was a dump.





Got to the camp site we had chosen, Discovery Park Darwin in Winnellie, about 12:30, and got the van parked in an overflow section amid some long-termers but with reasonable space. Left Norma with it, then on into Darwin and A2Y to drop off the Volvo and for discussions with Yash Sharma. He maintained that the wheel bearing had needed replacement and thus had fixed that as a priority. But he did admit he had not even checked the CV joint or anything else, despite my original suggestion when we first went there. Anyway, he accepted that he would get on with seeing what was wrong as soon as possible, and I got a cab back to the site.

So we started another waiting period, worrying about when we would (ever?) get back home!

Hot in the afternoon, but acceptable, and facilities quite good, with excellent 4G Optus internet and phone connections.

### **Saturday 31 August**

Doonas back on the beds overnight, but not nearly as cold in the morning as further south. The weather in Darwin was regarded as exceptionally fine for the season, without the usual humidity – a result of the continuing drought. So things could be worse.

No other excitements.

### **Sunday 1 September**

The main activity was a bit of a stock-up at Woolworths at the Gateway Centre in Palmerstone. Took the bus there (no money taken by the driver, seniors travel free in Darwin). Took a taxi back to help with the bags. Couldn't top up the wines and spirits though, through NT laws forbidding alcohol sales in the morning.

### **Monday 2 September**

Hotter overnight, and Norma (especially) and I got several severe (probable) sand-fly hits. So, we were very itchy. Called A2Y auto – CV failure confirmed at last, with damage to the driveshaft. Why won't such people listen? Parts ordered, should be in Darwin by the next day.

### **Tuesday 3 September**

Still there, waiting for news that didn't come. Both still very itchy.



### Wednesday 4 September

Decided to call into the workshop, given lift in by friendly Kiwi neighbour (also with a car needing attention, a Nissan Patrol, with fuel injection problems). Parts still not arrived, now coming by Australia Post. Expected “tomorrow”.

Sociable evening drinks with the Kiwis and another couple, friends of theirs – also with car problems, in this case with their near-new Land Cruiser! The conditions up north are hard on vehicles.

### Thursday 5 September

At least the weather was continuing pleasant, unlike – it appears – everywhere else in Australia, with bushfires in some places, icy cold in others.

News from the mechanic late afternoon was that the car parts wouldn't be here until Monday.

### Friday 6 September

A busy day!



First step was a bus run into Darwin, with the aim being to spending a day touring to pass the time still waiting for the car. As noted, we had been delighted to find that seniors from any state are entitled to ride buses for free, so took the bus into the city's bus interchange. With no particular plans, we wandered over to the Legislative Assembly which, on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, was open to all-comers. Not that there were many, at least early in the morning. It's an ornately impressive structure, attractive in a wedding-cake sort of way, and has a nice open interior. There were several historical presentations on the history of the Northern Territory, including WW2 and the cyclones. Darwin has had to rebuild itself several times!

We then walked about 3.5 kilometres right across the city and down to Cullen Bay and the ferry wharf there. We took the daily 45-minute tour of the southern shores of the city, passing good views of the city's skyscrapers, the naval base, the fishermen's precinct and the Stokes Hill commercial wharf with its long breakwater.

The Port of Darwin covers a vast area. We could see the huge LNG plant and wharf down south on Bladin



Point, and across to the western headland of the waterway, the Cox Peninsula. A very high proportion of the port is, however, shallow and not navigable for ships or even keeled sailing boats. In fact, the opportunities for visiting yachts look dismal. Fannie Bay, an expansive but exposed anchorage, is generally shallow and has a drying sandy bay at its southern end. We were told that HMS Beagle, carrying Charles Darwin, had gone aground there.

We had lunch at the café we had visited before, the Boatshed Coffee House, overlooking the marina. The marina is locked in – the tides have a big range here – and we were told that it costs \$85 each way to get in and out through the lock!

As we later sat in the bus that would take us back to the camp site, the phone rang again – and it was our mechanic to tell us that the parts *had* arrived and that he had fitted them. The car was good to go. So we halted the bus at an appropriate stop, walked down to his workshop, and picked up the Volvo. A great relief. Mr Sharma did concede a rather reluctant apology for not checking the CV the first time.

While waiting for the bus back, we did have another little walk in downtown Darwin, around the bus station and civic centre. There is a marvellous banyan fig tree standing in front of the library there, known – as several other trees in the world are – the Tree of Knowledge, but has nothing to do with the Labor Party as far as we know. It stands on the site of the original Terminus Hotel, once the centre of the Chinese community. It has survived all the cyclones since its establishment, as well as a fire that destroyed the Chinese community. In that little precinct there is also a nice set of bells, commemorating the bells on Darwin's Beagle. They can be played as a chime.



### **Saturday 7 September**

Being practically out of everything, the first task of the day was to drive down to the Gateway Mall in Palmerstone and do a Woolworths stock-up. In the mall we also managed to find at last some suitable new sandals, of an old-fashioned nature that you can't buy anywhere else in the world..

Then a peaceful afternoon. But it was hotting up considerably by then and so we sat in the van's air conditioning for a few hours after lunch. Time to get moving south, despite bushfires in the coastal regions of Queensland and NSW.

### **Sunday 8 September**

Got under way in good time for the start of our drive south and home, with the aim of putting plenty of kilometres behind us in the first three days. It was getting too hot here, and the humidity was building up. Also, we would be retracing our steps as far as Cloncurry, by-passing the Kakadu loop.

So out along the Stuart Highway yet again, reprising our run down past Mataranka before the transmission drama. No such drama this time, and on to Katherine for a lunch stop. The only problem this time was that Norma could not start the fridge on gas, a mode we hadn't used for as much as two weeks.



Then more boring driving to Daly Waters and the Hi-Way Inn. This was quite an experience! A free drink each at the pub came with the camping fee, and we enjoyed a beer and a wine in one of the noisiest, blokeyest pubs we have ever experienced! Outback life in the raw, but great fun.

### **Monday 9 September**

This was a fairly basic camp site overlooking a scruffy-looking horse field, with a few dispirited-looking horses wandering quietly around. Flocks of spangled drongos were pecking their way round the van. The wind was picking up as the sun rose, with dusty eddies whirling through the site. More typical outback camping: a baby boy, completely naked, climbed out of a big van and was crawling around in the dirt picking up plenty of immunity for the future!

The scenery didn't change much as we drove on down about 560 km to Barkly Homestead, another place full of character. The remains of a crashed plane are parked outside the pub. Guinea fowl wander round in a group, and some rescued galahs and black cockatoos talked to Norma from inside their big cage.

The original homestead looked to be a pleasant place, in the centre of the enterprise, and the huge camp site was really very pleasant. There some interesting palm trees and the remains of old steam machinery outside along with the fuel pumps.



### **Tuesday 10 September**

Burnt trees and rocky desert land were the scenery for the first part of this day's run, and we started to battle with a strong south-east wind on the nose which played havoc with our fuel consumption and made for a couple of anxious moments before fuel stops. (Although we were carrying spare cans, so we'd never run out.)

There were a few rocky outcrops further on, with views of an escarpment in the distance for a while, but most of the run was along dead straight roads of reasonable quality with orange dirt run-offs. Reaching Camooweal we were back in Queensland, where we felt liberated from some of the restrictions placed upon normal activities in the Northern Territory because of aboriginal sensitivities – licensing laws, for example, and not being able to visit certain parts of Australia without a "permit"). The town was very quiet indeed, and we admired some attractive murals painted on an otherwise blank wall.

On the approach to Mount Isa and well beyond the scenery was much more interesting, with rocky hills that we drove around on a winding road.

And so back to the Oasis camp site in Cloncurry, and what we saw as the end of the first part of our long drive home, 1,712 kilometres from our Darwin site. From now on, for a while, we would be on roads we had never traversed before.

### Wednesday 11 September

We decided to take a rest day, and try to find out why the fridge wouldn't work on gas. This would prevent us staying overnight in camps without mains power. However, after carefully reviewing the owner's manual for the fridge – which depicted a gas jet configuration different from what was actually fitted – we decided that it was too hard and risky to fix and not worth doing now that we were well on our way back. The chances were that the gas jet was blocked by the dust that gets everywhere in these parts, a known problem. The camp site is a very pleasant and friendly one, where we had stayed several weeks previously for a while to get the van's blown-out tyres replaced and the wheel arches repaired.

We did some stocking up in town in the morning and then sat in the sun in the afternoon. It was not so hot in the day by then, and a lot colder at night – doonas back on the beds! The persistent southerly wind eased during the day, too.

### Thursday 12 September



The plan for Cloncurry onwards was to take the Landsborough Highway south-east through Winton and Longreach to Charleville, across to Roma on the Warrego then down to the Hunter Valley via Walgett on what is now known as the Great Inland Way.

These are all very long legs, and we started with a longish run of about 530 km this day. It was firstly quite attractive through low, stony hills but then suddenly opening into wide, grassy pastoral plains. Along our right we ranged along the edge of stony desert land, with the hills of the Swords Range just visible at times in the distance. The grazing land to our left extended way up to the Gulf country. So, scenically, it got pretty monotonous as we drove past scattered herds of cattle and, latterly, a few sheep. Narrow roads led off to invisible stations deep in the outback. Small mesas, reminiscent of California, sprung

up out of the desert from time to time. Many road trains shared the road, but as we seem to travel at about the same average speed, most of the ones we saw were going the other way, carrying everything from stock, general freight to Very Big Things that we edged off the road to let past.



We took a stop in Winton, where there were a couple of things that we thought might be interesting. One was Arno's Wall, an eccentric collection of mechanical junk (collected from the town dump) made into a sort of art work by burying the bits and pieces into concrete mounted on the wall of Arno's property in a suburban street.

Rather less eccentric and much more interesting (to me, anyway) was a splendid private collection of "heritage" trucks and related machinery. Many were beautifully restored, and a much bigger number were lined up outside the shed, looking very sad in what the

volunteers who set up and run the place call the “graveyard”. A unique truck was a 1964 Mack prime mover that has never been restored, simply “tidied up”. We talked to an enthusiast who, for no obvious reason, was carefully restoring an old BSA single-cylinder stationary engine – “keeps me off the streets”, he said.

Reaching Longreach we drove to the bigger of the only two camp sites in town, and one that had been well reviewed in WikiCamps. It’s a huge affair, all on gravelly sand with just a few trees. We were allocated a position in the kind of perpendicular line-up we try to avoid, but at least we had a space each side (until the next day).

### Friday 13 September

A very cold start to the day again, but we soon became acquainted with the park’s most interesting residents, a pair of semi-tame brolgas! They were simply slowly pottering around from place to place, hugely entertaining. Norma commented that one of the good parts of this trip has been the wide range of birdlife that had entertained us many times along the way.



Longreach is famous for the Australian Stockman’s Hall of Fame, and a visit to this large, modern facility took nearly all the morning. As the promos promised, it’s more than just a museum. With lots of good explanations that museum took us through stories of the original pioneer settlers, the major outback properties, the work of the stock workers (men and women, of course!), and a display recording the history and present work of the RFDS. It is all very well done, with lots of historical photography and video material bringing the stories to life. We kept thinking of great-grandfather



John Henderson and his joining through marriage the Tapfield family, with its own history of property settlement in Tasmania and the Coorong.

In the afternoon we went to see the Qantas Founders Museum, but this did not look very interesting and appeared primarily to be a volunteers’ collection of stuff rather than an official comprehensive history of the airline. The admission fee was comparable to that of the Hall of Fame, so we chose to make our excuses and leave. The adjacent original Qantas hanger is the only truly historic artefact, except perhaps the Constellation sitting beside a 747 and a 737, all of which were closed off to visitors.



Norma did not join me at the Longreach Powerhouse and Historical Museum, in the heart of town, because it’s exactly what it says – an astonishing collection of huge generators lined up in a big shed. From era to era from 1921 to 1985 they had powered the town before electricity arrived by wire. I was specially taken by the monstrous size of the engine components, such as the pistons, conrods, crankshafts and bearings. Each generator was still on the foundation and in the place it was originally put, next to the one it had superseded.

From there it was back to the brolgas and our own patch of gravel.



Saturday 14 September



Off quite early with the promise of another long day. But not far along, at Ilfracombe, we made an unplanned stop at what they call the “Machinery Mile”. Along the roadside lies an amazing collection of old trucks, cars, bulldozers, high-funnelled steam engines and farm machinery. There are some very rare and interesting items, including knockabout station work-horse trucks of the ‘30s, and a 1917 tractor that killed a man who was cranking it and had a reputation for “rearing up”. Most significant, probably, is a 1917 Ruston caterpillar tractor powered by a huge Perkins four-cylinder kerosene engine. It was the precursor to the Caterpillar tractor line and is one of only three of its kind left in the world.



Across the road is the beautiful Wellshot Hotel, one of the neatest historic hotels we have seen. But we had to get going again, and the next town was Barcaldine. We didn’t stop there, but on its main road



there sits a replica of the Tree of Knowledge, this one being where the meetings of striking shearers in 1891 were held and led to the formation of the Australian Labor Party, for good or ill.

At Barcaldine we turned south for another 100+ kilometre run through flat pastoral country to Blackall. This is the centre of the large merino sheep wool industry here, and just out of town there is an old steam-powered wool scour, which operated until 1978. We were quite interested in seeing this, but it was by tour only and we didn’t want to wait. We did have a chat with a few big merinos, including a proud ram, though.



Blackall is one of three towns in Australia that claim a “black stump”, a boundary marker in the old days of settlement. Being “beyond the black stump” meant that the traveller was beyond the limits of civilisation, in the outback as it’s now known. We were rather relieved to be returning to within civilisation’s limits.

From there it yet another long run south to Charleville and to the Charleville Bush Caravan Park. This is a sort of bush camp, but actually a private (cash only, no pets, no smoking!) paying camp site in the bush on red dirt. But it is spacious and with all facilities, good ones actually.

In the evening we joined other campers for a chat round the big camp fire after they had enjoyed a sausage sizzle, a new experience for us! But very popular among Australian campers in the outback. We were joined by a bright full moon.

## Sunday 15 September



Warmed up quickly after the usual cool start. Into the town to have a look around, and after a visit to the tourist centre – cheerful and friendly as usual – we enjoyed a look round the town’s “historic house”. This was built in 1889 for the Queensland National Bank, and the original vault is still there. It passed through several private owners after WW2, and is now a very nicely preserved example of the era, with marble fireplaces, ceramic door knobs, cedar doorways and high ceilings. The rooms are filled with household possessions and bric-a-brac, with the dining room featuring an excellently set formal table. There are good period photos on the walls, with one intriguing shot showing a travelling sewing machine on a small cart pulled by a team of goats.

Down the back, in the old stables, there is some farm machinery and a few vehicles. There is a small rail ambulance, necessary for the days the roads were waterlogged or flooded.

We then went to shop at the IGA supermarket, which turned out to be a very good one. Back then for lunch and a quiet afternoon. In the evening most of the other campers gathered for a pizza DIY get-together, but we sat that one out. Norma went into the adjoining field to talk to the kangaroos, and after

sitting back at the van an Apostle bird sat on her foot. She talks to the animals.

## Monday 16 September

A long day of driving and sightseeing. First quick stop was at Morven, a tiny old town but with some nice features. In the 1800s it was a regular stop for bullock teams and the Cobb & Co coach line. In 1859 Queensland split from New South Wales and the state government opened up land for development by settlers following reports of good grazing land in the area.

During the Great Depression of 1929-1932 unemployment in Australia almost tripled and many people lost their homes. In the country, many built basic dwellings out of scrap materials, including kerosene tins. Kerosene was widely used as a



source of household energy. By the roadside there is an example of some simple huts that were built out of flattened kero tins. Another little hut houses an amazing collection of models of old buildings constructed in the same woods and same methods as the original full-scale buildings. They include a pub hotel, mail change station, shops and stores, and many kinds of dwelling. All but one were built by the same obsessional enthusiast. Quite something to see, really, which made for an interesting stop in a village that one would normally drive straight through.



The next stop was in Roma, very much a crossroads town. Its main feature is a multitude of Queensland bottle trees, with their bulbous trunks. They look like the Boab trees of Western Australia, but are a different species. Expert factoid: the Boab is an *Adansonia*, while the Bottle Tree is a *Brachychiton* - any resemblance is superficial. In one avenue, plaques remembering fallen WW1 soldiers are placed by each tree, including a Private Henderson (unrelated).



The largest tree of all sits by itself in a park by the river, which is a tributary of the Balonne River that joins the Darling right at the northern end of the Murray-Darling Basin. Roma is very regularly flooded, at intervals varying from one to five or so years, with data going back to 1917 and showing no significant rise in the flood peak level over time. The inhabitants must be getting used to it by now!

Since 1906 the region has become known for its natural gas resources, and there is a major display centre in the town describing how gas and oil are formed and found, how they were first developed as a resource and how they are now being utilised. There are displays of drill rigs and other mining equipment, and movies showing – for example – how coal-seam gas is formed and extracted. The importance to Australia of her world-wide LNG exports is described, bringing back our memories of the LNG terminal in the city's port. All very interesting and well presented, with good PR for Origin Energy being justified.

In Roma we turned right and started south down the A55, aka the Carnarvon Highway, aka the Great Inland Way. This was another 195 kilometres drag through flat pastureland and stock stations, a reasonable surface but a bit on the boring side. We arrived quite tired at our camp site in St George, another crossroads town, set on the River Balonne.

The town's name arises from the crossing of the river by explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell on St George's Day.

## Tuesday 17 September

We camped at the Pelican Rest Tourist Park, and booked in for a couple of nights for a rest. We drove into the town and found it a very pleasant place, with a lovely park running alongside the river. Inevitably, there were descriptions and measurements of the multitudes of high floods that the town has experienced over very many years, and one descriptive plaque can't help but quote Dorothea Mackellar's land "of droughts and flooding rains" poem. In 2012 the river peaked at 13.95 metres and 2,000 residents were evacuated.

There is a big bridge and weir – with the effect more like a dam, really – controlling the flow and height of the river at it passes the town.

Near a war memorial plaque are two plaques celebrating the lives of two WW2 pilots. One was from an aboriginal family, and is the only aboriginal to have become a fighter pilot, serving in the PNG and South Pacific theatres. He is now celebrated, but sadly, after his return from service, he was subject to disdain rather than celebration and descended into alcoholism and death.





We had picked ourselves a favourable position in this good camp site, and enjoying watching the activities of several birds. A kangaroo came to look at us before it saw a loose dog wandering.

### Wednesday 18 September

Quite a short run in the morning down over the border into New South Wales and to Lightning Ridge. One thing we had found distressing at times over the last few days had been the substantial level of road kill, and it had been particularly bad on the approaches to this town, with dead animals lying along the road at 100-metre intervals in places.

We camped at the Opal Caravan Park, a large facility a little way out of town and a pleasant enough place to stay.

Even the approaches to Lightning Ridge, a famous opal mining town since about 1903, are weird, with hillocks of white spoil by the roadside and the town name sign beside a painted up concrete mixer (old mixing bowls are used to wash the spoil and stones in the search for opal). We took a preliminary look around the town and its major points of interest.



The first was to the old house that is the headquarters of the Historical Society. It's actually just a typical jumble of old stuff with no theme or association between the items – all well intentioned, but rather amateur hour. Next door is the ambitiously named Australian Opal Centre. This is a more modern but still quite small building holding some descriptions of the opal open-cut mining process, the processing of the opal-bearing dirt and the generation of the lovely opal stones. We did learn that knowing a lot about opals was essential before buying any! An impressive new Murcutt-designed building is planned, much better to present the whole opal story in a contemporary manner.

### Thursday 19 September



The tourist organisation as a whole, though, is good, and is well promoted by the visitor centre. There are plenty of fee-paying tours of the mining areas and some mines, but what we did is to follow three of the self-guided tours the directions for which are painted on old vehicle doors placed along the route: the red-door tour, the yellow-door tour and so on.

Our first visit was to the owner-named Opal Adventure Mine, which had relatively few steps down to the mining level. Wearing the required (and needed) hard hats, we walked through the access tunnels and looked up into the narrow, cramped spaces where miners chiselled, hammered or pneumatic-drilled their way through the rock faces where the opal seams or stones were most likely to be found. There was a good movie describing most of this at the furthest end of the main tunnel. The lady in the inevitable shop did show us some beautiful little opals – some of the smallest, fingernail size, were the prettiest, and

approached \$1,000 in price. “Best place to buy them, though”, the lady claimed.

Around this mine, and around all the mines and mining areas, was an astonishing collection of mechanical junk – much of it





based on old cars and car parts modified to perform different mining operations. One collection of rusting cars – including a 2CV but nothing more significant than I could see – was enclosed by a wire fence, with a sign stating that these were a “heritage collection” that would one day be housed in a museum.

Elsewhere, we saw several small settlements, many directly adjacent to each other, difficult to tell whether they were still being occupied, surrounded by piles of spoil and centred on a caravan, motorhome or bus as home. There is a church recently built of corrugated iron as a prop for a movie..

There was one quite big open-cut mine, “Lunatic Hill Open Cut”, now disused but obviously a seriously commercial operation in its time. “Lunatic” because miners would have to dig three times as deep to get to the opals. It became an open cut mine when it became clear that so many individual mines being dug so deep was becoming seriously dangerous.

What was interesting was that the various layers of sediment could clearly be seen; the silica solution that turned into opal tend to be between the various layers, in this case between sandstone and claystone. The opal can be found as stones, in the form of seams, or in the rare form of fossilised plants and animals back to the dinosaur era. The cutting also revealed the old shafts and tunnels that had been dug by earlier miners. In its time this mine produced some of the world’s finest black opal.



## Friday 20 September



On the way out of Lightning Ridge, by the side of the road we came across a hugely tall sculpture of an emu, named “Stanley”: built – almost inevitably in this curious part of the world – of rusting car parts. The main body of the bird is built around the remains of a VW Beetle. It was conceptualised as a feature on the Birdsville Track, but its present location seemed more practical when it was finished in 2012. It stands on the top of the ridge which Lightning Ridge was named after.

We then started on a long, initially very windy-dusty and generally very bumpy run, down through Walgett and across to Narrabri and so on down to the Upper Hunter for our last camp site of the trip, the Murrurundi Caravan Park. We got a friendly welcome at this pleasant little site, one of the few along this route.

## Saturday 21 September

The final run was on better roads and latterly the freeways from the lower Hunter to Lane Cove. The traffic built up, of course, reminding us of one of the disadvantages of living in Sydney. But it was great to roll back into our driveway and be welcomed by Dianne, our next-door neighbour, in the late morning of a sunny Sydney early spring day.

We had travelled nearly 12,000 kilometres in just over two months.

### **Reflections**

All did not go smoothly at times on this trip, but overall we enjoyed it and had a very good time. The caravan was very comfortable and suited us well. But neither the van nor our otherwise excellent Volvo tow car were well suited to long runs off the bitumen. We had fitted out the van for a fair degree of off-grid self-sufficiency but never intended to get seriously off-road. The little we did we found too uncomfortable and not that rewarding.

Obviously, in our planning for the loop around eastern Australia, we knew that we'd be driving a long way. But we underestimated the sheer amount of often uninspiring driving needed to get from one interesting place to another.

We have clearly been spoilt by our European experiences, where the countryside changes every hour or two, and architectural, historical and cultural monuments are around every corner. Latterly during this trip we did discuss whether we might sell the van after returning, but we are reluctant now to do that because we still very much enjoy the freedom of camper travel and the ability to stay inexpensively in some lovely places for as long as we like. We know a lot more about touring Australia now, and all we need to do is to make plans more appropriate to our desires and expectations!