

# Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

**By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan**

**Newsletter Number Twelve**

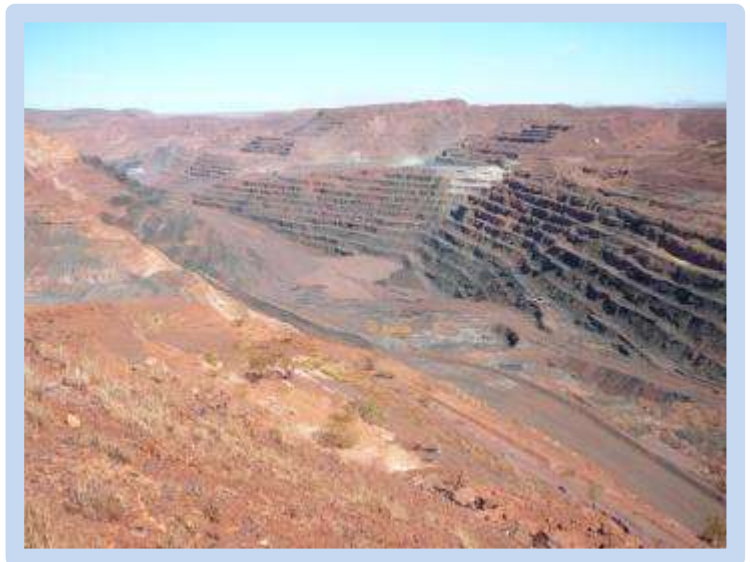
We concluded our last newsletter with our arrival at Newman and promised to bring you highlights from our visit to the huge and most impressive Mt Whaleback mine site.

After being in the vast and isolated wilderness for several weeks, the busy mining town of Newman “The Heart of the Pilbara” came as a real contrast. The camp-ground was *vast*, catering for mine workers who fly-in / fly-out (referred to as ‘FI-FO’ –locals tell us this also stands for ‘Fit in – or F... Off!’) The motor camp has 603 “Donga’s” (a shipping container sized cabin with bathroom & kitchenette) @ AU\$ 110.00 per night with a cookhouse on-site offering a 3 meal a day option for an additional AU\$ 70.00 a day.

First on our list was to catch up on the laundry, only to be greeted by this sign which we found a little unnerving! >>>



Glorious hot showers came next before a good sleep, despite the sounds of suburbia around us. Unfortunately for us we were kept awake by the continuous shouting, screaming and disorderly behaviour of the local indigenous people in the township. What we weren't expecting was the sound of a hearty Maori Haka being performed at 2am which drove this unruly congregation right out of the town. We later learned that over half of the population here are Kiwi's – they even hold an annual rugby challenge here based on the Bledisloe Cup challenge named the “Bloody-Slow Cup”!



A visit to Newman is not complete without a tour to the BHP Billiton Iron Ore mine at Mt Whaleback. This is the largest Single Open-Cut Iron Ore mine in the world – currently

5.5km long and 1.5km wide. Each of these bench lines seen in this photo are 15 meters high. The ore is Brockman Hematite – which is 68.8% iron, one of the highest grades in the world.

BHP Billiton has their own railway. This 426 km track from Newman to the port facilities at Port Headland is the longest privately owned railway in the southern hemisphere. The average train length is 3.75 kms, consisting of 6 locomotives & up to 336 ore cars (approx 42,000 tonnes of ore per load, each car capacity is 125 tonnes) and one driver. These long trains reach speeds of 65 km/ph and have a braking distance of 3kms.



Just for the record, the world's longest train record was broken here in 2001. It measured 7.3 km long and consisted of 8 locomotives, 682 iron-ore cars and one driver!

Forty Three enormous 240 tonne payload Iron Ore trucks are used here. Fully loaded, each truck weighs more than the take-off weight of a



747 jumbo jet! They run non-stop with two 12 hour shifts, refuelling every 24 hrs with 4500 litres of diesel each. The only time they are switched off is when the oil and filters are changed. Wow!

The tyres on these trucks measure up to 3.5 meters in diameter and weigh 5 tonnes with the rims inserted. Each tyre costs AU\$30,000 with 6 tyres per truck, each tyre lasting approx 10 months. Many of the dump trucks these days are operated remotely by computer & GPS from the control tower at the Perth airport, hundreds of miles away (can you imagine these 400 tonne trucks with no drivers! Scary Stuff!!)



Money is the big draw-card here. Young couples with small children live here & can save AU\$ 1200 a week on one income.

Departing Newman with the aid of mud-maps provided by some 4WD enthusiasts we had met, we headed off to the north of Newman and the eastern end of the Hamersley Ranges on the isolated and deserted Kalgan Pool track, to Eagle Rock Pool and Weeli Wolli Springs. A challenging & unmaintained gold prospectors track was very steep and rocky in parts with scary vertical drop-offs. **Low range gears are good!** >>>





Megan regularly elected to hike (just to take photos of course!) rather than risk many of the extreme climbs and descents on this track!

We camped in this valley lined with sheer cliffs of tortured & distorted iron ore rock. >>>



The clear pools throughout this narrow but pretty canyon attracted a wide variety of wildlife at dusk and early morning, much to our delight. All this beautiful scenery to ourselves. We didn't see another soul for three days!!

### The tranquil Eagle Rock Falls >>>



Further west on the Hamersley Range is **Karijini National Park**, regarded as one of the best in Australia. We hiked through these huge deep gorges with glorious rock formations carved over millions of years leaving distinctive banded layers of iron ore. We're told that these dark iron bands are so pure you can arc-weld directly on to them >

We discovered stunning waterfalls and crystal clear rock pools flanked by trees and 100 meter high red cliffs. Dales Gorge is especially pretty and has a tree lined river passing through it. With reasonable access down into this gorge we experienced tuff and challenging hiking.







The more westerly Weano Gorge and Hancock Gorge were more demanding with some near vertical climbs and narrow rock-ledge heart-stopping stretches.

Wading, swimming & clinging to narrow ledges is par for the course on most of these Class 4 & 5 tracks and the water was icy cold! Some of the more extreme Class 6 tracks were confined to those with ab-sailing qualifications only.



We were well rewarded by this experience, we gave it our all, and left behind the beautiful **Karajini National Park** very tired, happy and satisfied.



**Resting - with the end of the Gorge in sight.**



At the southern edge of the Hamersley Ranges, we arrived at the town of **Tom Price** which was built as a mining town at the base of Mt Nameless. It was a picturesque sight– a sudden green oasis after the endless burnt red plains and rocky ranges we had enjoyed during the last 2 weeks.

At 747 metres above sea level **Tom Price** is the highest town in Western Australia, situated approx 1600km north-east of Perth.

Nearby Mt Nameless (the aboriginals call it Jarndrunmunhna - the place of the rock wallaby). Low range was required to reach the summit of this mountain. At 1128 metres above sea level this is the highest 4x4 accessible mountain in WA. With a glass in hand, we could see right across the tops of five mountain ranges – a truly inspiring view at sunset!



<<< Whilst ascending this mountain at 5pm, a huge explosion rocked the valley below us. With uncanny luck, Graeme, with camera in hand at that precise moment captured this large mine blast.

On a second mine tour in as many weeks, we donned hard hats, safety glasses & high-viz vests and toured the Rio-Tinto owned Iron Ore mine that has operated here since the early 1960's and now employs over 1000 staff – 25% of which are female and 8% indigenous Australians.

This mine exports millions of tonnes of Iron Ore per annum with a target of 330 million tonnes next year. With the current price of AU\$140 to AU\$150 per tonne average, the mind boggles. Only a small fraction of Australia's iron ore is utilized by the steel manufacturing plants within Australia.



**David & Goliath** going about their business on the floor of the mine (**note the compulsory stop sign beside the Landcruiser**) It was a damned shame for the Toyota Landcruiser on the right, who didn't quite know the rules! (**It's doubtful this Haulpak Truck even felt the bump**) This mascot has been left as a daily reminder to all those that enter the mine site. We were pleased to learn that there was no loss of life in this incident.

After departing Tom Price we travelled south via Ashburton Downs to Mt Augustus. The sand-plains were devoid of anything apart from scattered scrub, a rare sighting of a kangaroo and the most undernourished cattle you could ever imagine. A farmer told us these cattle have never seen grass in their lives, and survive on herbage, but drought conditions over the past few years have left them "doing it hard". Thankfully artesian water is plentiful, but the numerous dead carcasses were appalling. They normally average 200 ml (8 inches) of rain per year here, but have not seen anything like this since 2006.

**For this motorist the lack of a tyre apparently went unnoticed** for quite some distance on one of these harsh, stony and corrugated roads. We have seen several battered rims like this one during our Safari, and still find it hard to comprehend.





**Mt Augustus** rises abruptly to 715 metres out of the extensive stony red sand-plains. We explored “Ooramboo” to find ancient aboriginal rock art under a long overhanging escarpment. At “Flinstone” we hiked up a steep rocky gully (shown as Class 5) and we were rewarded with vast panoramic views from the lookout.

**The heat reflecting off this flat rocky section of the climb could be felt through ya boots mate! >>**

The temperatures were still high at twilight as we departed, so stopping at the 1896 Cobra Bangemall Inn was only natural! This dusty little Inn has traded here continuously since the gold rush and the proprietor told us that 400 cars passed by last month, but we suspect very few punters actually stopped or spent any money at this remote watering hole!



While making our way north-west towards Exmouth over the next two days we utilised the safe haven of two dry river beds to set up camp. Both of these had plentiful fire wood for our evening campfires and the two metre high banks either side of these river beds afforded us protection from the cold desert winds at night.

<<< Even here “**Barky’s Outdoor Kitchen**” continues to produce fine cuisine. Hors-d’oeuvres before the main event, yum!

I guess it won’t be long before he hatches a Christmas cake from the camp oven to enjoy after the medium-rare roasted road-kill. Thank goodness he spent many years as a Sea Scout and picked up such valuable skills.

After 1200 km on tracks and dirt roads we were happy to be booking into the caravan park at Exmouth to refresh and revitalise before embarking on our sailing, snorkelling and sea-kayaking adventure on and around the Ningaloo Reefs, but more about that in our next newsletter.

In the meantime, we wish you a very safe and Happy Christmas with your friends and loved ones.



Ho Ho Ho from Graeme & Megan

