

Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan

Newsletter Two

It's Hi from Graeme & Megan once again.

At the conclusion of our first newsletter we left you at the small North Western town of Coonabarabran NSW where we pulled into a local campground just minutes later.

Huge Road-trains towing 3 double-decker trailers thundered past all night, and we were pleased to be heading for the hills again later today! But first we looked at one of the older residents of the town – or the fossilised skeletal remains of her anyway!

A giant Diprotodron, some 33500 years old, found just east of town. She was the largest marsupial to live here, over 3 metres long & 2 metres high, belonging to the wombat, elephant & rhino family. She was found by gem fossickers hunting for Zedite crystals. The teeth must have weighed a kilo each!

We entered the Warrumbungle National Park, near the Castlereagh River, a dramatic skyline of ancient volcanoes & bush covered ranges were punctuated by spectacular peaks and rocky escarpments. This was an unexpected place to see a huge astronomical observatory towering white and foreign on the top of the range.

The 'Sidings Springs Observatory' is an important Southern Hemisphere joint venture, funded by universities from Great Britain & Australia. This isolated area is totally devoid of city lights. The crisp clear nights make this the Astronomical Capital of Australia. We climbed 4 floors to the base of this huge telescope, the semi-circular roof opened to the night sky – for the astronomers that is; –not us mere mortals! The enormous mirror behind the lens weighs 15 tonne and took 4 years to manufacture in the UK before being shipped to Australia!

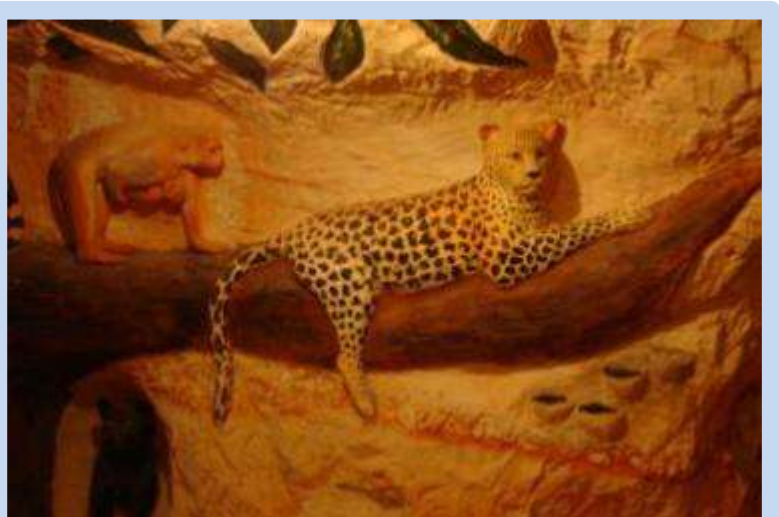
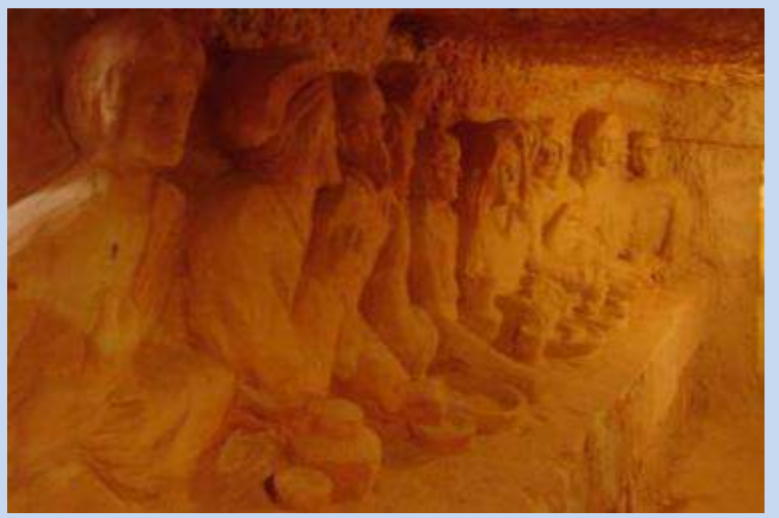


Lightning Ridge, NSW is not just about Opals!

There is a lot more than just opal mining going on at the town of Lightning Ridge. It's not just the opals that are colourful!

This desolate and isolated little mining town has attracted many talented and enterprising people. A 105 year old opal mineshaft near the centre of town has been transformed into an underground network of tunnels with over 400 amazing sandstone sculptures carved into its walls over the last 12 years. The themes are most inspiring and range from stunning animals, Hollywood heroes and stars like Elvis and Johnny Depp, Superman, Shrek, many famous Roman silhouettes, and even includes a Maori chief.

We bravely ventured 30 metres underground and were able to meet the 73 year old artist hard at work. He assured us he had another 10 good years of carving left in him. He was truly passionate about his work and for much of the time he worked from photographs or articles whilst he continued to carve these magnificent sculptures.



Ron Canlin, the artist, working on yet another carving with a sketch in hand.

The following day we awoke to the amazing sound of the bugle. The 2010 ANZAC commemorations were under way. A short time later a parade of ex servicemen was led through this small town by a lone drummer supported by approx 40 senior citizens, some in wheel chairs, others on sticks and supported by approx 60 family groups. We were impressed by the turn-out in this isolated township.

Later in the day we joined many Australians who were celebrating the day by playing a popular war-time gambling game called Two Up with other returned soldiers. This activity was taking place in a cluster of three real outback hotels located miles from anywhere and referred to as “The Pubs in the Scrub”.



These rustic outback pubs are approx a 10 minute drive apart and each compete for the custom of the hundreds of miners in the area. Aussie whit is something else, and we enjoyed being amongst the copious amounts of hilarious non-stop banter between the Aussies and the Kiwis, so much so that we were invited to camp right outside the Glengarry ‘Hilton’ Hotel!

“ANZAC Parade” – out in the sticks!!



All the pubs in this area relied on generators for electricity, and long drop loos were the only option! This was by far the best looking one we saw all day.... >>>



<<< **90 %** of all signage in and around Lightning Ridge is painted on car doors such as this



The signs say it all!

Decisions Decisions.... The Pub crossroads!
Only 3 Pubs - Tuff choice.....The Grawin,
The Shepyard Inn or The Glengarry
Hilton?



The main street

During the evening one of the friendly locals invited us to join him the next day to see a **real opal mine** in action. In the cold light of day we decided we would check out how safe his equipment looked before we would commit ourselves to descending 60 metres underground with him! This experienced miner (a retired electrician) had established a more professional looking mine than others we had seen. His two 50 x 50 metre square mining leases were on the edge of an area known as 'Millionaires Gully', where huge fortunes have been made, but not by him YET!



One by one we were lowered down a one metre diameter mine shaft on a hydraulic platform to a series of tunnels about 2.2 metres high and 40 long. A large diesel generator at ground level provided power for lighting and the hydraulics on all his excavating machines.

Graeme descending 60 metres below ground into this Opal mine

When something on the rock wall glistens the machines give way to the hand pick, a bright light and a much closer inspection. >>>



<<< It all starts like this: a 1 metre diameter hole 20 metres deep for \$1000 & then it's up to you to seek your fortune.

Our outback adventure is continually creating new opportunities for us to connect with the Aussie wildlife. Megan is yet to photograph the frogs that dominate the bathrooms, peeping out from under the loo seat, the shower curtain, and even the basin plug holes. Many of these little critters are foriegn to us Kiwis!



This cute little “shingle-back lizard” was out sunbathing on a bush track and our Roof-rack became home for this uninvited hitchhiker who bought his web with him!

In a small rural community just north of Bourke we arrived at Camaroo Station, with high expectations and ready to ride 'em Camels, only to find six had sadly drowned in the recent floods. The remaining mob of twenty was stranded on an island surrounded by hundreds of acres of water. The property owners were busy air dropping bales of hay to keep them and other stock fed who had reached higher ground. They were an enterprising farming couple who offer conference facilities

(Outback Bush style) and have some very interesting collections of mainly rural artefacts including a vast and comprehensive (if somewhat disturbing), Trap display. This display is recognised as the largest collection of traps in the world.



<<< This is a small portion of this collection. It included dingo traps, fox traps, mouse traps & even MAN traps!

For the last two months we have encountered plenty of flooded tracks like this which impede our progress no end as this photo indicates. >>>



A bit restricting you might say! The top of the fence went below the water level on the far side.

This was obviously a no go track and caused us to take a 300 hundred km detour. The landowner flew over his station earlier today mustering one of his smaller paddocks (a mere 10,000 acres). He advised us that there were 70,000 acres of his land under water and gave helpful directions for us to negotiate our way around this flooded area which was likely to remain underwater for months rather than weeks. This sign gives a phone number. And guess what? No cell phone coverage! >>>





With a beautiful sunset looming we arrived at the historic Hungerford Hotel just beyond the border gate which separates NSW and Queensland. These gates form part of the famous Dingo fence which stretches many thousands of kilometres across Australia.

After 250 km of tuff and corrugated tracks we set up camp across the road from the Hungerford Pub, dusted off and fronted up to the pub for dinner and an entertaining night with the locals.

Until we write again, we wish you well.

Cheers! Graeme & Megan

