

Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan

Newsletter Three

We left you last as we pulled in to the Hungerford Pub on the NSW Queensland boarder. We had a hilarious night there with 4 locals, and 2 bee keepers who where hunting out a pest free home for their bee hives, plus 4 other tourists who jointly own a small Cessna 172 plane and were enjoying one of their regular 'boys outback pub crawls'. Well it's Saturday night – no rush hour traffic in this town as not one single vehicle drove past the whole night – a fact the pilots noted, saying they could have touched down right outside the door, and proceeded to celebrate this remote main street by taking their chairs, their Bundi's & beers, and sat in the middle of the road until the wee hours!



The Hungerford Pub & the Locals

The next day, having travelled 250km down the track, we arrived late at Wanaaring, a flood troubled riverside town with a hastily built flood-bank around the perimeter of the Town centre. We thought a bush camp on the riverbank would do us, but it may be a mission finding a spot in the pitch dark, when a couple of scruffy unshaven guys with a tinny boat on top of their Ute pulled up outside the General Store next to us. Friendly chaps, they said Giddyay, and asked if we were here to catch Yabbies too? Admitting we had never even seen a Yabbie, they promptly invited us to camp alongside them and their wives and feast on these so-called local delicacies.



With nothing to lose, we followed their taillights along a bumpy, twisting one way track, ending up under some huge trees on the recently flooded & muddy banks of the Paroo River to find their well equipped camp, and their wives who were waiting for the large bags of salt the boys had been sent to the shop to fetch. They were a bit surprised to see guests! The



'tinny' was pushed out into the pitch dark river to check the nets, and soon the lads were back with their haul – buckets brimming full of angry flapping things that looked like a cross between a tiny crayfish & a crab. The catch was promptly thrown into the boiling salted water and the cooking timed down to the last second, then strained and tossed out onto the hessian tablecloth to cool. (as shown on page 1) Our hosts were eager to grab a Yabbie and show us how to pull off the tail, peel off the shell and savour the delicate meat inside. They were every bit as good as they proclaimed that they would be! We mastered the art of getting the sweet flesh out of the claws too!

Resuming our journey towards the desert towns of Innamincka & Birdsville, we continued to skirt around closed roads and taking detours that so often took us to remote spots that turned out to be highlights we could have missed, and of course the reverse applies also. From Wanaaring we travelled south west to White Cliffs to link up with a road to Tibooburra then on to Camerons Corner, a point where the three states of NSW, South Australia & Queensland intersect.

These remote outback areas in Australia so often lack the basics we assume small towns have these days. The mail & stores arrive twice a week, and cell phone and internet coverage is non-existent. Power is often supplied by generators supplemented by solar units, and the water quality can be poor. But, without exception the Pub remains open as the social centre of town, and the best source for obtaining local road conditions. The National Parks Offices and Information Centres kept us reliably informed that all roads to Innamincka & Birdsville were closed, but the 'locals' knew of a few back-roads and tracks that would get us there, albeit the long way! Just outside Tibooburra, we called into the historic 1870's Gold Rush town of Milparinka (Population 12) also a Cobb & Co stage coach stop-over point. You have to admire the work of the dedicated restoration workers who acknowledge and celebrate the heritage of these old towns.



The Milparinka Courthouse

Looking dusty and road-worn, we were promptly thrown in jail! Thankfully we were released just before sunset - it's been about 100 years since this court last tried a criminal here! >>>

This town had particularly grand local Government buildings which still grace this town. The explorer Charles Sturt discovered the area in 1845 whilst leading an expedition searching for the Inland Sea, then the 1870's gold rush put this town on the map.



Now excited to be nearing Camerons Corner, we pulled up outside the interstate gates through this very long & impressive Dingo Fence also known as the Dog Fence, The Rabbit Fence, The Worlds Longest Fence!

<< Megan opens The Interstate Gates

This 2 metre high Dingo Fence was built in the 1880's to stop the rabbit plague (which failed) then in 1914 it was repaired to keep the Dingos off the sheep grazing land. Originally this fence was 8,614 km long until it was shortened in 1980 to 5,614km. In this arid country of extremes, maintenance is difficult. The locals told us of huge sand storms gusting 160km/hour in Oct 2009 (when NZ was dusted with red sand also!) The fence was buried in places with three metres of sand, and in others blew gaps underneath just as deep.



We had arrived at Cameron's Corner. The corner marker was plotted in the late 1800's to mark the state boundary's to enable the local governments to apply rates to the settlers. The one lonely building here represents the cafe, the general store, the pub, the post office, the info centre, the camp ground and the petrol station (they ran out of fuel last week and don't know when to expect the next delivery!) The proprietors were pleased to see us. The floods are keeping the droves of tourists away who would normally be here at this time of year. On average 300 people stop here each day! At dusk, we were only the fifth vehicle that day. We set up camp and had a wonderful dinner with the only other couple who had stopped for the night.



<<< As the sun sets the jets continued to fly overhead, 400 suitcases at a time!!

The next morning we were waved goodbye from Camerons Corner. Both the northbound Old Strzelecki Track & the privately owned Bore Track were closed, so we took a more easterly track to Innamincka via some isolated cattle stations and the Dullingari Oil & Gas fields. From here the landscape began to change from vast arid desert plains to gas

& oil exploration fields. Pipes & steel constructions adorn much of the Innamincka Regional Reserve. Shortly after, we joined the northern end of the Strelecki Track for the final 50 km to reach the historical outpost of Innamincka at last.

The township was surrounded with glistening gibber rocks, flanked by Coopers Creek in full flood.

A ghost town by anyone's standards, this is normally the high tourist season but so few were making this journey due to the uncertainty of the road closures and long detours required. The local airport, with its chartered light aircraft flights, is all that is keeping Innamincka trading at this time. It must be a struggle to make ends meet as the cost of flying in provisions is making trading restrictive. E.g. One scooner of shandy & one black coffee cost \$15.60 Aussie!! The lovely modern dining room with seating for 100 was empty all night.

Australia's famous explorers, Burke and Wills, made history here at Innamincka. The 1860-61 Victorian Expedition was led by Inspector of Police, Robert Burke and his 2nd in Command, astronomer & surveyor William Wills. They were the 1st Europeans to traverse the Australian Continent from South to North (Melbourne to The Gulf of Carpentaria)

The story of their dramatic exploits and tragic deaths at Coopers Creek on their return journey have become part of Australian folklore. Burke & Wills led an advance party to the Gulf of Carpentaria, leaving a manned supply depot at Camp 65 on the banks of Coopers Creek, approx 70km North East of Innamincka, with instructions for them to wait 3 months for their return. The party remained there for 17 weeks and returned to the Darling River after burying supplies near the "Dig" Tree. Burke & Wills returned from their successful journey to this depot during the evening of the same day the depot party had departed. They found the message carved on the coolibah tree and located the provisions, but both Burke & Wills perished some weeks later near Innamincka, as they were now too weak and ill to catch up with the supply party.



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This face of Burke was carved in 1898 by John Dick >>>



<< More flood waters still arriving in NSW from North Queensland. Swift and 2m deep at Innamincka, it closed this track.

We left Innamincka bound for Birdsville via Noccundra, a detour of 571 km across. At the Noccundra Pub we purchased diesel (@\$1.89/litre, -55c more than average) a cold beer each and continued our journey, ending up on the other side of the closed Cooper Creek bridge near Nappa Merrie and close to

the Dig Tree, some 70 km from Innamincka, two days later!!

This sign confirms the difficulty we are having negotiating our way to our chosen destinations. Megan hasn't thrown her toys or maps out of the truck yet, but it's been close! She finds these signs very restrictive and a Map Readers nightmare. >>>

The buttresses at both ends of this bridge just north of Innamincka were washed out by floodwaters. Peaking at 11.2 metres in February isolating many people. This bridge is still intact but will be closed until at least Christmas, thus preventing us from travelling directly to Birdsville.



With four hours of slow-going behind us we stopped for lunch beside the Cadelga Homestead ruins.

<<< Graeme making himself at home beside the abandoned homestead!

On average we've seen only one vehicle per day for the last four days! Sharp stones and big washouts have restricted us to a maximum of 40km/h for most of the day. Slow, but the views were well worth it.



We passed through Cordillo Downs Station, once Australia's biggest sheep station (85,000 sheep) which now farms Poll Hereford cattle. The woolshed is still the biggest in the country, built in 1883 with local sandstone and a curved corrugated iron roof (the curve making it easier to pack and carry on camels) In its day this 120 stand shed annually hand

shored 82,000 sheep before the generator powered hand-pieces took over in 1907. The wool was scoured and dried (reducing its weight by 40%) before being packed out on teams of donkeys and camels to the rail head 1200km south, a journey that averaged 2 months.

Sheep farming was discontinued in the 1920's after years of droughts, then one particularly bad season when dingos took virtually the entire crop of lambs, so the remaining 42,000 sheep were taken by drovers to the southern markets.

Today they run 7000 cattle on this 7800 sq km property with 6 full-time staff. Only the shell of this historic woolshed remains, but the homestead & farm buildings still remain on these vast, flat and arid plains, hundreds of km from any neighbours.

You would have to love the life as it wouldn't suit just any one, but things are changing and the sign says it all, they muster

“by motor bikes, Toyotas & helicopters”. >>>

Nearing Birdsville, The 'black-top' came in to view; the Birdsville Development Road was in sight! Now travelling at 100 km/h, it seemed like we were flying. We laughed at the sign indicating that all road users must give way to aeroplanes on this dual carriageway as it also doubles as an emergency runway!

As the sun sets, we say goodbye for now, and we hope you've enjoyed our journey so far.

Cheers Graeme & Megan



