

# Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

**By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan**

## **Newsletter Four**

We arrived at Birdsville, tired and dusty after a few days of four wheel driving and bush-camping. We enjoyed long showers at the Birdsville camp ground, did several loads of washing, downloaded photo's, recharged batteries and enjoyed having phone and internet coverage.

Birdsville, a little town famous for its horse & camel race meeting in September each year is referred to as the Melbourne Cup of the Outback, it features 24<sup>th</sup> on the 'Top 40 World Party List'! The population swells from 100 to 6000 and the tiny airport becomes the busiest in Australia – just for the day! This old and historic pub draws people like a magnet & has done so since 1884. It's an iconic destination for many groups such as the annual variety Bash, Motorcycle tour groups, 4WD Safari's and Tag-Along groups, Helicopters and small fixed-wing aircraft, on the edge of the Simpson Desert.

### **The notoriously famous Birdsville Hotel >>>>**



As dusk fell we took a short walk to the Birdsville Hotel. The setting was surreal – 8 planes aglow with the red setting sun lined up alongside the front door of the Hotel, and only 3 vehicles! Ablaze with lights, the place was humming! The main bar was full - the buzz of conversation and laughter exciting, especially as we have been in such lonely and quiet places of late. In the smaller Lizards Bar we ordered counter meals; Roo Steak for Graeme, Barramundi for me. It was Ab Fab! The formal dining room was also full – and all on a Tuesday evening!

The beer is ice cold these days, however, we read of the famous Birdsville mail-man, Tom Kruse, who wrote about the days before refrigeration, 'your beer would be poured into a saucer, and you would have to continually blow on it to cool it down and of course to keep the flies away!'

The Birdsville 4WD Track (315km long) runs north from Marree (In South Australia) to Birdsville in South West Queensland. Once a challenge to 4X4 drivers, it still draws many modern-day explorers. Most visitors still prefer to camp but they no longer have to rely on sleeping under canvas, as they now have the choice of 27 air conditioned suites, and a very stylish dining room. The busy airport is conveniently located alongside the hotel. Four Qantas flights land each week plus numerous private planes and charter trips drop in regularly.

Birdsville has a good quality water supply (both hot and cold) A hot water bore (1219 metres deep) runs the geothermal power plant and provides this town with copious amounts of boiling hot water!



The summer average maximum temperature in Birdsville is 39 degrees Celsius.

Sadly for us, the Simpson Desert track was closed by flood waters just prior to 'Big Red', a mountain of sand 90 metres high; it is the first and largest of 1133 sand dunes, a legendary challenge for 4WD enthusiasts to conquer. 'Big Red' marks the Eastern edge of the Simpson Desert, 35 km west of Birdsville. Graeme had already enjoyed the opportunity to drive over 'Big Red' during his 2008 Outback Safari.

**Continuous Hot water is a real asset to Birdsville, this small remote desert township.**

**Alas, the Simpson Desert in the far distance is out of the question for Megan in 2010 >>>**



**<<< From the flooding between Birdsville & the Simpson Desert, this morning to this dry and arid salt-pan later in the day. Australia is certainly a country of great contrasts.**

In recent weeks we have inundated by huge swarms of grasshoppers which have appeared after hatching in the recent moist conditions. They are about the size of a small bird and they jump and fly and can hit you with quite a whack! The bathrooms are alive with them at night. They drive the Aussies mad as they can totally desecrate crops, fruit trees and gardens within hours.

We drove through huge swarms of them, slowing to assist airflow over the truck, but the swarms were about 2 metres deep and we still would end the day with them thick on the bumpers and the grill. Graeme was motivated to make a netting 'bra' for the front of the vehicle to keep these messy things out of the grill, radiator and the intercooler. Graeme still had to spend hours scrubbing the bumpers to remove the sticky carcasses with a stiff scrubbing brush.

We were fascinated by cheeky magpies that chose to feast on these dead insects stuck to the underside of the 4WD whenever we came to a halt.



Heading northwards out of Birdsville we admired a stand of rare Waddi Trees. Relics of the last Ice Age, the ones we saw were reported to be between 600 and 1000 years old. These grow in only 3 localities in the world all of which are on the perimeter of the Simpson Desert, in central Australia. This incredibly hard timber is so tuff it damages saws, axes and is resistant to drilling and termites. These insignificant looking trees were often used as fence posts. After a century these posts show virtually no deterioration.

### <<< **Waddi Trees – 1000 years old**

Leaving Birdsville behind us we travelled north and were curious about a set of homestead ruins shown on our GPS map, but not mentioned on any other maps we had. Following the GPS ‘pointer’ closely, with absolutely no track in sight, we covered 5km over the barron gibber stone plains. Whilst these ruins weren’t significant, their isolated and beautiful spot in the wilderness was so lovely, we made camp and watched the sun set on the horizon, and enjoyed another great meal out of our mobile deli kitchen.



Away from the lights of suburbia, it was a particularly dark night with no moon. At approx 2am we were awoken by the sound of a horny Bull bugeling & mumbleing under his breath. With heavy footsteps approaching at a steady pace we could hear his heavy breathing in our campsite, the ground trembled as he walked around us. Two metres off the ground and confident of our safety in the roof-top tent, but still concerned about our camp tables and chairs. It was an uncanny feeling, hearing this monster, but not being able to see him in the dark, we were not keen to shine a torch at him in case he took exception! By now we were fully dressed and fully awake, when, in the distance, we heard a very very feminine MOOO! Mr Horny Bull heard it too and seemed to hold his breath for an instant and then he was off! Calling out repeatedly, and forgetting all about us! In the morning light we found our camp site intact but his huge footprints were in the dust and sand all around our campsite, they were the size of dinner plates!!

Next morning we continued northward through the sleepy little towns of Bedourie and Boulia, before turning westward onto the Donohue Highway. We crossed the boarder into the Northern Territory & traversed the 'Plenty Highway' towards Alice Springs. Some 600km of dust and corrugations but we did find a few interesting things along the way.....

**One MONSTER termite mound >>>**



**<< One of many Dingos seen in the distance**



**And a few feathered friends >>>**



We were pleased to turn south off The Plenty Highway onto Cattlewater Pass (part of 'Binns Track') heading towards the East Macdonnell Ranges, and the 4WD track to Ruby Gap. Cattlewater Pass was a very pleasant surprise! Narrow, twisting, interesting and quite challenging with many wash-outs and creek crossings. We met a Tag-Along 4WD group from Perth on route who told us about the Old Ambalindum Homestead station camp they had stayed at. Ambalindum Station, an amazing 1.7 million acre property, boasts 850 kilometres of 4WD tracks for their guests to enjoy.



We spent three great days exploring the station with the benefit of some well drawn mud-maps. From rugged ranges and red rocky escarpments to rolling plains and deep gorges. Mostly dry river beds of deep soft sand were up to 500 metres across with stunning ghost gums lining the banks. Travelling east for approx 150km we never once reached the boundary!

The tracks varied from well maintained farm tracks to rough and seldom used stock routes with severe washouts and fallen rocks and trees across them. We were warned by the station manager that many of the tracks had not been driven on since before the wet season, and there had been a couple of unseasonal deluges of rain recently causing quite a bit of damage as well as a great deal of growth obscuring some tracks. Thankfully, many appeared on our GPS Topographical map system! For two days we remained in Low reduction, climbing through wash-outs and over ever-changing track surfaces from sand to sharp rocks, the tracks often vanishing before our eyes due to riverbed changes, or new fences having been erected over them!



On several occasions Megan opted to vacate her seat when the sides of some tracks had totally disappeared down the gully and chose to guide the Landcruiser through. A horse rider of many years, she claimed she wouldn't ask a horse to tackle much of the terrain we negotiated, especially the very steep sections! Having never had the benefit of Air Locker Diff's (front & rear) Megan suggested it was like an American Express card, as you wouldn't want to leave home without them!

Periodic use of the saw and our winch kept us on track. Two nights in a row we got home well after dark having negotiated particularly arduous tracks at times, which required hours of searching for the track as well as clearing trees etc. Exhausted, we got home safely, thanks to the GPS guiding us.

We seemed to have the whole place to ourselves, seldom having had to stop to open a gate – the smallest paddock on the property was the 70,000 acre horse paddock next to the homestead! Only cattle (Drought-Masters) were farmed here, no sheep, due to the uncontrollable Dingo population. We also saw two large herds of wild horses. Every animal we saw, feral or otherwise, looked in tip-top condition after the recent rains bought on a flush of fresh feed. The photo opposite was typical of the many water damaged tracks.



**Thank goodness for Air Locker Diff's!**

It was a true adventure negotiating our way home each night beneath some truly magnificent sunsets which had now become the norm. We had to take particular care to find a safe passage through and around the many washouts and river crossings after dusk.



Relaxing by the campfire was a great reward after three fabulous days of coaxing the Landcruiser over some truly demanding terrain! We were sorry to be saying goodbye to our hosts at Ambalindum Station

Arriving at Alice Springs just prior to dusk with the West Macdonnell Ranges in the background. It was time to dust off and have a few days relaxing!

We will be back on the road again soon!

**Cheers, from Graeme & Megan**

