

# Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

*By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan*

## **Newsletter Five**

A narrow “Gap” in the spectacular MacDonnell Ranges was our entrance to **Alice Springs**, claimed to be the geographical centre of Australia. With a population of 28,000, this is the first major town we have been in for quite some time! Nestled between two deserts, the Simpson and the Tanami, it is a popular stop over for tourists visiting ‘Uluru’ (Ayers Rock), with easy access via The Ghan rail-link from Adelaide to Darwin. The Alice Springs icon is the brilliant red **Sturt Desert Pea**. >>>



Taking in some of the sights we had a great time exploring ‘**The Transport Hall of Fame**’. Just about everything on wheels was represented there from vintage, to some surprisingly new heavy transport vehicles on display. The rail museum included one of the original Old Ghan engines,



plus a ‘First Class’ carriage with beautiful ornate timber interior, crimson velvet upholstery and beautifully crafted lead-light windows. Huge coal ranges in the battered and worn stainless steel compact kitchens were complemented by large Ice Boxes, for the champagne no doubt! The naming of The Ghan originated from the old Afghani Cameleers who previously provided the primary means of transport through the vast deserts to Alice Springs.



**The Old Ghan**



**Pondering ‘First Class’ Rail Travel!**

In contrast, many of the Kenworth Rigs, which were magnificently detailed and presented, were under 10 years old.



There is a very impressive display of restored trucks and memorabilia, together with hundreds of large gold framed portraits recognising and paying tribute to the many pioneers, men and women, who moulded the road transport industry of Australia.

Every conceivable mode of transport was recognised in the Transport Hall of Fame, from motor bikes, delivery vans, cars, buses and farm machinery. Dedicated volunteers and mechanics are devoting their time to the museum and painstakingly restoring these vehicles.

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Heavy Road transport is often seen passing through the streets of Alice Springs, delivering huge industrial equipment, especially to the various mining sites. We witnessed this huge load, reported to be the second of three power generators heading 30km south of town. It required three very large trucks, two in front and one behind, linked by long steel drawbars.



**No Weigh Bridges Please!**



**Where the Rubber meets the Road....**

'Alice' has a much acclaimed Desert Park. An informative display of three desert habitats, the Desert Rivers, Sand Country, and the Woodlands. All the plants and animals you would expect were on display, plus some that you may never get to see, such as this little fellow: the **Thorny Devil** >>>



From here we paid a visit to 'The School of Air', known as the Worlds Largest Classroom. We were fortunate to arrive



while a class was in progress. We watched the school teacher in her 'virtual' classroom, speaking to children far away with modern technology, computers and internet connection broadcasting up to a 1200km radius to children in very remote areas. We were impressed how in-contact she was, we listened to her interacting with each student, and the children communicating back to the teacher. Cameras hanging from the ceiling (see photo opposite) focused on her, or a white board or a lesson page being transmitted directly to the individual childrens computer screen using a

mirosoft based system. Webcams on the students desks, far away in isolated locations gave the teacher a full view of the students and their work. The usual subjects are covered by 12 separate teachers, plus some unusual topics such as guitar lessons and gymnastics on line!! Even English, as a second language, was catered for. The interaction between the children and the teachers was to be admired.



The cost of setting up a home classroom is between \$15000 and \$18000, partially subsidised by the Government. Children are supervised during class time, by a parent or a tutor hired by the family. The students are visited by their teacher twice a year, and each student travels to Alice Springs three times to attend camps where sport and other fun activities bring the children together.

<<< This map shows the location of each of the 133 enrolled students. The area covered by this school is 13 million square km.



## <<< The Tropic Of Capricorn

Talking amongst other campers, we are constantly amazed at the number of retired Australians living in their caravans for months at a time to follow the warm weather. They are called **'The Grey Nomads'**. "Stay North of the Tropic of Capricorn from May to

September" they say. We agree! We had been feeling the cooler temperatures, living under canvas as we do, so travelling the Stuart Highway, north from Alice Springs, we knew we were on the right course for the best weather during the winter months. We read that 30,000 caravans had moved north from Perth alone, to avoid the cooler months. Graeme often says there must be a lot of empty houses in Australia! This is truly a nation of campers, and some classic bumper stickers sum up the spirit well eg *'Adventure before Dementia'* *'Over the hill are we, caravanning and free!'*



### **Graeme agrees, North of here is best!**

North of Alice Springs, on the Stuart Highway we came to the small village of Aileron. From well down the highway we could see the imposing statue of an Aboriginal Hunter high up on the hill behind the village. Then a woman and child came in to view, standing on the plains below. The local publican commissioned these at his own expense to honour the local Anmatjere people. 12 metres high & 8 ton each, made with a steel frame, wire mesh & Ferris cement at a cost of \$165000. This publican has some unusual ideas about marketing and making a name for Aileron, these statues are a great credit to him. He loves the place so much he has chosen this as his final resting place, he has planned his own funeral in detail, and his inscribed coffin stands waiting at the end of the public bar – complete with his 'date of departure'!!

### **The striking Anmatjere Statues of Aileron**



**Wycliff** Well - Talking of quirky



places that have made a name for themselves, here is another intriguing settlement just north on the Stuart Highway. The speed limit here is 130 km/h, could this be to outrun an Unidentifued Flying Object? Who knows! Scientists, TV documentary crews and astrologists come from all over the world to study these strange & disturbing sightings of 'space ships' & other outer-worldly phenomina that occur from time to time. The local Roadhouse / Servo has certainly taken up the theme giving visitors a seemingly uncanny feeling!

**A Fitting welcome to 'Wycliff Well'**



<<<< The Welcoming Party at the entrance to the Wycliff Well Roadhouse & Caravan Park.

TTTT Even the bathrooms & facilities have an alien connotation, in fact the whole park is inhabited by aliens such as these!

The entrance to the 'Femalians' Facilities! >

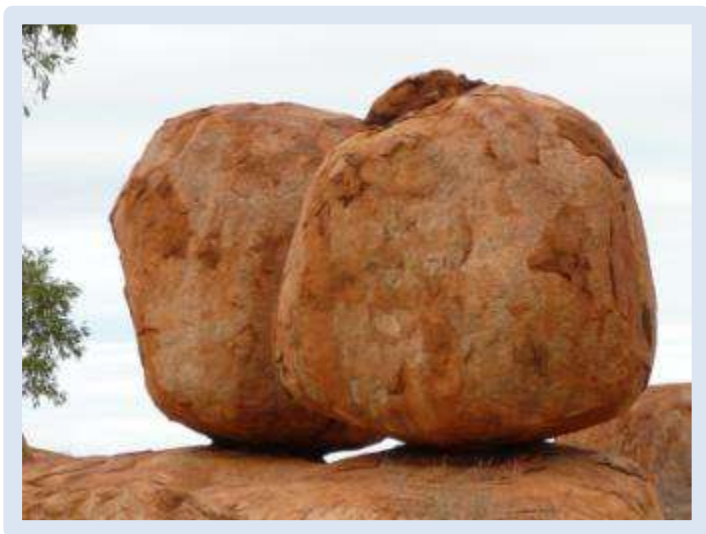


We've seen a lot of wildlife on a regular basis throughout our travels.



<< This time, it's the real deal, not an alien! This green monster, a prehistoric looking **Goanna** was taking his chances to cross a busy highway. At approx 1.2 metres long and very agile, we watched him run quickly across the road and scale a tall tree to safety as we watched from the 'safety' of our Landcruiser....

Still travelling north and approx 100km south of Tennant Creek, just off the Stuart Highway, is a group of immense granite boulders. These boulders, known as **‘The Devils Marbles’** are precariously balanced and look most spectacular, especially with the sun highlighting these ochre coloured rocks at sunrise and sunset. Unfortunately for us the day was overcast, so our photographs don’t emphasize their true brilliance.



These magnificent rock formations, now forming part of a Conservation Reserve, covered several hectares and this area also includes a particularly nice camping area.

**‘The Devils Marbles’** are often used as a backdrop by sales and marketing people, especially the automotive industry.

As dusk fell we pulled up at the iconic **‘Daly Waters Outback Pub’**, just west of the Stuart Highway, 275 km south of Katherine.

This pub has a huge reputation and we are looking forward to a classic night of entertainment. We will tell you more about our big night out in our next newsletter.

Well, that’s us for now, as we look at you through the heart of Australia! >>>

Sent with kind regards from Graeme & Megan



