

# Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

*By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan*

*Newsletter Number Seven*

In our last newsletter we promised to bring you some highlights of **Darwin**, and our visit to this very interesting tropical city in the Northern Territory.

**Darwin** was named after Charles Darwin, a scientist and evolutionist who explored the harbour aboard 'The Beagle'. Darwin was settled in 1864, but was slow to grow due to its isolation. Then in 1940 10,000 allied troops moved here to defend the coastline during WWII. In Feb '42 the Japanese bombed Darwin. This disaster was followed by the devastating 'Cyclone Tracy' after which the city was rebuilt with very few of the old buildings remaining. It is now a very modern city and still remains a major military base.

We enjoyed fabulous weather every day with temperatures averaging 33 degrees. A regular sea breeze kept humidity low. Perfect weather to do some shopping and enjoy cafe meals at the Wharf Precinct, along with taking in the colourful markets.

Our favourite was the Mindil Beach Sunset Market. We enjoyed outstanding food stalls specialising in local delicacies like the delicious Prawns on the Barbie, fresh Barramundi fish and local mangos. Great music from modern didgeridoo, to jazz, rock and reggae added to the wonderful atmosphere. Just on sunset the markets were forgotten as hundreds of market goers flocked to the beach and the sand hills to watch the sun drop into the sea and witness a stunning sunset. Then it was back to the markets again for more food, more music and more fun!

The next day **V8 Supercar** fever hit town commencing with the huge car transporters rolling in to the city in a spectacular parade. The drivers autograph signing session followed. Large crowds had assembled to welcome their heroes and to have hats and posters signed, and to buy the latest supporters merchandise branded HOLDEN or FORD! (Or should we say FORD or HOLDEN!)



The next day we were trackside by 9am for the commencement of the **Sky City Triple Crown – Round 8– 2010 V8 Supercar Championship Series** at Hidden Valley Raceway. “The Greatest Show on Wheels” >>>

The Hidden Valley track is 2.9km long, runs anti-clockwise and includes the longest straight of all the tracks in the series, which incorporates two hair-pins. The track was beautifully presented and is said to be a favourite amongst the drivers.

We positioned ourselves on the shaded mound above the gravel trap where we had great views up and down the track and especially through the tricky chicanes before the start of the pit straight. As Graeme had been here before, he knew this promised to be an action packed spot where overtaking manoeuvres were likely. A BIG screen stood 50 metres away, perfect for watching replays and action from the rest of the track, and see other on course entertainment.

Day One was practice for the V8 Supercars / V8 Utes / Formular Ford / Touring Car Masters / Improved Production Cars / Holden HQ Series and qualifying for some of the supporting classes.

Day Two. At 7am practice and qualifying got underway in front of a crowd of 20,000. In each class this was the final chance to improve your position on the grid for race 1. The hard charging antics of many was their undoing, but the skills of the top drivers was increasingly evident with each lap. At 5pm the days racing concluded and the much anticipated concert immediately got underway. The Aussie rock band, Grinspoon played to the already hyped up crowd. This venue was perfect and had a huge, high quality sound system. A great finale after an exciting day at the track!

Sunday: The big day when everything counts! – We arrived to secure our vantage spot at 5am. Darkness was still upon us, but coffee and bacon & egg rolls etc were available for the avid fans



and thousands of petrol-heads!! The Sunday paper was on sale filled with yesterday's results and commentaries!

There were few surprises in the top grid positions, but the races were hard fought to the end in every class. Graeme's old racing buddy, Jim Richards (who Graeme began his racing career with in Go Karts and Teenage Driving Competitions in the 1960's, then International Rally Driving in the '70's) did fabulously well cleaning up The Masters Series – an impressive 4 straight wins in his 1964 Falcon Sprint.

**The V8 Supercar** 69 lap (200km) race was the highlight of the day, with 2 mandatory pit-stops incorporating the normal Dunlop control compound tyres together with one set of soft qualifying compound tyres.

The young Kiwi driver, Shane van Gisbergen, was seriously pushing ahead, one car at a time, but at the end of the day Whincup won for Holden despite a spirited sprint home by Winterbottom (Ford) with young Shane third. The crowd was happy – with plenty of heckling amongst the fans.

But that was all forgotten as the concert started with the dance music group 'Sneaky Sound' warming up the crowd followed by rockers 'Gyroscope', both popular Aussie bands which rounded off a fantastic weekend. For Graeme this was a great weekend of top motor sport, which he dearly loves, for Megan a whole new experience!



<<< Between-race entertainment included full-throttle, high horse-power truck race demonstrations and as for these Motor Cycle stunt riders, they are highly skilled and fearless. They had the crowd with them all the way!

Departing Darwin, our 4x4 driving route was again thwarted with flood waters. The Kakadu National Park, east of Darwin was virtually inaccessible, so we chose an interesting alternative to the main drag, travelling south via some interesting little towns like **Humpty Doo**, famous for great Burgers. Graeme had a tasty Buffalo burger and Megan the Barramundi burger! Then it was on to Pussy Cat Flats, and Grove Hill which sported a historic, if some-what shabby & drab pub.

It was built in the 1930's during the gold mining boom, and it has not altered since. Whilst this pub is still operating we doubted it had ever been swept, and the copious cob-webs were definitely 'originals'! This corrugated iron building was still complete with it's original metal louver windows, and the local status symbols in the car park outside as shown below.



This Holden Ute won't be ready for racing any time soon! >>>



Returning to Katherine we headed south-west, rejoining the **Savannah Way** (the highway between Darwin and Broome) The traffic on this highway was almost exclusively holiday makers, camper vans, caravans, camper trailers, 4x4's with roof top tents or Ute's with Swags stacked on top. These travellers out numbered all other traffic 10 to 1.



(It's like a cult here; all these holiday makers religiously wave to each other as they pass by.)

The rest areas we passed were jammed full with free campers. We pulled into one such rest area about 5pm, securing the last small spot remaining. With no facilities other than one pit toilet, campers fended for themselves. Camped next to us in a tiny pup-tent was a cheerful cyclist setting about cooking her dinner.



This tiny 71 year old lady was truly inspirational. "Lizzie" escapes the winter in Victoria for 3 months each year by having a solo cycling holiday in the north. She tows a small trailer with all her gear, and listens to her Ipod as she goes!

Note: the High-vis jacket and self-preservation flag. >>>



**Gregory National Park:** finally a park with FULL access and no flood waters to hamper our 4x4 journey! We arrived via Victoria River, rejoining a portion of the 'Binns Track', which leads into the western edge of the Gregory National Park and follows

the Bullita Track through what had once been the Bullita Cattle Station. This isolated and rugged one-way 4x4 track follows the old stock route. A broad river crossing at the outset had Megan preparing to swim (windows down & seat-belt off is the norm for all river crossings!). This river crossing could be treacherous. A very faintly defined sign indicated, 'keep left of the markers to



stay on the flat rock shelf which zigzags a path between some deep water holes either side.

Once we were safely across we found the very rocky terrain and obscure track slow going, but very picturesque. This track wove its way between rocky escarpments, through gorges and valleys which opened onto plains covered with long grass and plenty of trees. The unusual but amazing **Boab trees**, are plentiful in this area and stand out with their glistening white bark. One huge Boab tree in particular dwarfed our Landcruiser. >>>



Surprisingly, we had this track and the pick of all the lovely shady riverside camp-sites to ourselves with no other 4x4 'explorers' in sight for three days! At the end of this track we turned south onto the Bullita Access Road, then east to tackle the Tuwakam Track which links up with the Bucannan Highway at Jasper Gorge.



<<< This '4x4 Only' track was relatively easy going until we hit the mid-way point some 20km later, where we were forced to slowly 'walk' our Landcruiser in low ratio over the sharp, flat limestone rocks at 2km max! This area was arid and quite barren, so we were intrigued to find tell-tale signs and footprints of large animals – then we were astounded to discover some!



**Scattered Water Buffalo  
and  
Wild horses thrive here.**

Departing The Northern Territory and entering Western Australia is more daunting than the average airport immigration procedure! We had depleted our stocks of fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts and honey, but still managed to forget a couple of apple cores in the rubbish! Nothing gets past these vigilant Government agents.



<<< Ever been strip searched?  
This is where your car gets it!

In recent years The Northern Territory has seen fit to impose speed restrictions on its highways of 130 km/h, so no longer could we enjoy the liberty of going as fast as we liked.....(as if our fully laden 3.8 tonne Landcruiser was ever going to beat the land speed record!) >>>



Having now arrived in Western Australia we had to further reduce our maximum speed to 110km/h as this is their state law.

As we crossed into another time zone today we have put our watches back by another hour and a half, so we're now out of time!

We'll be talking to you again soon from the beautiful **Lake Argyle**, Australia's 'inland sea', but for now its (as they say here) **See ya later mate!!**

Kind regards from Graeme & Megan