

Our 2010 Australian Outback Safari

By Graeme Barker and Megan Swan

Newsletter Number Eight

In our last newsletter we left you at the Northern Territory Border. Having now passed through the border control quarantine check point into the Kimberley region of Western Australia, we travelled 40km south west to the beautiful **Lake Argyle**.

This is Australia's largest body of fresh water covering 2000 sq km. It was created in 1971 by the damming of the Ord River and the flooding of the rugged Durak Family cattle station in the untamed landscape of the Carr Boyd Ranges. This created a reservoir for a



massive irrigation scheme in Kununurra, some 70 km away. A narrow gap in two ranges at the northern end required only a short wall dam which was constructed of local high grade aggregate at a cost of \$22 million. The Durak Homestead was relocated to higher ground nearby, stone by stone, and rebuilt as a museum complete with the family graves and their headstones.

The following afternoon we boarded the **Silver Cobbler II** and set off on a magical sunset cruise.

This gave us spectacular views for miles, cruising at approx 28 knots in an aluminium multihull boat powered by three 225 hp 4 stroke outboards. Cruising through some of the 90 islands and inlets, whilst it was impossible to see the distant shores of the lake. We saw plenty of wildlife, little rock wallabies, and wonderful birdlife. Greg, the skipper, attracted fish who were only too keen to come to the surface for a little bread. Catfish thrive here, and are commercially fished (but sold as "Silver Cobbler" for marketing purposes)



We fed the amazing '**Spitting Archer Fish**', who squirt fine jets of water at bugs and flies to bring them down to the water's surface. An accurate quick squirt of water certainly induced us to drop bread for them! All this activity on the water's surface caught the attention of those much higher up the food chain.

Fresh water crocs are plentiful, and they soon slid quietly from the shoreline and came cruising across to join the feeding frenzy! >>>



As the setting sun sank low on the horizon we cruised into a bay where the water was as smooth as silk to capture the last rays of the golden Kimberley sun. The Skipper was offering enticements, a glass of 'floating champagne' to any keen swimmers. A few of us took the bait! Megan took the plunge into the pristine water (a warm 25 degrees) having been assured that the 'freshies' (fresh water crocs) were not aggressive, and their throat was only large enough to swallow much smaller prey! A glass in hand, Megan floated happily in the sunset, as a tray of nibbles was ferried out on an upturned Esky lid. Graeme maintained his role as the official photographer and topped up the bubbles!



<<< Back at the camp ground the infinity-edge pool, overlooking Lake Argyle made for an impressive safe swimming alternative!

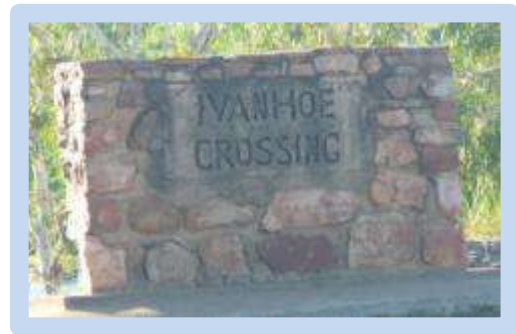
The Ord River Irrigation Scheme originally commenced with a much smaller dam near Kununurra. This was the dream of pioneer 'Kimberley Durak'. Later, with the much larger Lake Argyle dam built, it has resulted in being one of the largest and most ambitious irrigation schemes in Australia.

From the air the fully irrigated alluvial flat lands at Kununurra resemble a huge patchwork quilt with thousands of acres of canal fed market gardens and orchards growing an impressive variety of crops. Paw paws, rice, chick peas, pumpkins, maize, mangoes and dozens of other crops. It is said that there is sufficient water in this scheme to provide water for the whole of Western Australia, if only they could get it there economically. (Probably not in our life-time)

This area is where much of the movie "**Australia**" starring Nicole Kidman was filmed.

Alongside these agricultural wonders stands the Rio Tinto Diamond mine. This mine is one of the world's largest suppliers of diamonds and is renowned for the highly prized rare **Pink Diamond**, worth approx 20 times the value of white diamonds!!

The road west led us to a most spectacular river ford. **'The Ivanhoe Crossing'**. This causeway is a curved concrete ford with bollards on the low side. Crossing this wide expanse of water was a thrill with plenty of swift water, not to mention a 'Salty' sunbathing on an exposed rock nearby! >>>



That evening we found a lovely riverbank camp site on the lower Ord River. The wide smooth water was flanked by tall gums. We marvelled at a chap camping within 2 metres of the water's edge, with his 'Tinny' alongside him after a day of Barramundi fishing. He had no apparent regard for the dangerous Salty crocs nearby! During that night we heard

regular loud splashes in the river nearby being made by large Salt Water Croc's hunting. Loud choruses of 'Barking Owls' in the trees above kept us awake. These owls are quite like the little NZ native owl (the 'Morepork'), but make a sound like a dog barking!

This is the stuff nightmares are made of!!



Early the following day we visited the **Parrys Lagoon Nature Reserve**, where a huge body of wet land attracts thousands of birds. Board-walks out onto the viewing platforms provided quite a spectacle, as we watched shags diving and surfacing with good sized fish!

Continuing north along a rough 4WD track, badly scoured with frequent wash-outs, we had outstanding views of high rocky escarpments to the west. Broad tidal flats flanked the edges of the Lower Ord River and the Cambridge Gulf. To the N/ west was the port town of **Wyndam**.

Wyndam, “Top Town of the West” is the most northerly town in West Australia. It is historically linked to the cattle industry where it became the first ‘live-export’ cattle port in the country. Now it is home to commercial crocodile farming.

Ironically both the fresh water crocs and their salt water relatives are protected. Croc Hunting in the 1940’s & 50’s almost wiped them out. We visited a Croc Farm and saw some large live exhibits. A male salty can live up to 70 years, feeding on buffalo, feral pigs, wallabies and the like.



Some of the breeding stock at this farm are “problem” crocs, relocated here due to anti-social behaviour, e.g. consuming pets! We heard tales of dogs being grabbed while out on a leash for a walk, and even horses falling victim to these monsters. They have survived on earth for more than 2 million years (before dinosaurs!) The primary export is croc skins destined for Europe for making shoes, belts & handbags. Locally they sell croc burgers which taste a little like chicken.

We took a 4x4 track south-west from town, as we were heading for ‘El Questro’ on the Gibb River Road in the Kimberley. The **Karunji Track** is the coastal route around the edge of the magnificent Cockburn Ranges, commencing at the **Boab Prison Tree**. This tree, and other hollow Boab’s like it, were said to be utilized by “Black-birders” – back in the day, young aboriginals were captured for use as slaves in the pearl industry. These trees provided ‘holding cells’ during their transportation across the state.



This track was ill-defined as it crossed the salt flats. We stuck rigidly to the dotted track shown on the GPS rather than any visible sign of a ‘track’ initially, and then when we neared the Cockburn Ranges it became very rough and slow, with frequent large wash-outs to negotiate, and deep holes of Bull-dust. Causing us concern were the huge black clouds threatening rain. Any amount of rain here would cause this Bull-dust to become deep and sticky, and probably impassable. We pushed on until well after dusk, frequently having to stop and search for alternative creek crossings where the original track had been washed away! We made it across the Pentecost River in the pitch dark, and then sought hot showers and a camp-site well above sea-level at the **Home Valley Station!**

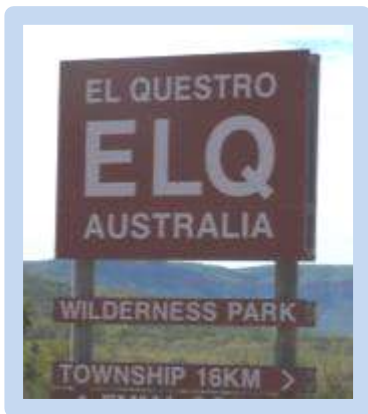


The rain never came, however we heard that a huge storm in May was the last rain they had and this instantly closed the **Karunji Track**. Graeme said he found this track totally unrecognisable from when he last did it 10 years ago, but it was very challenging and exciting none the less!

Graeme was confident that the base of this river crossing was safe to traverse as he had made this crossing twice in 2008. This photo was taken on our return crossing the following day on our way to the “**El Questro Wilderness Park.**” >>>



This Wilderness Park is still a working station with tourism as a mainstay. The Station ‘Township’ offers a choice of unpowered campsites in the compound, private bush camp sites alongside the river and boutique accommodation in fancy tents along with luxurious cliff-top bungalows. The big lure for us was the hundreds of acres with 4x4 tracks into the gorges complete with hot springs and range-top scrambles. We were disappointed some of these tracks were closed, or were only available to tour groups for much of the day.



Having been here twice in the past 10 years, Graeme was sorry to see little had been done to improve this park on the popular Gibb River Road. Obviously the revenue earned at this popular 4x4 destination was considerable and was not being spent here. The \$69 fee per night for an unpowered site which included a pass into the park, was considered to be excessive by all the 4x4 campers we spoke to.

We toasted our adventure to El Questro Wilderness Park with a nice bottle of Merlot, high up on a ridge top after a most enjoyable day exploring this station property and then we made our way back to our camp-site via several of these rocky stream-bed tracks. >>>





An attractive spot at sunset for a glass or two of Merlot don't you think?



Some outstanding spots at
El Questro Wilderness Park
Accessible only by 4x4 vehicles



These 'residents' patrol the camping areas and the 4x4 tracks!!

Emma Gorge – also part of El Questro Wilderness Park. >>>

Emma Gorge is stunning, as is the resort styled accommodation, gardens, pool & restaurant. They don't cater for campers here. International tourists fly in / fly out, or arrive via luxury 4x4 safari coaches. Fortunately the cafe is available to all!

Graeme being rewarded with a large Latte after a long hot Grade 3 hike into Emma Gorge. For some obscure reason no Toyota 4x4 tracks could be found here! >>>



<<< We frequently come across carefully built rock cairns such as these examples.

Travellers rely upon these to mark a safe route across vast windswept plains, deserts or perhaps marking a safe water crossing.

These days building cairns appears to be an Aussie pastime! We often see them on the tops of high peaks or points of interest along the way. Many following travellers feel compelled to place 'just one more stone' on top.

This photo marks the end of our visit to the El Questro Wilderness Park, and also the end of the Gibb River Road. We will now head south via Doon Doon, Crocodile Hole and Turkey Creek on our way to the Purnululu National Park, the home of the world renown **Bungle Bungle Ranges**.

Until we write to you again, we bid you all farewell for the time being.

Keep fit, keep well and enjoy.

Kind regards and best wishes from Graeme & Megan