

Adelaide to NT, Savannah Way and QLD May to July 2011

Again, Winter approached and it was time to head North to the warmer weather. We planned to spend some time in and around Alice Springs on our way to Darwin, and then after a stint of work in the Top End, and catching up with family there, we made plans to head over to Queensland on the Savannah Way. A route through central QLD and NSW would take us back home.



Special points of interest:

- Stuart Highway and Alice Springs
- Savannah Way
- Outback Campsites

Stuart Highway to Darwin

We have travelled the Stuart Highway so many times now it feels as though we could do it with our eyes shut. But we still love doing this trip and find parts of it interesting.

We stayed a night at Mambray Creek (Mt Remarkable NP, south of Port Augusta) as our first overnighter, then a night was spent at a gravel pit north of Coober Pedy. (The gravel pit is one of those spots we found a long time ago and we always stop there now, although it is a fair day's drive to reach there by nightfall. An early morning start then saw us arrive in Alice Springs by mid-afternoon.

We were intrigued to find the park was only half full - in the Dry Season, a time traditionally full of tourists in and around the Centre. And the roadside stops had few vans in them overnight.

We spent a few days in Alice Springs, then went out to Redbank Gorge in the West Macdonnells for several more days. The weather was beautiful - warm days and cold nights. You really can't beat the ridge top campsite views! When we left Red Bank, we headed into Alice Springs, filled up with fuel and kept going northwards on the Stuart Highway to Darwin.

By the time we arrived in Darwin, parks were fuller, and roadside stops were pretty close to capacity each afternoon by 3.00pm. This was mid-May.

Darwin was only remarkable for family connections and catching up with friends. There was a family wedding which brought our son and his family over from NZ and so we caught up with the grandchildren. Lovely!

Toward the end of our stint in the city we closely monitored the road conditions to make sure we could do the Savannah Way. It was only a week before we left that the Calvert and Robinson Rivers were passable, and we knew we could take that route.

I loved the Savannah Way for the freedom to camp anywhere you liked. There was a lot of tracks which lead off to the side of so many creeks or billabongs and you would be hard pressed not to find a suitable spot to camp. There was so much less traffic than I expected (having once done the GRR and experienced its crazy drivers).

I found the van's in-built washing machine invaluable on this trip. Using the "washing-in-a-bucket-with-soapy-water" technique, we washed clothes as we went and then used the spin cycle on the machine before hanging the washing out at the end of a day's travel. In the dry weather clothes dried in about three hours. This can only be done using either the generator or a big inverter and a hefty array of batteries (we have 520watts of solar panels, four big batteries and an 1800 watt inverter).

The trip through central QLD and NSW was glorious. I felt the country and the towns were all fascinating. Many of the small towns' caravan parks charge \$10 a night or less for a powered site. Or let you camp for nothing.

The Savannah Way

It was about 8.30am when we left Darwin on 2 July, and headed down the Stuart Highway. We knew it would be a long day's drive and we were keen to get going. But when there are vans all around you in a caravan park, it is hard to pack up too early as the noise will disturb others. We had rolled in the evening the night before, and put away all the paraphernalia which we collect when we are in one place for a few weeks.

We called in to Katherine to do some last minute grocery shopping and checked the road conditions at the Katherine Tourist Office. We wanted to check the advisability of travelling on a small connecting road from Roper Bar to Doomadgee, near Cape Crawford (Raymond's Bend) as it would save quite a bit of distance if we could take that road. Advice was that it seemed OK. As indeed it was....

We turned East at Mataranka and headed out on the Roper Highway to Roper Bar. Largely unremarkable country, the road was sealed for most of the way, with all but the last 35 kms of the road sealed bitumen (but narrow so we had to get off the road if another vehicle approached). There was a reasonable amount of traffic - perhaps as it was a Saturday, and

people were heading into town for the night?

We called into Roper Bar to top up the fuel, with the next fuel available 360kms away at Borroloola. The Roper Bar store is a hodge podge of ramshackle buildings and with rubbish strewn around. The fuel bowsers are behind a wire fence, which was too tight a turn for the car and van to fit, so Val emptied a jerrycan of diesel into the car and filled the jerry can at the bowsers. I used the toilets at Roper Bar and first had to get a key to a badly bolted washroom with broken down facilities - (the tap in the basin missed a handle completely). A health inspector would have a field day out there. But the general store seemed to have a good range of food, although I didn't look too closely as we didn't need to buy anything there. From Roper Bar Eastwards the road narrowed to more of a track, and there were some dips and minor corrugations but nothing too bad. We managed to do about 60 or 70kms an hour along this track and made reasonable time. We were aiming to reach the campsite at St Vidgeons Ruins for the night, another 69kms further on from Roper Bar.

We drove through interesting flat country, with a number of creek crossings and billabongs which made for scenic travelling.

About 59 kms from Roper Bar is a popular campsite called Tomato Island - which is not an actual island but rather a stretch of flat areas along the Roper River.. Talk about a crowded site! I reckon there would have been about 50 vans all crowded in there. Apparently the site is on the river opposite the Ngkurr community, and some people stay here for up to 18 months, with regular runs across to the community for provisions. For the next 10kms we could see groups of campers and vans clustered along the river. I am sure you could find a quiet spot if you tried.

2 and 3 July

Lomarium Lagoon

But our aim was for the quieter and more private type of camp and so we found a lovely, scenic spot on the Lomarium Billabong behind St Vidgeon's Ruins. All by ourselves, we had the van beside a nice stretch of water with water lillies and birds as our outlook. There were few mossies so had a nice evening, with a cool breeze which meant a nice night's camping. We arrived at 6.00pm which was just as the sun was setting. Thank goodness we had a curry for dinner already hot in the Eco Pot (a thermal cooker). We travel with it in the sink, and after a few bad bumps I had hoped it would not be on the floor - but all was well.



Lomarium Lagoon

We had not closed the fridge or door vents and we had a bit of red dust on the floor and around the kitchen bench. This was addressed promptly and no more dust! And, I might add, after Val

plugged a hole under the van near the door well with sealant. A particular cover had shifted under the van which should not have, and uncovered the offending hole. (Where we had pulled up in the evening, there was a line of dust on the ground for about 20 metres which had fallen from the van as we pulled up!)

We spent two days at the lagoon and enjoyed the absolute peace and quiet. There were some other folk camped about 200 metres away but we didn't hear or see them.

4 July

Towns River

From St Vidgeon's Ruins the road continued on Eastwards in much the same condition. There were some creek crossings but nothing to be remotely worried about.

We were headed for the Towns River where we had been told the camping was special. Friends with a Kedron had stayed at the river's edge on a rocky ledge. When we arrived we looked for the road down to the rocky ledge at the edge of the Towns River (which is a major river) and started to descend down a washed out track. Too late, we realised the van's wheels were going to fall into a large washout and tried to reverse out.

The car went on strike and couldn't cope with the van's weight and size. The ignomy of it all - we had to be towed out by a fellow traveller, pulling the van from behind.

Then we found the alternate track down to the river's edge, pulled up on the ledge and set up camp. It was a million dollar view. But soon it became clear the day was hot and glary, and the wind was swirling sand and dust right through the van. We pulled the long-suffering van and car back up to the main campground and set up in a nice little spot among the vegetation all to ourselves. (At dusk, the rocky ledge was swarming with camper trailers, Ultimates and Kimberley Kampers. It was camp city!). I am so glad we moved.

We found at a number of places it was hard to fit into official camp sites as there are overhanging trees, bollards or tight corners to back into. The moral of this story is that if you have a van longer than about 18 foot internal you may have some trouble in places on the Savannah Way. Our van is 19 foot internal and there was a couple of places it was tricky. I should add that you would always find a spot somewhere, but it may not be near the rivers or in official campsites. That could of course be a blessing.

5 and 6 July

Lorella Springs

The next day we moved on. The road had some corrugations but it was still fine. In fact we saw perfectly ordinary little onroad vans travelling the Way.

We called into Butterfly Springs and quite liked the camp site there but moved on. I would stay there next time...Note: there are only two sites which would fit a van our size and other campers often take these spots, so be early if you have a bigger rig. By about 1.00pm we had arrived at Lorella Springs. It is quite nice (but not quite the green grassed oasis the pamphlets lead you to believe). Its main attractions are the nearby hot and warm springs and the happy hour camaraderie at 5.00pm each day. And there are of course hot showers and toilets.

The second day we were there we visited the hot springs called Nudie Springs, some 19 kms out from the campground. It is a lovely spot although I didn't appreciate having to open and close four bloody gates on the way there and then back again. On the track coming back we got bogged and Val had to winch us out. Thank God it wasn't with the van on the back! The car was covered with black mud! (At this point I stopped whinging about the four bloody gates, as Val was not in the mood to listen...)

7 July

Gravel pit, East of Borroloola

I would like to have stayed longer at Lorella Springs, but at \$27 a night for a camp site (no power or water) there were equally nice spots waiting, I was sure, where we didn't have to pay to use our own facilities. ☺ It was easy to fill up the water tanks along the way (we filled up at Lorella Springs and you can fill up at any of the numerous creek crossings. Our van has separate washing and drinking water tanks, and we have a fine filter on any water going into the tank from a river or questionable source.

On this stretch of the road, there were a few river crossings and lots of gravel pits or tracks leading off alongside billabongs or creeks. It would not be hard to find a good camp for the night.

The road stayed in reasonably good condition, and we probably averaged about 60 or 70kms an hour. The numerous dips and creek crossings slowed us down considerably. But we got to Borroloola by about lunchtime, and we filled up with fuel. (Don't make the same mistake we did; we filled up at the first fuel outlet we saw, and then discovered it was 11c a litre dearer than elsewhere in town). The town is not a tidy or attractive place.. It is scattered with rubbish and is dusty. I would not willingly stay there. The general store where we bought some groceries would have a health inspector in serious distress - I didn't want to touch any surface if I could help it. And I grew up in remote Aboriginal communities which are far from pristine! There was more rubbish strewn around outside the general store - drink cans, paper, takeaway food containers....

But there was a dump point in town, well signposted, and it had a tap and hose which could be used to top up your water tanks I guess. Ours were full at this time. After lunch, which we made in the van at a grassy spot at the side of the road, while checking emails and ringing home, we continued Eastwards.

After Borroloola the road was wider and in better condition so our speed improved. There were still numerous river crossings though - they make a welcome change to the dry and dusty country!

At about 3.30pm we pulled off into a nice secluded gravel pit, spun out our day's washing in the machine's spin cycle, hung the clothes out to dry and sat down to a cup of tea. It was a beautiful, peaceful night, with cool breezes. Perfect.

By this time we had seen a number of Roadmaster vans, some Jaycos, a couple of Coromals, four Kedrons and numerous camper trailers and Kimberley Kamper type trailers. No Bushtrackers or Phoenixes, although someone said they had seen two Phoenixes earlier in the day. I am amazed that the little on-road Jaycos and Coromals are getting through what is reasonably deep water.

8 July

Lagoon, East of Hells Gate Roadhouse

It was fairly mundane driving all day, except for the Calvert and Robinson Rivers which we checked before driving through. The Robinson was a more significant crossing with deeper water, but nothing which remotely worried us. It was deepest at the southern side and so we kept well to the northern side and passed through without any hassles. It was about a metre deep most of the way and 400mls deep at its worst.

A pleasant surprise; we found the Hells Gate Road House was open and selling fuel and some limited hot foods. This is good news for folk who need extra fuel.

After talking on the side of the road to a couple with another Kedron van, we headed on and camped at a lagoon about 15kms to the East of Hells Gate. It was a pleasant place to just relax and read for a while - and update the trip report!

9 July

The next day we kept heading East until we hit Doomadgee, an Aboriginal community. The Roadhouse was only opening as we arrived at 9.00am and we spoke to the staff and bought some supplies, then headed on.

We filled up with diesel at Burketown (a nice, neat, green town) and turned South toward Leichhardt Falls. The Falls, reached at lunch time, were as spectacular as advertised. We pulled the van over the rocks to the edge of the falls and made lunch while we rested. I took the usual photos (which did not do justice to such a wonderful view) and decided the sand and wind were too bad to stay there. Within 5 minutes of having the door open, the van filled with sand. Days later we were still cleaning it out of the stove!



Leichhardt Falls

There is a reasonable dirt track from Leichhardt Falls heading 70kms due South to the Wills Highway, and we took that route as it saved us some significant mileage. We have been to Normanton before and didn't need to go there again. Besides we love to travel new roads! And so we left the Savannah Way.

It was a long day, and we finally pulled into a gravel pit on the road from Normanton to Cloncurry, just south of Burke and Wills Roadhouse, at about 6.00pm. We were tired and had a cold drink,

made a cup of tea, had a hot shower and fell into bed. There is not a huge amount of traffic on this road and we were not bothered at all by road traffic.

Outback QLD

10 July

It was mid morning when we arrived at Cloncurry. Quickly, we booked into a caravan park, hitched up to the water and started the washing machine. The poor thing washed its little heart out, churning through a load or two of clothes and the towels.

We washed the car and van very quickly, to get rid of the worst of the dust, and felt respectable again. We went out to dinner at the Leichardt Hotel which had a great dining room and good food.

11 July

Friends (Jane and Potta) were camped at the rest stop 46kms East of Winton, so we scooted across there to meet up with them and camp for the night. The rest stop is reasonable but its main feature is the tracks leading off to the side and down beside a little dam, where you can be relatively quiet and undisturbed. That is where Jane and Potta had located themselves and we tucked in not too far away from them. A cold night was made more attractive by the fireplace where we ate dinner and yarned for a while.

And there was mobile phone reception here!

12 July

An early morning start (is there any other kind?) saw us arrive in Longreach by about 10.00am, and we went to the Showground to use the dump point for the van's toilet cassette, and then bought a few groceries, then turned South on the Jundah Road. The road was flat at first, with dry, sparse grass on blacksoil plains. After a while the country became more interesting as the road wended through hills and trees and bushes were thicker. The road was mostly single lane and not in perfect condition, but it was all bitumen.

One of the rest stops we used for a lunch stop even had toilets and a dump point!

It was mid-afternoon when we arrived at one of the best rest stops I have stayed at ever. It was between Stonehenge and Jundah (about 40kms from Jundah), and situated on a rise overlooking the valley below. Shaded with trees and with a nice sandy gravel to camp on, the view was fantastic. A few other vans pulled in for the night and we shared drinks at sunset, overlooking the valley.

"Do we really need to leave here?" I whined, as we packed up and got ready to keep heading south. I was very tempted to spend another day in such a nice spot but we did need to get moving.... As matters would turn out, I wish we had stayed there for just a bit longer.

13 July

Cooper's Creek

We found a lovely spot on the Cooper's Creek, East of Windora. A view of the river from our van was idyllic. The river was about 80 metres wide and people were boating and canoeing up and down its length. We could see more ducks and birds than I think I have ever seen in

one place! We planned to stay for a few days. But in the middle of the night there was a fine rain. And we were camped on black soil plains. Hasty packing in the morning saw us pulling out by about 7am, and the mud clomped off our tyres alarmingly. When we reached the highway, there were clods of mud left in our wake for ages. The step was caked with it! I would hate to see what it would be like getting out of there after real rain.

This rain was to continue for the next five days. Of course, it made things a wee bit colder too - welcome back to Winter!

14 and 15 July

Toompine Hotel

Later in the day we pulled in to see the pub at Toompine, a place described as "a pub without a town". Located 74kms south of Quilpie, it is listed in Camps Australia Wide as a rest stop - and it is clear in advance that it will be free. It is simply a little outback pub which has smartly hit on the idea of offering free powered sites to travelers, with hot showers and running toilets. In return, people patronise the pub for dinner or drinks - or both! A guidebook entry on the place said "Cobb and Co. once serviced this town with its regular coach schedule. All that remains today from those early pioneering days in the Toompine Hotel (circa 1893), is a population of two." The place was busy both nights we stayed there, and it was a wonderfully social gathering each night. The food was good (a schnitzel with vegetables and potatoes was \$17) and the pot bellied heater was a great attraction. We put \$10 in the honesty tin (they had to find it first, so that shows not too many travelers pay anything!) because I wanted to use our heater. Did I mention it was wet and cold outside?

16 July

Roadside Stop

All good things come to an end and we waved goodbye to little Toompine. We headed onwards to the south, passing Eulo (a lovely little town with a genuine old fashioned store where we bought groceries) and through Bourke. After a long day's driving, we found a gravelled roadside stop, as the rain meant we could not pull too far off the road. It was a popular stop, as there were three other vans there with us. But they were not so close as to be bothered by the sound of the diesel heater in the evening and early morning.

17 July

Roadside Stop

Another day's long driving and we passed through town after town, pausing only for tea breaks, toilet stops and lunch. Another roadside stop was spent at a quite lovely spot, an official rest stop, well off the road among some pines. It was so cold we barely stepped outside the van once we had arrived and pulled up. There were four other vans there for the night, but we were all spaced well apart. Last year when we were in this neck of the woods we spent such nights all by ourselves. This year there are a lot of vans out and about.

18 to 20 July

Gol Gol (Riverside Gardens Caravan Park) near Mildura

We wanted to spend some time in Mildura and so we stayed at a caravan park. Fortunately

we had a lovely site right on the river, which gave us a nice view. This was only the second park we had stayed at since leaving Darwin - not too bad for the reliability of the solar panels and system. (But of course we were on power at Toompine...).

While in Mildura region we visited Trentham Estate Winery (one of my firm favourite restaurants) for lunch, and had dinner at Stefano's famous restaurant. It was a five course degustation meal which he selects for you, taking into account any dietary preferences you may have. I could rave for hours about the meal but this is not the place for it!

A meeting with fellow forumite Brickus saw us having coffee at his house overlooking his horse paddocks and a lovely chat about travelling (albeit a bit brief).

And then on 22 July we headed the last four hours home....to a very cold house.