

Norley Rest Stop to home in the Barossa Valley

Stage 3 August 2022

This last stage of the trip takes us from the relative warmth of the ridgetop camp near Thargomindah, through the Strzelecki Track back to SA, and Southward to home in the Barossa Valley. We travelled through almost 1000kms of gravel roads, as well as visited the Gammon Ranges and enjoyed camping in the Northern and Southern Flinders Ranges.



Track South from Mount Hopeless

From the lovely ridgetop camp called Norley, 50kms from Thargomindah, we left after a leisurely breakfast and a last final download of emails and newspapers, checked Facebook, and looked up any new geocaches which may have been put out since our last trip through here at the same time last year. We knew we would have phone and internet at Innamincka (five or six hours away) but weren't sure how long we would stay there.

The road to Innamincka from the East is a rough and narrow strip of bitumen. If you see another car coming you must get one wheel of your vehicles off the road to allow room to pass. There was a reasonable amount of traffic, mostly trucks, and the occasional car. We passed the turnoff to Noccundra Waterhole (it would have been good to camp there but they had had recent rain and the waterhole is on blacksoil plains), and continued with only one stop for coffee and to stretch our legs. Its always good to get out and have a short break.

We drove into the dusty community of Innamincka at about lunchtime and filled up with fuel. Fuel and its recent price increases had been a blight of this trip. Filling up cost us nearly \$300 - just topping up the fuel tank! The price has doubled in the space of a year.

We also bought a hamburger at the Trading Post and ate it while sitting at their wooden bench tables inside. A quick visit to the toilets, and a check of the campground (dusty, despite recent rains) saw a quick decision to keep going. I am unsure what the appeal is of Innamincka for so many people. I regard it as a dusty spot, with very little to recommend it. On a windy day, the dust swirling around has to be seen to be believed.

The hilltop rest stop near Moomba had us get out to stretch our legs again and do a last check of emails or messages. It would be several days before we would again have internet access. The phone reception here comes from the nearby Santos mine. You can see the mine site over to the East, probably two or three kms away....but it is restricted access.

Creek Side Camping

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Our destination was a camp along the Strzelecki Creek, and we pulled in at about 3.00pm. It was a pleasant enough spot, but nothing special. The creek was dry, and there were no other campers. Allegedly there is a dam further down the track but we were uncertain of rain and not willing to chance it. So we had a quiet night overlooking the creekbed.

Morning had us again heading due South and then West on the Strzelecki Track. The track was in good condition and had only minor ruts from recent rains which had seen the road officially closed for a couple of days. About morning tea time we arrived at the junction leading off the Strzelecki down to Arkaroola. The junction is called Mount Hopeless. I daresay there is a mount of that name but it is certainly not visible. The country is unremittingly flat at this point.

Now a strange thing happened. We had intended continuing on to Lyndhurst then South to Leigh Creek. But at the junction I could see in the far distance to the South, the faint blue smudge of the Flinders Ranges. The Mt Hopeless to Arkaroola track, a minor road by any definition, leads straight toward the Flinders Ranges, like an arrow. As soon as I saw those Ranges, which is an area we love, I said "Lets turn South here!". Over previous days we had debated which route to take and determined that the Lyndhurst option was the most practical, with less rough terrain. But just like that, a decision was made to take the Mt Hopeless track.



The track South was really quite good; it was the best we have ever seen it. I think it must have been graded in the recent past! I don't know how far South it goes to the Balcanoona Ranger Homestead (160kms?) but we didn't see another vehicle for the three or so hours we were on the track down.

We did see quite a few Stuarts Desert peas, but I didn't bother getting out to photograph them as I have done in the past. This image is from 2012, when we first travelled this route.



Weetootla Gorge

Once at Balcanoona (I must take some photos there some day) we filled up the water tanks (we hold 270 litres in the tanks) and quickly nipped over to the nearby national park campground called Weetootla. Over the years we have camped there many times and we do like this unassuming, peaceful spot, nestled into a range of hills. Weetootla Gorge's camping area is located to the west of Balcanoona at the end of Weetootla Gorge. Campsites are situated along Balcanoona Creek among mallee, native pines, and bullock bush. Designated campsites are set out adjacent to the pit toilets. Given the recent rains, there was so much flora in bud and flowering and it was just lovely. Especially prolific were the native hops, which we have seen all over the outback in the NT, WA and here in SA too.



Wild hops -Peter MacDonald photography

We stayed a few days at Balcanoona, essentially just relaxing and enjoying this lovely spot. There was another nice couple camped nearby and we shared a fire each night and some red wine (as you do when the weather is cold). On the second day we did a day trip up to Arkaroola, and the scenery as you approach this special place never fails to blow me away. We bought fuel (ouch!) and had a



coffee while downloading emails and the digital newspapers using the local internet tethering to our Telstra phone. There is still no Optus coverage, but no doubt one day there will be.

Fortunately, the weather was lovely while we were here; crisp and sunny days and very cold nights. We had been using the diesel heater from the very first day we left Pine Creek on this trip, which was 5 July. And that continued for the rest of this trip.

The next destination was not that far away; Aroona Ruins, a national park campground in the Flinders Ranges. We first headed South then trekked more Easterly to Blinman. Blinman is a small town, which has a hotel (never visited it to date) and it has always had a nice café. Initially the café was in an old school building but of late it has been housed in the general store. They had great coffee, home made scones and cream and bread baked on the premises.

When we arrived in Blinman it was very cold and a rainy, overcast day. The café was in demand, together with its inside tables and its internet reception. Running from the car to the café verandah through the cold rain, we were lucky to score a nice warm table inside. Brrr! The coffee and scones were very welcome. Despite the weather there were fellow travellers aplenty, all enjoying the region despite the wet conditions.

Replenished with morning tea, a loaf of bread and our emails again downloaded, we headed deeper into the Flinders and towards Brachina Gorge. The last seven kms of the route is on a good gravel road with several creek crossings. One of the crossings had running water but it wasn't anything to worry about. Well, not at this stage.

It was lunch time when we arrived at our national park campground at Aroona Ruins. Why do we like this spot so much? Because it has a view to die for, a nice clean drop toilet, a lovely camp site near the river (always a dry creek when we have been there) and several spring-fed water taps. Our favourite spot, pre-booked on the national park website (no.9) has a tap so close we could connect it to the van and do a load of washing.

Doing the washing is a regular chore that you don't really think about at home, you simply bung it on in the washing machine and hang it out. While travelling off the grid it is a bit trickier. Access to water is the issue. Our van's machine uses about 40 litres of water for a normal wash, or less if we omit the several rinses. Anyway, it makes me happy when we can connect to water.



And my, it was certainly cold now.

The plan was to spend three or four days at Aroona, and we had booked (online using the national park website) for four nights in case we wanted to stay the longer time. It was quiet there with only two other groups in the whole campground. As there is no phone reception here you have to book in advance for the longer time just in case you need to stay longer.

Each night we had a fire and enjoyed more red wine, as you do when the weather is cold.

The best laid plans of mice and men... After two lovely days, rain set in. It was Winter, after all. It rained steadily and although it wasn't a major issue for us, it occurred to us that the expected 10 to 20mls of rain may cause problems with the gravel road out and the creek crossings. Gravel roads can become quite slippery in rain. It's amazing how quickly we can pack up when we need to.



It would have been about 2.00pm when we pulled out, and as we drove past Wilpena Pound about half an hour later, using the iPad and the nearby internet reception from the resort, I booked a campsite for the night and a few days following at Mt Remarkable National Park's Betoota Campground (site 11 is our spot!). We had pulled the car over on a gravelled rest stop at the turnoff to Wilpena Resort so Val could pump up the van tyres. I made the booking from inside the car while Val looked after the tyres.

We scampered to get to our campground, driving straight through Hawker, and arrived at about 5.00pm. Whew.

Previous reports have detailed how much we like this national park, and we have posted photos so many times of our stays here that I suspect folk are tired of seeing it! But we did enjoy the four days here, before heading Southwards to Port Pirie.

Port Pirie is a fair sized town, with much history and lovely old buildings. The old railway station is a standout. While staying here we based ourselves at the new CMCA campground, wonderfully



situated near the centre of town, and in a nice safe and secure spot. Each afternoon the hosts organised a Happy Hour gathering and we enjoyed chatting with the other folk staying there.

From Port Pirie we headed to Auburn. This little town is just so lovely. There are many historic cottages and gardens, and a nice hotel for meals. There is also an iconic restaurant (Terroir) which has folk coming from all over the state to visit. We have eaten there

before but the prices are serious and by this time our budget was looking lean. Have I previously mentioned the price of fuel, and that we had driven about 16000kms since we left home in April?



A lunch at Skillogalee Winery near Clare was a must though, and we arranged to meet our daughter there on the Sunday before our return home.

We drove home early in the morning to avoid the rain scheduled for later in the day, and got home by 9.30am. And just like that, this year's trip was done and dusted. More than 16,000kms were driven since we left home on 19 April.



Italowie Gorge, Gammon Ranges