

Barossa SA to Pine Creek (NT) and then onto Mary Kathleen(QLD) Stage I April 2022

This year we needed to go North in a hurry for family reasons. We packed up with some haste and hit the road North. (Although there was a degree of real haste, Val still checked all the caravan brake drums and bearings before leaving, as these things matter).

The road North was a bit of a blur as we travelled quickly and simply stayed overnight at rest stops. We stayed at Lake Hart, just North of Coober Pedy, Desert Oaks camp South of Alice Springs, a rest stop North of Barrow Creek, Dunmara Roadhouse (for the airconditioning - it was HOT), and Katherine.



North of Coober Pedy

Pine Creek

While at Pine Creek, my home town, we stayed at my brother's town block in Pine Creek while we were there, which turned out to be two months. In that time we had periods away in Darwin, at Batchelor, and Katherine. But we always came back to family in Pine Creek in between trips away.

We did have some lovely day trips too. One was to Moline Rockhole, a spot about 50kms from Pine Creek, along the Kakadu Highway. I learned to swim here many years ago!



Fortunately it still has no signpost showing where it is located so it's still relatively unvisited. The miners and their families at nearby Moline uranium mine would visit here on days off work.

Moline Rockhole/Ikoymurrawa

Finally, we were free to start a more relaxed trip South. Although sad to leave our old home and brother, we were keen to start the trip home, the long way via QLD.

Elsely Stockyards/Jalmurark Campground

Years ago we would camp here, usually as the first night of a trip South. It was looking in good shape with grass being watered, with foliage nicely grown and an expanded number of sites. Alas, the online booking system was chaotic (and that's a kind description for what was happening). The site we had booked (number 18) bore no resemblance to the website description and was far too small for our van. It would suit a small motorhome or tent, perhaps. And the campground was hopping with campers, as it was school holidays. Others were all having the same issue as us, with very few actually on the site they had booked. People just started taking sites at random.

A nice couple said they had booked site 35 but someone else was on it when they arrived so they had taken an overflow site, so we were welcome to take the now vacant (and very appealing) site. Yay!



Elsy NP

One of the main attractions of this campground is the thermal springs at nearby Mataranka. There are two sets of springs and we visited both....the pool at Mataranka Homestead (which has water at 30.5 degrees) and the Bitter Springs (with water at 33 degrees). It really helps to wash away any stress!

Phone Tower

S19 24 17 E134 28 16

It was an easy day's drive along firstly the Stuart Highway and then we turned sharp East onto the Barkly Highway at what is known as "The Three Ways". It had been quite a few years since we last travelled on the Barkly Highway, and in fact we could not remember when we had last been this way.



Late afternoon, feeling a bit tired, we pulled into a Radio Repeater station tower, just off the road. There is an unofficial camp which allows for lovely views over the valley. And what a view it was! Spinifex and white ghost gums dominated the landscape and we enjoyed a deep blue sky followed by a night sky blazing with stars. Of course, it was



cold at night. Just on dusk three other vans arrived and we all enjoyed a quiet night at this peaceful place.

We sat outside for an afternoon drink, sheltered from the cold wind by the bulk of the car, and overlooked the valley. Talk about a drinks terrace with a view!

I joked that we had installed a giant sized antenna on the van...

← Phone Tower Camp site

Avon Downs

S20 1 28 E137 29 20

So, further East along the Barkly we travelled the next day. We had picked two spots to camp, but in the end chose neither, instead staying at a spot called Avon Downs. This is an official overnight campsite just off the Barkly Highway, opposite a Police station. There is nothing remarkable about the

spot other than it is neat and provides some small gums to camp among (not big enough to drop any limbs!). The main benefit of this spot was its proximity to nearby Camooweal, which we wanted to arrive at nice and early the next day to camp at their billabong. This is a popular spot and early arrival is a good idea.

An early start the next day saw us driving through flat grasslands with few trees. We knew it was wise to get to the next night's camp early, as it is said to be popular.

Camooweal

We stayed at the Camooweal Billabong for four lovely days. Did I say that it was popular? It certainly was. There are three main camp areas; one big open area not far from the highway, one billabong which had camping along its length, and the second billabong similarly had camping along the edge. By dusk each day those rigs which had packed up and left earlier (places to go, people to see..) were replaced by new sets of folk.

By getting there early (about 9.30am) we got a lovely spot and set up fairly quickly. This involves unhitching the car from the van, putting stabilising legs down, pulling the shade awning out, putting down a mat, and setting out the chairs and a table. Then time for coffee!

The billabong sites are quite lovely and the water views are quite nice to wake up to. This was our view:



← Billabong

Nearby was a geological site worth visiting, the Camooweal Caves. There are two main caves and a nearby waterhole. It was an interesting enough drive out, about 14 kms from the township of Camooweal, and we enjoyed seeing the nearby country. The caves were not deep at the part we could see but were deeper inside (70m apparently).



By sheer good luck, the photo of an interpretive sign, with small holes punched to form a design of a lizard, had sunlight streaming through to form a pattern on the rocks. Really pretty.



All good things must come to an end and after four days we needed to move on to a new town or campground. I am a planner by nature and had an itinerary all mapped out in the WikiCamps app. But usually we deviate from the plan, often to a marked degree. But on this occasion, our next camp site was one we looked forward to and had meant to visit for many years. Mary Kathleen, to the East of Mount Isa.

We called in to Mt Isa for food and groceries which were a bit low by now. We wore our masks in the shopping centre but were probably the only ones doing so. Finding parking near a supermarket was "interesting". The navigator took us who knows where, we both had an argument and the rest of the search was in sullen silence (only slightly exaggerating).

Restocked with the essentials we headed the 66 kms to Mary Kathleen.

Mary Kathleen

S20 46 39 E139 58 51

Mary Kathleen was first settled during the 1860s. Uranium was first discovered at Mary Kathleen by Clem Walton and Norm McConachy in 1954: the deposit and the township was named after the late wife of McConachy. Prospecting and exploitation rights were subsequently on-sold, and in 1955 Rio Tinto Mining formed Mary Kathleen Uranium Ltd to develop a mine and service town. An architect-designed town grew during 1956-58, with reticulated water from a nearby dam, Lake Corella.

Nowadays, it's a campground with hundreds of spots to choose from to camp free of charge. Pleasant trees and shrubs are dotted around the old town site, with cement slabs to show where houses, a cinema, a swimming pool and hospital etc were all once built. It's a lovely spot to camp.

Initially we had intended staying for two nights but we enjoyed it so much we ended up staying four nights. We chose a spot over a causeway and a bit more isolated than the main "Town Square", with a view of the creek.



Mary Kathleen

There were so many shrubs and trees we had to be careful to find a sunny spot for the solar panels. We had sunny days and freezing nights (with ice on the car bonnet one night). Thank goodness for the diesel heater!

Strangely, although it is a fair way from any township, there was good 3G phone reception. Very poor to non-existent 4G though, even with our phone booster (Cel-Fi Go) so internet was slow. You can't have everything. (We discovered that internet was best very late at night or very early in the morning. By getting up early, very early, we could download the newspapers...).

The minesite, now well closed and past its operational period, is about 6 kms out and we took a drive out there. The water is a spectacular blue!

This would have been one of the nicest campgrounds we have been to in a long time! It's definitely a new one to add to our favourites list.



Mary Kathleen Open Cut Mine (Now closed)