

# **B**arossa (SA) to Alice Springs (NT) and then onto Mary Kathleen (QLD) Stage I June 2023

This year we had a late start to our annual trip North. Family reasons kept us home until well after the cold of Winter set in and the lure of warmer places was strong.

We were not under any time pressures this year so we first spent a little time around Clare before a steady drive up the Stuart Highway.

We stayed at a freecamp called Island Lagoon View, then just North of Coober Pedy, at Desert Oaks camp South of Alice Springs, and a stay at Rainbow Valley. Each spot had its appeal.



*North of Coober Pedy*

## **Farrell Flats**

Although the weather was dreadful mostly (wet. Cold and windy) it was still a great spot to spend a few days relaxing and visiting wineries. This campground is a "by donation" site, with a large expanse of green grass and trees, or a separate area on gravel with a tap for several of the sites. It has a lovely new toilet block and a toilet dump point. I have often thought it would make a great spot to organise a group camp.

Of course we visited a restaurant for lunch and a couple of wineries and made a point of dropping into the Wine and Food Centre (the old Information Centre). We had a lovely coffee and muffin at the Centre, and then made a special trip to Taylor's Wines. Taylors won a prestigious London wine show gold and silver medal for their Shiraz and Chardonnay. The 2021 Shiraz was declared World's best. I wanted to get my hands on that! (Sorry Michael, I suspect it will be all gone by the time we get home).

Our initial intent had been to stay for a day or two at Port Pirie but decided that the weather was against us. Our plans also to camp in the Flinders and then travel up the Oodnadatta Track were foiled by rain. (Rangers contacted us and said they were closing the whole Flinders Ranges to camping, due to bad weather coming in). So we decided to make a start up the Stuart Highway (I could almost hear the siren song of the desert sands and sun) and so we set out early on day five.

We drove through Clare, and turned North. Port Augusta saw us stop for lunch, refuel and head steadily North. The terrain was first wooded and green, but this soon changed to flatter country, with less vegetation as we headed onward. At the time of writing near Winton QLD the green is a distant memory!

### **Island Lagoon View**

S31 15 52 E136 35 57

There are numerous spots to camp on this stretch, but we did have a destination in mind. However, we actually chose to stop at quite a nice place looking down on a salt lake (full of water at the time) called Island Lagoon View. There were islands in the middle of the salt lake if you looked closely and squinted. The expected bad weather did arrive that evening, with high winds and heavy rain. It didn't bother us, nice and cosy inside the van. It was cool but not so much that we needed a heater on. (as we travelled further on, the nights did become colder and we needed the heater on more often).

We had lunch at Coober Pedy at the BP roadhouse after filling up with fuel. Oh my it was busy. The coming weekend the Finke Desert Race was being held and all sort of groups were heading up to participate in the races.

Coober Pedy was busy with Finke Desert Racers, caravans, camper trailers and cars all milling around getting fuel, water and food.

### **North of Coober Pedy**

S 28 27 56 E134 11 55

Our next overnight spot was an old firm favourite of ours, a gravel pit 87km North of Coober Pedy. It was a cold night, all by ourselves, tucked well off the road and under a star spangled sky.

Onwards the next day, nice and early after a coffee and breakfast. The highway was still busy with vehicles towing trailers with trail bikes and buggies, all heading to the Races. And the usual number of trucks and caravans made it busy.

## Desert Oaks

S24 54 16 E 133 11 46

Our target camp for the night was Desert Oaks, an official camp site just off the highway. We got there nice and early, about 2.00pm. It is simply a place off the highway, tucked at the base of some heavily wooded sand dunes. As there is a toilet and rubbish bins there, it is popular with travellers. This year it was only moderately busy, which surprised me. Perhaps the Desert Racers were all now in place at Finke or in Alice Springs.

For the first time on this trip we were camping among red desert sands and under a blazing blue desert sky.

We shared a sunset drink with our van neighbours, had an early dinner and were in bed by nine o'clock.

## Rainbow Valley Reserve

On two previous occasions we have visited Rainbow Valley, and camped here in 2016 for a couple of nights. It is a place I had fond memories of, with lovely rock formations and hills and mallee bushes and spinifex growing in the red sands.

To get to the Reserve we travelled North of the Stuart Well Roadhouse for about 15kms or so then East off the Highway for another 23 kms. This year it was reasonably corrugated and there was evidence of churned areas after heavy rain. But when we



drove in the track was dry and we made good time.

There are several short walks, along with photography, birding, natural history and Aboriginal culture to discover.

The Reserve is small but remarkable for several reasons:

- It is the *ONLY* weed free conservation area in central Australia. You won't see any buffel grass here.
- Thanks to the lack of weeds, the reserve has a very high level of biodiversity: over 400 plant species, 110 bird species, 20 mammal species, 46 species of reptile and three species of frog have been recorded
- There are two species of plants, the beautiful Rainbow Valley Eremophila and a species of saltbush, *Atriplex sturti*, which grow nowhere else in the Northern Territory.

It's also well-situated, being only an hour's drive from Alice Springs. The Reserve is perfect for an overnight camp out or even sunset drinks.

The coloured sandstone feature and surrounding rocky outcrops are about 350 million years old. They're composed from a rock called [Hermannsburg Sandstone](#).

Hermannsburg Sandstone is very soft, and is easily eroded by wind and water - which is why the Reserve's rock formations are so striking.

The red and ochre colours for which the Reserve is known comes from iron deposits contained within the sandstone oxidising as they are exposed to the air and staining the underlying white sandstone. It is certainly an amazing sight at sunset.

The camp site needs to be booked online and as it can't be viewed ahead of time, to a certain extent we were guessing which site would suit the size of our van. But the site we had booked was reasonably good and we fitted onto it by pulling across it diagonally. We had site 4 in the Bushcamp loop.

The four nights spent there were quite lovely. The Reserve is peaceful and there were usually at least one or two other groups of campers staying.

### **Wanngardi Caravan Park, Alice Springs**

When in Alice Springs in the past we have always stayed at the large and well organised (read expensive) park just past The Gap, the Macdonnell Ranges CP. It is a very well run park but is large. This time for the two days between Rainbow Valley and the next bushcamp, we thought it could be nice to try a different park. We chose Wanngardi.

This park is about 12 kms out of the town centre and in a bush setting, abutting the Ranges behind. It was described in WikiCamps app as being "quirky". I thought it was actually lovely, although very relaxed and informal. Sites were set in and around the trees, and the toilet blocks were old but clean and functional. We liked it there.

But the internet and phone connections were patchy, so if that's important to you, maybe stay closer to town.

Our stay was only two days and we did a heap of washing and caught up on shopping. We also went to dinner at our very favourite Casa Nostra Italian restaurant (unaccountably run by French people currently).

Social media reports on violence and antisocial activity in Alice was not all that apparent to us, perhaps as we were camped out of the main town area. Shopping though was fraught with a little tension, and on one occasion I stayed with the vehicle while Val shopped rather than leaving it unattended. There were hordes of young indigenous people loitering and touching the contents in the back of the ute next to ours. At one stage a young lad pulled down his trousers and started to have sex with the girl with him and was being cheered on by all his mates. Salubrious.

We were advised not to drive into town after dark for security reasons. So we booked our restaurant for a 5pm dinner, which was before the sun went down. The restaurant told us not to risk it after dark as the car would be highly likely to be damaged or stolen.

We decided to have a few days out in the East Macdonnell Ranges. So we booked the site online after a bit of research into the sites best suiting our needs.

## **Trephina Gorge Campground**

About 70 or so kms out in the East Macdonnells is a lovely camping area. There are three campgrounds all quite close to each other; the Bluff, Panorama and the Gorge. We stayed at the latter. Situated in the East Macdonnell Ranges, Trephina Gorge is known for its sheer quartzite cliffs and River Red Gum-lined watercourses. The Park contains two gorges, Trephina and John Hayes; the latter can only be reached by high clearance 4WD. There are two separate campgrounds for vans and trailers, and the one we chose was Trephina Gorge Campground.

By doing some research we managed to get the very best camp site in the whole park, no.11. It was large, flat, had good access to the sun for solar energy, a tap with clean drinkable water and was off by itself. The relative isolation meant we were not covered in dust when passing traffic went through. This was a delightful spot to camp.

And icing on the cake...there is good Optus phone coverage. I have Telstra and Val has Optus so we are always covered in the event of only one system being available.

There were geocaches nearby and we managed to nab those, as well as an earthcache. The countryside out there is spectacular, with rich reds and yellows in the ranges. And we enjoyed lovely weather again so we felt we had done well.



After three days out here, we headed back into Alice Springs, as I was on call for the coming week. As it turned out, I could have stayed out at Trepina as there was phone coverage, although it was of questionable quality.

## Alice Springs

Alice Springs has been experiencing high levels of violence and antisocial behaviour, and this was much discussed on social media and forums. Indigenous youth have rejected their culture and behaving

in a variety of antisocial ways, attacking visitors and locals alike, and vandalising cars. Visitors are told not to drive into the town centre at night, or to leave their vehicles for any length of time.



We had no problems although we witnessed some strange behaviours.

On this next stage of the trip we stayed at the large and highly regarded Discovery Park (previously a Big 4 caravan park). It was nowhere near as busy as usual, with reported 40% drop in occupancy levels. This is attributed to social media reports about the violence and problems in Alice Springs.

We had the chance to catch up with our grandson and his girlfriend as they passed through Alice. They spent two days camped on a site near ours, travelling with our camper trailer. (on his arrival

in Australia Isaac flew to Adelaide picked up a vehicle and our camper and drove North).



## Phone Tower

**S19 24 17 E134 28 16**

On leaving Alice we travelled up the Stuart Highway to the Three Ways, a Roadhouse just North of Tennant Creek, and then turned East onto the Barkley Highway. Our camp for the night was a simple stop over at a Telstra tower.

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. We stayed at this same spot last year so we knew how nice it was.

A cold night was spent under a sky full of stars. But we knew the next day would bring warmer weather, as it did.

## Camooweal

Another day, another fairly long drive (oh the cost of the fuel!) and a quick stop at the Barkley Homestead for fuel and lunch, saw us pull into the well known and loved Camooweal Billabong. To get a good site you must get here before lunch ideally. The best sites are along the water's edge of the billabong. It was fortunate that we managed to get a great spot and we pulled in after a small argument or two about our competence at setting up the chocks under the van wheels to level it (sigh) and soon had our chairs out under the awning and set up.

This is such a special spot. There are campsites all along the billabongs, about a kilometre from the small town of Camooweal. It was busy as usual, with vans pulling in right up until sunset each of the two days we were there.

The Mount Isa Council looks after and manages this region and has recently announced they are closing the camping area to visitors other than locals. They cite "cultural reasons" (sigh) and degradation. As the whole area is spotless and beautifully kept by campers it is hard to believe there is much degradation. As local businesses will lose massively on the closure of camping, and they are hostile to the idea, hopefully Council may change their minds. I am doubtful though.



*Our view at Camooweal Billabong 1*

## Mary Kathleen

**S20 46 39 E139 58 51**

Mary Kathleen is a ghost town, and all that remains is grass, cement slabs and trees from where once houses sat. There are remnants of a town square as well, and a path along a small creek.



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.

It is available as a freecamp and on any given day during the peak Winter season there will be upwards of thirty or forty or more campers spread over the huge expanse of



grass and trees.

We found a nice cement slab and pulled up on it to set up camp. Sited at the top of a sloping hill we felt we had a secure spot to wait out the coming rain. A large rainband was headed over from the North and expected to bring up to 40 mls of rain. In fact we got over 100!

But as there was little wind and the rain was a steady drenching over 36 hours, it felt manageable. Two days later the weather was back to its sunny and cool normality and it felt like the rain was just a bad memory.

This was such an enjoyable spot to stay we ended up spending eight days here. In that time we made a day trip to a nearby weir (Rosebud Weir) and two trips to nearby Mt Isa for shopping.

While in Mt Isa we bought some wine at a liquor outlet. This proved the start of a stressful hour or so. No sooner out of the shop we received a text message from our bank, saying there had been a suspicious transaction on our credit card and they had frozen the card. Of course the transaction was the alcohol but it took a little while to clarify that. It took nearly an hour to get the bank on the relevant number (which I had to look up from the webpage) and have the card unfrozen. All good fun.

During our days here we enjoyed the company of quite a few folk around a campfire in the afternoons, and just thoroughly relaxed in this lovely spot.