

From Alice Springs to home in SA's Barossa Valley July/August 2016

July 2016

We were now in Central Australia and planned to be heading East again on the now. This trip originally planned to take in the Plenty Highway to Queensland, a 800km gravel road from Alice Springs to Boulia. We had met up in Alice Springs with friends from back in SA, Jeannie and Chris, and we had planned to do this stage of the trip together. But our plans were all changed when very wet weather set in at the QLD end, and so we made different plans. Instead we decided to head back to Redbank Gorge and then head South from Alice Springs back home to SA. While we would be taking less distance to get home, the itinerary included more gravel roads and interesting places.

This stage of the trip began on 18 July.



Special points of interest:

- Desert Tracks
- Redbank Gorge
- Oodnadatta Track - wet weather!

Gemtree

On the Plenty Highway, about 150 kms North East of Alice Springs, is Gemtree, a fossicking and camping area. It has fuel, and powered sites as well as bush camping. We did not need power but were grateful for the water at each site and found a nice spot to camp for the night.

This was to be the first night of travelling on the Plenty.

That night the camping ground had a special event of drinks at the firepit "bar", fish and chips for those who ordered them in advance, and singers accompanied by a guitar. The male singer was Maori and his wife was Maltese - a "Malteser" he described her.... They were great. Sitting with a cold drink around a fire, listening to music from the 50's and 60's, under a full moon, was just great.

The next morning we all chatted and decided the wet weather at the other end of the Plenty was a worry. Our travelling companions were particularly concerned. Val and I quickly conferred and decided that in the light of current reports of heavy rain at the QLD end, we too would pull out of this trip and change our plans.

We headed back down the Stuart Hwy to the Tanami Track Junction and turned West toward Papunya. A

couple of hundred kms along the track we took the South track to Haasts Bluff (we were here only a fortnight ago...) and curved into Redbank Gorge down. about a further 50kms of gravel road. All up this was about 250kms of gravel and corrugations.

It was 4.00pm when we arrived at the campground and we were feeling quite tired by now, having driven pretty much non-stop all day. We had not even stopped for lunch, just eating a muesli bar and having a cup of coffee on the run. So we were relieved to see our favourite site unoccupied and we backed into it (with some difficulty due to the dratted bollards). We think bollards are the spawn of Satan...

Redbank Gorge

MacDonnell Ranges NP

This camping ground is in the West MacDonnell Ranges National Park and is maintained by the Parks and Wildlife Services. Its only facilities are fireplaces and a low table at each delineated camp site, and a drop toilet. The weather was absolutely beautiful on this occasion, with dry cool days and a slight breeze each day. And there is of course that beautiful view.

Alas there were mozzies and again I got eaten alive one evening while sitting outside. What is it with me and insects just lately?! But it was just that one night and the rest of the time it was fine.

We did a day trip out to nearby Roma Gorge from our Redbank camp. It was 8kms in from Larapinta Drive

and although it needed a high clearance vehicle to access the gorge, we found it an easy drive. The gorge was scenic as was the drive in. There were numerous petroglyphs on the rocks (Aboriginal etched designs) of circles, fern shapes and traditional designs, which from memory show it was a meeting place.



We did a couple of other day trips from here as well, and otherwise just relaxed and enjoyed the lovely weather.

On the morning of the fifth day we headed into Alice Springs and the caravan park, so we could top up with water, do some food shopping and wash the sheets and towels. While we can do the washing out bush (the van has a washing machine) water is the issue and so it is easier in a park with water.

Again we did a short trip out to the East Macdonnell Ranges and particularly enjoyed visiting Corroboree Rock. And we went out to dinner with some new friends we met out at Redbank.

The weather was freezing in Alice; literally.

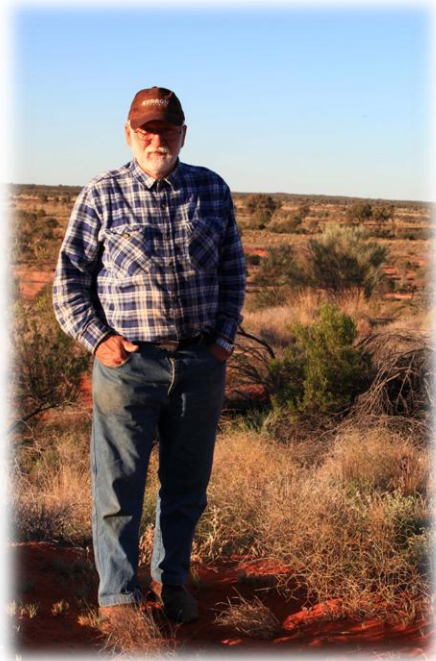
More importantly, now the school holidays were over, the park was considerably quieter, and there were no hordes of kids riding bikes and pedal karts all over the roads. It was much more peaceful!

Rainbow Valley

About an hour or so South of Alice Springs is the lovely Rainbow Valley Conservation Reserve. It is 75 kms south along the Stuart Highway and another 22 kms in, along a rough track. Only small in size but it packs a real dramatic punch in geological features. We let down our tyres before the drive in, as we knew the road would be corrugated (and it was) and arrived about noon after a leisurely drive down from Alice Springs.

There were lots of little daisies dotting the roadside on the road in, both yellow and blue - so pretty! The rock is composed of Hermannsburg Sandstone, which is very soft and 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.



There are two camping areas now (when we visited years ago there was only the one, with small and narrow

sites we would never have fitted into) and we quickly found a nice spot which allowed us to leave the car and van hitched up together, and we unpacked before a late lunch.



Then we walked up to the lookout and onward to the main feature mountain and

its associated rock "Mushroom Rock". The weather was cool and dry and made for pleasant walking. At sunset we climbed the dune which gives a good view of the rocks, and joined the others up there for the event!

Plus we did the earthcache there as well as getting another traditional cache which was at the gate to the reserve.

The next day we had a leisurely start after breakfast, and drove back to the Stuart Highway and then South to Eriklunda, a Roadhouse at the junction of the Stuart Highway and Lasseters Hwy out to Uluru. Our interest in Eriklunda lay more in its good coffee and internet reception than anything else. I downloaded a heap of emails and sent a couple in return. Val downloaded a geocaching pocket query (don't ask...) and we were on our way again.

We camped at a really pleasant spot about 23kms North of Cadney Homestead, by pulling off the road and

setting up camp down the back near some small trees and shrubs (S27 43 11 E133 58 31). It was a peaceful night and cool, not cold. That was a bonus! After a dinner of quiche and salad we watched the news on satellite TV and went to bed early.

The next day was a fairly long day's driving. First we drove a little way down the highway to Cadney Homestead where there is a famously grumpy manager, but this day he served our fuel with a smile and friendly chat. At this point we turned off onto the gravel Painted Desert Road across to Oodnadatta via the Arckaringa Hills. The hills are reputed to be spectacular at sunset and I was keen to see them. But alas there was dense overcast conditions and in the grey light the colours of the hills were hidden. I took a few photos but was not all that pleased with the results. Another time... The track though was interesting and went through really interesting hilly country.

Generally the condition of the road was good with very few corrugations or dust. It was about 170kms across from the Stuary Hwy to the Oodnadatta Track.

The road ended at Oodnadatta and we filled up at the infamous Pink Roadhouse with fuel again and had a hamburger and chips. Luxury! After discovering there is Optus coverage at Oodnadatta we called Kathryn (who I think was underwhelmed to hear from us again so soon) and continued South along the Oodnadatta Track. It was dry and a little cut up from recent damage done by travelling vehicles after the rain but reasonably good.

It was just on 3.00pm when we pulled into the Neale Waterhole, on the Eastern side of Algebuckina Bridge. We had a solitary site right on the waterbank with a view of pelicans, grebes, cormorants and a variety of ducks. And some mozzies too, alas! At times like this the caravan with its tight sealed windows and door is a blessing. This is a lovely spot and we did debate spending longer here, but the weather looked as though it was changing.



The nightly TV weather report showed a rain band coming across the region. Not good...we knew from a past experience that it is easy to get trapped by wet track conditions out here. So we headed out early next morning, after listening to light rain on the van roof at night. The track out to the main road is clay based and would not take long to become a quagmire so we wanted to put that behind us.

As we travelled further South there was intermittent light rain and the road seemed OK. We spoke to other travellers on the UHF and they reported the road to be fine in our direction so we felt reassured. After a while it got slightly slushy and rain was really setting in now.

We passed through the small town of Marree fairly early in the afternoon and kept pushing on to get as much of the dirt track out of the way before the rain caused us real problems. About half way between Lyndhurst and Marree we were on a bitumen stretch of 17kms and found a gravel pit on the side of the road. So we pulled over for the night onto nice clean blue gravel and had a comfortable night. This area is a treeless plain with nothing to see other than gibbers and sky as far as the horizon. The wind was fierce here that night and rocked the van all night long, whistling across the plains.

The next morning saw us soon back on the gravel road and although the rain had stopped the road was really slushy now and we picked up a heap of the stuff under the van and car wheels. Once we hit the bitumen proper near Leigh Creek it was a wonderful relief and we could hear the "clap-clap" of mud chunks falling off

the van and car onto the road.

As we pulled into Leigh Creek the van was a pitiful mess of mostly grey mud overcoating red dust from the Northern parts of the Oodnadatta. Val estimated he later chipped and prodded about 75 kgs of mud off the rig. Fortunately we found a truck wash at Jamestown (it cost an arm and a leg but it was worth it) and the car and van were nice and sparkly clean again.

But I am jumping ahead of myself here. The still dirty van pulled into the small caravan park in the town of Orroroo about lunchtime and we set up in this nice little park. It is neat and clean and had gravel sites, all within 5 minutes walk of the town which has a great pub and a fantastic coffee shop. Heaven!

We spent three night here, enjoying a drive around the district to get more geocaches and see the countryside, eating at the pub (twice!) and having lunch at Maggie's Cafe. We caught up with a geocaching friend for dinner and had a thoroughly good time here.

On the fourth morning we moved out, still with a dirty van but minus most of the mud which Val had chipped off as much as he could. (He took a wheelbarrow load of it away from our site, and we raked the site back to its usual clean state).. The park gave us permission for all this activity....

And onto Clare we travelled, for the final three days of the trip. The days were crisp and sunny but literally freezing at night with ice on the windscreen an bonnet. As the days were lucky to reach a maximum temperature of 13 degrees we knew we had finished the warm part of our trip.

Our days here were spent wisely with winery visits, a wine tasting event on the Friday night, lunch at Mr Mick's restaurant; and lunch on Sunday at Skillogalee Restaurant. Our Kathryn drove up from home to join us for lunch and welcome us back home.

What a fantastic end to our trip.

At Clare we were only two hours from home.



Painted Desert