

River Murray, Vic, NSW and QLD

April and May 2014

With Autumn's cold again biting at home in the Barossa Valley, it was time for our next trek North. Something we had not done before was follow the River Murray through SA, Vic and NSW to Echuca and then head North to Brisbane. That was the rough plan. But things went decidedly NOT to plan the first day.



Willow Rest Stop, Griffith

Special points of interest:

- A disastrous start to the trip
- Outback Campsites
- Freedom Camps provided by communities

A Disastrous Start

The First Day

It was a cold and windy Monday when we left home in the Barossa, with a garden turning on its Autumn colours and Winter bulbs starting to appear. But we were keen to get moving.

We had thought it would be a nice easy run to a camp site up on the River Murray near Loxton, called Moorook Game Reserve. This is a lovely spot where we have camped several times before. Although it is beautiful and peaceful, right on the bank of the river, we have had two experiences here where our four van's AGM batteries have all failed. Completely failed, as they are in tandem and that is what happens with batteries in a series. Lots of research failed to reveal what was the issue but as the last lot were replaced under warranty we could do no more than watch the batteries carefully. This lot were over two years old and had given no problems before.

On this occasion we arrived nice and early and set up the van and put the awning out. We knew bad weather was forecast but we were not directly on blacksoil so figured any slight bogginess which arised due to the rain we could just wait out until rain cleared.

We sat outside and had a cold drink to celebrate the start of the trip and then went inside as the night started to get nippy. Val idly looked at the battery voltage meter on the wall of the van and said "The battery voltage has dropped!". And it continued to drop. At this stage we realised we had another complete failure of batteries on our hands and heavy rain coming, with the potential t keep us stuck here for days. So at 1am we packed up, hitched up the van and car and started out, aiming for a

gravel pit on the side of the nearby highway. A gravel pit would be ideal in rain as it provides good solid purchase for van tyres, and weighing 3.5 tonne this was an issue.

As we started to pull out up the Reserve road in the pitch black night Val suddenly announced "the van's brakes and lights are not working, it must be the light plug!". So we pulled into a gravel layby and he pulled it out to look at the plug. One of the plug's wires had come loose.... So with my holding the torch, and with a triangular emergency reflector triangle front and back of the rig, he started unscrewing the plug. All the wires fell out. Amazingly he didn't swear....but I did. He had no idea where all those little wires were supposed to go, and he had no spare plug with us. By this time it was 2am. We went back into the van and online with the iPad found a wiring diagram to enable him to fix the unit. With the help of the diagram he was able to put all the spaghetti of wires back where they should be. Relief...we had brakes and lights back.

By now it was raining so we found the gravel pit and pulled into it with gratitude. It was a tense few hours trying to sleep and thinking about the best course of action about the blessed batterie. In the end we decided to go back home to nearby Mount Barker's Home of 12 Volt and buy new batteries.

So that is what we did. Three hours later we pulled into the supplier's workshop where they were waiting for us, and had the new batteries installed. Not cheap.

Back on the road we headed for Berri where we figured we would find a bushcamp somewhere on one of the many spots all along the river. What we hadn't allowed for was how much rain they had all received and many of the access roads into camp sites were impassable. So we gave up at about 5pm and pulled into a lovely caravan park in Berri and were grateful for the spot to stay a couple of nights to recover. We slept well that night.

Of course, the next day we discovered the nearby lovely freecamp rest stop provided at Lyrup, right on the river and with four powerpoints provided...all to tempt people to stay in the area. Free power!! We will stay there next time we travel through.

The batteries? We can only conclude that the van sitting idle for months in some way damages the batteries, although we have them on a proper charging regime all that time. The advice we have been given now is every month when the van is not being used, put them under load and bring the voltage down a bit then re-charge them. Just as though they were being used.

An addendum: Several days later we felt the new batteries were not charging as they should be. So Val sighed and checked the system. He discovered a cable in the link was missing, effectively breaking the link between the two banks of batteries (we have four batteries in a set of 2 x 2). So only two batteries were effectively being used. As our usage was low this wasn't a major issue but it would have become one in low sun situations. He replaced the cable and immediately all was well. We will talk to House of 12 Volt on our return!

Then we discovered the new small generator we had bought especially for this trip wasn't working. Val took it to pieces (OK that is an exaggeration - he pulled its cover off and discovered a wire loose). A fellow camper at the camp site who is an electrician agreed that this could be the problem. Another issue resolved.

About this stage I started to wonder if we should have stayed home. I started to say so. Frequently.

...And it was still raining.

Mildura

It was still raining when we got to Mildura so again it was an easy decision to stay at the Buronga caravan park (the best park in Mildura by a mile, as they say). We knew we wanted to do some sightseeing here and the park was right on the river and centrally located. The gardens are lovely and the managers are very friendly. Site 43 was allocated and we saw it was the most delightful spot, large and with its own gardens. Unfortunately someone was still on the site, who should have left hours ago. We were allocated a nearby and almost as good site so there no real hassles.

In Mildura we had a degustation dinner at Stefano's restaurant, always an indulgence and one to reflect back on later with fond memories of a truly memorable meal. Memorable cost too....but what the heck! One of the most remarkable features of the meal was a serving of prosciutto on a block of solid rock salt, which cures as it sits at your table. You leave it for longer for more "cooking/curing " depending on personal taste.

Nyah Recreation Reserve

Harness Racing Complex, S 35 10.01 E 143 22.52

It was still overcast when we left Mildura and headed East along the River Murray. We realised that so many ideal spots were inaccessible due to the heavy rains the area had experienced, but picked on the freecamp site at the small town of Nyah. This is a delightful area put aside by the local community for travellers, again designed to encourage people to stay for a while and inject money into the



Swan Hill

community. The rest-stop had potable water at a tap near the toilets and a dump point, as well as a large area of grassed parking near the river. We enjoyed a couple of days here while we explored nearby Swan Hill. This included visiting the Pioneer Settlement, which I thought over-rated for the admission price (\$30 each) and as it was very quiet the day we went, with few shop owners in the buildings, we didn't stay very long.

Wills Bend (Camp site)

S 36 03 12 E 144 3 21

It was timely we moved on and with the help of the great WikiCamps software, found a great spot to camp in a national park on the River Murray near Echuca. Our camp site was right on the banks of the river and had a sweeping view of the river and the passing houseboats as they went past. The only other campers were about a kilometer away and we had a lovely peaceful time. We had a campfire here and cooked a roast dinner which was so nice in that fresh country air. The days here were mostly sunny as well as cloudy at times but freezing at night. This camp site has to be a firm favourite, I think.



Places like this are all about what someone on a forum called the "rustic ambience"; in other words the not having someone parked right next to you, and having a wonderful view. Who would not prefer that to a caravan park?

As Echuca was so close (15 or so kms) we went into town for shopping, coffee at a café and did a little sightseeing. It was raining most of the day we visited and photography options were limited.

Lake Wyangan, Griffith

S 34 12.43 E 146 00.57

At this point we needed to start heading North (after all, Brisbane was the destination) so we left the River Murray behind us and turned the car and van up the highway toward the city of Griffith. We had not been through this area before and had not previously visited Griffith.

Lake Wyangan is a bit out of town (10 or so kms) and is located on a sloping field overlooking the lake itself. It is provided as a facility free of charge to travellers who are self-sufficient, and the only facilities out there are toilets which are clean and well maintained. It was beautifully quiet and peaceful there and we spent two relaxed days enjoying the spot. On the advice of a forum member we went into town and had morning tea at an iconic Italian café (Bertoldo's?) and dinner the next night at another Italian restaurant in the main street.

Before leaving bright and early on the third day we called into the amazing freecamp right in the heart of Griffith (Willow Rest Stop) and used the dump point and filled up with water. Again this tremendous facility is provided by the local community (24 hour stop only) as an incentive for folk to come and visit. Look at the view to be had if you are camped here.



If we had more time we would have stopped at this spot but we needed to get a move on and head further North. Besides it was cold!

Forbes

Another day's steady driving had us arriving at the NSW city of Forbes. We had stayed here some

years back for a few days, but on that occasion we had stayed at the caravan park. This time we chose the freecamp provided by the local community on the banks of the Dumaresq River, another beautiful place which was being enjoyed by a few fellow-travellers. You are starting to see a theme here; towns and communities across Australia are recognizing the value of travellers visiting their area, for the dollars they bring with them. This camp site is on lovely green grass, with trees and shrubs dotted strategically around the site, and toilets and a dump point at the far end. I think this is a two day limit although people said they had been told by visiting park staff that an extra day or two was fine. Clearly they do not want permanent ferals to set up camp there.

Moree

Although Forbes was cold at night the days had been sunny but we did want to get to warmer climes so headed North after two days at Forbes and arrived at our favourite caravan park, the Gwydir Carapark, with its wonderful hot pools. I could stay there for the whole winter, but alas they were booked pretty solidly and our site was only available for the two nights. So after a few good long soaks in the pools, and talking to people similarly bobbing around in the water, we again turned the car and van ever more Northwards. And this time we aimed for the delightful freecamp at the small Queensland town of Texas. (It was in Moree that Val discovered the missing cable on the recently installed batteries...).

Texas

Right on the border of NSW and Qld, this town has all the basic facilities (including a small hospital) but its main claim to fame as far as I am concerned is the wonderful freecamp two kms out of town on the Dumaresq River. We have stayed here a couple of years ago and remembered how nice it was. It



did not disappoint this time, with a large green grassed area along the river and plenty of space for rigs of all sizes to fit into. We scored the prize spot, overlooking the river right down the back, with lots of peace and privacy. This was such a nice spot to stay (and you are allowed to stay for 14 days) that we ended up being there for three days before we could pull ourselves away. It was so nice to have the view, the privacy and a lovely sunny position for the solar panels. Mind you the nights were freezing and we needed the diesel heater well and truly. While here we shopped at the local store (which gave us a

Senior's discount on our grocery shopping without our asking!) and had a good look around the district. I could spend a lot longer there, I reckon.

After our few nights at Texas it was hard to head to a caravan park but that is what we found we had to do next. I wanted to be in one place and that place with good phone reception to be able to work for a week so we felt that a small caravan park would suit us. We booked for the week at the park in the small town of Esk, South West of Brisbane.

Esk and Wivenhoe Dam

The park was busy. What more can I say....vans were parked very close to one another in our area because a caravan club was coming in that weekend and every inch of space was needed. The town itself is delightful, set in the green and lush valley and with an old world village atmosphere and with great coffee shops and a huge antique shop. And the park is one of the best we have stayed at with

immaculate gardens and very friendly managers. But it was busy and that meant that it was not restful. The best that could be said for the park was that our next destination at nearby Wivenhoe Dam, was a lovely contrast. We have stayed here many times before and the view from the awning is a serene lake which sparkles in the sunlight and is a haven for waterbirds of different



sizes and species. This time however, management had changed. Previously a ranger was employed by the Queensland Water Board to manage the place and collect fees by coming to your van in the late afternoon. Now the management has been let by a tendered contract and taken over by two folk who were grappling with an inadequate internet and telephone system. I was surprised our booking was intact when we arrived...But all was well and so we relaxed and enjoyed the freedom of having vans all around us in a caravan park. And the weather was delightful so what more could we ask for?

Brisbane was getting closer!

Linville

Once again, we found a perfectly delightful little town, inland from Brisbane by about two hours, which welcomes travellers by providing a free rest area for us to camp. They have toilets and potable water on tap...and free power for three or four vans! There is an honesty box at the little general store but it is not advertised. If people ask they are told about the voluntary donation. We stuffed our contribution into an over-full container and said how we valued the hospitality.

In fact we did not use their power as our solar panels provide all we need unless it is hot and we need



an airconditioner. So we put the van further up the back on a slight slope with a great view of the hills and on nicely mown lawns. We were joined there by some pleasant folk later that day.

After drinks in the afternoon with those pleasant several camper neighbours, we all went over the road to the pub for dinner. And this is how the town benefits from travellers; we put quite a bit of money into the community with six people having meals and drinks.

The hotel is said to be haunted and they have recently had an exorcism performed there so I am

guessing they want that ghost gone.