

Boulia QLD to Alice Springs NT **THE PLENTY HIGHWAY** **Stage 7 August 2017**

In this seventh stage of the trip we cross the Plenty, which is really two separate highways; the Donohue (from Boulia to the NT border) and the Plenty (from the NT border to the Stuart Highway). It is more remote travel again, and undertaken in brilliant weather.

This stage started on 27 August 2017.



Gem Tree campgrounds

We have long wanted to travel on the Plenty, an iconic trip which starts at Boulia in QLD, and ends at Alice Springs NT. We tried to do it last year but rain stopped us from travelling. Before crossing, we had spent the two days prior out on the Bourke River near Boulia and filled up with water at the dump point before driving out. We stopped for the obligatory photo at the start of the road West and were then on our way.

The first 60 kms were bitumen and that made for nice easy driving. The countryside was flat and we were going through open plains which were fairly featureless. At the start of the gravel we let our tyre pressures down to avoid punctures and continued through country which was increasingly populated with ghost gums and shrubs. The country remained flat for the next couple of hundred kms, but it was far from boring. They had enjoyed good rains here six weeks previously and the country was looking lush and healthy. We passed over many cattle crossings, and learnt very quickly to walk



them slowly as they had vicious drop offs. We also saw a lot of cattle, often waiting for them to get off the road; they are too big for us to argue with!

It was just before lunch we passed over the QLD/NT border and I said hello to my home Territory. Tobermory Station hove into view a bit later and we called in there to get fuel (and ice creams!) and briefly considered staying there for the night. The camping area had nice green



grass, but we heard that each night there were quite a few groups in, so we decided to continue on and look for a spot which we had tentatively planned to stop at - Limestone Rise.

Limestone Rise

S22 26 0 E137 25 42

What a lovely spot this turned out to be. We found it on the WikiCamps app, and previous campers had said it was nice. A little track turned in from the main road, and we bumped our way over it to find a series of places which were level and flat, on nice clean pebbles and with a view of the valley below. Any number of groups could fit in here. We soon had the chairs out and sat with a cup of coffee and enjoyed the peace and tranquility of this lovely place. Several shrubs were flowering which added to the general attractiveness of this camp. Unfortunately a cow was heard nearby moaning and carrying on (I thought it was a bull and it coughed and grumbled aggressively, getting closer and closer. Friends will know I have a fear of bulls and this certainly unsettled me until I saw it was a dratted cow). Apart from this incident, which unfeeling Val treated as an unreasonable attitude (sigh) we enjoyed a really peaceful night. The stars were so bright out here, and there was no traffic - I guess folk are aware of the presence of those cattle and kangaroos on the road and it would be dangerous to drive after dark for fear of a collision.

The weather was perfect, with cool, sunny days and cold nights. We used the diesel heater at night I think, on a couple of cold mornings.

The next day we moved on after a leisurely breakfast, and started seeing interesting and scenic country. There were hills and ranges in



Anthill, NT

the distance and the gum trees were much larger than to the East. We continued to see lots of fat and well fed cattle and kangaroos, as well as flocks of little green budgies. And for the first time we saw the distinctive anthills which are prevalent in the NT.

There was a pleasant camp spot at Arthur River and it would have been nice to camp there for the night but it was too early for us to stop. So we had morning tea here and pressed on. Our target was a place we had heard of and thought sounded nice.

By this time the road was pretty good, certainly better than just after the NT border.

Between The Hills

S22 57 22 E135 45 45

This was another cracker of a spot. We had been told about it by a Caravaners Forum member (thanks Rosiebear) and it was accessed simply by watching for some distinctive hills and taking a track in toward them. It was a nice, clean spot and others had clearly camped there before us, as there was a ring of rocks and remains of a fire with a pile of wood. We pulled in pretty early -

perhaps about 2pm- and we relaxed for the rest of the day before having drinks with a scenic view.

The nights were very cold out here and we were again using the diesel heater, and were grateful for it.

The next morning found us back on the road by 8.30am and pressing on to the West. The country was quite scenic now with more ranges and water courses to cross (minus any water).

We met a grader doing up a whole section of road prior to grading it (we hoped) and it went on from about 160 kms from the border and



Between The Hills camp

remained reasonable until we again hit the bitumen. The sealed section started at about 90kms from the highway.

We were aiming for Gem Tree's campground, 70kms East of the Stuart Highway. It was a welcome sight when we pulled in and paid for an unpowered site for a few nights. This nice park has sites with water and power or unpowered sites, most with water taps. We did not need power but we could certainly use the water. It was luxury to turn a tap on and get water.

Our lithium batteries cost a fortune but have proven a great cost saver as we often found we could save money by not needing powered sites, and also we were able to go much longer between filling the gas bottles. We use gas for heating shower water and the oven, but all our boiling water, coffee machine and toaster are powered by the batteries. Here at Gem Tree we even used the washing machine on a quick cycle and cold water and it used in all about 2 amps of power for an entire wash. That is almost nothing, and replaced by the solar panels in minutes.

Commented [CM1]:

Gem Tree is a campground about 140kms from Alice Springs, and arranges fossicking tours as well as providing takeaway food, camp-oven meals two nights a week, and of course camping among the desert oak trees. It is quite lovely really.



The three days we spent here were taken up with a lot of loafing around and talking to folk, and a day trip over to the fossicking fields to look at the camp spots there. We discovered that it had peaceful and attractive bush camping, all totally free. It is an idea to come back this way again some time and camp here.

On the Friday morning of the fourth day we packed up and headed toward Alice Springs. Although we had accommodation booked there in five days' time, we needed to stock up on groceries before heading out to the West Macdonnell Ranges to camp. So we found a parking spot for the van and car near Woolworths (no mean feat as Alice is a busy place) and did a lightning fast food shop, filled up with fuel, downloaded our emails and were headed out on Namatjira Drive.

Redbank Gorge

S23 34 59 E132 30 53

Friends will know I love Redbank Gorge, a campsite in the national park about 150 kms out from town and not all that far from Glen Helen Gorge. I have a host of 'favourite' spots but this would be in my top three. It is a gorgeous spot, camped up on a ridge overlooking a valley and gorge below, and there only a handful of sites there so it can never be too busy. Besides it has no facilities other than a drop toilet. Over the years we have camped here probably close to a dozen times and I fall in love with it afresh each time. The spot we backed into this time had the benefit of shaded bushes which, when we put up the awning, provided a nice cool little cave to sit in out of the sun and wind. It always seems to be windy here, and that helps to keep things cool.

The first two days were warm but we were comfortable enough with the fan to keep us cool in the heat of the day, or sitting outside in the shade. There was a nice cool breeze every day and it kept us from becoming too warm. A neighbouring woman in a motorhome likewise took comfort in our little cave by sitting with cups of tea and coffee and chatting to us.

We took a day trip from here and visited the gorge at Ormiston, getting a couple of geocaches along the way, and having lunch at the kiosk there.



And then at sunset of course we sat overlooking the valley with a cold drink. Just lovely.

Finke River Two Mile Camp

S23 40 25 E 132 40 14

After three days here at Redbank, we decided to risk moving over to Finke River Two Mile Camp near Glen Helen, which is another cracker of a camp spot. Why do I say "risk"? Because two years ago we got bogged here, in deep

sand, and had the dickens of a time getting out with the van wheels almost sunk to the axels. It was a bad moment or three, and alas we had got our friends Lesley and Erich bogged too. On that occasion after some kind souls helped extricate our van, then Val helped Lesley and Erich get out. But this time we scouted our path more precisely and took a firmer path on pebbles and hard ground. We always avoid camping directly on waterways as animals need to drink at the water, and if you camp on the water's edge you deny access to other people.

The waterhole is a permanent body of water and hosts a wide variety of birdlife. A bonus was the whistling kite nesting in the huge gum tree up the bank, and feeding its young chicks.

The view in the photo above is of the waterhole and rock feature directly in front of our van, and if you look carefully there is a view of Mt Sonder, in the far distance.

This is another of our favourite spots, and you can see why we keep coming back to the West Macdonnell Ranges (now known also as Tjuritja from the local Aboriginal language).

There is no phone or internet but the NT Government has installed free wifi up at the Glen Helen Resort. It seems to be limited to half an hour each 24 hour period but you can buy 100MB for \$4.95. Oh, and no pets are allowed here...

I noticed the campground over at Glen Helen was particularly unappealing, with dust swirling around. So, I really prefer this pristine place on a waterhole to the Glen Helen camp- but the road in is rough and not recommended for an on-road van.

After two days here we had to head into the bright lights and traffic lights of Alice Springs.

