

Travelling from Brisbane to Darwin Stage 24 Queensland, and heading toward the Northern Territory

In order to undertake another stint of teaching in the NT, we left Brisbane on a Thursday, heading first down to Stanthorpe for a few days, and then inland and across to the Stuart Highway, and up to Darwin. There was some nostalgia connected with this, as we were at Girraween a year and a half ago and absolutely loved it there.

Special points of interest:

- Stanthorpe and Girraween NP
- Back roads to Mitchell



Trip report

Girraween National Park

Near Stanthorpe

27 to 30 March 2008

When we left Brisbane it was pouring with rain; luckily it held off long enough to allow us to pack up first. It is an act of faith to believe that at the other end of the journey will be sunny skies...but once over the range and passing through Aratula the clouds had lifted mostly. So most of our time in the Granite Belt at Girraween was sunny, although very cold at nights.

Stanthorpe is about 900 metres elevation and experiences very cold winter days as well as cool summers. Last time we were camped at the national park it was November 2006 and we had snow one day. That's when we decided to get the Webasto diesel heater installed! I can tell you it came into its own out there this time. Others were cold in their tents or vans but we were toasty warm.

The campground is lovely, with spots reserved especially for vans, alongside thickets of greenery and tall eucalypt trees to shade sites. We need sun on the solar panels of course, but had more than enough. Often I like to use the computer for a few hours a day if there is enough sun, but as there was no mobile reception (and hence no internet) I was able to leave the computer to sit idle for a while.

There is prolific birdlife in this national park, and one of the 'friendliest' was the satin bowerbird. Last time we stayed here, a juvenile satin bowerbird flew through our awning, lifting a biscuit from Val's hand and taking it away with him completely. The bird made a little gravelly sound in its throat which sounded like it might be laughter... Anyway they were around this time too, and one pinched a couple of grapes from a bowl on the outside table. I gather it takes seven years for them to develop this special glossy black plumage. The juveniles are more of a creamy colour.

As well as the mature and juvenile satin bowerbirds we saw wrens, crimson rosellas and kookaburras. They are a real delight. Although we didn't see it apparently there is

reputed to be a Chestnut-rumped Warbler in the region as this is the upper reaches of where it has previously been sighted.



While we were here, we had a scamper around some of the wonderful sights of Stanthorpe. This a truly amazing area, with wineries, a dairy to buy cheese, olive outlet, a chocolate shop (right on the road into the national park, no less!) and more wineries than you can poke a stick at. I love this area. And as the apples and pears were fruiting, we could buy lots of produce at great prices.

Adult Satin bowerbird

We went to Mt Stirling Olives, Collins Road, just north of town and bought olives and olive oil after a thorough tasting of the product. Then we went over to the Dairy factory and bought cheeses after another tasting. Yummy.

Equally delightful was the fact that another two Kedrons called in while we were at Girraween; Averil and Greg, and Peter and Dianne. Both have Top Enders and are out enjoying themselves in their vans. In fact we had met Peter and Di when we were visiting New Norcia (WA) back when their van was new. They have one of the first vans ever produced and we were so impressed with the style and finish of the product. One night we joined them for a drink and chat and it was good to hear about the travels of other vanners like ourselves.



While we had the time here, I made some sausage rolls, which I vary each time I make them. But Val always says they are delicious (bless him!). They are easy to make and they can be varied to suit whatever you like to add. I often put chopped chillies in, but this depends of course on who you are serving them to. They are useful for travelling, as we can heat them up in the oven or microwave, or just have them cold with tomato sauce. A great lunch while in transit with the van.

We ate ours for lunch while driving up from St George to Mitchell...

Sausage rolls. (Makes about 24 rolls))

1 finely chopped onion
1 clove garlic (optional)
quarter cup chopped capsicum
1 grated carrot
teaspoon grated ginger (optional)
250g of sausage mince
salt and pepper
dash of soy sauce or kecap manis
3 sheets puff pastry
milk for brushing on rolls before baking



1. Add chopped onion, garlic, capsicum carrot and ginger to sausage mince, mix well with hands
2. Place a sheet of pastry on floured bench, cut in half longwise. Brush milk on edges. Put a 'roll' of mince mix along middle of each cut piece of pastry. Roll pastry over the mince filling and form a long sausage roll. Cut each roll into four smaller rolls with sharp knife. At this stage you have 8 rolls.
3. Do the same with the other sheets of pastry. Place rolls on a greased baking tray – or one lined with baking paper (my preference)
4. Brush with milk.
5. Bake in a hot oven (220 degrees) until brown -about 20 to 25 mins.

Mitchell

31 March and 1 April 2008

In order to start the trek back to Darwin, we left reasonably early, having packed up the night before (awning in and chairs packed away). It was a freezing cold morning again (just 2 degrees) and a lovely blue sky heralded another beautiful day. At first we headed from Stanthorpe westwards to Texas, then to Goondiwindi and up to St George and then up a back road from St George to Mitchell. The back road cut off a lot of kms but was very ordinary in places. The road was mostly narrow and with soft edges. Once again we experienced that peculiar undulating, bumpy ride which is specific to Qld outback roads. Unfortunately I was driving when we hit the last stretch (about 220 kilometres from memory), which was the worst. But scenic though...they have had good rain here and there was heavy grass growth. Often we could look over rolling paddocks of thick grass, and as the day turned into late afternoon the light turned the fields and gum trees to gold, a tranquil sight.

Earlier in the day we nearly took out a herd of pretty young deer, who erupted from bushes onto the road; you could hear the Landcruiser drums locking at that point...

Then I narrowly avoided some kangaroos, and there were cattle on the road somewhere else. An agricultural day!

I think this was the longest period I had driven the van, and never before on such a bad road. It was a testament to Val's patience that he didn't ask to take over. He just sighs a lot when he thinks I can't hear.

We arrived in Mitchell about 6pm, just on dusk, and set up the van, put the awning out, wiped our brows, said "bugger, we're exhausted" and promptly went to the pub for dinner.

Crawford Creek Rest Stop

S22 33 29 E 143 25 30

2 April 2008

During the day we called in to Tambo and bought some food at a supermarket. Tambo of course is famous for its Teddies, which are made by the local residents as a community money making venture. The Teddies (that is, stuffed teddy bears) are wonderful and come in many different sizes and shapes, all with a printed name and 'pedigree'. We have bought quite a few here over the years, for the grandchildren. Although we bought one for ourselves and he still travels with us in the van, and has done right from the beginning of our trip – his name is Ercildoune Eric. I guess he was made by someone at Ercildoune Station...

About 5pm we pulled over on the side of the road at a rest stop 132 kilometres NW of Longreach. This spot is officially right beside the highway but in reality there are roads going off down the back in all directions, so we took one of those roads and tucked ourselves behind some bushes and in the shade of a tree (but not UNDER a tree) and had a restful night's sleep. Spots like this are magic; at night the stars shine so brightly, as you are under a canopy of dark sky and with no city lights to dilute their sparkle.



Our habit is to set up by pulling out the chairs and a table, sitting over a cold drink of something nice (in this case we had some left over champagne to finish off) and sit chatting together until it's time to cook dinner. The evening was cool and we had a good night's rest.

There were some people nearby but we couldn't see or hear them so it felt as though we were quite remote.

Mount Isa

3 April 2008

We had looked for an overnight spot bushcamping close to Mount Isa, approaching from the Eastern side, and found nothing suitable. Friends had once stayed at a caravan park on the road out to Lake Moondarra and said it was nice. We decided to try it out and pulled in. The park was chock full of permanents, and we found we couldn't get enough swing to bring the van into the allocated site, due to a permanent's car badly parked. I didn't think much of the place, so we asked for our money back and left. I have never had to do that before – the place was a real dive, in my opinion, and is no doubt providing a service for locals who live there but it is truly not suitable for travelling vanners.

Being tired, we finally decided to stay at the Big4 on the Eastern outskirts of town, and had a drive through site which we didn't need to unhitch for. This was a fine park...

Of course, as luck had it, next morning on the way out of Mt Isa, there were heaps of spots which would have suited us to just pull over for the night. We have always in the past stayed at the Isa for several days and not looked out for nearby rest stops....

41 Mile Bore Rest Stop

Barkly Highway

S19 19 13 E134 51 03

4 April 2008

During this day we passed through the Barkly Homestead, and paid \$2.08 for diesel! They really take advantage of the tyranny of distance. We only topped up the tanks, not filling them, and filled up the next day at the Three Ways on the Stuart Highway.

As those who follow these trip reports will know, we have stayed at this spot before, a few times now. It is quite one of our favourites. It is an official rest stop, but there are little tracks leading off to secluded sites down the back. Our favourite little spot has a big gum tree for shade and gravel on the ground to keep the dust down. The afternoon light was drawing in when we arrived and the flies were terrible. Once the light disappeared, so did the flies, thank goodness. So we sat outside with a cup of tea, chatting, until it was time to head to bed. Although it was a warm night it wasn't too bad, and we found we had a reasonable night's rest. I was intrigued to see a couple of other groups somewhere camped nearby, who had camp fires. I personally thought it was too warm for a fire, but maybe they needed to cook dinner on a fire.



41 Mile Bore (we aren't actually under the tree, just near it)

12 Mile Stock Yards, Elsey NP

S 14 57 18 E 133 13 09

5 April 2008

This too is one of our favourite camp sites. Over the years, pre-vanning days, we used to drive down over school holidays or long weekends and camp here with a tent. It is a bush camp site, near the Roper River and about 20 kms or so out of Mataranka (head out to the Hot Springs, and turn south –to the right- along John Hauser Drive). It is a large area with both open areas for camping as well as individual camp sites. There is a large ablution block with solar heated hot showers and flushing toilets. There are no powered sites, and there is either limited or no NextG phone coverage.

The park was looking very run down this time – maybe they haven't yet had time to get it in order after the fallow Wet Season.

This time we pulled in about 5.00pm and it was still a very warm afternoon. I put my chair in the shade of a gum tree and read for an hour or so, and with dusk there arrived a nice cool change. This was a relief – we thought it could be an unpleasant night – no generators are allowed. We slept very well indeed, until the cockatoos woke us up. Very early!

Darwin

6 April

...and we were back in Darwin. It had been a hectic seven days of driving (not counting the additional day stopping over in Mitchell). We were glad to be at our destination. But there was a tinge of sadness; it could be a while before we are on the road again with the van!