

Outback SA and Back Home

July 2014

This report on the third stage of the trip covers some areas in the outback of SA, including Cullyamurra Waterhole, the Strzelecki, the Flinders Ranges and back home in the Barossa Valley. The main features of the trip were of course the wonderful, vast outback with its compelling beauty. We were surprised at the extent of the drought in far Western Queensland and now more fully appreciate the plight of the graziers.

Carrying water is such a priority out here as you must be self sufficient. Where we had been able to get clean bore water at Innamincka on our trip in 2012, the only water available this time was untreated river water - which is a milky solution of mud and water. Luckily we had full tanks from somewhere to the East.



Burke's Dig Tree

Special points of interest:

- Camping on The Cooper
- Coongie Lakes
- The Flinders Ranges

Of Blue Skies and Cold Nights

Paddabilla Bore had been a peaceful and relaxing couple of days but it was time to get moving again. With our washing all up to date and our floors swept and washed at the Bore, we set out fairly early for the next night's camp. We had been told in advance that the caravan park at Thargomindah would be busy with a group who were staying there while attending a native title handing over ceremony (or something similar) and so we knew a crowded caravan park would not suit us. While in the area previously we had looked at some nice camping spots on Lake Bindegolly, East of Thargomindah, and so we pulled the van in to have a look. This is a sandy area and was as dry as chips. The lake was completely dry and in the area we chose to turn the van, we got temporarily stuck in sand. A bit of digging soon had us out again and back on the highway, having abandoned that idea. Fortunately we left little damage behind us and no one would have known we had been bogged there.

We passed through Thargomindah, first picking up fuel, then using the dump point to empty the toilet cassette and to fill our water tanks. We nabbed a previously unfound geocache (yay, a First to Find for us!) and pulled back out of town mid afternoon. We knew of a nice, peaceful spot about 55 kms West of town off the road and overlooking a valley. We had seen a caravan camped there on the last trip through here and

captured the details. There is a similar area on the opposite side of the highway (to the East), and coincidentally, we later met up with a couple in another van who had camped over that side the same night we were there. And we had no idea anyone was nearby!

Hilltop Rest Stop near Thargomindah

The spot was even nicer than we had remembered. It was a high spot well off the road, on nice even and clean pebbles and overlooking a valley. We could see trucks and cars on the nearby highway coming from quite some distance before night fall, when all traffic seemed to cease. The colours in the sky at the horizon as dusk fell were delicate pinks and gentle blues and we felt so privileged to be in such a lovely place. I think we had a glass of Riesling sitting outside looking at the view. Alas not Forbes and Forbes of Springton but something much more mundane.



That night was cold again, as only the desert nights can be, a dry, frosty morning greeted us the next day and we nursed cups of tea in the warm confines of the van before heading on. From memory there was a frost that morning....

Noccundra Waterhole

This is a spot which many travellers seem to enjoy staying at. It is a campsite on the Wilson River on Nockatunga Station. The Noccundra Hotel is about 500 metres from the camping area, which itself is simply a number of spots strung along the waterhole. We enjoyed a lunch at the pub after setting up camp at a niceish spot at the water's edge and kept all the windows shut to avoid the dust getting into the van. Why would anyone want to spend longer than a night here in these conditions...? Last time we had been here it had been a lot less dry and the camping area was considerably fresher and more appealing. The dry conditions were a sign of things to come as we headed further West.

Burke's Dig Tree

The story of the ill fated Burke and Wills expedition is one every school child hears about in Australia and the Dig Tree is a reminder of this tragic episode in our history. The tree was blazed with instructions on where to dig for provisions which was left for Burke's small advance party who had returned to their main party months later than expected and to have only missed them by a matter of five hours. The tree is still



there and is a popular site for travellers to call into and visit as they pass through the area. There was a strange little carving in a nearby tree; who knows what it represented?

It looked a lot like Val...on a bad day!

Conditions around the Dig Tree were woefully dry and dusty and although we looked at the camping there nearby on the Cooper Creek, it was less than appealing. Our guess was that the station had been grazing cattle in the precinct and their hooves had done a lot of damage. Who could blame a station who is desperate to feed their cattle. The drought is really biting.

Cullyamurra Waterhole, Innamincka

S 27 42 07 E 140 50 19

Cullyamurra is a waterhole on the Cooper, about 15 kms from Innamincka township. Back in 2012 when we stayed at this waterhole it had been a good year of rainfalls and the countryside was green and fresh. I took photos of the wildflowers on that occasion. It was much drier around the area this time, although the river was still wide and there was plentiful birdlife. The water was much more milky with a sediment which did not separate out...do they call that colloidal? We managed to get there early enough and grabbed our previous camping spot right near a huge old ghost gum which gracefully leant down and sheltered a large area with its boughs. We camped well away from



the limbs and had a lovely view of the sparkling water right on our doorstep.

Camp sites here are well spaced along the river and no one can really be close to another camper unless they are travelling together and camp close by choice. Or unless it is school holidays.....then all bets are off! An amazing coincidence; camped just up the river were the Walshes, who live in our small town in the Barossa Valley and about 300 metres from each others' houses. They were here for a few nights before continuing their trip to Birdsville. Again by some strange quirk of fate, we had similarly met them on the Mereenie Loop (central Australia and very remote indeed) last year when they were travelling in the opposite direction to us and we met up. Neither of us had even known the other was to be in the region...on both occasions. The chances of this happening two years in a row would have to be lower probability than winning big on

Lotto! Ben is our car's mechanic so we joked that he had come a long way to check on his work!



We did a day trip out to Coongie Lakes, a trip of about 100 kms, all gravel road. Some of the road was smooth and easy driving, and some was quite corrugated. We added a bit more dust to the car, which was really covered in a thick layer by now. Last time we were here the road was impassable following rains, so it was a good opportunity to see this iconic region. It was a truly

amazing body of water, although photos do not do it justice. There are several camp sites 20 kms back from the lake area proper, but they are quite nice and on a billabong. Number one camp is probably the best for medium to large vans. There are more sites right at the lake itself. At the lake site it is necessary to go up and over a reasonably sized sand dune so those more appealing sites would be too much for a heavier van, although it is possibly doable if you have a couple of vehicles in case of problems (someone to tow you over the dune and out).

There was a geocache hidden out there, which we searched for and found with little difficulty.

On the way back we called in to the day use area and visited the museum which has been created from Kudriemitchie Station's old homestead. The house has been repaired by the SA Toyota Club and is in good shape. How remote it must have been for the family who last lived there in 1967. I was intrigued by the Meathouse, an elaborate construction of brush over roof, all enclosed by flywire and with a water tank over the top, dripping water. The evaporating water would keep foodstuffs, including meat, much cooler in the heat. Even in a dry state, it was noticeably cooler when we were inside the house.



Back at Innamincka, when we stopped, the dust storms swirling around were so bad I got dust in eyes and mouth and a head full of the stuff. I had to wash my hair to get rid of it! I could not live there in those conditions! Val saw a picture of the early Australian Inland Mission nurses at Innamincka, with a sheet covering their heads, and food on a table to keep the dust out. Heroines!!

Fortunately, the dust was not so bad out where we were camped on the Cooper, probably due to the bush and vegetation.

It was warm enough each day to sit outside without jumpers during the day but at night it was very cold indeed.

After six days of lovely peace and quiet at Cullyamurra, we finally left and headed back out on the Strzelecki Track. The track was in reasonably good condition although there was heavy traffic (many vehicles seem to be work vehicles from various mining operations). We called into Montecollina Bore for a quick lunch break and cup of tea, and kept on. At Mt Hopeless, about 25 kms further on from Montecollina, we dropped South toward Arkaroola and aimed to be at the campground in the Gammon Ranges near Balcanoona Homestead by evening. It was still pretty dusty in this region although there were signs of rain damage on the track in spots. Fresh wheel ruts indicated recent rains. But it was unclear how recent that might have been.

But by 3.00pm we were pretty tired, and looked for somewhere suitable to pull over for the night. We found a spot near a tree lined creek with some light vegetation nearby. (S30 37.585 E 139 04.098) A nice and quiet night all by ourselves was passed under a brilliant sky full of stars, and the only company was a calf and its mother which visited just on dusk. They wandered off into the sunset. One of the things I like about such peaceful camps is the not having to close the windows to get dressed or undressed and to be able to sleep with the blinds up, looking out at the stars.

As a result of the overnight stop we were nice and early into the Weetootla Gorge campground near

Balcanoona. (S30 29 49 E 139 15 33) We chose the second campsite which is further in and usually quieter. But not this time! There were two other campers already set up nearby and just after our arrival some tenters put their tents fairly near us. The tenters were couple of interesting medical specialists who do a lot of bushwalking and they were good company around the fire.

But something happened at this campsite which we have never seen or experienced before; a nearby couple (in the smallest Jayco van I have ever seen) were so determined to be reclusive that when I went over to say hello, she waved me off with a dismissive wave of the hand. It was a definite message not to come nearer. They made no eye contact with us during our time together and when they packed up the next day they did so without speaking to us. The tenters got the same treatment, so it was not personal. Quite intriguing. But we need to respect others' preferences and so left them alone. I am guessing that they felt we had invaded their space. But as we had taken one of the allocated camping sites, with nothing available further away, there was not much else we could have done. In all our years of caravanning we have not found people in bush camps to be as dismissive as this couple was. You may get such behavior in a caravan park but not out bush.... As I say, it is necessary to respect other people's desire for privacy.



View from our van's awning at Weetootla

By this time we had been camping or travelling remotely for about 10 days and knew that the emails would be banking up, so we took the time to travel the 30 kms up to Arkaroola Resort to get diesel and to check the internet. The absence of the internet is an interesting thing; when at home or in mobile range I usually check emails constantly throughout the day or look at Facebook or do Google type searches on and off all day. But the absence of the internet was a relaxed freedom and it was pleasant not to have to think about it. But once I had access again,

it was like an addict's reaction to their need for a hit. I was only reluctantly dragged away from the land of internet back to the campground....

There is a fairly rugged four wheel drive track near Arkaroola, called the Wortupa Loop Track. The Track is an 80 kilometre return journey from Balcanoona and takes approximately four to five hours to complete. The drive provides some interesting scenery and a couple of steep (black diamond level) hills. My head knew the hills were not too steep but my gut reacted differently and I felt high anxiety with one of them. The track goes past Grindell's Hut which is available to be rented through the Department of Environment and Water Resources. It is fairly expensive but I understand there are three double bedrooms. The campground just below Grindell's Hut is quite nice and there were several tents and campertrailers there. Don't even think about taking in a larger caravan - the track in is quite overgrown. And there is that Black Diamond level hill to be negotiated....

The days at Weetootla were pleasantly warm during the day but still freezing at night. It was clear that the Southern Flinders were experiencing very cold conditions (even snow!) so we knew it would be progressively cooler as we headed further South. But eventually we needed to leave this pleasant campground and start to head homewards.

It was a fairly easy half day's drive to Aroona Ruins, one of the national park campsites South West of Blinman.

Aroona Ruins

S 31 16 45 E 138 34 45

This camp spot overlooks the ABC Range and is 33 kms North West of Wilpena Pound. It is sited near the ruins of an old homestead and remnants of a once thriving garden which was held by John Hayward as a sheep run in the 1850s. In the 1920s Aroona became an outstation of Oraparinna. Spring water was used to grow the extensive gardens here, the remains of which you can still see today. Artist Hans Heysen made many trips to the Flinders Ranges, beginning in 1926, and he made a number of paintings of the area which he described as "a very old land of primitive forces".

The campground is on the Heysen Trail, one of the world's great walking tracks and the longest trail in Australia. If you start here - or at the other end in Deep Creek Conservation Park in the Fleurieu Peninsula, you can tackle the full 1200 kms of trail.

One of the best features of this campground is the taps which provide fresh, spring fed water to camp sites. The drop toilets are clean and well maintained too.

It should be noted that although at the time of this visit there was a self-registration station for fee payment, the Department is moving towards a pre-booking and fee payment system in August 2014. It will be slowly expanded from a couple of parks only, to include as many as possible, with perhaps Aroona as well. It will make it very hard to extend a stay at such remote parks as there is no mobile phone reception for about 30 or



Aroona Ruins campground

40 kms.



ABC Range

It would be fair to say that our fears of colder weather were realised. It was very cold at Aroona; during the day it was cold and freezing at night. There was ice on the windscreen again. Still, it was July and mid-Winter!. When worse weather was forecast on the night's news, we felt it was time to head home. Home, in SA's Barossa Valley, is a good six hour drive from Aroona, so we headed out early.

As we steadily covered the kms Southward, the weather got colder and quite squally. We called into the mining community of Burra for bakery-made pasties for lunch and kept going. Eventually we arrived home about 3.00pm, to a very cold house. We had been away for 12 weeks and the house had been empty all that time. And took days to heat up again! But it was good to be home.