

# Flinders Ranges, Strzelecki Track and Outback QLD

**May to June 2012**

With Autumn's cold biting at home in the Barossa Valley, it was time for our next trek North. An area that had always been on our list of places to see was the Strzelecki Track and so we decided to head to outback Queensland on this iconic stretch of remote road. Fellow members of a caravanning forum suggested we take a back way onto the Track through Blinman and Arkaroola, rather than the traditional Lyndhurst to Innamincka route. We travelled through some remote corners of Queensland and then into Brisbane.



Bunyeroo Valley, Flinders Ranges

## Special points of interest:

- Flinders Ranges
- Strzelecki Track
- Outback Campsites

## Flinders Ranges

Sitting around a campfire at night while out camping can be a magical experience. "We have a million dollar view of the ranges and the stars, and it is all free" I said. We were camped at Brachina Gorge East campground and were enjoying brilliant blue skies each day and cold, frosty nights. What more could you ask for? Back home it was raining and very cold indeed.

Although we have visited parts of the Flinders Ranges before, we can't honestly say it is completely familiar to us. There are so many parts of this vast area which we have not yet travelled to and so we thought it could be good to first stop at Brachina Gorge (where we have enjoyed camping before) and then travel up through Blinman to Arkaroola. As luck would have it, The Gammon Ranges were mostly closed due to a pest eradication program, although we knew this in advance. What a shame - we will just have to come back to see this unique place in more depth another time!

We pulled into a familiar campsite at Brachina Gorge East late in the afternoon and quickly put the chairs out for a glass of red wine. A good friend from the Barossa is owner and wine maker Colin Forbes and in the best tradition of friendship we pulled out a bottle of his cabernet sauvignon and promptly polished it off before dinner. Before heading out from

home I had prepared a chicken casserole in the thermal cooker, with a top pot of rice, and so dinner was all cooked and ready to serve and eat. We sat outside and enjoyed the warmer weather as well as the clear skies and stars. As there was no one else anywhere near, we relaxed into the feeling of being in a remote spot. It was so nice and peaceful at the camp site we found it easy to stay a second day, to make absolutely sure we had unwound!

### **Flinders Ranges**

As usual, we did some day trips around to look at the other campgrounds (and found that the Aroona camp site was not only a lovely spot but had water taps near to most sites. Those sites would be more suited to the camper trailer so we earmarked one or two of the sites for a future trip. A further foray over to Wilpena Pound had us back in civilization and we really noticed the busyness of the resort. While at Wilpena we topped up an empty gas bottle (right at the start of a camping trip we ran out of gas in one bottle....sigh) and checked our emails on the iPhone. There was only a heap of spam mail, so all was good. A quick check to our daughter on the phone reassured us all was well at home.

We moved over to Trezona campground for a change of scenery. This site is located along a



creek bed (usually dry) and with towering gums all around. The designated camp sites each have a barbeque pit and plate and there are drop toilets in a central position. We camped right down the end of the camp ground, all by ourselves and enjoyed more tranquility. We could feel the peace!

*Trezona camp site*

Before we left home we had taken the precaution of buying a South Australian Desert Parks Pass (about \$120) which would cover all park camping on the Strzelecki Track, and we already had our All parks Pass, which covered park entry fees as well as our camping fees. This latter pass has been a great saving in the past as we camp in SA parks frequently enough to make it well worthwhile. We hoped it had been a worthwhile investment to buy the additional pass.

After leaving Trezona camp ground we headed North East to Blinman and then North to Chambers Gorge. Blinman has a wonderful café where we had coffee and scones with jam and cream (alas, one of my weaknesses) and bought some instant coffee at the small General Store.



From Blinman, the gravel road first wound its way through the hills with some delightful scenery, and

then we travelled for an hour or so through flat plains to the turn off to Chambers Gorge, 60 kms south of Balcanoona.

The road into Chambers Gorge was fine; a little dusty and corrugated in places, but nothing a two wheel drive could not do, even at the creek crossings. But as the author and Flinders Guru, Ron Moon says, you wouldn't want to take a new car in there. Following advice from a woman at Blinman, we stopped at the first camp site and unhitched the van, set up camp and drove in to see the rest of the gorge. Of course, we discovered much nicer camp sites closer in, all of which we would have had no problem fitting into. Sigh. There was water running in the creek, although strangely, it was slightly saline.



Our camp had a magnificent backdrop of hills stretching to the South East, and the creek bed. With beautiful weather, we could not have had a nicer spot to spend

a night. I am so glad we took a chance on coming into the gorge as it was well worth seeing.

It was another bright sunny day when we awoke next morning and we headed off early as we wanted to be up on the Strzelecki Track by mid afternoon. The road was dusty but we travelled on a formed road as far as Arkaroola (where we turned off for the 28 kms in to pick up fuel) and then we continued on a less well used track up North.



*Road to Arkaroola turnoff*



*Road after Arkaroola*

There was very little traffic either before or after Arkaroola, but the only other vehicles we saw on the northern less-travelled road was a group of motorcyclists on trail bikes. So far we had seen a few Evernew vans (close to Wilpena), a group of Trakmaster vans who were coming off the Balcanoona to Arkaroola road and travelling together, as well as another Kedron coming out of Arkaroola. Where is everyone else?

### **Strzelecki Track**

We reached the Strzelecki Track by about 2.00pm and found there it was much faster travelling, being a formed road, but dusty as hell. We had foolishly only sealed the door vent with foam, rather than our usual practice of duct taping it securely shut, and had one rest stop spent sweeping and mopping out the dust. Not happy Jan. Val did what he should have done at the start with his duct tape and after that not a scrap of dust was to be seen.



An overnight stop at Montecollina Bore was a bit of a disappointment to me; I was expecting a hot dip in an artesian hot pool but apart from very hot water coming out of the pipe into the pool, the pool's water was frigid. The campground was nothing to write home about either - just a dusty expanse. Next time we would stay on the side of the road somewhere.

The cold nights made for sound sleeping, tucked up in our bed with a doona, and each morning we used the diesel heater until we were thawed out sufficiently to get dressed. The nights got to below freezing and the daytime temperatures generally reached about 22 or 23 degrees. Beautiful weather for travelling.

### **Innamincka**

Innamincka was one of those spots we had always meant to visit but never managed to get there. I imagined a dusty township and in that respect it lived up to its reputation. When we pulled in, there was a stiff wind blowing and it whipped the dust in great flurries through the car park and over the hotel and Trading Post. What a dismal place to live.

But the campgrounds were a delightful contrast. There are three separate camp options. First are the spots on the creek down from the hotel; then there is the Town Common, and finally there are several camp sites further out along the Cooper at some more private and smaller sites. For the latter sites you need a Desert Parks Pass (obtainable at the Trading Post for \$125) which covers park entry and camping for a 12 month period. The Town Common is \$5 a night in an honesty box; and the creek camps are free (I think...). We chose a camp about 8kms from town on the Creek at a spot called Ski Beach. For those sites you need a Desert Parks Pass. We were all by ourselves there and enjoyed the most delightful solitude with a view of the River to die for. All the camp spots along the creek are fresh and shaded, as well as more open spots if your solar panels need the sun. We had a good combination of shade and sun so were comfortable.



#### ***Camp site at Innamincka***

The Cooper was at very high levels and it was a great sight, and the birdlife was amazing.

The wind wasn't a problem down along the Creek, which was a blessing. But dinner at the hotel that first night reminded us how dusty and unattractive the township can be. To cap it off, the Hotel was playing blaringly loud music, all day and night, it seemed to me. It was so loud it was hard to think straight,

and it was loud speakered out to the parking area. Lordy me....

Nevertheless, the camping was so special it made up for the township.



The track out to the Coongie Lakes was closed so we were not able to go out and see this iconic area, one of the places I have yearned to see for so long.

But we did visit the site where explorer Burke's body was initially found and buried, as well as Wills original grave site and the place where King was eventually found by a rescue party who had set out to find any survivors of the disastrous Burke and Wills ill-fated expedition. Very sobering stories and they have made me determined to find out more about this tragedy when I get back to civilization.

The Trading Post at Innamincka generously allows travellers to top up their water tanks and we took advantage of this, but only put a reasonable amount in rather than abusing their hospitality and using too much of what may be a precious commodity. In any event, we had access to river water for washing clothes and dishes.

Altogether we spent three nights at Innamincka, and then pressed on Eastwards toward Thargomindah. The road was initially very pebbly with stones which could easily cut tyres which have not had the pressure lowered. But as soon as the Queensland border was reached, the road was suddenly bitumenised and what a welcome that was after so much dust and corrugations.

### **Noccundra Water hole**

We travelled through mainly flat plains up until Noccundra, when we detoured South about 20 kms into the well known waterhole and pub. A quick camp was made at the water's edge and we had a delightful spot overlooking the river and near some shady trees. There was a number of other vans similarly camped along the waterhole so this spot must be well known. I reckon you could easily stay here for a week or so, as there are toilets and showers in an ablution block up at the nearby hotel.

The bloke running the hotel was interesting. He didn't seem to want to be there and he certainly didn't seem happy to have customers. When I asked for a beer for Val and a can of soft drink for myself, he had trouble finding the soft drinks..... Our plans to have dinner at the hotel were dashed when he said there was no cook and thus no food. Apparently the hotel has just changed hands, so let's hope things get back to normal soon.

So instead, we spent a pleasant hour sharing drinks with our camp neighbours and then made a salad with some frozen home-made quiches. The night was cool and the sunset was spectacular.

The waterhole is a pleasant spot and I can see why it is so popular. There are toilets and showers up at the pub - about 300 metres away? - but we used our own facilities.

### **Thargomindah**

An early arrival at Thargomindah meant we had our pick of sites in the caravan park. We needed to stay at a park in order to do our washing of towels and sheets and to top up with water. As parks go, it was a good one - nice level sites, on clean gravel, and the ablution block was nice and clean. And it was pleasant to go out to dinner at the Oasis Motel, which is apparently the place to go on a Sunday night, as the pub doesn't provide meals that night! Everything in town is a very short walk away and we thought it was a pleasant, clean and

attractive town. While staying here, we drove out to look at the camping site at Lake Bindegolly and found that the southern side of the lake had a couple of pleasant camp spots overlooking the lake. I am sure that in normal seasons the water's level would be much lower and perhaps not quite as pleasant.....



The weather remained lovely; cool days and cold nights, while at home we knew there was freezing and wet conditions. Much nicer here.

From Thargo we turned Northwards up the Quilpie to Thargomindah Road, which was mostly a one lane bitumen road but with about 40 kms of good gravel. It was a bit dusty so we made sure we left the UHF on at all times, in order for trucks or other vehicles to let us know they needed to pass us.

By mid morning we were at little Toompine ("The Pub without a Town", population two). We stayed here last year and thought it was a friendly and hospitable spot. The local Council provides free power, shower and toilets and access to a tap. In return it is expected you will buy a meal or a drink (or both!) at the pub. As a result the pub is hopping with a busy vibe in the evenings, as travellers all come in to share in the social scene. It is nothing special as regards the camping but the sites provided are level, on clean gravel and as noted



***Toompine Pub***



***Camping at Toompine***

previously, have free power if you get there early enough.

It was our intention to spend some time at Quilpie's Lake Houdraman after leaving Toompine, but by now we were aware that the weather reports signaled that wet weather was heading that way in a couple of days. We suspected this may mean a change in our plans. Last year it was also wet and this prevented us from staying in what is regarded by fellow travellers as an iconic free camp.

But we headed out there on the advice from the Tourist Office back in Quilpie that it would be OK as long as we "skedaddled" at the first sign of rain. So we drove out the 5 or so kms

to the Lake, and found a nice spot overlooking the wide body of water, with the van out in good sun (for the solar panels) and with shade at the water's edge. It is a place you could easily spend a week or two (in dry weather).

Lake Houdramon was as nice as everyone had described. It is a large water body, with waterlilies, and camp sites all along the water's edge. We were advised to go down to the spots on the left. We found a nice spot with enough space for the van to be out in the sun to capture light on the solar panels and with shade for our chairs in front of the water.

Unfortunately, late in the afternoon, just on dinner time, clouds come over and it started to rain. So we skedaddled, as advised. You have never seen people move so fast. Dirty coffee cups were thrown into the sink, with the wine glasses, the windows were jammed shut in haste and we were off and running. It seemed best to head in the direction we would take the next day so we turned onto the highway and travelled toward Charleville for about 20 kms. We found a gravel scrape well off the side of the road and pulled off onto it with grateful thanks to whoever put the gravel right there. It was just coming onto dark and there was a cold wind which brought short flurries of rain.

It was a peaceful night, all by ourselves and with very little traffic on the Balonne Highway after dark.

The next day we travelled solidly Eastwards, stopping at Charleville for lunch and to find the dump point. Tip: there is a great CMCA sponsored dump point near the Information Office in Qantas Drive, with a tap that supplies drinking water. What generosity by the locals. Unfortunately we didn't need any water, being fairly full from the caravan park at Thargomindah. But we did some food shopping in town to repay the local population for their dump point and water!

It was late afternoon when we arrived at our next stop, the Neil Turner Weir at Mitchell. This has to be one of Australia's best free camps. There is a toilet block with a soap dispenser and paper towels, taps with the best quality water you will get anywhere, and a lovely view of the river. The only downside was the effect the rain was having on several riverside camp spots, which have blacksoil and trap unwary drivers. Great tracts of grass had been clearly churned up from people who had foolishly parked there and had trouble getting out.

We camped on a gravelled area, overlooking a green park and the Maranoa river and were very comfortably positioned in case of rain. Normally, there would be lovely areas of grass to park on and get away from other campers. But with the rain, everyone was keen to camp on whatever hard surfaces they could find and as a result were fairly close to each other. It was still better than a caravan park!

While in Mitchell we went out to dinner, filled up with fuel, did our vegetable shopping (including a visit to the butchers) and bought a newspaper each day. At each spot we shopped at we made sure to tell people where we were camped and that we were keen to put something back into the town through our shopping. I would love to come back and spend more time there when it is drier....

After leaving Mitchell, we headed directly for the coast at Maroochydore. It was a long day's drive, but we arrived at our destination at 4.30pm. We stayed at the Council owned Cotton Tree caravan park, a spot right on the beach but with shops and coffee shops just over the road.

It was time for a rest!