

Stage 18 Moree to Sapphire

Moree behind us, we headed north again. Well we did, after a false start when we took the wrong road due to my being occupied by putting on lipstick instead of giving Val map directions. This stage of our travels introduced some new friends and some reconnections with gremlins.

During this phase of the trip I developed an obsessive compulsive habit of watching the evening news and weather reports to track the weather.

5 July Surat (QLD)

Fishing and Camping Ground (Free Camp)

S 27 07 0.950 E 149 04 0.383

It was a lovely sunny day as we headed north and it felt so good to be out of that cold rain for a while. Camps Australia Wide (a good camping spot publication) listed a camp site on the outskirts of Surat, a small country QLD town. This is a top spot and justifiably popular with vanners. The campground is only a kilometre out of two on the banks of the Condamine River. It has clean flushing toilets and water taps. There is also a dump point! There were two vans which had apparently been there for more than the permitted 72 hours. And there is even mobile phone coverage, both CDMA and NextG.

We had happy hour with two couples and it felt good to be socialising in the way you do at free camps. About 5.30 the cold came creeping around all our ankles, and it was time to go inside.

Just after arriving we soon became aware that we had a problem with our water tank. There was a soft hissing sound (much like Val makes by drawing air in over his teeth while I am driving....) when we turned the water pumps on. Hmmm. "This means we may have to change direction and head for Brisbane, and the Kedron factory for repairs", I said. Val agreed, so the mobile phone was deployed and arrangements made for the van to be at the factory Monday morning.

This is the first time the van has let us down....not bad in three years of constant travel.

6 -8 July

Esk Caravan Park

So, Eastwards from Surat, we headed over to Esk in the Brisbane Valley. The town is quaint and the area is scenic. And the park is right in town, within walking distance from the shops and a nice pub for dinner. Some readers will recall that we have been there a couple of times before and enjoyed it.

We enjoyed it this time too, although there was some subdued chaos at the park, due to the presence of two separate caravan club meets that weekend. The park allowed caravans to park willy-nilly all over the place and it was a bit hectic. One

club took over the camp kitchen which meant no one else could use it. But they were all very quiet (mostly) and respected other's space. Well done to both clubs, I thought. No bouquets to the managers, whose only thought was to fill the place to the overflow point, with electrical cords running everywhere, and people parked in such a manner they prevented other vehicles from getting out in some cases.

9 to 15 July

Brisbane Big4, Zillmere Road

I always enjoy spending time in Brisbane. It is a lovely city and there is so much to do in the area. As we have family in Brisbane and up at Bribie Island (two Aunts, my mother's sisters) it is a chance to catch up with them as well. And to go shopping in the city, of course!

My Aunt who lives at Bribie Island is 99 years old and is still fit and healthy; she is certainly mentally alert. We took her out to lunch at a seaside café (lovely sparkling water and sunshine – a good combination). And we had lunch at my other Aunt's. She is 85 years old, and fitter than I am!

The Big4 in Zillmere Road is a nice park, with well spaced sites and is well maintained. It isn't too far from the railway for a trip into the city, and there are reasonably sized shopping centres nearby (including Chermside). We managed to fit in two visits to the cinema (the latest Shrek movie, and the latest Harry Potter). And we had dinner over at the Hornets Club with Darryl and Sue, other Kedronning friends.

I had to be contactable on the mobile phone all week for work purposes, and we had to get the car serviced, so we decided to stay the week in the city. There are always things to be done in the housekeeping department, like buying new tyres or car servicing....

The Kedron factory not only fixed the hot water service (with only one day's advance notice!) but only charged us for the labour. They persuaded the tank supplier to give us a new tank, as the tank really should not have developed a leak like that.

16 and 17 July Chinchilla Weir, Chinchilla

S 26 48 0.133 E 150 34 0.800

This spot was mentioned by Kimbo, another Kedronner, and I don't know how we had been unaware of such a great free camp. Spread around an area of trees, near the weir, and with a toilet block, it is a very appealing place. And the final touch is the free power, from a couple of poles with electricity boxes, each with about 8 power outlets. This is designed to encourage people to stay for a couple of nights, and thus spend money in the nearby town (nine kilometres away). There is more to the town than we had thought too; when driving through it to

access the free camp, we realised there are coffee shops and a lovely pub. None of this is visible from the highway passing through town.

We had a nice little spot all to ourselves, among the trees and overlooking the water, with geese, swans and pelicans for light entertainment. Of course, we stayed two days; it was hard to drag ourselves away from such a lovely camp. It felt strange having power in a free camp. And there were one or two bars of CDMA and NextG mobile coverage. I was able to send and receive emails.

It was freezing here at night (literally), and very cold during the day, although the sun was shining. There was little warmth in the sun.

18 to 21 July

Carnarvon Gorge (Takarokka Bush Resort)

We had booked a site at the Takarokka campground and so had to travel solidly to get there for the night. In busy periods it is a good precaution to book ahead by a few days in advance, but it can restrict one's flexibility. The countryside changed markedly as we travelled up from Roma; from spindly light woodland, we headed into more tropical type vegetation. Carpentaria palms soon appeared and a range of hills in the background. Quite appealing, and very like the area around Moline (near Pine Creek in the Northern Territory).

The campground was extremely dusty and dry. At first they tried to put us and our van in an open area, with a long line of vans placed in a dusty expanse of nothing else other than vans. Val said it would be like camping in a carpark (at \$30 a night!). So they gave us a nice spot backed into the trees and shrubs (site P29), and this was much more appealing.

The Gorge walks are truly wonderful, with very special places indeed. We did a walk into Mickeys Creek one day (just to warm up) and then a long haul into the gorge proper up to Ward's Canyon. I thought the Moss Garden and Ward's Canyon were the most beautiful gorge systems I have ever seen, and I have seen some special ones in the past. But my legs and back certainly knew all about it that night and the next day. It was worth every step of the way (about 10 kms in all).

The resort has a label of "Eco" attached to it; this (in my opinion) gives establishments licence to not provide items or facilities such as dump points, soap and hand towels in the laundry, sullage, or watered grass. Now, when I see Eco as any part of the place's name, we check it out carefully. Takarokka is an Eco resort.

22 to 25 July 2007

Emerald

After a pleasant drive through grazing country, and a backdrop of ranges in the distance, we arrived at lunchtime at the park in Emerald. I completely forgot

about the nice campground back at Springsure that friend Kimbo told me about; drat! Next time...

This is a busy time in this part of Australia with vans crisscrossing the state. We see so many vans beetling up and down each highway; many of them are Victorians and New South Welshmen, but there are a lot of Queensland vans on the road too. Not many Territorians though. So it was no surprise that our park was bursting at the seams, with vans being squeezed into every available spare space. Luckily we had booked ahead, but even so they placed us across from the other sites on a patch of dust, with no concrete slab, and a cord running across the road from the electricity pole. Not sure what Work Health would make of it all...must ask my friend Linda.

Then on the second night our worst park nightmare happened – two buses full of school kids arrived and set up near us. Oh woe. There were 90 of them! You should have head them at 6.00am as they all tumbled out of their tents to go to the toilets, and passed our van. Actually, they were relatively well behaved, but it was still a pain.

The weather was wonderful at Emerald up until the last day when it was a wet and cold day. As they need the rain badly, I found it hard to be sorry. Except that as we were placed on a dusty site, the rain meant we had some mud to step in and out of near the van. Only a small problem though.

We had excellent CDMA and NextG reception here.

One day we went over to the small town of Sapphire (44 kilometres to the West) and spent some time “washing” a bucket of dirt, then sifting for sapphire gems. They are hard to spot in the raw state, but even so we found three large pieces which were of cuttable quality! How exciting. We arranged for them to be properly cut, and to pick them up a few days later. The whole process was quite interesting and not too much like hard work.

And another day we took a trip over to Lake Fairbairn. There is a very green and well maintained park near the caravan park there, where you can have a picnic or just a welcome rest in the green oasis.