

Stage 12 Darwin to Brisbane

19 20 September 2006

Roper River 12 Mile Stockyards

John Hauser Drive, Mataranka, 100 kms South of Katherine (14 57 17 S, 133 13 07 E)

Darwin was getting very hot and steamy, so it was definitely time to leave for a drier climate. We were aiming to be in the town of Milmerran for the 5 -6 October Camp Oven Festival, where we were to meet up with a Kedron van group. 35 vans were due to be there. It was exciting to think of meeting people we have only met on the internet van site. And to catch up again with another Kedronner couple we met last year at Mataranka (Shane and Elle).

We have spent many enjoyable stays at the Roper, so headed for there again. Sited on the Roper River, but well back so you can't see the river, this is a nice bush camp. The park was decidedly run down and looking neglected. But the shower and toilet block was clean and well maintained. Due to the absence of a resident caretaker there were no fees, a plus! And we had a nice site, near trees and flowering shrubs. We need to keep the vans solar panels in direct sun for at least 5 hours a day, if we aren't to run down the batteries or have to put on the generator. Without good sun we could only last 3 days probably, due to the 230 litre 12v/240v fridge. But I do value the space in that fridge; we can get any amount of ice cream and meat in its freezer!

Although the weather was hotting up we found it quite cool during the evenings, and had a doona on the bed.

Our favourite apostle birds were missing! And so were the top knot pigeons. But there were a number of the usual crowd of crows....and lots of kangaroos around our camp.

40 Mile Bore Rest Stop, Barkly Highway

21 September 2006

(19 19 23 S, 134 51 00 E)

This is a nice rest stop just off the Highway, and as you can get well off the road into the bush, it is popular with vanners. We shared the area with about three other groups, but as they were all well spaced could not say we were bothered with their presence. The night was clear, and the stars sparkled in a way that can only be seen away from city lights. Our van was nestled in the bush near a huge gum tree and we were as happy as could be. So much nicer than most caravan parks. While the day had been warm, at night it was cool enough to need the doona.

Mount Isa

22- 25 September 2006

Sunset CP

As I had to finish a court report and needed the computer on for hours (and hours!) we needed town power. And we could visit friends in town, as well as go out to dinner and do our shopping.

The park is small and friendly, and we had a lovely shady site so again we were happy. But it does gall having to pay to be so close to other vans, and able to hear the phone conversations of the people next door. Mount Isa is always warm at this time of the year, but we thought it was delightful weather, cool dry days and cooler nights.

26 and 27 September

Winton

Matilda Country Tourist Park

This is a nice, friendly and well set out park (been here a few times) and we enjoy returning to Winton. It is a friendly place and has wonderful options to dine out. We enjoyed a great meal at the Tattersalls Hotel, with tables and chairs on the pavement outside the hotel, overlooking the main street.

The apostle birds finally put in an appearance right outside our awning, preening themselves in the trees.

We did some van housekeeping, and then spent the day having a drive to Bladensburg NP, only 20 kms out of town. There is a nice bushcamp there, (Boughshed Camp) and we spent 4 nights out there alongside Surprise Creek when we came through last year. There is a cairn dedicated to the shearers in the late 1800s who went on strike twice, thus forming the genesis of the Labor Party. Weather? Very warm days but cool nights; we didn't need the airconditioner at all, even during the day.

28 and 29 September

Barcaldine

A small town, Barcaldine has never before had any appeal for us, but we are so happy we stayed this time. We booked into a Top Tourist park on the Eastern side of town, and what a lovely park it is! Green grassed sites, lovely gardens, free washing machines, clean and sparkling amenities, all for \$14.50 a night with power and water. Better yet, there was a wonderful rose garden which served great Devonshire teas (and coffees!). And a quilting shop. I was in heaven.

30 September

Barcoo River Free Camp 59 km N of Tambo 24 38 10 S 145 52 59 E

Last year we stopped at this nice free camp on the banks of the Barcoo River, just south of Blackall. This time we were the only people there, and we enjoyed

the sounds of the bush as well as a full moon. While in Latvia earlier this year I found a CD of La Boheme with Pavarotti and Freni, and this was my first chance to listen to it; without bothering any neighbours who may not have a taste for classical music. I find many travellers seem to prefer country and western, which is not my cup of tea. It was so pleasant to sit outside in the evening, with a glass of cold gin and tonic and to listen to that wonderful music. Have I said before how much I like free camping? We have been so lucky with the weather; it was cool enough to sit outside in the late afternoon after arriving, and the breeze was pleasant. And no flies! This whole trip has been conspicuously short of flies, especially compared with last year's hordes!

1 to 3 October

Mitchell

Another favourite, the council owned and run park ("Major Mitchell Caravan Park") is hard to beat. Just over the river from the artesian bore pool, and an easy walk into town, this park is very appealing. An en-suite powered site costs \$19 for three nights! (Pay for the first night and get two free). They even gave us a small package of gourmet biscuits on arrival. We had dinner at the Courthouse Pub one night and thought the hospitality in this town is very warming. They have a good butcher and a great bakery too, as many outback Queensland towns do. We get a three day pass to the thermal pool and just go as often as we like. They have a very good café there too, and an internet access point.

4 October

Cecil Plains Apex Park, Picnic area at Cecil Plains 1 km E of PO on Toowoomba-Cecil Plains Road

Mentioned in the Camps Australia Wide 3 book as an author's recommendation, we enjoyed this free camp, just on the outskirts of Cecil Plains, a very small town indeed. It had been quite a long day's drive from Mitchell, and we were ready to relax when we got there. Again, an advantage of a free camp is that usually there are no near neighbours and we can leave the van hitched to the car. We gathered into a group for "sundowners" at 5pm with the other two vans in the park, and then had an early night after dinner. Tonight was quite cool, and we got a good night's sleep, but woken at about 5.30am by the local galahs and butcher birds. I really don't mind, I love the sound of bird calls.

5 to 8 October

Millmerran Camp Oven Festival

We had booked to attend the festival quite some time ago, as part of a Kedron caravans group. Organised through our internet group, many of us didn't know each other before arriving, but we sure did afterwards. There were about 35 Kedron vans there, and (I think) about 1500 vans altogether. The festival is held every two years and is held in the expansive show grounds. They had damper cooking competitions, demonstrations in a range of rural activities including camp oven cooking, poet's breakfasts, evening concerts, etc etc. Wonderful good fun.

And our group gathered each night for a convivial drink or two. Some had more than a drink or two, of course. I won't name them, or they may repay the favour.

It was good to see other people's vans and especially their modifications. The newer Kedron vans are just luxurious, and I had thought ours was good!

9 and 10 October

Oakey Creek Reserve GPS 27, 19, 40 S 151, 27, 17 E

What can I say about this place, except wow! It is delightful; a council owned park with toilets – no other facilities- right on the banks of the permanently flowing Oakey Creek. We put our van on the river bank, with the awning facing into the river, and shaded by flowering grevilleas. The birdlife was spectacular, and we saw so many parrots, babblers, galahs and kingfishers that I lost count.

All this was totally free. We did our washing here (we have our own washing machine with us) and cleaned out a bit of the dust from Millmerran (and before). We left the car hitched to the van and otherwise just relaxed. Another Kedron couple from the festival joined us over at this site and we had a red wine with them in the late afternoon (Hi Neil and Julie).

The only downside of Oakey Reserve is that apparently local groups use it on weekends and holidays and leave rubbish strewn all over the place, a mammoth job for the council employee to deal with. He was not happy about it. These grubs spoil it for everyone.

11 to 16 October

Esk

In the past we have stayed near the lovely little town of Esk ("PictureEsk") at Lake Wivenhoe – another one of our favourites – but this time I needed to be close to town facilities for a conference patch-in by phone. I arranged to use a Government office's landline phone for the meeting, and the officers there were wonderfully helpful. (I hasten to add there was no cost to them for the phone call, they just lent me a desk and phone for an hour or so). This meeting meant a bit of work on a computer before and after the day of the meeting itself, and so I preferred to be on town power for those days, rather than free camping. Although we have 4 x 120 watt solar panels, three deep-cell batteries and a generator, sometimes it's easier with town power. And cappuccinos within walking distance.

This town is a real gem, and people come up here from Brisbane for the day or weekend, as it is only an hour or two from the city. The Brisbane Valley all around seems to be a real fruit and vegetable region, and fresh produce often costs very little. We loved every minute of our stay here, and think the park is one of the best we have stayed at. It nestles at the base of mountains and is on a small creek, with the town centre only five minutes walk away.

The van needs to be at the factory in Brisbane for several days next week, and we can get there nice and early from here. While the van is being fixed, we will scamper around with the car to Bribie Island and just stay in either motels or at park cabins. This might make a nice change.

Esk was cool, and while we were there on the last day some light rain arrived, which would have been very welcome to the local people.

Stage 13 Brisbane to Darwin

24 October - 6 November 2006

Cotton Tree CP, Maroochydore

While the van was at the Kedron factory having some repairs and modifications done (new solar panel on roof, measuring up for an annexe, a water gauge installed for our five water tanks, a new battery charger installed and all three batteries replaced by new "you-beaut" technology ones- AGM's) we scampered around in the car, staying firstly with friends and then a couple of nights in a park cabin at Brisbane.

The week went quickly.

Then, after picking Okie back up we took him up the Bruce Highway to Cotton Tree CP at Maroochydore, a place which was recommended by another Kedronning couple. What a lovely place! The park is right on a beach, and our site was just perfect; it had a prime view of the beach, and no one on either side of us; someone at the park called it the "penthouse suite". You can't book ahead here so it was just good luck that the previous occupants had moved off it that day.

Just across the road is a nice shopping village; bakery, butchers, grocers, cafes, etc. Just 15 minutes walk away is a major shopping centre, with a Myers and a host of specialty shops. I was in heaven. While here we had the mail delivered to the local post office, and caught up on all the detritus from a normal life (bank statements, professional journals etc).

We visited the Hinterland and marvelled at the quaint villages of Montville, Flaxton, and Maleny. A brief stop at a cheese factory (with ice-cream!) in Kenilworth was a welcome respite from all that driving. And then we saw a Kedron camped at the showgrounds across the road from the village centre in Kenilworth. When we called in to say hello we were impressed at the site's spectacular scenery and appealing surroundings (mountain range in background, green grass, shady trees) and all for \$8 a night powered and watered sites! Wow.

While at Cotton Tree we went to Brisbane for an overnight visit. Catching a bus was so easy; it picked us up from outside the park and delivered us in the city

centre. It was nice to stay at a hotel for the night (the Ibis) which is right in the city centre, and handy for all that shopping I needed to do. Our son was in Brisbane for a few days at a course and so we caught up with him over a meal and a coffee. We dutifully handed over the organic chocolates we had bought for the grandchildren, and which he was instructed to give them on his return to Darwin. (They can't eat anything but certain high quality chocolates and nothing with colourings or artificial flavourings).

Eventually the new annexe was ready, and we picked it up in Brisbane and tried it out for all of about four hours. Looked great. Now we were ready to move on and see new pastures.

7 -9 November

Massey Greene CP, Brunswick Heads, NSW

Friends suggested we would like this area and this park, and it has lived up to its reputation. We have a water-front site (no 119) and all that separates us from the river is the trees and a stretch of grass. It is lovely.

A day after we arrived it started to rain – steadily. The weather forecast said that we should expect destructive winds and possible hail. Bugger, I thought. Luckily this did not eventuate. But the new annexe has proven to be worth its purchase price. How nice it is to sit in a protected area which allows for shoes, chairs etc to be nice and dry whatever the weather outside. It has taken us this long after buying the van to organise as we needed to be close to the area where they are made for long enough to have it measured and then sewn up.

This area is stunning. There are green, rolling hills, massive headlands, lovely beaches and quaint little villages. Of course no one could call Byron Bay quaint, but it made for an interesting day's visit.

Mid-week, this park is great, but we noticed that on the weekend (and after we had left) it turned into Fisherpeople Central! There were tents and camping groups as far as the eye could see.

10 -14 November

Terrace Reserve CP, Brunswick Heads

As the weekend was approaching, and the park was full, we moved over to the town's second park, which is right in town. The town is very small (several hundred in population I would guess) this was no problem. . And this park is right opposite the café and shops! Some sites are overlooking the water, and we will book one of those next time. The weather was cool but sunny most of our stay in this town, although it rained a couple of days, and was cooler then. I used one of those days to clean out a few cupboards in the van, and felt virtuous afterwards. We met another Kedronning couple here who we enjoyed evening drinks with each day – Gordon and Chris Carter. The birdlife here was prolific.

15-20 November

Girraween NP (south of Stanthorpe, QLD)

We had read about this park and thought it could be nice. Indeed it is; beautiful bush, trees, spring flowers, birds and creeks running through granite country. As the elevation is about 1000 metres, it was cool but crisp and sunny most days. But one day it actually snowed, and we had rain and sleet. This cold snap then disappeared and the rest of our stay was glorious.

While we were there a group of Queensland birdwatchers came for the weekend, and that was the end of the peace and quiet...about 30 of them set up tents (most in areas specifically set aside for caravans). But they were nice enough folk, and retired early at night. My worst nightmare is large groups who sit around a fire at night with guitars or playing CDs loudly. The birds all largely deserted the camp ground while such a large group was there, too. The irony of the situation did not escape me; once the birdwatchers arrived the birds all disappeared!

There are several lovely walks in the area and we did four walks, all of which we would like to repeat. I especially liked the Doctor Roberts waterhole walk. The spring flowers were especially lovely, and as there had been recent rains, the area was full of flowering shrubs and trees. Little ground orchids were nice, and there were just so many bushes with different flowers around every corner.

And as the area has heaps of wineries we visited a few of those, as well as a cherry farm and a restaurant for Devonshire tea. I can safely say we will be back here!

21 -22 November

Oakey Creek Reserve GPS 27, 19, 40 S 151, 27, 17 E

We stayed here for 2 nights just after attending Millmerran, and appreciated the tranquility and the view of the Oakey Creek then. Just as we did again this time. I had forgotten just how nice it is. There were flowering grevilleas in front of our van, and dipping into the river in front of our awning. This meant that birds were in and out of the bushes eating the nectar. As our nearest neighbours were a long distance away, we could sit in the evening and play my CD's of Pavarotti and Freni (La Boheme) bought in Europe earlier this year. Usually other vans or campers are too close for me to do this, as the noise will bother others. Our van has external speakers for these times, so we can sit out under the awning and listen to this wonderful music. Bliss.

People say that the Reserve is best enjoyed during the week, as on weekends noisy and disruptive groups take over.

23 – 26 November

Mitchell

Again we stayed at the Major Mitchell CP, on the banks of the Maranoa River, a short, a very short, walk from town. It was so very hot while we were there; about 40 degrees each day. The van's airconditioner struggled to keep up one day. We just left it on, to make sure the van didn't heat up. And to think only a week ago it was snowing and sleeting at Girraween! Again we organised a multi-entry pass for the thermal artesian pool.

"Knock, knock" on the van door one afternoon, as we were having a nice little seniors snooze inside. It was Peter Binns, another Kedronner, who we met up with last time here at Mitchell. He was just as amazed to see us. On the previous occasion, we had dinner together on the Sunday night, over at the Courthouse Hotel. So we arranged to meet again for Sunday Roast dinner night at the same venue. At \$10 a head it is very good value, and the venue is original Outback architecture.

27 and 28 November Barcaldine

Yesterday it was over 42 degrees while we were travelling, and when we got out of the car, the heat seared the eyeballs. I don't know how people bushcamp in this weather! Unless they have a generator and run it all day. Even in the early evening it is still hot as the landscape has heated up from the sun's heat during the day. We again stayed at the Top Tourist park in Barcaldine, which is nice and green and a good price (\$14 a night powered, with a membership discount). While here we drove the 15 kms out of town to the Weir, which is listed in Camps Aust 3 as a good free camp. It is quite pleasant (although a bit dusty and hot at this time of year). There were several vehicles there, and one of those we spoke to said he and another camper have been there for months! He agreed it does get hot in the middle of the day.

29 and 30 November Winton

How I do like Winton; there is something appealing about the wide streets and the country- Queensland shop facades, built in an earlier era. I especially like the Tattersalls Hotel for a great meal in the evenings. It is quite therapeutic to sit on the pavement under the hotel balcony, eat and drink and watch the world drive by. There is good free camping just out of town – actually, VERY good bush camping – but it was too hot to consider anything but the airconditioner pushed up all the way to high, 24 hours a day. For that, you need town power if possible. We met a travelling couple at the RSL that night, who were free camping out the back of the Gregory Hotel. They said trying to get through a hot day in Winton without power was very trying. (The Gregory won't allow vans to use generators – understandably).

1 to 3 December Mt Isa

We again stayed at the Sunset CP, which was eerily empty, except for another couple of vans, and the permanents that all ring the perimeter of the park. These permanents seem to rejoice in the shabbiest and most dilapidated premises I have ever seen. I think in future we may stay at the Big 4 on the eastern side of town... On the other hand, the park has just changed management and perhaps we should wait and see if there are improvements.

4 December **Three Ways**

What a day! At about 3.00pm we stopped at a roadside camp site, well off the road and under the shade of a gum tree – note, NOT under the gum tree itself. As it was still hot – well actually, it was searingly hot –we put on the generator and the air conditioner. After a few minutes the generator failed, stalling. We tried again; same failure of the genny to run. I knew that come evening it would cool down, but as it was so hot, we decided to pack up again and move on to the Three Ways and town power. We could sort out the genny when we got back to Darwin. The park at Three Ways is small but quite pleasant; clearly it has undergone a major change since I last saw it a few years ago.

In the evening we received a phone call from our son, telling us my mother had passed away earlier in the day. This was not completely unexpected given her age and her recent health but was very distressing news. Had we stayed at the bushcamp as planned earlier in the day, we would not have received this news. Maybe it was meant for us to be within CDMA range that night, rather than camped in an isolated spot. Certainly, the generator has never before played up in this way....

5 December **Territory Manor, Mataranka**

By now we were pushing hard to get back to Darwin and the family, but needed to stop at Mataranka, as the day had been long and stressful. It is a curious thing to be cooped up in a car driving long hours with little to relieve distressing thoughts. A night at the oasis of the Territory Manor (turn East off the Stuart Highway at the edge of Mataranka into Martins Road) was very welcome. We parked the van on green grass near some attractive trees, and had a meal at their restaurant. This was just what we needed, I think. It was peaceful – there were certainly no other vans- and the hosts were lovely people.

6 December **Darwin**

Back home at last, and so happy to be able to pull the van into a site at the Howard Springs CP, and to deal with all the issues connected with my mother's death.

Life can be strange; we had come back to Darwin for the imminent birth of a grandchild, but first we had to bury my mother. The day after the funeral, grandchild number 4 arrived, safe and sound. The cycle of life continues.

We will stay here for a month or so, to sort out some issues relating to the estate, and some professional activities, then we will continue the journey. The next leg has been mapped out; down through the centre of Australia to Adelaide, then the East Coast, taking as long as it takes. Already I can't wait.