

Trip Report -Northern Territory and Western Australia 2013 (Stage 2)

This report details our travel across the Great Central Way from Uluru (NT) to Laverton in WA. Incorporated into the trip was the West Macdonnell Ranges and the Mereenie Loop

Special points of interest:

- West Macdonnells
- The Red Desert
- The Great Central Road
- Special camp spots



This leg of the trip was an amazing adventure and one of the best trips we have done with the van. What made it so special was travelling with two other vans on the Great Central Road, something we have never done before. In the past our preference has always been to travel solo although we have in the past met and travelled with another van in what was a loose arrangement. On this occasion we had an organised convoy of three and it proved to be an ideal number to travel together, we felt. What made it special was having like minded folk, who all knew each other beforehand, sharing the day over a cup of coffee or a cold drink around a campfire each night. It was also the ideal sized group to find suitable camping sites. More than three would have been hard to accommodate in the lovely spots we chose to camp.



Finke River Two Mile Camp

It was a blustery and overcast day when we headed out of Alice Springs for the West Macdonnell Ranges. And this was early June, when the weather should be sunny and cool! Weather patterns around Australia seems to be changing, we feel.

Finke River Two Mile Camp

S 23 40 03.5 E 132 40 13.1

A short trip of just over 100kms and we found ourselves at a previous camp site where we had stayed more than eight years ago, at the Two Mile freecamp on the Finke River. Near Glen Helen Gorge but along a rutted and sandy track in, we found a delightful spot overlooking the permanent waterhole and set up camp fairly quickly.



In the past when we have camped here, there was no signage and the spot was relatively unknown. Then it appeared in Camps Australia Wide (CAW) and it was very well known indeed. And now, to cap it off, there is a Conservation Commission sign welcoming you to the camp site! But as yet there were no facilities and thus no camp fees.

The water is very slightly saline so not suitable for drinking and not really suitable either for washing other than clothes in a pinch. But the egrets, coots and pelicans found it equally desirable and we were comfortable here all by ourselves in peace and quiet. In any event we had brought an extra bucket of tap water with us from Alice Springs so had more than our needs. We took the precaution of bringing the additional water as our plans were to stay out here and then travel the Mereenie Loop to Curtin Springs, being out of range of water taps for a couple of weeks.

We stayed three days in this lovely peaceful spot and apart from a distant group of Larapinta Trail walkers, had no one near us.

We did day trips out and about to a couple of places, like Ormiston Gorge, only about 10 kms away, and otherwise just relaxed, read and watched TV on the sat dish-delivered service. Isn't solar power a wonderful thing?

Oh, and one night we went over to nearby Glen Helen Resort for dinner, having booked in advance. It is as well we did, as the place was hosting a folk music festival on the weekend and was hopping with campers and caravans all vying for space in the limited campground. The meal was wonderful and the service was exemplary, with white tablecloths, subdued lighting and space between tables in a heritage style setting. I am glad we went.

Redbank Gorge.

From the Two Mile Camp we headed over to Redbank Gorge. The weather was still overcast and drizzly off and on, and we started to wonder if we were rainbringers. The same thing happened last year in Queensland; unseasonal rain followed us for so much of that trip and wrecked one whole leg of travel through the Burnett region. We started to pray that reports of heavy rain over WA and Alice Springs did not mean the much anticipated and well planned trip on the GCR would be cancelled due to road closures and rain.

But Redbank was a lovely place to wait out the weather and due to the camp site's height



above the gorge, and the stony nature of the road in, we knew we were secure despite any rain. There are two separate and very different camp sites at Redbank; Woodlands, which is on the valley floor and set in among the bushes and trees, and the ridgetop camp which looks down into the gorge itself. We love the higher spot because of its views and it is smaller and tends to be

quieter.

Fortunately it was quiet with only one or two other campers there most nights and we enjoyed a couple of nights all alone on our quiet ridgetop camp.

We had plenty of food and were able to capture rainwater from the awning, so we were comfortable. And we still had a load of firewood from the generosity of fellow campers in the Flinders, so we were able to sit around a fire at night and to cook dinner. One night we



put homemade pies (baked at home before we left) in the bedourie oven, over the coals and they were wonderful heated in this way. Another morning we made pancakes for breakfast, with lemon and sugar and a view to die for.

On the second day there the rains stopped and the clouds lifted, allowing us to enjoy warmer weather and to see the

solar panels performing as they should. Prior to this we had been running the generator for an hour a day to keep the batteries topped up. Each time we did this, if there were campers nearby we asked if they minded us using the generator, and only ran it at a reasonable hour. I hate it when others run a noisy generator at sunset drinks time or too early in the morning so we try to be careful not to bother others with our usage. Interestingly, in the past Conservation Commission signage had said that generators were not allowed, but new signs made no mention of them. Instead the admonition was to not bother other park users with undue noise. Sounds reasonable to me.

The earlier rains had produced a lush growth of grasses and



the flowering bushes were a delight. In another week or so, we figured, the desert flowers would appear and that would be worth seeing, as always.

The other interesting thing we noted was the proliferation of dingoes. Each campsite was visited by groups of dingoes which were certainly not wary of humans. Back at Dalhousie Springs they were wandering openly through the camp grounds. At Finke River Two Mile Waterhole we passed a pack of four all ripping into what looked like a hind leg of a cow. At the Finke camp site, one had come into our campfire and left a calling card there on the rocks - a decent sized "dump". I wonder what message was being sent?

On the Monday we headed out on the Mereenie Loop with Curtin Springs the final destination. The Loop Road was in good condition and we made very good time. We refueled at Kings Canyon and were able to top the van up with water from the hose at the service station. This was a welcome bonus. That night we overnighted at a roadside rest stop, called **Salt Creek Rest Area (S24 48 21 E 132 18 24)** which was extremely busy. But it was a pleasant enough spot to spend the night and all our fellow travellers were in bed and quiet by 9.00pm. We arrived at Curtin Springs the next day, in good time and were greeted by our fellow travellers who would be doing the Great Central Road with us. Lesley and Erich were in another Kedron and Bruce and Kay were in a Coromal. Both vans were seasoned and experienced offroad rigs.

Curtin Springs is 80 or so kms to the East of Yulara and provides both powered and separate free camping. There would have been about 50 or 60 vans and camps of every description there, all enjoying campfires and social gatherings. There are showers and toilets at Curtin Springs as well as a watering point to fill up the van (between the toilet and shower block).

GREAT CENTRAL ROAD

Early the second morning we left for Yulara, where we picked up fuel and groceries, used the town dump point, and we were off! The three vans stopped at the end of the bitumen, near Kata Juta to let down the tyres and have lunch.



The **Great Central Road** is a mostly unsealed Australian outback highway that runs 1126 km from Yulara, NT to Laverton, WA. The first stretch of road seemed reasonable and we were able to sit

on 65 kms an hour comfortably. The road conditions continued in this form all through the next day as well. The corrugations were minor and gave us no trouble.

First night's campsite

S25 06.693 E 130 07.641

About 2.30pm we found a lovely campsite beside the road around some desert oaks and we pulled in for an early



stop. A fire was quickly started and we had our chairs out for a cup of coffee and later happy hour drinks. The desert night was blazing with bright stars in the sky and it was certainly a chilly night. The sunrises are lovely in the morning, with the duckshell egg blue band at the horizon turning a paler pink up into the sky.

A relatively early start again the second morning meant we were at Lasseters Cave by morning tea, found the nearby geocache, and we were on our way to Docker River for fuel before the lunchtime closure. The Lasseters Cave rock formations were impressive and the ghost gums in the riverbed were a stunning sight.

As we travelled on, the road conditions were slightly damper from recent rains but nothing to worry about. In fact it reduced the dust.



Campsite 2

S 24 54.998 E 128 46.971

We had been given co-ordinates for a camp site well in from the road but that turned out to be not suitable due to encroaching trees and bushes, so all three vans were turned around from the narrow track (now there was an interesting exercise!) and we camped at a lovely spot just in from the road and well protected site which was

magic. A campfire was soon set and three camp ovens were on it for roast dinners.

The dingoes were far from shy here and we had a pack of about four visit our camp during the night, howling from just outside the vans. Due to the presence of dingoes right through the outback, from the Flinders, the Oodnadatta and the West Macdonnells, and now here on the GCR, we learnt to carefully put away all food scraps each night and brought our shoes in as well, as dingoes love to nibble on shoes.

By now we had become used to early finishes to the day and a start at about 8.30am. We reached Warrakurna at mid-morning on day three and filled up with fuel at the Roadhouse. This was a pleasant and neat community and we were able to fill our water tanks at the Roadhouse. This was an unanticipated bonus and much appreciated. A quick visit to the Giles Met Bureau was in order (and the finding of a geocache there) and we found the station to be an interesting and informative display. Unfortunately they didn't have any tours on that day.

Campsite 3 Yarla Kutjarra

S 25 36 37 E 127 13 24

This camp site had drop toilets and a large area for a group of rigs so we corralled the vans together and had a fire going pretty smartly. There was room off down some tracks for other rigs and a couple of camper vans did come in for the night.

The next day on a stop at an official icon called White Cross (we called in



for a geocache) we discovered a fascinating plaque and cross erected. These historical markers give real purpose and meaning to the trip. The cross was erected by an Aboriginal Christian group to honour their faith. It certainly an outstanding marker in this remote area.

We continued on good roads and made good time to the next camp site at Yarla Kutjarra. This is an official rest stop and quite pleasant. The nearby red bluffs and the trees and bushes made for an attractive spot to corral the vans and prepare another camp fire.

Travelling with two other vans was a first time experience for us and we found that we enjoyed the camaraderie and social sessions at the end of the day. It is also a comfort to know that if something were to go wrong mechanically with one rig the others were available to help out.

Campsite 5

Mananytja Rockhole

S 26 50 10 E 125 39 29

We found another lovely breakaway campsite on the fourth day of travelling at a rockhole (a well of freshwater which historically provided valuable water to Aborigines and stock, as well as the early explorers. The camping area we chose was right up the back near the breakaways, in a secluded and natural bush setting. Another magic camp.

Campsite 6 Minnie Creek

S 27 50 32 E 123 55 03

The next night we spent at a spot with several other vans, including fellow Kedronner couple Phillip and Gail. They joined us for our happy hour that evening. This particular camp was large and had some shrubs and low lying trees but was otherwise unremarkable. We sat around



a campfire and yarned while some of our group cooked dinner on the fire. Kay is a dab hand at getting presentable meals out of the camp fires when we camped. She could run courses on it. And the scones she made and shared were really appreciated!



Campsite 7 S 28 16 49 E 122 42 03

Our final night was spent at Giles Breakaways Lookout, a large camp site with outstanding views of the valley below. What a magnificent spot! The reds and golds of the breakaways were remarkable at sunset and we lined our chairs up at the edge of the cliffs for a sunset

drink.

The trip was nearing its end as we approached Laverton, but our group wanted to travel on to Leonora rather than finish at the official end of the *Great Central Road* in Laverton. Laverton was a small community and held few attractions for us. Disappointingly, the general store had been closed for some time and there was no chance to replenish the fruit and vegetables we had been required to surrender to the Quarantine bin earlier in the day.

So we filled up with fuel in Laverton at the truck stop (directions at the Information Centre, and about 10 cents a litre cheaper than the roadhouse), picked up some more water and headed on to Malcolm Dam near Leonora. The Dam is 13 kms from Leonora and had some water in the dam still as well as swans and other wading birds. We corralled the vans for one last time and settled in for three days of relaxing and cleaning the vans. Each of us had a pile of washing (clothes, towels and sheets) and the vans were covered in dust as well.

I thought the *Great Central Road* was a route well worth the effort of planning, obtaining permits and travelling. It is full of interest and delightful camp sites. I would do it again in a heartbeat.