

Stage 10 Perth to the Pilbara

It is hard to believe that we have been travelling in the van now for ten months...we left Darwin last July. Since then we have had a wonderful time seeing this vast land and now have a better appreciation of its unique landscape and the people who live in it.

After leaving Darwin we travelled down the Stuart Highway, stopping at places such as Elsey Stockyards; the Davenport Ranges (out from Tennant Creek); spent a couple of months around Alice Springs; done the Oodnadatta Track right from the top end (starting at Apatula, which was previously called Finke); stayed in the Flinders Ranges; the Eyre Peninsular (ah, Coffin Bay and Lincoln National Park!); came across the Nullarbor; stayed at Esperance and Le Grande Beach; Margaret River; enjoyed the Pemberton karri forests; and finally arrived in Perth.

I have so many impressions of these places. It is hard to say which was most special, as they are so different. But uppermost in my mind is Brachina Gorge in the Flinders Ranges; staying on the beach at Lincoln NP; and the karri forest at Shannon National Park, near Pemberton. Oh, and the Davenports were delightful too. And Coward Springs on the Oodnadatta Track. And the West MacDonnells near Alice Springs.....

Enough reminiscing, it is time for more adventures!

When we left Perth it was cool and we were not sad to be leaving the rain and cold weather behind. We definitely felt it was time for some remote and warm country. So we planned a scamper through the inland north of WA, up through Meekatharra and Newman, to the national parks of Karijini and Millstream-Chichester. After Millstream, we planned to come out on the coast at Karratha. Then depending on the weather and road conditions, we thought it may perhaps be good to travel across the Gibb River Road to Kununurra. Karijini and Millstream-Chichester were to be the main features of this leg of the trip.

17 May 2006 (Jibberding Rock)

(GPS reading 30° 00' 15S, 116° 49' 20E)

We took Highway 95 northwards. The country to the north of Perth was initially grapegrowing, and we travelled through green fields. Soon we hit the wheat belt and a golden landscape emerged, with sheep farms and agriculture a mainstay.

There are many small and interesting towns on this route, including Bindoon, New Norcia, Calingiri, Mukinbudin, Cue and Wubin. Of course we stopped at the Benedictine Monastery at New Norcia, and I happily anticipated the fresh bread I had heard of from the monastery's bakery. Sadly, this was not to be. They had bread but it did not appear to be fresh. On a happier note however, the bakery at little Bindoon had supplied us with delicious meat pies and bread rolls. They are a must visit!

It had been our intention to free-camp up to Newman, and so we travelled until ready to stop, in the late afternoon. How I rejoice in our self-contained van. With solar panels and a generator as a standby, with a toilet and shower on board, we are completely self sufficient, and can stay wherever we wish (and where it is legal!).

Guided by Camps Australia Three (thank you Philip Procter!) and the brilliant Jan Holland Guides to camping (Priceless Campsites and Rest Areas in North WA), we could plan ahead well. The first night we stayed at a rest stop well off the road, and we nestled the van out of sight of the highway among some gums and shrubs. We sat out in the last rays of the setting sun with our gin and tonic (me) and beer (Val).

18 May 25 Mile Well

41 kms north of Meekatharra.

Another day of steadily pushing north, with the van holding on tight behind the Cruiser, we relaxed and enjoyed the remoter country and the green growth which is the result of a heavier than usual rainfall this year. The wildflowers will be spectacular in a month or two. Another roadside rest stop, and well off the road behind a shield of trees and bushes, we spent a quiet and restful night.

19 and 20 May 25 (Gascoyne River, Middle Junction)

148 kms northwest of Meekatharra.

We had only travelled for an hour or so when we decided to stop for an early morning tea, and pulled into the Gascoyne River camp spot. What appeared at first to be a routine and ordinary pull up spot, on closer inspection revealed to be a lovely bush camping area along the river. So we tucked the van into a site along the Gascoyne, with the awning opening into some wattle shrubs and nearby gums, and put out our chairs facing the water. Lovely! So nice in fact, that we stayed for a couple of days. This stop was a 5/5.

21 May

Mt Robinson Rest Area

109 kms north of Newman

We found this lovely spot, with a great view of the nearby Range, and situated well off the road amid flowering shrubs and gums, through the joint contributions of Jan Holland's book and Camps Australia 3. The view was lovely, and there was a (clean) toilet as well!

We called into Newman to top up our water tanks, and stock up on a little food, prior to entering the National Park at Karijini. We have found that some fuel stations do not mind letting us use their water to top up the van's water tanks, when we buy diesel there.

22 to 24 May

Dales Camp, Karijini NP

Dales Gorge camping area is the closest to the entrance from the East, and we found it to be a very pleasant camp site, with shady gums and liberal flowering bushes and grasses.

We visited all the areas which could be accessed without strenuous climbing or abseiling into gorges. Our days of doing that sort of thing are well over, I think!

I personally found Fortescue Falls (a steep but not too difficult climb) and Fern Pool to be my favourites. The colour of the water is a delightful turquoise and is very appealing. The peacefulness and tranquillity of Fern Pool really were a lovely experience.

The weather was cool and sunny, but definitely too cool for swimming.

There is a rim walk along the top of the Dale Gorge which is easy and gives delightful views.

25 to 27 May

Savannah Camp, Karijini NP

Many people decide against coming to the Savannah Camp site as it is twice the cost of Dale's Gorge, and without any additional services. (It does have a shower block – just the one for the whole camp- but that is all). At \$10 a head per night for bush camping is probably too high. We have stayed at powered sites in parks for less than the \$20 a night we paid here.

We found it quieter (as you can imagine) and our camp site was very appealing, being close to a large snappy gum and with lots of grass and flowering shrubs around the van.

The first night we were there, after dark a campervan turned up, and parked right in the site opposite ours! In the whole area there was only one other group camping, and this peanut camped right next to us! As this happens so often, we think these folk may be frightened of the dark, and need to be near others.

We find that in our various travels quite a few people pull in after dark (usually in camper vans or wizz-bangs) and head out again first thing in the morning, before anyone can get close to asking for a camping fee. But that doesn't seem to work in Karijini as the host managers usually come around even late at night if they see someone arrive.

While at Savannah we walked down into the Weano Gorge to the pools below and took the usual photos. A beautiful walk. And the lookout at Oxer's Lookout had truly awesome views, but not for those with vertigo. There is a pleasant walk along the gorge rim to the lookout, which was easy and scenic. A winning combination!

While at Savannah Camp we did a day trip over to the mining town of Tom Price, to stock up on milk, bread and newspapers etc. ...and to replenish the empty gin bottle. Tom Price looked like a nice little town and the caravan park was quite appealing. We may stay there another time.

28 and 29 May

Deep Crossing Pool, Millstream-Chichester

The back road connecting the two parks was incredibly scenic (especially the bit through the ranges) but a bit rough. Nothing that can't be handled easily by a Kedron but not to be lightly undertaken by other than an offroad van.

There was a lot of red dust in patches, and due to our not having sealed the front door vent properly, we had a bit of cleaning up when we got to the camp site at Millstream. Bugger. And we had another flat tyre to fix, courtesy of the sharp little stones in this part of the Pilbara. Sigh.

Millstream was a refreshing sight, as it was lush and there were many waterholes in the area. It was a true oasis of greenery and the riverside camp was fringed with green couch grass. The camp sites are strung along a deep river pool and it was a nice camp site indeed.

We spent a couple of night there relaxing and reading, eating and talking. I am now onto book 5 of the Wheel of Time, a good fantasy series (Val is onto book 10...). Val pumped water out of the river, through a filter and into our tanks, so we were not short of water. After two weeks of bush camping this becomes an issue. We even washed down the van windows so the dust didn't blow into the van. Kedron vans have a separate drinking water tank so this is not contaminated by water from questionable sources.

On Tuesday (30 May) we pressed on, driving out to the north, past Snake Creek and Python Pool. The latter is only 100 metres in from the car park, which is close to the main road, and is an easy walk into a lovely pool. I can imagine the early explorers would not have been able to believe their luck at finding this spot! After a few hours of picturesque driving, we emerged on Highway 1, and in to Karratha for some retail therapy and washing of the van and clothes.