

Stage 1 Darwin to Davenport Ranges

We left Darwin on 22 July 2005 with a feeling of anticipation and relief that the time had finally come for our trip! The weather was suitably fine and cool and we headed out reasonably early. Our van is an 18 foot (internal measurement) Kedron all terrain vehicle. It has a very solid chassis, four 120 watt solar panels and five water tanks holding 300 litres of water. We have also equipped it with a dvd, stereo and a satellite dish for remote area access to television. The towing vehicle is a 4.2l turbo-diesel Toyota Landcruiser, with airbag suspension, a diatronic chip for extra power and a snorkel.

After a stop at Pine Creek to say goodbye to my mother (and drop off an armchair), we were definitely on our way.

It felt strange after years of short trips and tight deadlines for returns to work, to be so free of such constraints. Who knows, we may be absent for two years, three years or even longer. The house is now rented out and our only real need for returning to Darwin is the grandchildren (a major interest indeed) and a Board which sits in Darwin and which I need to attend periodically.

12 mile stockyards (22 to 27 July)

As the trip preparation had been so hectic and draining, we planned a stay at the 12 mile stockyards, a bushcamp site on the Roper River near Mataranka. Run by the Conservation Commission, the park is situated adjacent to the Roper River and is a popular spot for families and those who enjoy a quiet bush setting. There is no power or water supplied, but the toilets and showers in the central ablution block are solar heated and very clean. The charge is currently about \$12 a night. We often stay there and knew it would be an ideal place to wind down and enjoy the tranquility. How wonderful to be woken in the morning by the sound of a variety of bird calls, as the birdlife is prolific at this spot. After six days of spending time reading, bird watching and sipping red wine in the evenings, we knew it was time to move on.

Elliott (28 July)

An overnight stay in the little outback town of Elliott was indicated, as we wanted to see the nearby Longreach Waterhole. This was unknown country for us and so we parked the van at a local park, and headed out to inspect the Waterhole. It was about 12 kms of dirt road to the waterhole, which is again run by the Conservation Commission. The road wasn't too bad and would suit camper trailers and most off-road vans. The site was peaceful and the views from the various camp sites quite special. There is no fee for camping here. Apparently the waterhole is a recognised birdlife haven.

Tennant Creek (29 and 30 July)

We were heading next for the Davenport Ranges, to the East of Tennant Creek. Adjusting to travelling distances while towing an off-road van, meant a slower pace than usual, and a stop in Tennant Creek. In the past we have stopped at the Outback Caravan

Park in Tennant, and it was heavily booked, as we expected. Fortunately, as we arrived reasonably early, we got a nice shady site on a cement pad (site 38) for two nights. Our mail had been forwarded onto Tennant Creek, so we picked up the package from the Post Office and bought the newspaper and magazines. Our second day was spent doing the washing, and stocking up groceries for the Davenport trip. We had a lovely dinner at the local Memorial Club, signing in as visitors.

On the Stuart Highway we noticed the large number of vans, mostly heading north. No wonder the parks are all full...

Davenport Ranges (31 July to 6 August)

The northern turnoff to the Davenports is about 80 kms south of Tennant Creek, and we stopped at the road junction to tape up the van's vents and to check that tyre pressures were lowered to 40psi, to prevent too much jarring of the van and its contents on the dirt road. We have found (after a disaster on a corrugated road in Kakadu) that not riding on lower pressures can cause a very unstable ride for the van, and damage to contents.

Whistleduck Creek

An hour and a half later (and about 70 kms) we turned into the access road to Whistleduck Creek. A further 25 kms led us into the camp spots nestled into the low-level range and waterways of the site. There was very little water in the gorge system (and certainly none in the riverbed) but the area has a grandeur and is delightfully peaceful. There are few facilities, apart from a drop toilet. All water has to be brought in, and rubbish taken out with you. The fee for camping is \$3.30 a person per night. We stayed here for three nights. Each night there was only one other camp site occupied, so it was certainly tranquil. There is a special clarity of light out there, and in the evenings (which were cold!) the hills took on a range of gold and pink hues, which are spectacular.

Policemans Waterhole

The second camping area in the Davenports is the Old Police Station Waterhole. Situated on a considerable body of water on the Frew River, this site is the better known and usually more frequented campsite. There are individual camp sites strung out along the river, and mostly situated on couch grass under spreading gum trees. A more picturesque spot is hard to imagine. But the 200 kms of rough road and dust deters many from coming in to such a remote place. As we have an off-road van, it is not an issue for us.

On the fourth morning we packed up the bikes and satellite dish, and scampered across to Old Police Station Waterhole from Whistleduck Creek.

We were last here two years ago and on that occasion there were several other groups camped on the River, which is very pretty and again a relaxing spot. No water or power is supplied here and the only facility is a drop toilet. On this occasion there were some other campers, a couple of Telstra vehicles doing work out this way, and a group of two Conservation commission vehicles with rangers. They were only there for our first night, and so we had the whole site to ourselves.

Evenings were heralded with gin and tonics, and a toast to the good life. I am reading the latest Harry Potter novel and enjoying the relaxed pace. Why didn't we retire earlier?