

Outback Queensland and the Gulf Savannah

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Whilst on a flying safari to the Gulf Savannah in 1997 we promised ourselves that we would return one day to fully explore the region. We didn't envisage that we would be doing so in a Landrover Defender, a camper trailer in tow and a happy, smiling and not to mention, talkative, four year old in the back seat. We could only imagine the delights we would experience on our five week trip as we headed down our driveway under a clear blue sky.

Our plan was to travel through South-West Queensland, towards the Northern Territory border and then northwards towards the Gulf Savannah region in Queensland, passing through a number of national parks along the way.

The first of these parks was Currawinya National Park, situated just over the Queensland border from New South Wales and not far from the small township of Hungerford. The focal point of Hungerford is the Royal Mail Hotel, and to our surprise

we discovered that Thomas had been immortalised on the pub's photo wall of fame. Whilst taking refuge from passing thunderstorms twelve months earlier, Sherri, the publican's wife, snapped a shot of Thomas perched atop a stool at the hotel's bar.

Fortunately, this time we were blessed with fine weather and after bidding Moc and Sherri good-bye we headed towards the park and a camp by the Ourimperee Waterhole.

Currawinya's lakes, rivers and wetlands are a striking contrast to the harsh sand plains and rocky ranges of South-Western Queensland. The wetlands are among the most important inland waterbird habitats in Australia. Evidence of aboriginal occupation, and more recent relics of pastoral activities dating from the 1860s, are scattered across the park. The park has two large lakes, that are separated by only a few kilometres of sand dunes, and are the centre piece of a fascinating mosaic of habitats

across the park. Lake Numalla is freshwater whilst the slightly larger Lake Wyara is saline. Although both fill from the local area, Lake Numalla is more frequently flushed by floodwaters overflowing from the Paroo River.

On our last visit in 2003 we were unable to visit the lakes due to the tracks being closed by heavy rainfalls. This time we made the most of the opportunity that the fine weather presented. Whilst many of the migratory birds had moved on we were able to identify numerous birds, and were fortunate to spot an emu closely guarding its clutch of small chicks.

Leaving Currawinya behind we headed towards Quilpie, visiting the small township of Eulo along the way. This day will go down as the coldest we experienced throughout the trip, and even the locals, who are used to large variations in the temperature, were complaining it was the coldest day they could remember. If visiting Eulo be sure to call into the Eulo Queen Hotel for a drink and chat with the locals. Ken, the publican, is a mine of information on the region and is more than happy to share his knowledge with passing travellers.

The region has a history steeped in opal mining and the small town of Yowah, situated not far from Eulo, and on the road to Quilpie, was hosting an annual opal festival the day we passed through. After thawing out from an extremely cold night in Quilpie we eventually got under way to our next destination, Welford National Park.

Welford National Park protects examples of three of Queensland's natu-

ral arid regions, Mulga Lands, Channel Country and Mitchell Grass Downs. Some of Australia's most easterly wind-blown sand dunes occur in the park. Large permanent waterholes on the Barcoo River are a refuge for wildlife, especially birds. Yellow footed rock-wallabies shelter in rocky outcrops in parts of the park, although they proved to be far too elusive for us to spot.

We camped for three days at the Little Boomerang Waterhole, an idyllic spot that is home to a number of birds, mostly raptors and large flocks of budgerigars. Thomas got his first taste of fishing along the banks of the river, however the yellow-belly were safe this time around.

There are a number of touring options within the park and we opted to do the Desert Drive, which took in a couple of beautiful water holes and numerous red sand dunes.

One of the enjoyable ways to pass the time in this beautiful spot is to bird watch. The waterhole was an ideal spot for this. Amongst the birds that entertained us were a pair of black kites.

Continuing our journey westward we left Welford behind for the small township of Windorah, an isolated town in far Western Queensland. We arrived early in the day which gave us the opportunity to do some domestic chores, like washing, before taking a tour of the town. Outback towns are full of characters and Windorah was no exception. The petrol station is owned by one of the nicest people you would hope to meet in your travels and despite being blind he just went about his daily business as though he did not have a care in the world.

The pub beckoned us for dinner where we had an enjoyable meal and chat with the publican.

One place we were excited about visiting is the Diamantina National Park which is situated north-west of Windorah. The drive, which takes you through some very remote country, is approximately 350 kilometres from Windorah. One interesting stop to make along the way is the site of the old J.C. Hotel. It is marked by a small brown and white sign not far



from Canterbury station. The initials J.C. stand for John Costello who carved them in the trunk of a Bauhinia tree back in the late 1800s. It wasn't long before others followed him on the way west that he pioneered. Eventually a pub was built at the site and it seemed inevitable that it would become known as the J.C. Hotel.

We had morning tea at the site and tried to imagine what the routine of a morning would have been back in its heyday, 120 years ago.

The Diamantina River is an important part of the Channel Country, a vast expanse of the Queensland Outback that has spawned more yarns and tall stories than just about any other part of Australia. The area has been associated with the Australian pioneering legends, Kidman, Costello and Durack, all of whom have left their mark on the region. The book, *Kings in Grass Castles*, springs to mind as you travel the long, lonely road to Diamantina Lakes. The country is flat and featureless apart from the Mitchell Grass that stretches as far as the eye can see. After turning north onto the Bedourie road, leaving the main highway to Birdsville behind, the only people we saw were part of a droving team moving a mob of cattle through Palparra station. There is a stock-route that runs through the

National Park and it isn't uncommon to see a droving plant in the region.

The term Diamantina Lakes is a little misleading as there are no lakes within the park, just a series of waterholes and plenty of channels from the main Diamantina River. The waterholes are a bird-watchers paradise, with many examples of Australia's diverse birdlife evident.

We made our camp at Gumhole Waterhole, a small stretch of water towards the western boundary of the park. Whilst here, we were fortunate to catch some yabbies, a small freshwater crustacean, in the waterhole which made our stay all the more enjoyable.

The Kirrenderri people are the traditional landowners of the area and have lived here for thousands of years. They call the land "Kurrawoolkani" and regard this place as their homeland. The park has a rich aboriginal history and is also the traditional land of the Maialwali people.

During our stay we took the opportunity to do the 157 kilometre Warra-coota self-guided circuit drive, which takes you past sand dunes, floodplains, claypans, gibber plains and grasslands. The Warra-coota Waterhole is quite large, and after the rains can be quite deep. It is a great spot to sit under one of the many trees

and immerse yourself in the surrounding country.

In the northern sections of the park there are the ruins of the Mayne Hotel, an oasis that provided refreshments and lodgings for the many travellers to the region. It was a fairly substantial place and even had its own horse races. Today, there are just a few rotting timbers and remains of the old cellar and a graveyard with a number of headstones. Not far away the flat-topped jump-ups of the Mayne Range rise with their weathered sandstone escarpments looking down on a land that has been here for a million years, and will be still here long after we have gone.

A very scenic spot in the park is Janet's Leap, which looks down upon the Diamantina River as it winds its way through the parched countryside.

After an overnight stay in Boulia, a far-western Queensland town, we headed towards the Plenty Highway which connects Western Queensland with Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Although the term 'highway' is possibly misleading in the modern context as it is no more than a dirt road that has long stretches of the infamous Australian bull-dust. We made our way along the Plenty crossing over the border into the Northern Territory on our way to Tobermorey station.

Tobermorey is a 1.65 million acre cattle station just inside the Northern Territory border. The surrounding country is a mixture of jump-ups made up of weathered ironstone ranges and flat open downs. To the south, the top edges of the Simpson Desert can be found with its trademark sand hill country. The station's eastern boundary is the border between Queensland and the Northern Territory, but its 1.65 million acres stretch away in all other compass points from there. Placed on the lower edges of the rich Barkly Tableland, Tobermorey has always turned out top quality cattle. Originally taken up as a pastoral lease in the late 1800s by the Anderson family, the station remained in the Anderson family until Graham and Nita McDermott bought the lease a few

years ago.

Near to the homestead is a well maintained camp ground that is popular with travellers between the Territory and Queensland. We spent an enjoyable overnight in the company of many other travellers whom were only too willing to share their own travel stories.

The next day we encountered the longest stretches of bulldust we would encounter on this trip. The road between Tobermorey and Urandangie was long and dusty through very remote country.

The road to our destination, Camooweal, passed through the Barkly Tableland, an area synonymous with the history of the pack-horse drover. The route was well trodden by droving teams travelling between the Territory and Queensland in times long gone. Along the way we visited the Camooweal Caves National Park. The special beauty of this place lies underground where water has percolated through 500 million year-old layers of soluble dolomite creating an extensive cave system. We arrived late afternoon and enjoyed a cup of tea by a small lagoon teeming in birdlife. After a restful night and a visit to a small museum the next morning we headed off on an unplanned excursion to Mt Isa to replace one of the camper trailer's wheels which had been damaged on the rough roads.

Our next destination was Adel's

Grove and Lawn Hill National Park travelling via the Riversleigh Fossil site. We had visited Lawn Hill in 1997 and vowed to return one day—that day had arrived!

Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park is one of Queensland's most scenic national parks and is situated within the remote north-west highlands of the State and features spectacular gorges and sandstone ranges. The main gorge is formed by Lawn Hill creek which is fed by numerous freshwater springs from the limestone plateau to the west. The creek is home to a number of freshwater crocodiles. The magnitude of the sandstone cliffs lining the gorge, its emerald waters and lush vegetation make the area a visual splendour.

Located within the south-eastern section of the park is the World Heritage Area of the Australian Fossil Mammal Site, Riversleigh. Riversleigh was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1994 for its outstanding natural universal values. It is one of the most significant fossil deposits in the world and the richest known fossil mammal deposit in Australia. Spending four nights here gave us plenty of scope to explore the beautiful landscapes, and to canoe and swim in the warm waters of the gorge. Thomas had a wonderful time swimming near the cascades, a small waterfall upstream of the main visitor area. I did all the walks that the park had on offer, whilst Janet basked in the warm sunshine of a



North Queensland winter.

Thomas was pleased that he discovered an 'Arafura File Snake' that was sunning itself near a small waterfall—no they aren't dangerous and are more at home in the water than on land. There are two camping possibilities within the area, either within the national park itself, or a few kilometres up the road at Adel's Grove, a private lodge that is very well presented. We stayed at Adel's along with many other travellers enjoying the region. We were even joined by a 'Variety Club' group who had come all the way from Adelaide raising money for charity. Their vehicles were a sight to behold.

For nature lovers there is plenty of fauna and flora in the area to observe, and one of the more notable creatures that we enjoyed watching was the Gilbert's Dragon, commonly called the *Ta-ta lizard*. The colloquial name Ta-ta refers to its habit of arm-waving.

For the early risers a walk up a small hill near the camp area is a must to watch the dawn break on a new day over the golden grasslands of the Gulf Savannah.

Whilst hard to leave this idyllic spot we headed eastwards towards Gleeson, a large cattle station, and home to Janet's cousin Belinda Keats and her family. Tom, and Belinda, and children, Jack, Peggy and Georgie made us welcome on their large cattle property, where everyday brings something new and adventurous.

At the time of our visit they were busy weaning the calves from their mothers and the calves cries could be heard some distance from the cattle yards where they were being held.

Light aircraft are used to cover the large distances in this remote area and we bid Tom and Belinda farewell as they headed southward in their Cessna 206 to visit their eldest daughter, Emma, who attends school in Toowoomba, a large regional city in southern Queensland.

No doubt Thomas will remember our visit to Gleeson, for apart from the friendships he made, the poor little bloke backed up against the electric fence surrounding the airstrip. They



say there are some things you will only ever do once—touching an electric fence is probably one of them.

Living on the east coast of Australia means that you never get to see the sun set across the ocean, unless of course you head to Western Australia, or places like Karumba, a town situated on the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Before arriving at Karumba you pass through a town whose name resonates loudly the charm of Australia's outback—this is outback by the sea country.

Normanton sits on a high sandy ridge between the edge of the Savannah grasslands to the west and the wetlands to the north. Established on the banks of the Norman River as a port for the Croydon gold rush it is the terminus of the historic and most unusual railway line in Australia. The railway station is the home to the "Gulf Lander" a small railmotor that travels the 150 kilometres between Normanton and Croydon. These days most passengers are tourists visiting the region, but in earlier days was an important link between the two towns.

Just outside of the town is Camp 119, the northern most camp of the ill-fated explorers, Burke and Wills.

Let there be little doubt this is crocodile country and a testimony to this is the life sized replica of a monster 'croc' called Krys. Named after the man that captured it back in the

1950s, Krys is a whopping 28 feet long—yes, 28 feet.

Travelling the 70 kilometres to Karumba we left Normanton behind. The drive takes you through numerous wetlands teeming with all types of water birds.

Karumba is situated on the shores of 'The Gulf' and is the centre of the Gulf's prawning industry and a mecca for fishermen who come in their hundreds to enjoy the warmth of a northern winter and to catch the prized barramundi. The town was also used as a refuelling point for the Empire Flying Boats on their trek from Australia to England in days gone by.

If you want to indulge yourself in this great country of ours, then one way to do it is to take up a spot in the beer garden of the Karumba Hotel just before sunset, beer in hand, and watch the sun set over the waters of the expansive Gulf. You'll be in the company of many other travellers, as well as locals, who are happy to share a story, a yarn, and plenty of the amber fluid with you.

We spent two days in the town, feasting our way through barramundi and succulent prawns, however it was a little too crowded for our liking, so with a camera full of sunset snaps we headed southwards, retracing our steps through Normanton, and along the Savannah Way to Croydon and Cobbold Gorge.

If you are travelling through this region be sure to stop in Croydon, take a walk around the town, and visit the local history museum.

Thoughts of fortunes to be made spurred thousands to travel to the Croydon goldfields in the 1880's. When the gold ran out, this once thriving boomtown adopted a more peaceful pace.

A little known gem in the region is Cobbold Gorge. Situated 45 kilometres from Forsayth, Cobbold Gorge is located on Robin Hood station, a 1,284 kilometre cattle property that runs up to 10,000 head of Brahman cattle. Hosts, Simon and Gayle Terry, make visitors feel welcome and go out of there way to ensure that your visit is enjoyable.

The main attraction is the gorge itself, hidden away within the rugged sandstone formations. The gorge is extremely narrow and the Terry's have specially designed boats that take you on a short cruise through this awesome and unforgettable experience. The gorge is fed by several springs which keep the water level constant all year round. Delicate ferns thrive along the waterline, whilst native fish abound in the waters including, of course, the freshwater or Johnstone river crocodile which is generally considered harmless to us mere mortals, unlike its cousin, the saltwater crocodile.

There are a number of walks that you can take that are within close proximity to the camp area. One walk takes you to a large quartz blow situated about seven kilometres from the resort. I opted to walk to the Quartz rock, whilst Janet and Thomas took a more leisurely drive.

Cobbold is a great spot to sit back and simply unwind, and we certainly did this whilst feeding on the last of our barramundi and prawns that we brought with us from Karumba.

Continuing our discovery of the Savannah land's natural beauty and features, we headed east towards Undarra Lava tubes, visiting the small town of Einasleigh, and the Copperfield Gorge along the way. Einasleigh sits on the eastern edge of the Newcastle Range, and on the eastern banks of the Copperfield

River. The town is on the old Chilla-goe to Forsayth railway line, now the Cairns to Forsayth railway. Once a copper mining town, it is set among some unusual scenery with flat top hills that rise out of the grasslands.

Situated on the McBride Volcanic Province, and 40 kilometres east of Mount Surprise, the Undara system of volcanoes has some 164 craters. In the vicinity of 190,000 years ago the main Undara crater, the highest and most dominant vent, produced a geological phenomenon that is rare and fascinating—the Undara Lava tubes. The tubes wind through old river beds for a distance of 160 kilometres and can only be accessed through the Savannah Guide Post at the Undara Lava Lodge.

camp fire. Thomas enjoyed it and was a favourite with the crowd, especially the grandmothers on tour, some of whom were obviously missing their own grand-children. His rendition of Rolf Harris's—*Tie me Kangaroo down sport*, with a wobble board, brought rapturous applause from the crowd.

If you enjoy the America television show *Survivor* and are familiar with the Australian episodes, then you will most likely be familiar with Blencoe Falls. Situated inland from Cardwell and east of Mt Garnet this was the site of the series in Australia and is such a beautiful place for us to showcase to the world. The road between Mt Garnet and Cardwell is an old cattle route that passes through a



The resort caters to many tourists and has a number of levels of accommodation. The area is well known to foreign tourists as evidenced by the number of different languages you hear spoken as you walk around the resort.

Whilst the tubes were fascinating, without doubt one of the highlights for us was a Mareeba Rock Wallaby that was carrying a baby in it's pouch. They are a small animal and quite common to this region.

Whilst at Undarra I undertook a number of walks around the area and we all joined in a sing-a-long one night that was held around a large

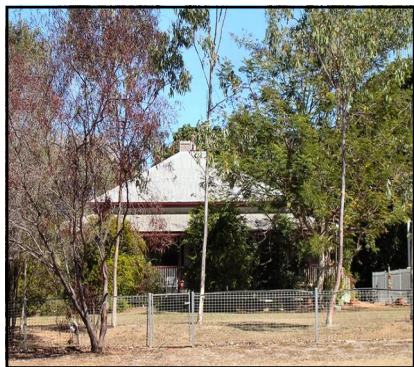
number of properties and crosses the scenic Herberton River. Whilst not the largest waterfall in Australia, Blencoe Falls is none-the-less spectacular and breathtaking in its beauty and size and a must see for any visitor to these northern parts. Leaving Blencoe the road winds its way down to the coast at Kennedy, a small town to the north of Cardwell.

For us it is always a delight to visit Townsville, where I spent my early years, and to visit our dear friend Mrs Joy Burnett and her very large and extended family. The town has become very cosmopolitan in recent years and we enjoyed a cultural festival that was being held on the *Strand*

during our stay.

We were fortunate to be able to visit Janet's uncle Ross whilst in Townsville and to introduce Thomas to him. Ross lives on the outskirts of town in a semi-rural setting with a close friend, Lyn and her husband, Jim. Thomas had fun chasing the resident ducks and sheep whilst we enjoyed a yarn and cup of tea. Ross managed and worked on a number of properties in far western Queensland and was very familiar with the route we had been travelling.

A town that almost needs no introduction, certainly not to Janet's family, is Charters Towers. Janet's grandfather had a house in the *Towers* and it was here that Janet's mother grew up and went to school. We stopped in the town, on our way south towards Carnarvon Gorge, taking in some of the magnificent architecture that is a hallmark of this North Queensland town. In its hey-



day the town even boasted its own Stock Exchange.

On the way to our final destination, Carnarvon Gorge, we made an overnight stop at Clermont, a mining town in central Queensland. Just to the north of the town is Blair Athol, the site of the world's largest seam of coking coal.

Australia is full of 'must sees' and without hesitation Carnarvon Gorge is highly recommended to this list. Carnarvon Gorge is the most visited section of the vast 298,000 hectare Carnarvon National Park. The rugged Consuelo Tableland and Great Dividing Range rise above the cliffs—providing a spectacular backdrop to the gorge. There is a walking track that takes you through the gorge and that links to smaller side tracks, taking you to various places



of interest. Amongst these are areas of aboriginal paintings. Soft sandstone overhangs are adorned with stencils, engravings and freehand paintings reflecting a rich and long cultural heritage. Short trips off the main walk reveal narrow side gorges shaded for most of the day and providing moist havens for ancient remnant rainforests, lush ferns and mosses.

We stayed at Takarakka Bush Resort which is situated approximately three kilometres from the National Park visitors centre. There is also one other resort, Carnarvon Gorge Wilderness Lodge, which also caters to visitors to the region. The facilities at Takarakka are first class and blend into the magnificent surrounds unobtrusively.

A real treat for us came early one morning when we saw a platypus. This very shy animal can be observed most days around dawn and dusk beside a small creek running through Takarakka resort. They can also be seen in the National Park, not far from the ranger's office.

After spending three days of hiking and socialising at Carnarvon it was time to head south towards home.

Leaving Carnarvon Gorge behind we passed through the large rural centre of Roma towards our final night's destination, Moree in the far northwest of New South Wales.

As we headed towards Sydney on our final day we recounted all the places we had visited during our five weeks on tour. Not surprisingly, we could not agree on our most favourite place, but only because there were so many places that would easily lay claim to the title.

As for outback characters, well we met plenty of them, and without a doubt we had one travelling with us in the back seat—an inquisitive four year old who goes by the name of Smiley!

The Fact Box

Duration—37 Days

Kilometres Travelled— 8,584

Fuel Used—1,264 litres