

# On The Road Again 2010 - Porcupine Gorge to Mt Isa

## *Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 2*

Page 1

Back again with part 2 of this years travels. It was the 27th June and we left Porcupine Gorge to make a B line for Undara National Park but had to kill a day before we got there as we had booked in for the night of the 28th June. We were advised that we should book as it was QLD school holidays still, and Undara is a very popular destination. We figured that we would be able to camp at the Oasis Roadhouse but were on the lookout for any other bush camps along the way. About 90Km up the road we decided to pop in and check out Blackbraes NP. Our advice was that there was no camping allowed but thought we would check it out anyway. Blackbraes was once a station and the homestead was now the park headquarters. Chris and I were out of our car as Nicko pulled up at the homestead. His car's front left wheel was making a terrible din. Sounded like a rock was caught between the back plate and the disc brake rotor. So to be sure we proceeded to remove the wheel and get to the bottom of the problem. We couldn't find anything, replaced the wheel and found the noise had disappeared. Obviously the rock had fallen out during our inspection without us noticing. At the homestead there was not a sole to be seen anywhere except a few wallabies. There was a sign up pointing to a camping ground called "Emu Swamp" along a 4WD track - 17Kms. So much for all the literature saying that there was no camping. From the looks of some of the infrastructure at the homestead, QLD National Parks are in the process of gearing the Park up and so the literature probably hasn't caught up with the situation. So what the heck, we thought we would check out Emu Swamp although "Swamp" never engenders a very pleasant mind picture for a camp site. More an image of relentless mosquitoes.

The swamp was vast, with its depth being created by a man made causeway and subsequently has become an extensive wetland. Obviously a source of water for the station when it was stocked with cattle. It was a pleasant enough place but not ideal for camping so we had lunch under a gum tree and then headed back out to the main road, and accepted our fate of camping in a commercial camp ground at Oasis Roadhouse at "The Lynd Junction".

"The Lynd", if you care to check it out, is a quite a well known old station that is mentioned in a lot of the history of the outback and is a few K's short of the junction where the roadhouse is sited. Well the drive from Blackbraes NP was about 90km plus the 17Km of 4WD and another 5 of dirt so it was past mid afternoon by the time we reached the roadhouse (and after all our lunches are generally fairly leisurely). The roadhouse campground was chock-



*Lunch at Emu Swamp*



*The Einasleigh River next to our emergency camp spot*

ers, one of the problems of touring during schools holidays. Everybody that heads to Undara and Cobold Gorge from Charters Towers, Townsville and all towns south virtually have to pass through "The Lynd Junction". So after checking with the staff at the Oasis on possible camp sites in the bush we headed west towards Einasleigh along the Einasleigh River. About 25Km down the road we spied a track off to the left and head down it. What a pleasant surprise it was when we reached the river. The campsite was OK, but the river was an absolute treat. Had the place to ourselves except the following morning we were visited by a 4WD. As it approached we thought perhaps it was the landowner to check up on us but turned out to be an older couple coming to get their red claw pots. Red claw are a form of fresh water crayfish prevalent in the area and they were huge.

Next morning we headed west to Einasleigh. We could not hang around for too long but have noted it as a place to go back to and spend some time. There appear to be many off road camping spots along the Einasleigh River. The river has an excellent flow of crystal clear water. And the little town of Einasleigh appears to be another one of these very friendly and welcoming outback towns. The Einasleigh Hotel even makes sure that light aircraft now were "The Pub" is (see photo). It could be used by us as a base for further exploring this wonderful area of QLD.

From Einasleigh we headed north via a track for high clearance vehicles only. This track continued to follow the Einasleigh

## Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 2

Page 2

River so whenever I saw likely tracks for future investigation I entered them as way points in the Magellan. The track was only



***"The Pub" - Einasleigh***

42 Km and a very scenic drive. Once we hit the main road we headed East to Mount Surprise which left about 50Km to the Undara camp ground. We set up camp in the non powered camping area. All things considered, this was a pretty good camp ground. Being away from the caravans on the powered sites was excellent as they were packed in cheek to jowl. We also booked into a tour of the lava tubes for the afternoon of the next day.



***Einasleigh Gorge at Einasleigh - railway bridge in background***

Went to the Restaurant for dinner. One of the park rangers was giving a talk and slide show after dinner so we decided to sit in on it. This young ranger (26yo) was out of control and had us in fits of laughter all night, we were cringing at the reaction that he may get from some of the more staid people in the audience, but he was so down to earth and obviously a real country lad, that he got away with it without much problem. He did advise the crowd how to deal with these morons who insist on A: running there generator at all hours (or at all) and B: the same morons who seem to think running their diesel vehicle engines for



***Undara residents - l to r - Pretty Face Wallaby, Noisy Friar Bird, Wedge Tail Eagle***

hours in the morning before they depart is OK, or in fact just to charge their batteries when generators are banned (which is the same thing actually). The solution is to have lamb chops for dinner and save the bones, leaving some small portions of meat. Then discreetly heave the bones onto the offenders tent or caravan roof. This will ensure that he and his group will wake to one of the most wonderful sounds in the Australian bush. Half a dozen or so Kookaburras in full voice, right there next to his ear hole. It's likely that a couple of these morons were in the audience as there always are in larger camp grounds, so hopefully his humour may have hit home with some of them.

Next morning Chris and I did most of the short walks in the park including Atkinson's lookout and The Bluff while Nicko had a



***Tour group inside a lava tube - note the lady in blue shirt and cowboy hat - read text for her story.***



***Lava tube - by torchlight.***



*Lave tube - Undara*



rest day (morning). At 1:00pm we assembled at reception for the lava tubes tour. Well as you know we are not really group tour type people but sometimes you just have to do it to see things. And besides you meet some really interesting people when confined in a small bus, and this day was no exception. There was, on the tour, a 70 year old woman who was travelling on her own in a fairly old Nissan Patrol. Now we think we get around, well I've got to say she's been everywhere we have been and more. She is off the land and her husband has passed away and she is out touring all the remote areas of Australia on her own. No tent, just a swag on the ground. It was also obvious that she was a dab hand at changing tyres, and knows her way around under the bonnet. What an inspiration she was, if she can be taken as an example, Chris and I can keep doing this for some time to come.

Until we had arrived at Undara we had little knowledge of



*Nicko and Chris - Undara Swamp -  
Cameras at the ready*

what lava tubes actually were. So here are the basics with a lot of detail missing. For a particular type of volcano, the lava flows in precisely the correct way and flow along river beds. At Undara the lava flow was an incredible 23 Cubic Kilometres (yes Cubic Kilometres) and flowed at a rate of about 1000 cubic metres every second. Enough to fill Sydney Harbour in 6 days. The tubes are formed as the lava cools and forms a crust and the inner core of the flow continues to flow. When the lava stops flowing it continues to flow until it leaves behind the hardened cooled lava in the form of a tube. Apparently Undara has some of the best examples of this in the world with volcanologists from all over the world visiting the area and doing research.

The lava tubes are not particularly stable and the roofs of the tunnels are known to collapse from time to time, thankfully mostly during the night. The guides/rangers have to check indicators each time they take tourists into the tunnels and report back to the office any movement that is observed. However the risk is always there and there was quite an orientation by the tour guide of what to do in an emergency. Now this may have been just to add excitement for the tourists, but it certainly put the wind up us. In any case, one of the tunnels had now been closed due to a recent roof collapse.

Next day (30th June), went for a walk around the swamp and took photos of the wildlife, did the washing, attended to emails and then in the afternoon climbed Kalkani Volcano and walked around the rim.

Broke camp the following morning and headed back west and had a coffee at Mount Surprise, then further west dropped into Georgetown for fresh fruit and veg, picked up a couple of excellent QLD pineapples, got fuel and had lunch at the roadhouse. Then headed for Cobold Gorge. Pineapples we have found are excellent to tour with as they last for a long time without refrigeration.

Until we got to Undara we had never heard of Cobold Gorge. At Undara we spoke to the people on the lava tube tour. In particular the comments from the 70yo lady made up our mind for us. Cobold Gorge is about 90km south of Georgetown along dirt roads. It is situated on a station ("Howlong" I think) and is run by one of the sons of the station owner and his wife. The station is split into 4 areas and a son runs each area. We arrived mid afternoon, set up camp in the camp ground then wandered up to the bar for drinks and dinner. We booked into the boat tour for the next day (another group tour - starting to get a bit repetitive). The boat tour is the only way that you are able to see the gorge and includes a tour around part of the station.

There were 2 tour guides as the 20 people had to be divided into 2 boats of 10 each. Very narrow boats to fit up the gorge. In fact so narrow that the small aluminium boats could not turn around so had electric outboard at each end of the boat. A very unusual gorge different than any we had ever seen before. The tour guides were outstanding, a couple of late fifties guys who



**Cobold Gorge**

had a very good understanding of the bush and their botanical knowledge blew us away. We could recommend a visit to Cobold Gorge to anybody. The photos of the gorge do not really do it justice but I guess photos seldom do any scene justice.

Next day back through Georgetown to the main road and headed further west to Croydon. Set up camp in the camp ground, had a walk around the town during the afternoon, and as usual checked out the pub for dinner. Fairly non remarkable meal, and they forgot Nickos order so he got his as we were finishing. Hey but you can't expect too much in the bush.

Arrived in Normanton the next day, found a camp site at a caravan park and had lunch. It took some effort to find a place to camp. In the afternoon we headed out to Karumba for a drive. We had been for warned not to bother trying to get into a caravan park in Karumba. Driving around Karumba, we have never seen as many portable boat trailers in one place. Every fisherman that has a caravan I think was in Karumba. They carry their boat on top of the car and then assemble their boat trailer for getting their boat in and out of the water. The caravan parks weren't 100% full, they were 120% full. Vacant blocks along side the caravan parks were set up as temporary camping areas. It was dusty, unsightly and all around bloody awful. You would have to be a very dedicated fisherman. Imagine putting up with that and then not catching a fish. It would be sole destroying. YUK, get us out of here!

So to get away from all these people we headed for Burketown the next day. Very pleasant drive, now back on dirt, and so other than a couple of exceptions, void of caravans. We stopped at Leichardt Falls for lunch. There were a few others at Leichardt falls and a young "Hippy" couple decided that they needed a swim sans clothing. I think



**Club Hotel - Croydon**



**Rainbow Bee Eater - Karumba**

everyone goes a bit troppo in the heat of the tropics but it did bring back memories of our 15 years in Darwin in the 70's and 80's when this behaviour in swimming holes on the side of the road was not at all uncommon. Leichardt falls was also a possible bush camp spot but we were fairly keen to make it to Burketown that day and it was after all, only lunch time. Arriving at Burketown was a little bit of a surprise after our visit in 2008. This year it was very busy and we were the last campers to be squeezed into the very small camp ground. Had we read our notes from 2008 we would have remembered that there was free camping on the river a few Kms away. Never mind, we only needed to stay a night and then head out to Kingfisher Camp (KFC) the next morning after fuelling up, and finding some supplementary supplies.

Kingfisher Camp is quite a delightful spot on Bowthorn Station about 120Km south of the Gulf of Carpentaria, virtually on the NT border. You might say fairly remote. The drive in is on a fairly narrow road that has needed a fair amount of work on



**Leichardt Falls**



*Crossing Lawn Creek - a couple of decent blokes standing in the creek as guides to miss the deep holes.*

KFC to Lawn hill traverses Bowthorn Station and Lawn Hill Station. I think we counted 14 gates that had to be opened and closed over a distance of about 140Km. There was a lot more water about than 2008 and so there were a few wet creek crossings to negotiate.

it after the heavy rains of the last wet season and while it was a fairly slow drive the road was OK. It was a little surprising to see the number of campers at KFC but there is plenty of room and the people with generators are relegated way down the back (a long way from the ablutions - serves them right). The showers are heated with a donkey boiler that has a fire lit under it by the caretaker each morning and night.

We had been to KFC in 2008 and considered putting our name down then as caretakers for a wet season being 1st Nov. to 30th Mar. Well we talked about it again, despite the fact that the current caretakers who spent the last wet season there were isolated for 7 months, we have put our names down for wet season 2011/2012. They may have better prospects lined up but we will wait and see.

We only stayed one night at KFC and then headed south for Lawn Hill NP. We had spent 5 days there in 2008 and Nicko was keen to see it as he had heard a lot about it. The track from



*Lawn Hill NP*



*Chris checking her camera settings.*

We booked in to the bush camping (in the Grove) area of Adel's Grove camp ground. Getting a camp spot in Lawn Hill NP is almost impossible and Adel's Grove is better camping anyway and only about 8Km from Lawn Hill NP. That afternoon we drove to Lawn Hill, did a couple of small walks into The Cascades and to Mad Dog Dreaming. Next day we did a fairly long walk to the Furthestmost lookout in the morning. Nicko was feeling a bit off colour so we cancelled our intended canoe trip up the gorge and then after some lunch we headed back to Adel's Grove and booked ourselves into the restaurant for dinner. A fixed menu of Roast of the day. The proprietors of Adel's grove organised a talk on the RFDS.

The RFDS seem to be always in the forefront of peoples mind in the outback, and when you hear some of the stories of how peoples lives have been saved in very remote area by this service it never ceases to amaze. So if you find yourself in an outback town or community you will not have to look very far for a donation tin and often there is some bazaar competition in the front bar of the pub in which the entry fee is a donation to the RFDS and if you fail it is even a bigger donation to the RFDS. Please donate wherever possible, Chris or I may need their services at some time in our travels.



*Our Camp on the Gregory - taken from waters edge*

The following day we headed for one of Chris' and my favourites camp spots on the Gregory River south of Gregory Downs. Now this is probably the most idyllic camp spot that you could ever hope to find. Weather is warm, the river is flowing and crystal clear and swimming temperature, no salt water crocs, paperbarks for shade, and seldom is there any other campers. To top it off there are rubbish bins provided by the shire. Hey, so there are no facilities, but there is plenty of bush and plenty of sun to heat up our black shower bag.



**Finches Playing Tug-of-War - Gregory River**



**Restless Fly Catcher - Gregory River**

We could have stayed there for a considerable time. Nicko was going to leave us here and head to Darwin to surprise his best mate Russell for his 60th birthday. Well Nicko was never scared of a bit of a drive and 1500Km there and back for a birthday party seemed fairly reasonable to him. So the plan was for him to take 2 days to get to Darwin, spend a few days in Darwin and then catch up with us wherever we may have been. One thing for sure was that we were going to hang around at the Gregory River for another few days. We arrived at the Gregory on the 9th and Nicko decided that he would head off on the morning of the 14th. Well after some intermittent forgetfulness to turn on our Sat Phone each night at 6:00pm EST for 1 hour we got out the sat phone on the evening of the 13th. 2 Minutes after turning it on our hearts stopped as it sprang to life. We had 3 messages to contact family. This was when we found out that Chris' mum had passed away and we needed to get to Adelaide as soon as possible.

The first option was to go to Mt Isa, virtually just around the corner at a mere 500Kms. But that would mean finding somewhere secure to store our gear and finding flights to Adelaide which is not easy from Mt Isa. So after some discussion and the fact that we have friends in Darwin, we headed the next morning for Darwin 1500kms away. Got to Tennant Creek with phone and internet service and Chris booked flights for herself and me and arranged for somewhere to stay with friends in Darwin including looking after our gear.

Details of our Journey to Adelaide and the funeral are not really subject matter for this journal. Only to mention that we returned to Darwin on the following Sat 24th July. On Sunday we visited an old and dear friend in Rum Jungle, Sue Mornane (Nee Brigg), who owns the Rum Jungle Bungalows in Batchelor. On the Monday morning we set off for destination unknown.



**Our Camp at Butterfly Springs**

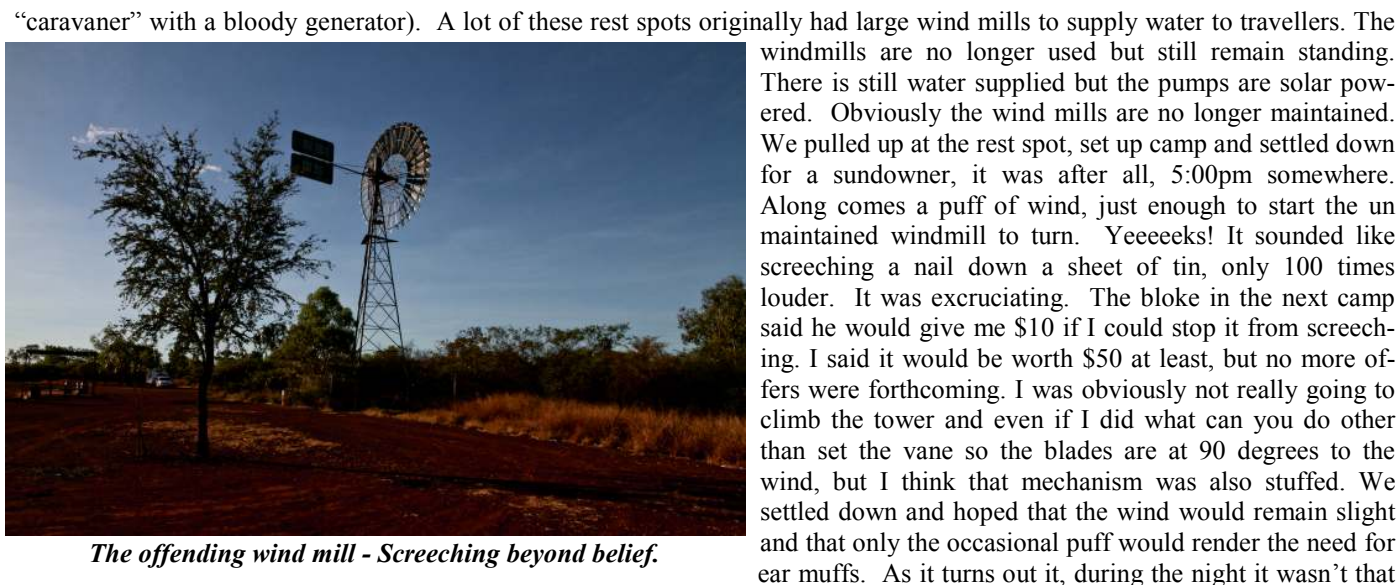
manded. We had spread ourselves out fairly well so he set up camp 100 metres up the river. We thought "they will be OK, very basic campers, boat on a trailer etc". Well they had only turned there motor off 5 Min when the generator started up. The damn thing ran all night. Not even the worst caravanning people run the generator all night. Thankfully spreading ourselves out prevented him from camping next to us with his generator. He was gone early the next morning, we stayed one more night then headed off. Heading SE we had a look around St Vidgeons (Station) waterhole and ruins, then lunched at Towns Creek. Arrived at Butterfly Springs in time to set up camp and have a swim (bath) in the spring. Great spot but a lot of campers. Got talking to a great couple our age from Tas. Seems there tastes in touring are very similar to ours and they detest generators.

Next day, 29th July we headed for Cape Crawford, stopping to do the "Southern Lost City" walk, and promising ourselves that we would return to this area as there are a lot of places still to investigate, even though we spent a fair bit of time here in 2008. I have now done the Lost City walk 3 times and simply do not tire of it. It really is stunning.

At Cape Crawford ( don't ask me why it is called "Cape" Crawford as it is nowhere near the sea) we purchased only enough fuel (very expensive) to get us to Barkly Road House and headed directly South. Camped in a rest spot for the night (another



*Southern Lost City - Limmen NP*



*The offending wind mill - Screeching beyond belief.*

“caravaner” with a bloody generator). A lot of these rest spots originally had large wind mills to supply water to travellers. The windmills are no longer used but still remain standing. There is still water supplied but the pumps are solar powered. Obviously the wind mills are no longer maintained. We pulled up at the rest spot, set up camp and settled down for a sundowner, it was after all, 5:00pm somewhere. Along comes a puff of wind, just enough to start the un maintained windmill to turn. Yeeeeeks! It sounded like screeching a nail down a sheet of tin, only 100 times louder. It was excruciating. The bloke in the next camp said he would give me \$10 if I could stop it from screeching. I said it would be worth \$50 at least, but no more offers were forthcoming. I was obviously not really going to climb the tower and even if I did what can you do other than set the vane so the blades are at 90 degrees to the wind, but I think that mechanism was also stuffed. We settled down and hoped that the wind would remain slight and that only the occasional puff would render the need for ear muffs. As it turns out it, during the night it wasn't that

bad as it was a fairly still night. We headed off for the Barkly hwy the next morning and at Brunette Downs realised that if we had checked the map and completely filled up with diesel at Cape Crawford we could have taken a short cut to Mount Isa along a dirt road. Now it is not like us to not check all routes to where we are headed as we do not really mind what the roads are like and the minor roads are usually a whole lot more interesting and also void of caravans. We were soon to rue the error as after reaching the Barkly Hwy and a little more fuel at the Barkly Road House (also expensive but not quite as bad as Cape Crawford) we were about to set off for Mt Isa when we found out that the Barkly Hwy is to be closed for 4 hours due to a road train accident. Had we taken the short cut we would have by passed the accident. After some deliberation we decided that we would prefer to be at the scene waiting to get through, and the travel time to reach the accident would eat into the 4 hours anyway. The



*Surreal Image of Mount Isa - HDR ( not every bodies cup of tea - either the city or the style of photo.)*

cynic in me suggests that the people at the Barkly Roadhouse were indeed making it sound worse than it really was just to get us to spend more money on lunch etc. We reached the scene of the accident (trailer rollover with no cars involved) in time for lunch, so Chris prepared lunch for us while we waited and as we were about to make coffee we got the go ahead to get past the accident.

Chris rang ahead from Camooweal and with some difficulty got us booked into a caravan park and also booked into Beaufort to get a tyre replaced under warranty. A stone had pierced the tread and lifted a lug and the tyre was unrepairable. Beaufort offer a deal where you pay an extra \$12 per tyre and they are guaranteed for life. Lifetime puncture repairs and pro rata replacement



## Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 2

Page 8

(calculated on percentage of wear) of any unrepairable tyres. Fantastic deal if you do a lot of travelling off the bitumen but a waste of time for normal use around the city. We have gotten our money back several times over during the last 2 trips.

When we got to Mt Isa and checked into the Caravan Park we realised that we were lucky enough to have booked the last 2 sites at the park. And boy were we packed in. The whole of the town was packed to the rafters. Why I do not know. We do not like the place. Our 2 nights stay was 2 nights too long. At night we had to put up with drunks yelling at the top of their voice on their way home from the pub, and purposely stirring up all the neighbourhood dogs. Then when they got home in the wee hours of the morning they would have a domestic with the missus at the top of their voice. The main offender doing it 2 nights in a row. Never again will we stay in Mt. Isa. Maybe we just got the Caravan Park that was in the worst part of town. The town was so full that the large vacant area in front of the very large RSL club was given over to caravans and campers, we think free of charge. I guess the RSL owns the land and relies on people using the club. We had arrived in Mt Isa on Friday and so the day we spent there was a Sat with most of the town closed between 11am and 12 Noon. Nicko and I spent the whole of Saturday morning searching for some latches for my camper that had rattled loose on rough roads and then a small component had worked its way out and gone missing. Couldn't believe it, never lost one in 3.5 years and then loose 2 in one day.

Next Stop Boulia

Well that's it for this journal. A little boring but things do liven up a little in part 3.

Cheers for now

Graham, Chris (and Nicko)

Acknowledgement - thanks to Nicko for the photos that Chris or I obviously could not have taken.

