

# On The Road Again 2010 - Mt Isa to Arkaroola

## *Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 3*

*Page 1*

At Mt Isa we were sort of back to where we were about 2 weeks prior and felt that we needed to re-access our travel plans. It was becoming obvious that we were running short of time to fit in all the things that we had planned. This came as a revelation to Nicko who thought at the outset of our trip that we would have heaps of time up our sleeve. He had never taken a 4 Month holiday before and thought that would be more than enough time to fit all of the things we had planned to do. With our experience of the last 2 years we had our doubts but thought that keeping quiet as to our thoughts would be the best bet and let Nicko discover the reality himself. Two key parts of the tour was to visit Birdsville and the Innamincka Reserve area of South Australia (Nicko had never been there) and also drive across the Gibson Desert from Alice Springs along the Gary Junction Road, a 1500 Km track across the desert from Alice Springs to the 80 Mile Beach in WA. After which we would explore The Pilbara, then drop Nicko off at Kalgoorlie (where he lives) by the 6th of Sept. So one day in Mount Isa Nicko announces that he thinks we are running out of time. With that we all agreed, and decided to head for Birdsville and then to Innamincka. Since we left home we were keeping on eye on access to Innamincka area but the whole of the inland it seems was receiving rain off and on with roads closing and then opening almost weekly. It seemed that we were never going to be able to get to Innamincka. So with the agreement that we would re access the situation when we got to Birdsville, off we headed via Boulia and Bedourie.

Just to make it a little more interesting we decided to head down some minor roads that service Cattle Stations between Mt Isa and Boulia. So we headed off through Duchess and then to Dajarra (Which as it happens is on the main road all be it dirt). Now many readers would never have heard of Dajarra and it really is a quaint little town. It was a Sunday when we arrived and there was not a soul to be seen anywhere. However you would not believe that it was once the largest Cattle Railhead in the world (I think it is the world, if not then southern hemisphere, but I am fairly sure it was the world without being too much of a yank but as you would all know I am not a stickler for detail). After Dajarra we headed for Boulia via Chatswood, Carrie Downs and Blair Athol (Cattle Stations). On the map there is scant reference to "Phosphate Hill Mine" on a side track. Well it seems that maps do not necessarily match up with what is actually on the ground. We came to a "T" junction near "The Monument" with a sign that signified that if we were to consider using the road to "The Monument" we would vaporize before your eyes, "Strictly Prohibited". This was a little unfortunate as we could see a land form in the distance that was obviously "The Monument" and it would have been great to inspect it from closer quarters. Not being confrontationist (read "chicken") we decided to head in the opposite direction. We had been traversing dirt roads up until this time and now we were on a very well maintained broad bitumen road in the middle of nowhere. We encountered more threatening signs that indicated we should not be using this road, yet



*Camped by the Burke River on our way to Boulia, the back way*

our maps and GPS indicated that they were public roads. Well to cut a long story short, it seems that mining companies seem to rule the roost and they can commandeer public roads and reroute them for their own purposes. In fact what was once a public road was now an overburden heap for the "Phosphate Hill Mine". With a little deciphering of our GPS and what we could see on the ground we found the road that we were looking for only to be confronted by another hand written sign that said that we would be shot on sight if caught trespassing. Well not really shot, but it did say that all previous permissions had been withdrawn and that entry would constitute breaking the law particularly if fire arms were to be found in our possession including crossbows. If we did not comply, the full force of the law would be brought to bear. Now who this was meant to warn we are not really sure but it did not seem to mean us but instead some red neck gun toting Queenslanders. Heck, we are harmless grey nomads and ignorance can work a treat. Fortunately it was also Sunday and it seems little activity happens in "Red Neck QLD" on Sundays. Our confidence was boosted when we encountered regular road signs like "DIP" and "GRID" which indicated that it was a public road. Besides our GPS continued to confirm that we were on the correct route.

After a couple of more uneventful hours we started to look for a camp spot as we were certainly not going to make it to Boulia

## Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 3

Page 2

that day. After a couple of dead ends we eventually found a spot on the Burke River. A usually dry river but with recent rains had some waterholes on it. Consequently we had Brahman cattle wandering by our camp in the evening a little unsure of what to make of us. Next day we made Boulia in time for Coffee then a visit to the Stone House Museum. This is a real treat and is run by a crusty old bushy who tells fabulous yarns but is a very proficient amateur palaeontologist at heart. He has some stunning 65 Million year old skeletons of mainly under sea creatures that he has discovered and unearthed in the area around Boulia (And since donated to Museums). If you ever visit, ask him about the intellect of sheep, he is an authority. But be prepared, you may be in for a long recital of stories regarding the stupidity of sheep. By his own admission he has a very shady past that brought him to the outback to elude the authorities, where he obviously reformed. Well at least it is a good story, but I do suspect that it is very true.

Boulia claims to be the Min Min centre of Australia. I think I mentioned this in 2008 journals. If you are unaware of the Min Min legend, do a Google search. I never have, (done a Google search on it that is) but I am sure that you will get a heap of info. Basically a Min Min light is a red light that appears in the outback with no apparent explanation. It is usually at ground level amongst the trees, that is not up high in the heavens, and is sometimes stationary and sometimes moves. There is little doubt that people have seen something over the years, but what it is, is anybody's guess. By the way, the Min Min centre café has excellent lunch and coffee. Somewhat of an oddity this far away from a main centre.



*We encounter a tourist bus at Cuttaburra Crossing on Eyre Creek between Bedourie and Birdsville.*



*A remnant of the original Kidman empire - Bedourie to Birdsville*

It was still fairly early when we left Boulia and headed for Bedourie. We arrived at Bedourie in time to set up camp in the Shire Camp Ground, have a spar in the naturally heated artesian spar and then wander over to the pub for dinner. Meal was great after the second attempt. The first attempt was raw rissoles and raw fish. They were extremely apologetic and looked after us without a problem.

Next morning we set off for Birdsville, really only a short drive of about 188 Km. We arrived in time to have a Curried Camel Pie for lunch at the famous Birdsville Bakery. You may laugh, but don't offer an opinion until you try one of these gourmet pies, they are yummy, and yes they are made from camel meat.

We settled into the camp ground at Birdsville intending to stay a few days. Set ourselves up in a non powered site by the "lake" which is really a waterhole on the Diamantina River. As Nicko said, it was like bush camping but with access to showers and toilets. It really is a good camp ground. From this base we did a bit of exploring including a drive down the "Inside Track" and a drive out to the Simpson Desert and "Big Red" From when we were there last year it has completely changed. Last year we thought that the rain had had an effect but this year it was so much more. The desert is green almost like dairy country and the expanses of water laying around are/were unbelievable.



*Probably Australia's most iconic pub - note planes far right*

Of course when we arrived in Birdsville one of our first questions was "Are the roads open to Innamincka?". The answer was a resounding NO. We were thwarted. But Christine had had a yen from way back (In June when we first read about the ferry be-



## Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 3

Page 3

ing put into operation on the Birdsville Track at Cooper Creek) to travel the Birdsville Track when the Cooper Creek is in flood and having to use the ferry. The last time the ferry was set up to get people across the Cooper Creek crossing was 1991. Really a once in a lifetime, unique, opportunity. It seemed like it was destiny that it was going to happen as the only way out of Birdsville was either to return North the way we had come or to go down the Birdsville Track to Marree. The Birdsville Track had only reopened the day that we arrived at Birdsville. We also had confirmed in Birdsville that we would be able to have the camper trailers taken across on a flat top truck on the ferry. The ferry can only take one vehicle to a maximum length of 7.8M and our car and camper was well over that by about 2m.



*Exploring the Inside Track - see Chris in the distance.*

So with our only option decided for us unless we wanted to re-trace our footsteps and head North, we settled down to enjoy Birdsville. We were concerned that Birdsville would not necessarily have that much attraction for Nicko. It is an odd place, in that you enjoy being there but if asked why, it is a little hard to describe. It just feels good. It did not take long for Nicko to warm to the place so we stayed a few days. On one day we headed down the “inside track” which is an alternate route to the Birdsville Track but has been closed for some time (I don’t think it has been open for at least 2 years or more). We did not want to go far so the fact that it was closed was not an issue, and the scenery is great with cream coloured sand hills in comparison to



*From left to right, - So near but yet so far - 20km around the water hole to advance 100m; Lunch on top of big red - looking south; “Big Red” looking north (water as far as the eye can see)*



*Only 1198 sand hills to go to Dalhousie- hmmm?*



*More Cockatiels about than we have ever seen before.*

the red sand hills of the Simpson Desert.

On another day we headed out to the Simpson Desert to do the mandatory inspection of “Big Red”. “Big Red” is a rather large sand hill that stretches north/south for a hundred or so Km and is the largest sand hill that has to be crossed when crossing the Simpson Desert from east to west or from west to east. There are two places to cross “Big Red”, one is known as “Little Big Red” and the other simply as “Big Red”. “Little Big Red” has been established for the travellers who cannot get their vehicle and gear across “Big Red” and is a much easier crossing of the sand hill. Normally to drive out to “Big Red” is a simple matter of heading west until you come to the iconic sand hill. However with the huge rainfalls that have been experienced in central Australia in past months you are able to get within a few hundred metres of the track across Big Red but are prevented by a huge body of water. It is a 15 or 20 Km trip to circumnavigate the water hole. Once around the water hole we crossed “Little Big Red” and then drove into the desert for a few Km but the idea of crossing the desert and driving across 1200 + sand hills is a little beyond the pale. Maybe one day if we feel so inclined. Nicko was adamant they we need not invite him if ever we decided to do it. After our short jaunt into the Simpson Desert we headed back to the larger “Big Red” crossing. While most blokes get a bit of a buzz out of charging up sand hills in their 4WD, not Nicko. “Boring” was his immediate comment “Does nothing for me”. We stopped on top of Big Red and had lunch. Great view and nobody else around.

After a few great days and, camel pies and a pub meal in Birdsville Hotel, we headed south, our first stop being Mungeranie. It was now the 8th August(Sun). The trip to Mungeranie was very interesting. The Birdsville Track had only recently reopened, in fact it re opened the day we arrived at Birdsville. So there were some interesting detours and wash outs that needed to be negotiated. It really is hard to believe that there can be so much water laying around in the middle of the desert.

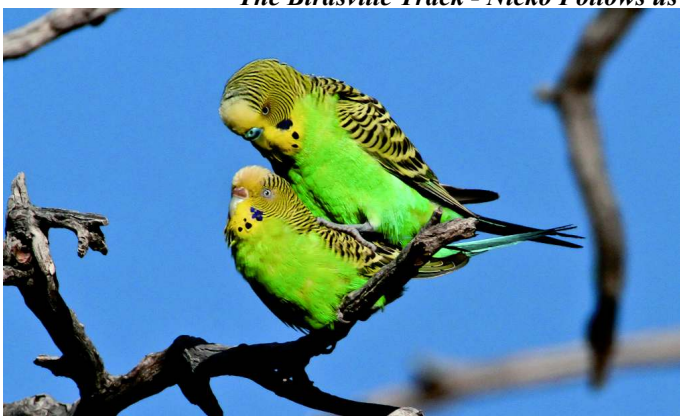
In Birdsville we had been wondering why there were so many cars around covered in mud. It did not take us long to find out. Our cars got a little muddy but minor compared to some of the other wacko's on the road. One good example was when we came to a long wash-out across the road. There was a detour just to the side of the water that stretched the length of the water, and as we approached a convoy of 4 cars (probably a 4WD club) were approaching from the other end. We had reached the detour first and normal practice would be for us to drive slowly around the water, give the other guys a wave and then they would take their turn. Not these twits. Bugger waiting; 80kph straight through the middle of the mud



*Numerous ruins on the Birdsville Track, all with amazing history*



*The Birdsville Track - Nicko Follows us up and then we contemplate our next move.*



*Budgerigars at Mungeranie in a playful mood - its actually not easy to get a good photo of a wild budgie unless they are otherwise distracted!*

and slush slipping and sliding and spraying mud and water in all directions. This really was stupid, as they could have easily slid across the road straight into us. All you can do is shake your head and say to yourself "it takes all types". They probably had generators too!

At Mungeranie we set up camp, Chris and I had a hot spar in the artesian spar then had a bit of a look around this "Oasis in the desert" before opting for dinner in the bar. Chris retired early and Nicko and I sat in the bar and chin wagged with the barman and a bunch of other travellers. Great night to say the least. Barman was fairly generous with a few freebies. On further investigation we discover that he is part owner of the place, so why he was giving away cheap grog is anybodies guess.

Next day we were full of anticipation as we were not sure what we would be confronted with to get our trailers across the Cooper on the ferry. It was going to take four trips of the ferry to get two vehicles and two trailers across the river and we had no idea how busy it would be. We arrived at the Cooper and were immediately concerned at the number of vehicles that were apparently trying to get across. However it seems that there are a heck of a lot of people that just drive out to observe. "Rubber Necks" to coin a phrase! Most were from Marree which is not far down the road, only about 150km. The ferry is set up a few km to the east of the Birdsville Track on a narrow part of the Cooper Creek. Nicko was a little concerned when I said, "Heck it doesn't matter if we camp here the night and go across first thing in the morning, we're in no hurry". It seems he just wanted to get the crossing out of the way TODAY! Well we were both across before the ferry guys took a break for lunch. The guy with the flat top truck that we loaded our trailers onto put on an extra special effort and Nicko was so thrilled he slipped him an extra 20 bucks. What a great once in a lifetime experience. After having read and watched videos of the legendary Tom Kruse (If you have never heard of him, Google his name and be amazed) in the early 20th Century delivering the mail and supplies up the Birdsville Track and what he had to do to cross the flooded Cooper





*Our Camper being loaded onto the Flat Top*



*The ferry across the Cooper - one vehicle at a time.*



*Nicko is happy as he is last across.*

sticky. The rain persisted and the road gradually turned into the equivalent of an ice skating ring. Before we got to Marree we were slipping and sliding all over the road. Like trying to balance yourself on a greasy log. The concern was that the road was often built up high above the surrounding country and that any slide into the side of the road could most likely have ended in trailer or car or both rolling over in the ditch. Well with our heart in our throats we finally made it to Marree. We purchased some diesel then checked out the accommodation options. With the continual rain we were not keen on setting up our campers so we decided to head south to Lyndhurst and onto Copley thinking that the road would obviously be better south of Marree, after all there are sections that are bitumen. Famous last words, we slipped and slid all the way to Lyndhurst. When I had the opportunity to glance in the rear-view mirror I thought the trailer had fallen off the back of the car but looking in the opposite mirror revealed that the camper was trying to overtake us on the left hand side. Then visa versa. At times it seemed that the trailer was trying to pull us into the ditch on the side of the road. The apex of the road was such that the camper continue to slide off to the side one way then the next. Very Scary! Just short of Lynfhurst there was a normal sedan car (Camry or something) trying to make its way up the road. It had only gotten 100m onto the dirt and was going nowhere, not bogged but the driver had no control whatsoever of the direction the car was heading. There was a truck in front of Nicko that stopped and gave them assistance. Well we reached Lyndhurst without incident and from there to Copley it was bitumen all the way. As it continued to rain the spray from the bitumen road did a half reasonable job of washing some of the excess mud from the car. Chris and I agreed that this would be the last time that we would travel on wet, greasy dirt roads if it could be helped. Well we did not realise how perverse mother nature can be, but that will have to wait for Journal 2010 part 4.



*Our camp at Arcoona - delightful*

Creek. It certainly makes you appreciate the hardships that the early settlers experienced just to get mail and supplies.

We were the last travellers across before the ferry guys took a break for lunch, then, as we later found out, there was only one other trip after lunch before a storm struck and it was deemed unsafe to cross and the ferry was closed for the rest of the day. We were dead lucky that we got across when we did.

After hitching up our trailers we continued on to Clayton Cattle Station where there is a rest area and another artesian hot spa. We didn't bother about the spa but we did have lunch. The weather was starting to look threatening and even started to drizzle as we were finishing lunch. As we headed for Marree the rain continued. It all seemed good for some time but then the road started to get a little

At Copley we decided to take a cabin because the weather was terrible and we felt that we needed some respite. Next morning it was obvious that we could not get up to Innamincka in a hurry and Nicko was getting itchy feet as work was beckoning and he wasn't keen to get caught on closed roads and not being able to get home. He thought he would head to Adelaide and catch up with his brother. So after a coffee the next morning at the Quandong Bakery, we split up the shared tucker and Nicko headed off. We later found out that his brother was away and so Nicko turned right at Pt Augusta and headed for Alice Springs.

So Chris and I were now on our own with some time up our sleeves. Getting to Innamincka was looking a little doubtful so we decided to hang around Copley for a few days while we waited for the roads to dry out. We then headed east towards



the Gammon Ranges on the Copley/Arkaroola Road. There is a back track that heads up to Arkaroola through Mount Searle on the western side of the Gammon Ranges. Although the weather forecast was for more rain we decided to head up the track and camp at a spot called Arcoona. We had plenty of food and supplies so we new that we could see out bad weather and wet roads for a week or so. We also new that we could get drinking water at Arcoona, while this was not a big issue as we carry 150 litres



*The backtrack to Arkaroola*



*Road signs - outstanding!*

with us it is still very comforting. We also new that it was likely that we would have it to ourselves from last year when we spent a few days here. Well over 4 night there was only one other camper on one night. It really is a great spot. Well the weather did come in with terrific winds and a little rain followed by less wind and heavier rain. After 4 nights we decided that we would head up the Western side of the Gammon Ranges to Arkaroola. We had always thought that we would only tackle this track if we had another traveller to buddy up with us. Well we threw caution to the wind and headed off, after all it was only about 200km to Arkaroola but it was very remote. As can be seen from the photos, the local shire is very keen to ensure road signage is clear and concise so that no travellers could possibly go the wrong way. I guess there is at least a sign. There were a couple of spots that there were no signs and our GPS was the only way of confirming that we had taken the correct road.

Anyway, what a great drive it was. We did run in to a group of bickies with a support vehicle supposedly following them. They warned us that it wasn't far behind when we passed them going in the opposite direction. Well according to our maps there were a couple of alternate routes, one much further that the other. We have a feeling that the bikies would have waited a very long time for their support vehicle to catch up with them as we did not see it and it would be impossible to pass as two cars cannot fit past one another on the track without pulling off into the scrub. The support vehicle obviously took the long alternate route.

We cruised into Arkaroola the back way, registered and set up camp in a brilliant camp spot. Arkaroola is also cheap camping so we settle in for a few days. Access to laundry, showers, bar, and meals if required. We settled down to do some exploring that we hadn't done in 2009. The girl in reception also filled us in on which tracks to find some good examples of Sturt's Desert Pea. In our past travels, Sturt's Desert Pea have always been very minor and a little hit and miss with isolated plants here and there. Well with recent rains in the outback, the Desert Pea has become quite common. We headed out to Stubbs Waterhole and encountered more Desert Pea than we have ever seen before, little did we know what mother nature had in store for us in other parts of the desert.

After a few days at Arkaroola and the opportunity to do the laundry, bake a cake in the camp oven, and cook a roast in the Cobb



*In our naivety we thought this was a fabulous display of Desert Pea - little did we know what was to come*



*Chris checks out Stubbs Waterhole - Arkaroola*



## *Graham and Chris (and Nicko) on tour - 2010 Part 3*

*Page 7*

we crossed our fingers and decided to head for Innamincka via Mt Hopeless. In Arkaroola there were notices in the toilets and in reception that one of the stations up the road were sick of pulling tourist out of the mud. In future there would be a \$90 call



*Exploring Arkaroola*



*More exploring Arkaroola*

out and \$90 per hour charge. This was a bit scary. "Only those in convoys of 3 cars or more or those with plenty of 4WD experience should tackle this road", said the notice. So we decided that we should ask around, particularly people who had just recently arrived from the north. To our surprise cars that had come down that road hardly had a scrap of mud on them. One guy said they hardly got their tyres wet. It seems that the idiots who were getting bogged were close cousins to the idiots that we came across on the Birdsville Track. Instead of taking the dry tracks around bogs these twits were charging fair through the middle, then when they got bogged they had the gall to enlist the help of the local station who obviously have a lot better things to do with their time. Particularly as the cause of the bogs was 40mm of recent rain, while very welcome, it also increases the work that needs to be done on the properties. Chris and I set off determined that IF we did get bogged we would somehow get ourselves out or wait for summer for the roads to dry. It is little wonder that while most people welcome the tourists in the outback because of the money and employment that it brings, others are a little negative. Another case of a few mucking it up for the majority.

We left Arkaroola on the 20th August.

In Part 4 we will head north, first stopping at Wetloona in the eastern Gammon Ranges and doing some exploring in Balcanoona, then onto more bloody rain and wet roads.

Cheers for now

Graham, Chris (and Nicko, just)

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